

**NOTE OF THE MEETING OF THE GREAT NOTLEY COUNTRY PARK JOINT
VENTURE BOARD HELD AT THE VISITOR CENTRE GREAT NOTLEY COUNTRY
PARK ON 30 MARCH 2010**

Membership:

Councillors:

* Mrs Tracey Chapman Essex County Council (ECC)

Jeremy Lucas Essex County Council (ECC)

* Roger Walters Braintree District Council

Claire Sandbrook Braintree District Council

* Graham Butland Braintree District Council

Officers: * Tim Dixon ECC/Head of Country Parks

* Steve Bunn ECC/county Parks

* Paul Partridge Braintree District Council/Operations
Manager

* Janet Mills Committee Officer ECC

* Graham Hughes Committee Officer ECC

1. Apologies and Substitution Notices

The Committee Officer reported apologies from Councillor Sandbrook (BDC) and Peter Crofts, Corporate Director (BDC).

2. Notes and Minutes from the Previous Meetings

With an amendment to show that Councillor Sandbrook was not present at the July meeting, the notes from the meeting held 17 July and the minutes from the meeting held on 1 April 2009 were agreed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

3. Declaration of Interest

None recorded.

4. Review of Car Parking Charges Great Notley Country Park

The Board received report GTP/01/10 and a presentation from Tim Dixon, Head of County Parks outlining proposals for changes to the existing car parking charge structure and car parking prices.

The Board was advised that Great Notley Country Park had become a well used high profile park for families to enjoy active outdoor informal recreation in the countryside. The provision of the play trail and the investment in the catering provision had attracted a new range of visitors to the park over the last 12 months. The park had on occasions during the school holidays been at capacity.

Through generating income from car parking and secondary spend at the park the net cost of the country park is £60,000.

The current charges for parking at the country park had remained unchanged for 2 years. To ensure the income generated from car parking fees continued to reduce the cost of operating the park the fees required reviewing.

Background

Tim Dixon outlined the background to the pay and display car parking charges. The Board was advised that the Pay and Display Car parking charges were introduced to Essex County Council Country Parks in December 2003 and applied to the car parks at Belhus, Hadleigh, Thorndon, Weald, Danbury, and Cudmore Grove Country Parks. Car parking charges were introduced at Great Notley Country Park in April 2008 following completion of the capital investment project.

Current Charges

The current charges and range of season tickets that could be purchased were outlined to Members. The Board was advised that the pay and display daily charge was £2.00 currently.

The income generated from the current daily charge at Great Notley Country Park in 2009/10 was projected to be £87,000 this represented a 35% contribution toward the costs of running the Park.

Analysis had shown that the income generated from car parking charges varied across the seasons and was directly affected by weather and school holidays.

Satisfaction Levels and visitor profile

Visitor surveys carried out face to face, through comment cards and online provided evidence of high satisfaction levels of visitors.

The park and its facilities provided a different visitor offer depending on the time of year.

- From April to the end of October the visitors using the park at weekends and during school holidays were dominated by family groups.
- The peak use of the park, (though much reliant on the weather), was during school holidays and this has resulted in the overflow car park being full.
- The length of stay of visitors on these days was extending to over 3 hours
- Outside of school holidays and weekends the park has low levels of use.
- The main user groups during these times were dog walkers and parents/guardians with pre school children. There were also organised school groups using the facilities.

To maximise the income from the car parking charges whilst ensuring the park continued to offer value for money it was recommended that a seasonal variation in the car park charges was trialled.

Proposals

Tim Dixon outlined and explained the proposals for seasonal increases to the Pay and Display daily car parking charges. The Board was advised as follows:

It was proposed that the charges should vary in line with the seasonality of the park and the potential value gained from visits at that time of year.

The proposal was to introduce differentiated winter and summer car park charges at Great Notley Country Park. The differentiation should reflect the potential value gained by the customers in line with the seasonality of the country parks.

It was proposed that there should be 2 tariffs used at Great Notley Country Park.

These would be defined as the Autumn/Winter charges and the Spring/Summer Charges.

Autumn/Winter Charge

To be applied from the 1st November or the last day of the October half term whichever is the later.

Weekend charge and school holiday charge 2.50

Winter weekday charge outside of school holidays £1.00

Spring/Summer Charge

To be applied from the 1st April or the first day of the Easter Holiday's, which ever is the sooner.

Weekends and School Holiday charge £3.00

Weekday charge outside of school holidays £2.00

It was estimated that the new charges aligned with the charges with the seasonality of the park would generate an increase of £20,000 income. This was based on visitor numbers in 2010 remaining the same as in 2009.

The Board discussed the matter at length. Whilst it was fully recognised that the Park provided many free facilities and currently provided excellent value for money, (i.e 1 car with 2 adults and 2 children could use all the facilities all day for the cost of £2 daily parking charge), Members wished to ensure that the public would continue to receive the maximum value for money if car parking were to be increased.

Members also discussed at length the following issues:

- The price of car parking charges in other counties.(Hertfordshire car parking charges in country parks cost £5 per day).
- How charges affected dog walkers and others using the park for a walk in the evening would be affected.
- Whether there should be a morning and afternoon car parking charging scheme and how this would be monitored, as the ticket machine would need to be recalibrated each day.
- The proposal had too many variants, not everyone knew when it was a school holiday,
- Concerns regarding raising prices during school holidays

After a full discussion and having evaluated a number of different car parking charge models the following proposal was agreed.

RESOLVED

As from the 1st May 2010

Daily car parking charges at Great Notley Country Park would be seasonally increased as follows:

Summer Charge £3.00 per day from April to 31 October or end of autumn half term school holiday which ever comes first.

Winter Charge £2.00 per day from 1 November to 31 March or to the end of Easter which ever comes first.

Twilight Charge £1.00 per evening (after 4pm during the summer evenings)

5. Update on All Weather Pitches

The Board received report (GTP/02/10) and a brief presentation from Paul Partridge Operations Manager BDC updating the Board on matters related to the all weather football pitches.

The Board was advised as follows:

The Facility

The new 'state of the art' third generation all weather, floodlit artificial grass pitches and multi-use games area (MUGA) that had replaced the old all weather surface were completed in November and formally launched in early December 2009. The MUGA which provided for football tennis basket ball and tennis was free of charge to the public.

The facility which had cost £336K primarily funded by Essex County Council (ECC) with some additional support from Braintree District Council, Great Notley Football Club and Great Notley Parish Council. This was then match funded by the Football Association who approved a grant of £110k against the total cost.

Management and Operation

With regard to management and operation of the facility, Braintree District Council (BDC) were currently responsible for taking bookings, however this function was to be transferred to Essex County Council (ECC) with effect from 1 April 2010, as part of the overall management and operation of the County Park.

A full time caretaker was appointed in February 2010 to undertake maintenance of the facility site security and to meet and greet customers. This was a jointly funded post with ECC as it incorporated the caretaking duties (including cleaning of the Discovery Centre building. The terms and conditions of the post were flexible to allow for the hours worked to be able to coincide with the opening hours of the facility and this had largely been responsible for a significant up take in bookings. In addition the standard of cleanliness within the Discovery Centre itself had shown a marked improvement. These flexible employment arrangements had worked particularly well. It had therefore been decided that this temporary caretakers post will be made permanent and that a further half time post, which had previously been identified in the parks original business case, would now be implemented. This would then allow for seven day per week cover/working arrangements.

Utilisation

There had been no need to carry out any extensive marketing of the facility as it was widely publicised and had been promoted by existing clubs and users.

Currently all evening and weekend slots were being filled on a regular basis.

There had been 347 bookings since the facility opened in December 2009.

Gt. Notley Football Club were dominating the bookings. In future this may need to be managed, as other clubs were now asking about booking spaces. For instance Leighton Orient Youth Academy was now using the facility.

Full bookings were predicted at 6,144 hours per year with a break even figure of 3,602 hours. It was too early to predict how annual usage would compare with the predictions.

Figures presented within the report showed low booking figures for December and January. The Board was advised that this was due to the adverse weather conditions.

Performance

The whole facility had been tested in February and was found to meet the requirements of the specification of both the football Association (community use) and the UEFA.

Income

The aim was to reach breakeven in the first year of operation.

A table showing various levels of usage if breakeven point was not reached was set out in the report. The figures indicated that 81% peak use bookings and 40% off peak bookings were required to reach break even. To make a small income 78% peak use bookings and 62% off peak bookings were required. Whilst bookings had been encouraging and had steadily risen over the first few months of operation. Work would now be undertaken to maximise every opportunity to increase usage, particularly during off-peak periods. Currently schools in the area were being contacted to promote use of the all weather facilities. Local football leagues would now be contacted to promote the facility and commercial organisations would be approached promoting the facility for private inter-company five aside competitions.

In summary Paul Partridge advised the Board that there was no doubt that this new facility enhanced those already to be found at the park. The facility also met the corporate objectives of both ECC and BDC in ensuring that local facilities met local needs and offered increased opportunities for people to live more healthily and improve their quality of life.

6. Gt. Notley Park General Report

The Board received the parks Annual Report from Steve Bunn Park Ranger.

The Board was advised as Follows.

Great Notley County Park had experienced a successful year with around 180,000 visitors using the park over the past 12 months.

The park had been in the public eye on a number of occasions throughout the year including television radio and newspaper coverage. The park had been nominated for awards for good practices in green spaces and for a seasonal event. The park had also become a show case for play equipment country wide.

The park had successfully met its objectives as set out in its 2008/09 management plan and would be submitting an application for the Green Flag ward again this year.

The following work had been undertaken:

Play Equipment

Work and planned projects undertaken through the year included the follow items.

- Drainage.

The drainage projects undertaken through the year had been successful. All pathways were now accessible for visitors to be able to use the play equipment.

- Maintenance and resurfacing works due to high usage around the play equipment had been undertaken.
- Repair of damage and vandalism. There had been very little graffiti though out the year.
- The park had received grant funding from Play Builder for the Installation of a new water play facility aimed at children with disabilities. Work was currently being undertaken. The new facility would be opened in May 2010.

Conservation and Land Management

- Some 2,500 trees had been planted in different areas to create small copses. Some hedgerows had also been restored. Both initiatives would improve the amount of wild life found at the park.
- It was considered that the park had some of the finest grasslands in Essex. Work to maintain the biodiversity in the grass lands had been undertaken. A new machine designed to cut grassland banks had been purchased.

- Grass reseeded had taken place around the play areas to assist re-growth in the areas of high foot fall.

Flitch Way

- In partnership with the Friends of Flitch Way Group, a plant survey had been carried out and a good deal of verge clearance and path widening work had been undertaken. New fencing and gates had been installed using section 106 funding.

The Friends of Flitch Way Volunteer Group

- Greenfield's Housing Trust Grant funding had been used to purchase a wood chipper. Members of the Flitch Way group had received formal training, and had volunteered to help park staff use the equipment in future.
- The Flitch Way Group had made a big impact upon the disused Rayne Railway Station and old signal box sited along the Flitch Way. New notice boards and panels had been installed. The Group had improved the ambiance of the site by planting appropriate flowers such as Fox Gloves and Blue Bells. Members acknowledged that the Café which was sited on the station continued to be a great success with visitors. Members expressed concern that there was a need to consider fencing to ensure people did not fall from the platform. The Board was advised that objections had been raised by local councillors to a previous attempt to fence off the platform. Members asked that the matter be raised at the next Flitch Way Liaison Group Meeting to ascertain what could be done to improve health and safety at the station.

Visitors

There had been a high number of visitors through the year. The catchment area had widened with some of the visitors coming from as far as Greater London and Cambridge.

There were a diverse range of user groups now using the park. These ranged from horse riding groups to husky dog teams. A number of different Charities were now using the park for their fund raising events.

With regard to horse riding in the park Members again raised the issue that horses were leaving the bridle way. Whether wooden barriers should be erected around the bridle areas was discussed.

Steve Bunn acknowledged that this remained a problem and informed the meeting that much work had been undertaken to erect bridle way signage and re-educate riders. The Bridle Way Association had undertaken initiatives to educate local stables and riders. The Association had also undertaken 'guiding' walks.

Events and Activities

The park had held a number of events and activities though out the year some would be repeated and some new events were planned in the coming year.

Halloween

The Halloween event undertaken last autumn had proved a great success and this would be built upon and repeated this year. The Park received the Cursed and 'Screamie Award' for the 2009 event.

Santa in the Park

This event had not been as successful as wished. For this reason the event would be changed this year.

Puddleducks

These had been a particular success and would be run again this year

Education and 'Playground Physics'

These events would be rolled out at local schools

Birthday Parties

These had proved popular and would be run again this year.

World Cup Event June 2010

This was a new event planned for this year. The idea was to promote a family day by inviting families to the park to watch the competition on 'event size' TV screens. The event which would cover the 2 England qualifying games the Quarter, Semi Finals and Final would be well advertised by leaflet drop in the local Great Notley and Whitecourts housing estates, the Parish Magazine, Local football clubs and the Web site. Adults would be charged £4 and Children £2.

Geocache

It was proposed that the park would hold these new technological treasure hunts in the park. The hunt relied upon GPS systems to assist competitors to find 'Geocache' coins that had been hidden. There was world wide interest in the new pursuit.

Climbing Wall

This would be introduced again this year.

Members commended the park rangers and all members of staff at the Park for their hard work which had brought about many successful outcomes through the year.

Catering at Great Notley Country Park

It was acknowledge that the chef at the Park was very talented however the catering remained disappointing. It was noted that the current catering contract was due to end shortly.

5. Date of Next Meeting

Members agreed that meetings should be arranged for the following dates:

Friday	10 September 2010
Monday	31 January 2011
Friday	18 March 2011
Friday	9 July 2011
Friday	2 September 2011