

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE GREAT NOTLEY COUNTRY PARK JOINT
VENTURE BOARD, CAUSEWAY HOUSE, BRAINTREE, WEDNESDAY 3
FEBRUARY 2016 AT 10.00AM**

Present

Councillors:

R Hirst (Chairman)
G Butland
W Schmitt
K Twitchen
S Walsh

Essex County Council
Braintree District Council
Braintree District Council
Essex County Council
Essex County Council

The following Officers were present in support of the meeting:

Tim Dixon	Head of Country Parks, Essex County Council
Emma Woods	Head of Place Services, Essex County Council
Nick Day	Parks and Open Spaces Manager, Braintree District Council
Jennie Duffy	Area Manager, Country Parks Team, Essex County Council
Claire Bunn	Senior Ranger, Great Notley Country Park
Richenda Greenhill	Committee Officer, Essex County Council

1. Apologies and Substitution Notices

The Committee Officer reported apologies for absence from Paul Partridge, Head of Operations, Braintree District Council, Andy Wright, Corporate Director, Braintree District Council and Julie Nash, Head of Delivery Transition, Essex County Council.

Cllr S Walsh offered apologies that he would need to leave the meeting at 11.00am due to another engagement.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes

In considering the minutes of the meeting on 29 April 2015 it was noted that:

- I. Although the Board had not met formally since that date, Members had met informally in July 2015 at the launch of the Sky Ropes attraction and there was regular contact at officer level;

- II. The Head of Country Parks had established a link with Great Notley Parish Council to share good news about the country park and he would be doing the same in relation to Rayne Parish Council (**Action**: Head of Country Parks at Essex County Council (ECC));
- III. The Head of Country Parks had made contact with the Wilderness Foundation for an initial exchange of information. It was agreed that this contact should be carried forward as a continuing action (**Action**: Head of Country Parks at Essex County Council).

The draft minutes of the meeting held on 29 April 2015 were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

The Chairman reported that he would be stepping down from the Board in the near future in order to seek election as the Police and Crime Commissioner for Essex. His place on the Board would be taken by Cllr Kay Twitchen.

4. Site Activity Report

The Committee considered and noted the Site Activity report by the Head of Country Parks and received a verbal progress report. This included:

Staff Changes

- I. Claire Bunn was introduced as the Senior Ranger at ECC with responsibility for Great Notley Country Park and Jennie Duffy as the new Area manager. New members of staff had also been recruited to run the Sky Ropes attraction and had settled in well with the existing team;

Sky Ropes

- II. The Sky Ropes attraction had opened in July 2015. The launch event had gone very well and the attendance of members of the Board had been greatly appreciated;
- III. Initial visitor numbers had been very good and remained encouraging during periods of good weather, but during poor weather they had dropped significantly. It was acknowledged that the visitor numbers contained in earlier projections had been overly optimistic and officers were now revising predictions for future numbers based on the first year of operation;
- IV. Visitor feedback via Facebook had been unanimously positive and was seen as an important marketing tool in encouraging both repeat and new customer visits;
- V. It was expected that Sky Ropes would break even during the current financial year and it was expected to generate surplus revenue of £75-86k during the financial year 2016/17;
- VI. The Junior Ropes Course had proved less busy than anticipated as many younger children were choosing to use the main high ropes course. New ways of promoting and marketing the junior course would be considered in order to increase usage;
- VII. Promotion of the attraction had operated to date in conjunction with the Braintree marketing team and an excellent working relationship existed. It was now also intended for ECC country parks Service to create a full-time marketing post by the end of the current financial year to support marketing initiatives across the whole service.

- VIII. Repeat visitor numbers were not yet available, but it was intended to introduce loyalty cards to help capture this data. Work was also in hand to establish where visitors were travelling from to help direct the focus of future marketing;
- IX. There had been occasional technical difficulties with the automated number plate recognition (ANPR) system operating the car park barrier. So far this had not led to significant numbers of complaints, but officers were mindful of how this impacted on park users' overall experience;
- X. It was anticipated that total visitor numbers for 2015/16 would be in the region of 130-140k which would see Great Notley drop from the second to the third most visited country park in Essex. Thorndon Country Park remained the most popular with over 200k visitors expected, whilst Weald Country Park had moved up to second place due in part to the popularity of the new Stick Man attraction;
- XI. Work on the settling tanks and reed beds was now complete and the existing wood bark around the activity trail attractions had been replaced with tiger bark, a more hard-wearing and efficient alternative. Remedial works had been undertaken on some of the play equipment and it was noted that that this was now ten years old;
- XII. A 'Changing Places' facility for disabled park users and their carers was being added to the Discovery Centre building with access from the ground floor. This would be part-funded by an ECC grant and it was hoped that work would be completed by May 2016. The Board commended this addition to the facilities which would help support full community access to the park. The Head of Country Parks confirmed that the new facility would be proactively marketed;
- XIII. The Park Run initiative had now entered its second year and was showing an increase in the number of both participants and volunteer organisers. Some paths had become muddy due to the higher volume of runners, but the routes would be revised in consultation with the event organisers to allow recovery time to the affected areas and no repair costs were anticipated. The high numbers of return runners was noted;
- XIV. Following discussions with officers the Tamdown construction group had submitted a planning application to create up to an additional one hundred all weather parking spaces within the existing boundaries of the Discovery Centre car park for the use of their employees during business hours. If approved, these spaces would be made available to visitors to the country park at weekends. The Board supported this initiative;
- XV. The café at the Discovery Centre would be operated by Essex County Council staff until the end of February. Tenders to take over the running of the café had been requested by 14 February 2016 with a view to the new operators being in place by Easter. The decision to award the tender would be made by the Head of Country Parks with support from ECC's property team.

5. Great Notley Country Park Strategic Review

The Board received a presentation from the Head of Place Services at Essex County Council on a long-term strategy in relation to Great Notley Country Park, including a proposed approach and timescales.

During discussion, the following issues were highlighted, raised and/ or discussed:

- An officer level workshop had been held on 23 September 2015 which had been attended by delegates from both Essex County Council and Braintree District Council;
- The park had enjoyed increased popularity over time amongst both local residents and visitors from further afield;
- The importance of ensuring affordability in the context of diminishing public funds;
- Acknowledgement that a lot of useful information already existed, but that it needed to be pulled together to produce a more coherent picture. Additional new information would be obtained through a peak period visitor survey which would be carried out in August 2016 and a full year of financial data;
- Cllr Schmitt emphasised that all work on the future direction and shape of Great Notley should ensure that its integrity as a country park was maintained;
- Cllr Butland noted the need to be mindful of Chelmsford City Council's plans in relation to Great Leighs and the interests of Uttlesford District Council in considering the future shape of Great Notley Country Park and he emphasised the need to establish appropriate engagement with both organisations at officer and Member level;
- Braintree District Council (BDC) was working on an open space action plan in relation to Section 106 monies and there would be an on-going dialogue on this issue between the Parks and Open Spaces Manager at BDC and the Head of Country Parks at ECC.

In summing up the discussion, the Chairman noted that work would need to be ready to feed into Essex County Council and Braintree District Council budget considerations by the end of 2016 if any actions were proposed during the financial year 2017/18. To meet this timescale work on developing a vision for Great Notley Country Park would need to take place alongside the collection and analysis of baseline information. Governance arrangements would also need to be agreed by mid-November 2016 in order to tie in with both budgetary and local planning considerations. Discussions would need to take place within that timeframe with interested parties including local district councils and the Wilderness Foundation (**Action:** Head of Place Services, Essex County Council to co-ordinate).

6. Sports Facilities Update

The Committee noted a report by the Parks and Open Spaces Manager at BDC on the use and monitoring of the Artificial Grass Pitch (AGP) and Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA) at Great Notley Country Park in the period 1 April to 31 December 2015.

During discussion, the following issues were highlighted, raised and/ or discussed:

- (i) During the period a total of 42 different football teams representing 19 sports organisations had made use of the sports facilities. This equated to over 1,900 hours of bookings being made during the period;

- (ii) Income over the period amounted to £34,900 which represented an increase of just over 12% on the same period during the previous year. If this income level was maintained for the final quarter of 2015/16 the facility was on course for a total income of £51,990 which would offer an operating profit of around £7,000. All fees and charges were reviewed annually;
- (iii) There had been increased use of off-peak sessions during the period and very positive relationships existed with Great Notley Football Club and Braintree Town Football Club;
- (iv) A number of 'soccability' courses had been offered for young people with disabilities in addition to a programme of holiday football clubs;
- (v) The AGP would probably need replacing in around 2024;
- (vi) Officers from Braintree District Council had attended a Football Foundation Support Day in Chelmsford on 12 November 2015 during which the management and performance of the facility was subjected to close scrutiny by representatives of the Football Association and the Football Foundation. The facilities were awarded a score of 3 on a scale of 1-5 which rated it as 'Good, Meets Expectations'. The next review would take place in 2 years;
- (vii) The AGP and MUGA were now firmly established as a multi-use sports centre and the future direction of the facility would feed into the wider Strategic Review.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The Committee **agreed** that a Member workshop should be arranged for Spring 2016 at the Discovery Centre, Great Notley with a further meeting taking place in July 2016.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 11.20am.

Councillor Roger Hirst
Chairman
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