
Minutes of the meeting of the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held in Committee Room 1 County Hall, Chelmsford, CM1 1QH on Thursday, 23 November 2017

Present:

Councillor Eddie Johnson (Chairman)	Councillor Bob Massey
Councillor Tony Ball	Councillor John Moran
Councillor Mark Durham	Councillor Chris Pond
Councillor Stephen Hillier	Councillor Ron Pratt
Councillor Paul Honeywood	Councillor Andrew Sheldon
Councillor David Kendall	Councillor Julie Young

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Stephen Canning, Ricki Gadsby and from Councillor Wendy Schmitt who was substituted by Councillor John Moran.

2 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Mark Durham declared an interest as the Cabinet Member Deputy to Councillor Susan Barker and any items that may arise related to her portfolio.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 21st September were agreed as an accurate record (subject to two manuscript amendments).

4 Questions from the Public

There were no public questions.

5 Essex Country Parks Overview

Councillor Simon Walsh, Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste was in attendance for this item. He was joined by Steve Bunn, Area Manager, Country Parks Team and Laura Boreham, Development Manager, Country Parks Team.

Councillor Walsh explained Country Parks is a non-statutory function of the County Council and the current focus is on further commercialisation. There are health and wellbeing opportunities that come with green spaces.

Councillor Walsh informed the Committee the locations of the Country Parks should be seen in the context of the issues on the emerging Essex coastal path which will provide opportunities as there are areas within the path of outstanding natural beauty. There are also the strategic walks, such as the Essex Way.

The Essex Country Parks mission statement is *Essex Country Parks aims to promote access to green and open spaces for visitors and residents: to help support their health, provide places to learn, get close to nature and history, and make memories that last a lifetime.*

Councillor Walsh provided a synopsis of each country park to the Committee. In summary:

- Belhus Woods Country Park is ancient woodland with fishing and conservation lakes and is also a working forest. Car parking improvements are under way, and new play equipment and toilets will be available from spring 2018
- Cudmore Grove, located on Mersea Island, is 100 acres of sandy beach with views to the mainland. There are World War II pill-boxes and a 16th Century fort on the site; as well as an area with fossils. There has been investment into a new play area. Visitor numbers have increased with 16,000 additional visitors in July-September 2017
- Danbury Country Park is a 13th Century parkland estate which has had investment on car parking and signage as well as resurfaced footpaths. There are partnership opportunities for food outlets – Essex Outdoors located close by has such facilities
- Great Notley Country Park is one of the newest country parks and is a joint venture with Braintree District Council who were gifted the area as part of the Great Notley housing development. The park has play installations such as Sky Ropes; and a zip wire is to be installed shortly.. The park is very busy with up to 100,000 visitors a year; and has been awarded a Green Flag for the facilities on offer
- Marsh Farm Country Park has 300 acres of grazing marsh and attracts funding as a site of specific scientific interest. There is a privately owned demonstration farm on the site
- Thorndon Country Park is split into the north and south sites and is a site of ancient woodland. The north site houses The Gruffalo Trail and is in partnership with Essex Wildlife Trust who have their countryside centre there. The south site is a place of tranquillity. There has been investment in the toilet facilities at both sites and there are plans to improve the car parking facilities and access. It is one of the busiest country parks with the numbers boosted by The Gruffalo Trail. Barbecues in the summer have a tendency to take over the current car parking facility on the south site; however MITIE security supervises the area and there is plenty of space at the park for other visitors
- Weald Country Park has 500 acres of woodland, lakes, flower meadows of national importance and a deer park. It also houses The Stick Man Trail. Toilets are being installed in readiness for the end of next year. There is some land that backs onto the park currently on the market and if any plans adversely affect the county park Councillor Walsh confirmed he would look at those plans
- Cressing Temple is on land gifted to the Knights Templar in 1137 and holds events such as craft and food fairs and weddings – there

is also a successful tea room on the site. The park utilises volunteers on the upkeep of the walled garden. There are, currently, no capital investments planned

In response to Committee Member questions Councillor Walsh and officers stated:

- He would be meeting with residents adjacent to Cudmore Grove in the next week regarding car parking and the increase in traffic
- Park Run takes place in three of the country parks; but with regard to adult fitness equipment experience suggests it is under-utilised. However, Councillor Massey countered that following a £30,000 conversion in Chelmsford the equipment is well used
- Advertising the country park at Marsh Farm, beyond the demonstration farm attraction does need to be improved with additional signage
- Public transport links are part of discussions going forward
- Putting the demonstration farm into private ownership was the right thing to do but this can be reassessed; and Councillor Walsh committed to provide a written answer as to whether the County could take it back at any stage; however, at present, it is working very well with significant investment from the private operator
- The concerns of Councillor Massey in relation to investment in the country park of Marsh Farm were noted
- County gets permission for the Gruffalo and Stick Man characters, which are carved by the Ranger, on the two sites and this is closely monitored to avoid any deviation. Councillor Walsh undertook to ascertain there was no cost to ECC for this
- County parks have good relationships, in general, with adjacent residents, landowners and businesses and there are regular discussions
- Capital investment at Cressing Temple is a challenge due to the historical nature of the site
- There is not necessarily a great deal of district council input in country parks with the exception of Great Notley Country Park; and conversations with Thurrock UA in relation to Belhus Country Park. The parks are regarded as Essex County Council assets

Other assets the County Council manages are 27 areas of woodland; six mills; and two disused railway lines.

Capital investment in Country Parks has increased from just short of £127,000 in 2014/15 to over £1.7million in 2017/18. There has been a significant increase in visitor numbers from over 625,000 in 2014/15 to in excess of 860,000 in 2016/17 – add to that in the first seven months of 2017/18 visitor numbers are already at 659,000. The parks are now operating at a surplus (there was a deficit up to 2013/14) and this allows for reinvestment. Councillor Walsh paid tribute to Essex Country Parks' staff.

Essex County Parks has a vastly improved website; runs educational visits; and has successful volunteer arrangements and partnerships. The Country

Parks are now becoming destination visits with the key attractions which have been developed.

Councillor Walsh undertook to provide a written response on Hainault Forest Country Parks, which is mostly owned by the LB of Redbridge but maintained under contract to ECC by the Woodland Trust, with regard to the current contracting arrangements.

Councillor Walsh also undertook to provide a written response on the management arrangements of the woodland that is not open to the public. Councillor Walsh accepted a point made by Councillor Pratt in relation to Country Parks needing to become more commercially aware, rather than relying upon car park charges for viability, but reiterated the changing nature of the parks as destination visits. Commercialisation is a direction of travel and some of the parks do host events; however, issues with ancient woodlands and wildlife do need to be taken care of. Councillor Walsh undertook to provide additional information on capital investment planned.

The Chairman stated ECC should be commended for the work undertaken on Country Parks and thanked Councillor Walsh and officers for their presentation.

6 Essex Country Parks: car park charging consultation

Councillor Simon Walsh, Steve Bunn and Laura Boreham continued to be present for this item.

Councillor Walsh stated there is to be a review of car park charging at the Country Parks as there had been no change in charges for quite some time. There should be consideration of the allocation of time slots and reflection upon usage.

The Chairman suggested a discrete Task and Finish Group that could meet on a single occasion in December which should be provided with more detail so recommendations on the consultation could be given to the Cabinet Member. To that end Councillor Johnson stated he would Chair the Group and would be joined by Councillor's Massey, Pratt, Durham and Young.

7 Localism and Subsidiarity Task and Finish Group

Councillor Pond updated the Committee on the work of the Localism and Subsidiarity Task and Finish Group which has met on three occasions and is making good progress. The Cabinet Members for Highways and Transportation (twice), and Culture, Communities and Culture have attended meetings of the Task and Finish Group; and a representative of the Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC) attended the last meeting. The Group will receive a submission from Highways and the EALC which will be a list of projects that could be devolved within the county. There will be a further two meetings of the Group with a report likely to the full Committee with recommendations in January 2018.

8 Place Services And Economic Growth Policy And Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2017/18

The Committee work programme was noted.

9 Date of Next Meeting

The Committee noted that the next scheduled meeting on Thursday, 14 December at 10.30 a.m.

There being no urgent business the meeting closed at 2.20 pm.

Chairman