

Minutes of the meeting of the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held digitally on Thursday, 29 October 2020

Present:

Councillor I Grundy (Chairman)	Councillor S Lissimore
Councillor A Wood	Councillor C Pond
Councillor R Moore	Councillor R Pratt
Councillor A Erskine	Councillor W Schmitt
Councillor S Hillier	Councillor C Weston
Councillor P Honeywood	Councillor D Kendall

1. Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

There were no changes to the membership of the committee since the last meeting.

Apologies were received from Councillor Henderson

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 24th September were approved.

3. Questions from the Public

There were no requests to speak from members of the public.

4. Essex Country Parks and Essex Outdoors – Update

The panel for this item was:

Cllr Simon Walsh, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Action
Sam Kennedy, Director, Environment and Climate Action
Dee O'Rourke, Head of Essex Culture and Green Spaces
Mark Rowley, Commercial Operations Manager
Erica Gilson, Marketing and Business Development Manager

Members received report PSEG/12/20 providing an update on how Essex country parks and Essex Outdoors have fared throughout the pandemic and future proposals to develop the service.

Members received a presentation from officers, key points raised included:

Background:

- ECC manages 8 Country Parks, and 30 woodlands across the county.
- ECC also maintains multiple heritage sites including Cressing Temple Barns, the Jaywick Martello Tower and 5 Mills.
- In a normal year, ECC would see 900,000 visitors annually to the parks, monitored via car parking (note: ECC is unable to record walking visitors, nor is it possible to record visitors to woodlands).
- Country parks deliver a variety of educational and outdoor activities such as Wild Wednesday at Danbury Country Park as well as themed walking trails at Thorndon and Weald Country Parks.
- Cressing Temple Barns ECC's main event site it plays host to a variety of seasonal events, as well as weddings and conferences.

Essex Country Parks - Impact of Covid-19:

- On 22 March 2020 all ECC owned or managed Country Parks were closed. They remained closed for 8 weeks. Containing the spread of the virus and the safety of our staff and volunteers was our top priority.
- Public Rights of Way remained open throughout the lockdown for people to walk and run through the parks.
- Reopening the parks when it was safe to do so was uppermost in our planning. On 21 May 2020 - when COVID safe measures had been put into place for our visitors and staff, all 8 Country Parks were reopened.
- Additional cleaning was undertaken of toilet facilities, car parking machines and high touch areas. Signage was displayed throughout the parks and on social media.
- Access to play equipment was restricted and facilities closed off in order to support social distancing guidelines. On 4 July 2020 play areas in the Country Parks were reopened in line with wider government guidance on play equipment.
- In-park cafes and snack kiosks remained closed until mid-July when a COVID safe operating procedure could be put in place. Cafes are currently offering a take-away service only – this has impacted park income.
- Explorer Pass car parking season tickets were suspended, and an additional 8 weeks given to permit holders to compensate for the time for which the parks were closed.
- Public reaction was positive to the parks re-opening. Many residents had been commenting on social media and messaging us to request that the parks be re-opened to them for exercise and leisure.
- Car parking income from the parks was lost due to the 8-week closure but has been mitigated in part by the exceptionally high number of visitors over the late summer months.
- No Country Park staff were furloughed during the height of the pandemic. Rangers and on-site staff continued to undertake their roles, carrying out maintenance work on buildings and the woodlands.

Marketing and communications:

- The marketing team took a proactive approach to ensure that the public were kept up to date regarding park closures and how ECC was abiding to national restrictions. This information was updated frequently.
- Upon reopening, messaging was carefully crafted to highlight new and incoming restrictions to ensure the safety of visitors to Essex Country Parks.

Essex Outdoors:

- The four Essex Outdoors centres offer high quality outdoor learning opportunities and activities for children and young people across the county and beyond, supporting mental and physical wellbeing.
- The service is mainly used by Essex schools, many of whom come every year, valuing the experiences and skills that Essex Outdoors can offer. Last year the service was used by 129,961 visitors.
- All the centres are accessible to, and well used by, children with disabilities and special educational needs; we also provide opportunities through ECC's Short Breaks for Disabled Children (SBDC) scheme.
- Throughout the year Essex Outdoors also delivers Forest School sessions, First Aid courses, and various professional and technical courses on behalf of national governing bodies including the Royal Yachting Association, British Canoeing, Mountain Leader Training, National Indoor Climbing Award Scheme.

Essex Outdoors – Impact of Covid-19:

- On 20 March 2020 all Essex Outdoors activity centres and The Lock Climbing Wall were closed. Unlike some other activity day suppliers, Essex Outdoors offered those groups or individuals who had to cancel due to COVID-19 with a full refund or option to postpone their booking. Approx. 70 staff were furloughed from June.
- From 25 July 2020 and following advice from Public Health colleagues the activity centres began to re-open to the general public for school holiday activity club bookings and to schools for educational activity days. However, activity levels were low across the summer. Bradwell, which focuses on sailing has remained closed throughout as it is not possible to offer socially distanced sailing.
- Residential stays are still restricted under government guidance and day activities only are being offered until further notice. COVID-safe measures around social distancing and additional cleaning of equipment have been put into place and a groups/ pods system introduced to limit numbers. Signage was displayed throughout the activity centres and a handwashing regime enforced. Three sites have successfully hosted schools in September and October though access to some activities is restricted.
- The peak season for Essex Outdoors runs between May-July so that loss of these weeks has had a significant financial impact this year. We are seeking lost fees and charges under the government's reimbursement scheme.
- School and education bookings are being taken for Summer 2021 for residential trips.

- Summer holiday options such as camping for the general public will be offered during August 2021 for residents as an affordable and low travel option for holidays and short breaks.
- Bookings for next year are currently about the same as previous years but we are awaiting guidance from DfE to confirm whether these will all be able to go ahead.
- Essex Outdoors continue to offer the *Book with Confidence COVID-19 cancellation guarantee*.

Cllr Andy Wood left the meeting at 10:54.

Following the presentation, members of the committee were invited to discuss the item with officers. Key points raised included:

- Uptake of ECC holiday club programmes – this has improved due to Covid cancellation guarantee and assured postponement to next year's programme
- Poor facilities and under-investment at Marsh Farm – like all of ECC's country parks, site improvements will be subject to a bespoke business case once a new commercial strategy for the sites is finalised.
- Frustration around closure of parks throughout the pandemic- This was in line with Govt Guidance to prevent unnecessary car journeys. This was communicated effectively, and rights of way were maintained throughout.
- Reopening of cafes – ECC is cautiously reopening in line with Govt and public health guidance.
- Potential expansion of facilities at Thorndon Park South to generate revenue – members were assured that all options would be explored in the upcoming business case development. Members were invited to be part of this process as it moves forward.
- Second lockdown contingency plan – Members were assured that officers were keeping abreast of emerging guidance and would ensure that parks remained open as long as it was possible and safe to do so.
- Estimated loss of income – around £2.5m from Essex outdoors and £500k from Country Parks – this is unlikely to change significantly through to the end of the year as peak season has come to an end.
- Long term sustainability – Officers discussed the potential to fit solar panels in appropriate spaces and proposals to adapt accessibility to ensure that members of the public did not have to rely on unsustainable forms of transport to access country parks.

5. Date of Next Meeting

The next full committee day was confirmed as Thursday 26th November. This would be a joint meeting with members of the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee, looking at Economic recovery following the Covid-19 pandemic.

6. Urgent Business

None received

7. Urgent exempt Business

None received

Close of meeting

The formal meeting finished at 11.45