

		AGENDA ITEM 7
		<b>GTP/03/15</b>
Meeting:	Great Notley Country Park Joint Venture Partnership Board	
Date:	23 January 2015	
Developing Great Notley Country Park further as a ‘Destination Park’		
Enquiries to:	Tim Dixon, Head of Country Parks Essex County Council Email : <a href="mailto:tim.dixon@essex.gov.uk">tim.dixon@essex.gov.uk</a> and Paul Partridge Head of Operations, Braintree District Council Email : <a href="mailto:paul.partridge@braintree.gov.uk">paul.partridge@braintree.gov.uk</a>	

## 1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this report is to update the Partnership Board on the following areas relating to Great Notley Country Park:

- The proposed car parking charges.
- The proposed 'Sky Trail' course.
- The photovoltaic panels on the Discovery Centre and the replacement of the existing Wind Turbine.

The report also seeks the following decisions from the Partnership Board:

1. To approve the proposed parking tariff for the Country Park as set out within this report, subject to any changes arising from public consultation.
2. To confirm that Essex County Council (ECC) and Braintree District Council (BDC) may proceed with negotiations for the land lease for the Sky Trail course.
3. To agree to the installation of PV Panels on the roof of the Discovery Centre and the replacement of the Wind Turbine at the Country Park as outlined within this report.

## 2.0 Car parking capacity and proposed charges

### 2.1 Charges

Essex County Council's Country Parks service provides access to the County's prime sites for countryside recreation, manages visitor centres and provides on-site staffing to ensure safe enjoyment for all ages and abilities.

All of the income generated from car parking goes directly towards offsetting the costs of staff and managing operating the parks.

Car parking is being reviewed in Essex Country Parks with the aim of offering even better value and greater convenience and flexibility for visitors. It is

therefore proposed that the current flat rate charge and reduced flat rate winter charge be replaced with variable charging models based on the length of stay,

The current and proposed parking tariffs for the Great Notley Country Park are shown below:

### Current Charges

Period	Charge
1 April to 31 October	£3.50 a day
1 November to 31 March	£2.50 a day

### Proposed charges for Great Notley Country Park

Band	Length of Stay	Tariff
1	Up to 30 mins	£1.00
2	Up to 1 hour	£2.00
3	Up to 2 hours	£3.00
4	Up to 3 hours	£4.00
5	Over 3 hours	£5.00

For example, if you have a family of four visiting the park for up to 3 hours (band 4); the proposed maximum charge would be £4 which equates to £1 per person.

By comparison, Braintree District Council's parking charges are as follows:-

Hourly Charge	Monday to Sunday 7am to 7.30pm
Up to 1 hour	£0.90
1-3 hours	£1.80
3-6 hours	£3.00
Over 6 hours	£5.50

The introduction of a banded charging system offers customers greater choice and more flexibility and convenience when parking. It also accommodates those customers who only wish to stay for a very short period, as they would pay less than half of the fee they are currently charged.

Alongside the new charging tariff it is proposed to introduce a pay on foot/exit operating system. Payment will be collected through cash, credit/debit card and contactless as well as remote payment over mobile phone. The cost of installation will be fully funded by ECC.

The charge for a car parking season ticket that enables parking across all ECC country parks will remain at £65 for 12 months and £40 for 6 months, reduced to £45 and £30 respectively for Blue Badge Holders and over 60's.

This more flexible and affordable parking tariff seeks to address the current imbalance between customers who pay for parking at the Country Park and those who avoid paying by parking on the roads in Gt. Notley Garden Village.

## **2.2 Car park capacity**

Current capacity is 200/250 hard standing and 400 overflow car parking spaces. The maximum number of cars parking at the park on any day this year has reached two thirds of the capacity available, including the overflow. There is a further overflow area capable of holding another 200 cars in an adjacent field, should it be required.

The existing car park is considered adequate for the current operation and the proposed Sky Trail course, given the fact that there is an overflow car park (and additional overflow capacity) to meet seasonal fluctuations in demand. It is recognised however, that more permanent car parking may be required if the park continues to grow. This will be included in the scope for the review of the longer term vision for the park.

## **2.3 Financial**

The new charges will generate additional income for the County's Country Parks Service of up to £15k per annum excluding VAT, taking into account additional visitors using the proposed Sky Trail course. Customers on bands 1-3 will be paying less, balanced out by those who pay slightly more on bands 4 and 5.

## **2.4 Legal**

Under Section 43 of the Countryside Act 1968, a local authority has the power to make reasonable charges for any facilities or services provided by them in a Country Park.

## **2.5 Communication with Stakeholders**

- Stakeholders, including Great Notley Football Club, will be advised of the proposed tariff in writing prior to public consultation. Great Notley Parish Council has already been engaged with and other sports clubs will also be contacted as part of the consultation.

It is ECC's policy to consult on changes for a period of 6 weeks following approval by the Partnership Board, commencing on 26 January, and the information gathered will be used to feed into the final version of the charging model. Should there be any changes to the proposed charges, members of the Partnership Board will be asked to agree them 'virtually' without the need for another Board Meeting. Should no changes be required the new charges will commence in April 2015.

- Posters will be displayed in the park for 6 weeks inviting visitors to e-mail or write in with their views on the proposals. An e-mail (Countryside.assets@essex.gov.uk) and postal address will be provided for visitors to send in their views too.

- The ECC and BDC websites, Country Parks website <http://www.visitparks.co.uk/>, Twitter and Facebook page will also provide details on the proposed changes and explain where to send any comments.

## **2.6 Risks**

### **2.6.1 Opportunity Risks:**

Delivering more affordable and flexible charging will have a positive impact on reputation as the new model provides better value for money.

### **2.6.2 Reputational risks:**

The potential consequences of the new car parking model could be that some customers stay for a shorter period of time.

The new variable charging model may be viewed by the press in a negative way and result in a temporary reduction in visitor numbers. Publicity will focus on better affordability, increased choice that reflects the duration of stay and cashless parking. ECC and BDC Communications Teams will monitor and manage this potential risk.

## **3.0 Sky Trail Course**

**3.1** Building on the existing successful Joint Venture Partnership with BDC, ECC is seeking to invest circa £390k (Capital) in a 'pay to use' new adventure activity installation. This will deliver additional annual net revenue of over £250,000. It will enable the Partnership to move the park towards being cost neutral, whilst improving customers' experience of the recreational and play value the park has to offer. Great Notley has been identified as the most suitable site for this type of attraction within Essex because:

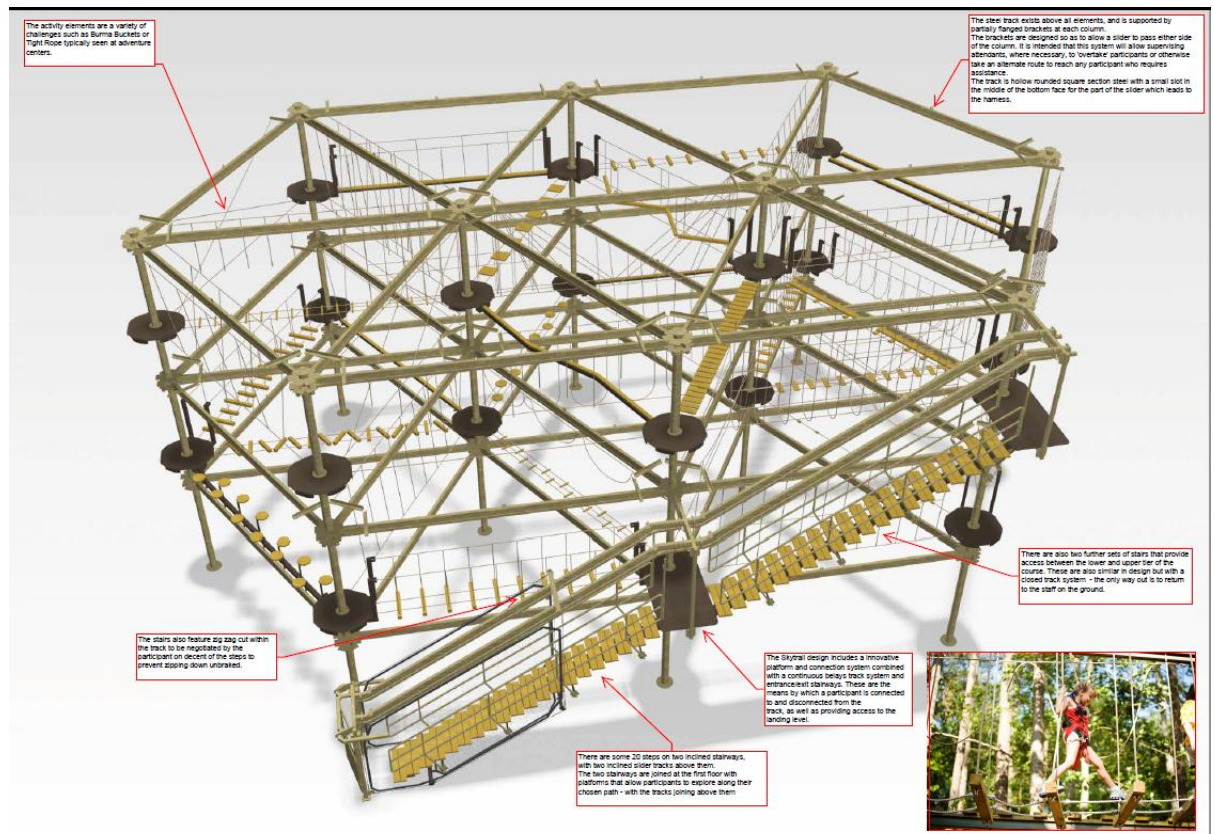
- ECC has an excellent working relationship with Braintree District Council.
- It is already a 'destination park' with good transport links and its existing offer of adventure and sensory play attracts visitors from within a 30 mile radius.
- It is a popular destination for families with children up to the age of 13. The adventure ropes course, whilst designed to be used by all ages and abilities including those with limited mobility, it will increase the facilities on offer to families with teenagers.
- It already has a large number of customers (at least 150,000 a year) and therefore the early success of the new attraction will not have to rely on a specific marketing campaign.
- There are no restrictive covenants on the land and historically local residents have welcomed developments.

The proposal is in line with recommendations made by Vision XS - a leading consultancy in the leisure industry - to create an additional attraction at the park for which customers are willing to pay.

## Procurement Exercise

Three companies were invited to tender and all submitted proposals in response. ECC officers, alongside BDC officers, have undertaken a procurement exercise and have selected a preferred supplier - Innovative Leisure - and their 'Sky Trail' system (image below).

## Innovative Leisure Sky Trail



The Sky Trail offers a unique high ropes adventure course with traditional activity elements, but with distinct advantages over other traditional high ropes courses. It has an overhead continuous belay safety system and has the ability for users to overtake, which reduces bottlenecking and allows continuous circulation. It is a unique shared high ropes experience for the whole family. At no point are participants detached from the rail course or be required to make transitions at height.

As part of this package, it is proposed to provide a ropes course for little ones! The 'Sky Tykes' course is specifically designed for children ranging in age from 2 to 7 years old (up to 1.2 metres in height). This course allows for a parent/carer to accompany their child while they are navigating around the course. The course will enable more users to use it at one time and the

operational costs are lower than the traditional type of course as less staff are required to operate it.

The Sky Trail and Little Tykes trail provides a high ropes experience for the widest possible age range, from 3 years to adults. The offer promotes active recreation and challenges all participants at levels appropriate to their physical fitness and ability.

The scenarios offered to users will potentially improve balance and co-ordination and increase confidence in their ability to overcome challenges. The continuous rail system and the design of the course enables a broad range of abilities to have the opportunity to participate in an adventurous activity without direct supervision. A range of abilities are able to use the course at the same time without causing operational delays and delaying other users on the course.

### **3.2 Location of the New Facility**

It is proposed to locate the equipment in between the Discovery Centre and the 'Bowl' on the hard-standing area currently being used to store woodchip. A Planning Application was submitted to Braintree District Council at the end of December 2014 and a decision is expected by late February/early March.

### **3.4 Financial model**

Following a visit to an existing facility already in operation at the National Watersports Centre in Nottingham, we have made the following assumptions regarding customer take up and are proposing a charge as set out below.

1. 61,000 customers per annum will use the course (60:40 Sky Trail and Little Tykes respectively). Of these 20,000 will be new customers to the park. This will equate to around 100 more cars per week, based on four people in a car, which the existing car parking infrastructure can accommodate.

*The expected visitor numbers reflect a combination of the views of the service combined with figures supplied by an industry provider and validated by the National Water Sports Centre in Nottingham who run an existing facility.*

2. The proposed charges are £10 for adults for up to an hour and £4 for Little Tykes for up to 40 minutes. This is based on benchmarking with the existing operation based in Nottingham.

<b>Capital: Item</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Capital cost	£390,000
<b>Revenue: Item</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Annual operational costs:	
Staff	£ 56,000
Marketing	£ 12,000
Maintenance	£ 5,000
Total	£ 73,000



Forecast annual income (inc VAT) (excluding car parking income)	£493,000
Annual net revenue (net of VAT)	£338,000

ECC has already secured the capital funding to install the Sky Trail course, including Little Tykes and so, subject to the Board's agreement, it is proposed that ECC proceeds with the project on that basis.

In order to build the new facility it is proposed that BDC agrees a new land lease for the proposed location, car parking and access, incorporating the existing café in the Discovery Centre. This would be for a ground rent of £15k from 2015/16 and increasing to £30k in 2016/17, which equates to a 50% reduction in BDC's current revenue contribution of £60k p.a. to ECC by April 2016 over two years.

### 3.5 Management and Operation

Dedicated staff will be recruited and trained specifically to manage the Sky Trail. It is proposed that one additional full time member of staff supplemented with seasonal and casual staff.

An online booking facility will be offered in addition to pay on arrival, and there is scope for integrating the booking of the Artificial Grass Pitch and Multi Use Games Area facilities operated by BDC into this approach.

A marketing budget has been identified to promote the course to draw in new visitors to the park. Special packages will be developed to support this, such as themed packages, birthday parties and youth groups.

### 3.6 High Level Key Milestones

Milestone	Timescale
Procurement process	October to November 2014
Partnership Board	January 2015
Planning process	December 2014 to February 2015
ECC governance	February 2015
Contract awarded	March 2015
Build	March to July 2015
Recruitment of staff	May to June 2015
Commence marketing	May 2015
Go live	End July 2015

### 3.7 Risks

There is a risk that the planning permission would not be approved, and ECC has looked to mitigate this with early engagement with the key stakeholder Great Notley Parish Council who responded favourably to the proposal.

As with any facility of this type, there are always risks associated with health and safety. However, this will be mitigated by formal training of the staff who will manage and operate the facility. In addition, the Sky Trail Course

incorporates a safety system that is unique to this piece of equipment which ensures that the user is harnessed to the equipment from start to finish.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

The Sky Trail and Little Tykes Courses offer customers a unique play experience, with high level thrills and progressive structured challenges that the whole family can experience together in complete safety.

The facilities will help us to further promote and achieve our respective health and wellbeing aims and objectives and enhance the overall status of the park as a first class destination/visitor attraction for leisure and recreational activities along with sports and nature conservation.

## **4.0 PV Panels and Wind Turbine**

### **4.1 Solar Panels**

BDC is seeking funding as part of its 2015/16 capital programme to remove the existing faulty solar thermal panels and replace them with an 18kW 72 panel solar photovoltaic array on the south facing roof elevation of the Discovery Centre, which will generate 17,000kWh/yr. The green electricity generated will be consumed on site. The cost of the system is £30k and offers a 7-8 year payback on the investment.

### **4.2 Replacement Wind Turbine**

In addition, it is proposed to remove the faulty 6kW turbine and replace it with a 20kW turbine on a 20m mast in the same location. This would generate an estimated 45,000kWh/yr. The original 6kW Proven wind turbine has not been in operation for at least 2 years. To repair the turbine would not be cost effective for a number of reasons:-

- The outdated model of turbine does not have available spares and would require comprehensive replacement, along with its inverter, when numerous modern, better performing alternative small scale wind turbines are now available.
- The performance of the original turbine is now hampered by the established landscaping. We have sought the advice of commercial small wind turbine installers who have modelled the site's parameters and determined that a 20kw turbine on a 20m mast is the best for investment and return.

The green electricity generated would be consumed on site. The cost of the system is £76,000 which should be recouped within 7-8 years. Both these projects are being led by BDC and funding is included in the 2015/16 budget.

### **4.3 Indicative Timeline**

The solar panels would qualify as permitted development and planning permission would not be required. Subject to Member approval and the



procurement process, the project can be progressed quickly within 3 months at the start of the new financial year.

The wind turbine will be subject to the same procurement process, but will also require planning permission; it is anticipated that this will take approximately 9 months to complete from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015.

BDC will engage with ECC to sign off the designs prior to installation. Braintree will be responsible for the maintenance.

## **5.0 Recommendations**

It is RECOMMENDED that the Partnership Board:

1. Approves the proposed parking tariff outlined within the report, subject to any changes arising from key stakeholder and public consultation, which can be implemented from April 2015;
2. Confirms that Essex County Council and Braintree District Council may proceed with the land lease and the construction of the Sky Trail & Little Tykes courses (funded by ECC), the Discovery Centre and car parking and access; and
3. Agrees to the installation of PV Panels on the roof of the Discovery Centre and the replacement of the Wind Turbine at the Country Park as outlined within this report.