
REPORT TO THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE 28 JANUARY 2009**PORTFOLIO: ENVIRONMENT****REPORT FROM HEAD OF ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES****SUBJECT: CHERRY ORCHARD JUBILEE COUNTRY PARK
ADVISORY GROUP****1 DECISION BEING RECOMMENDED**

- 1.1 To consider the recommendations of the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park Advisory Group as detailed in this report and the attached works schedule.
- 1.2 That a further report to be submitted by the Advisory Group with regard to the work programme and recommended capital expenditure for future years.

2 FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE No: 13/08**3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION**

- 3.1 On 26 November 2008 a report was submitted to The Executive which suggested a programme of work within the Country Park through to March 2011.
- 3.2 The Executive resolved the programme of works for the current financial year, 2008/09 would be agreed, providing a total capital budget of £94,300 of which £58,000 would be funded from grant aid. With regard to future proposals it was resolved that the Portfolio Holder for the Environment appoint an Advisory Group to consider the issues in the current financial climate. The Executive asked in particular that consideration be given to site access, bridle paths and tenancy arrangements.
- 3.3 The Advisory Group met on 8 December 2008 and 15 January 2009. Membership of the group comprised Councillor M. Starke (Chairman), Councillor J. Cottis, Councillor M. Steptoe, Councillor Mrs. H. Glynn and Councillor Mrs. P. Aves.
- 3.4 Initially the Chairman advised the group that the option of acquiring an agricultural tenancy had been withdrawn by the landowner. Members of the Advisory Group noted that the continued expansion of the Country Park was a key priority identified in the Corporate Plan 2008-2013 (Objective 5 – Improve the quality of life for people in our District) and that over £700,000 of capital had been spent this financial year on the purchase of land. It was further noted that the park had significantly increased in size since the project commenced in 2001.

Access

- 3.5 Members of the Advisory Group noted that the main access to the extended Park would be from Cherry Orchard Way. Current estimates for the road access were between £130,000 and £250,000. However, it was noted that there was a realistic prospect of securing this access at little cost through future implementation of the Joint Area Action Plan (JAAP), possibly within the next three years. Should funding not be available from this source it is likely that Council resources would be required. It was reported that the car park would cost in the order of £80,000.
- 3.6 It was noted that considerable ground works were required on the land adjacent to Cherry Orchard Way in order to regenerate the arable fields and that these would not be suitable for visitors until the meadows and newly planted trees had matured.

RECOMMENDATION 1

That no further action is taken with regard to vehicular access from Cherry Orchard Way until the proposals from the JAAP are finalised.

- 3.7 The Advisory Group then considered pedestrian access points and noted that these were available from Gusted Hall to the north of the park and Edwards Hall Park to the south. Access is also available from Blatches Chase and Flemings Farm Road, but not easily through Grove Wood, Rayleigh. The Advisory Group were particularly concerned that access to the Country Park should be available from Rayleigh. They noted that Essex County Council were responsible for maintaining public rights of way.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That Officers investigate with ECC the possibility of securing access from the Western most point of New England Wood through to Connaught Road and Grove Road.

RECOMMENDATION 3

That advisory and way-mark signs are provided to all points of access in negotiation with landowners as appropriate, including Edwards Hall Park, Gusted Hall, Blatches Chase and Flemings Farm Road.

- 3.8 Members of the Advisory Group noted that very limited seating was available within the Country Park and that this had been identified in the earlier public

consultation. Members were of the view that the provision of further seating could be achieved through external sponsorship.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That Officers identify suitable sites within the Country Park and appropriate designs for seating. That opportunities for sponsoring such seating are promoted with local residents and businesses.

Access for horses

- 3.9 With regard to access on horse back, the Advisory Group noted that an extensive network of bridleways already existed to the east and a substantial part of the southern boundary of the Country Park. It was further noted that one bridleway was available between Gusted Hall Lane and Flemings Farm Road which cuts across the Park.
- 3.10 The group were advised that representations had been made by the stable owners in Rayleigh Drive (adjacent to New England Wood) and other horse riders for access between Rayleigh Drive and Flemings Farm Road. Further, that landowners had written to the Council requesting that action was taken to address the damage which was being done to crops on adjacent farmland by horses not using bridleways. Officers reported that damage had also been caused by horses riding through New England Wood, an ancient semi-natural woodland that was now in our ownership.
- 3.11 Members of the Advisory Group considered that whilst it was desirable to have a bridleway that would connect between Rayleigh Avenue and Flemings Farm Road there was concern about the damage caused by horses and the need to protect both New England Wood and new areas of planting.

RECOMMENDATION 5

That the provision of bridleway access between Rayleigh Avenue and Flemings Farm Road is a low priority for RDC resources and that Officers investigate the availability of funding of such a bridleway from ECC.

RECOMMENDATION 6

That Officers take immediate action to prevent access by horses into New England Wood and the new areas of tree planting within the Country Park.

Proposed Water Meadow

- 3.12 The Advisory Group noted the proposal to create a water meadow by widening one bank of the River Crouch in the western section of the Country Park. It was considered that this would have significant advantages in terms of increased biodiversity, particularly for birds and that it may have benefits in terms of flood relief.
- 3.13 It was noted that funding was likely to be available from Natural England to create this new habitat. Alternatively, there was support for this to be considered for Council funding at a future date. This would be subject to a further report and decision at a later date if full external funding cannot be secured.

RECOMMENDATION 7

That Officers seek funding from Natural England or other bodies with a view to creating a water meadow.

Visitor Centre

- 3.14 The Advisory Group considered the concept of a Visitor Centre which they noted was a long-term aspiration. It was hoped that any such building would be carbon neutral, but it was explained that it is likely to be several years before a Visitor Centre could be considered and that this would only be achieved with external funding. The Advisory Group were supportive of the design concepts and the proposal that sources of external funding should be explored.

RECOMMENDATION 8

That Officers utilise the design proposals developed as a basis for exploring external funding opportunities for the Visitor Centre.

Animal Welfare Issues

- 3.15 The Advisory Group gave consideration as to whether there were any animal welfare issues now that the agricultural tenancy was not to be progressed. It was noted that a full ecological survey had been undertaken as part of the planning process and that whilst the site did contain protected species such as badgers, the proposed works did not pose a threat to any wildlife. Indeed it was considered that the proposals would enhance animal habitats and create opportunities for more species.

Financial Considerations

- 3.16 The Advisory Group expressed concern about committing substantial expenditure in view of the current financial climate. Officers offered reassurances that the Chief Finance Officer had confirmed that the issues with next year's budget related to revenue rather than capital expenditure. It was reported that £100,200 had already been identified in next years draft Capital Programme for this key project.
- 3.17 The Group noted that there would be external funding opportunities in respect of a number of different elements of this project including the creation of habitats and ongoing funding for woodland maintenance.
- 3.18 The Advisory Group gave consideration as to what works should be undertaken over the next few years, but decided that until there was more certainty about future financial provision, they were reluctant to recommend any expenditure beyond the next financial year. Works considered for the 2009/10 programme included:-
- Re-shaping of stream banks,
 - Temporary signage,
 - Grass cutting,
 - Removal of earth banks,
 - Creation of meadows,
 - Weed control,
 - The construction of a service compound,
 - Ground preparation works,
 - The creation of a water meadow,
 - The burial of overhead power lines.
- 3.19 Following consideration of this matter it was agreed that the draft budget of £100,200 was appropriate. It was reported that alternative sources of external funding were still being explored with regard to the water meadow and the power lines. The Group therefore, considered that those options should not be progressed at this time.

RECOMMENDATION 9

That subject to available capital funding, that the works programme for 2009/10 should include re-shaping of stream banks, temporary signage, grass cutting, removal of earth banks, creation of meadows, weed control, the construction of a service compound, ground preparation works.

- 3.20 The Advisory Group then gave consideration to the staffing resources, noting that no staff were currently employed within the Country Park. The Group agreed that staff would be required to safeguard the Council's interests, maintain safety arrangements and undertake further development of the park.

It was noted that staff time during the development phase of the Country Park could be charged to capital, provided that it met certain pre-conditions. It was noted that in the longer term any staff employed on the site would need to be funded from revenue.

- 3.21 Initially, the Advisory Group favoured two trainee positions, however after further deliberation with Officers, they recommended that one permanent post should be sought, subject to available resources.

RECOMMENDATION 10

That one temporary member of staff, a Woodlands Assistant, is employed for one year only in the Country Park, funded through the Capital Programme.

- 3.22 Also with regard to the staffing arrangements it was considered that Officers should investigate opportunities for joint work with other partners, building upon the existing links with the Probation Service and exploring an arrangement with Writtle College.

RECOMMENDATION 11

That Officers investigate the opportunities for extending the working arrangements with the Probation Service already in operation at Hockley Woods and a potential arrangement with Writtle Agricultural College.

4 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The work programme and estimates are calculated on the basis of employing our own staff. If we are unable to recruit the project costs will increase though the use of external contractors.
- 4.2 The recent acquisition of land to the east and west of the existing park brings with it land owners' liabilities and responsibilities. Officers have already undertaken a safety audit and started to address the urgent work required to remove hazards and prevent trespass by motor vehicles, etc.
- 4.3 The long term proposals are highly dependent upon external funding/grant aid, if we are unable to securing such funding further development of the Park may not be possible, or will be delayed.

5 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This project provides a significant opportunity to enhance the environment in terms of increased biodiversity and, in particular, the creation of habitats for

plants and animals. This is demonstrated by the availability of grant aid from Natural England and the Forestry Commission.

5.2 Any future Visitor Centre will be designed to have a zero carbon footprint.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Staffing resources to manage this key corporate project were put in place following the recent restructuring of Environmental Services.

6.2 A value for money assessment has shown that it is more economical to directly employ additional staff to undertake a significant proportion of the manual work. It is proposed that this will be funded as technical assistance against capital expenditure over the development phase of the project. In the longer term any staff working in the Country Park will need to be funded from revenue.

6.3 The net capital requirements for 2009/10 are £100,200, subject to confirmation as part of the budget process.

I confirm that the above recommendation does not depart from Council policy and that appropriate consideration has been given to any budgetary and legal implications.

SMT Lead Officer Signature: _____

Richard Evans

Head of Environmental Services

Background Papers:-

None

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If you would like this report in large print, braille or another language please contact 01702 546366.

Proposed Works Schedule for 2009/10

| | | |
|---|----------|----------------|
| Re-shaping of a stream bank | £ | 1,700 |
| Temporary Signage | £ | 2,000 |
| Removal of earth banks | £ | 3,000 |
| Prepare rest of site. Areas A + D | £ | 4,000 |
| Mowing/grass establishment to create species rich meadows | £ | 5,000 |
| Weed control around all newly planted trees (mowing and chemical management) | £ | 6,000 |
| Construction of service yard | £ | 58,000 |
| Technical Assistance | £ | 20,000 |
| TOTAL | £ | 100,200 |