

**Forward Plan reference number:** Not applicable

<b>Report title:</b> Countryside Stewardship	
<b>Report to:</b> Councillor Graham Butland - Cabinet Member Devolution, the Arts, Heritage and Culture	
<b>Report author:</b> Samantha Kennedy, Director, Environment and Climate Action	
<b>Date:</b> 20 March 2023	<b>For:</b> Decision
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<b>County Divisions affected:</b> All Essex	

## 1. Everyone's Essex

1.1 The Countryside Stewardship scheme's overarching aims are to look after and improve the environment by:

- Conserving and restoring wildlife habitats
- Flood risk management
- Woodland creation and management
- Reducing widespread water pollution from agriculture
- Keeping the character of the countryside
- Preserving historical features in the landscape
- Encouraging educational access

1.2 The Country Parks service plays an important part in the achievement of Everyone's Essex strategic aims, including in Environment, Health and Family commitments. The proposed Countryside Stewardship Agreement aims to support the levelling up of the environment objective by: enhancing Essex's green infrastructure; leading by example in making best practice improvements to important ecological sites; and bringing in a sustainable funding method for these enhancements.

## 2 Recommendations

2.1 Agree to enter into a Countryside Stewardship Agreement with the Rural Payments Agency to receive funding of £447,659, setting out environmental management regimes for Cudmore Grove Country Park, Danbury Country Park, Great Notley Country Park, Hadleigh Country Park (Hadleigh Marshes) and Marsh Farm Country Park, for a period of 15 years.

2.2 To agree to provide match funding of £125,000 to undertake enabling works on site at Cudmore Grove Country Park, Danbury Country Park, Great Notley Country Park, Hadleigh Country Park (Hadleigh Marshes) and Marsh Farm Country Park.

- 2.3 To note that a further Agreement is anticipated covering Belhus Woods Country Park, Hadleigh Country Park (Hadleigh Downs), Thorndon Country Park and Weald Country Park that will be the subject of a separate Decision.

### **3 Background and Proposal**

- 3.1 Land across Essex County Council's (ECC) estate is eligible for schemes attracting funding depending on its use and potential use. ECC's Country Parks have previously been enrolled into Environmental land management schemes.
- 3.2 Currently, some of the land in ECC's Country Parks is registered for 'Basic Payments Scheme' and 'Higher Level Stewardship' grant revenue funding schemes from the Rural Payments Agency (RPA), which stipulate management regimes for specific areas of sites to deliver target environmental outcomes such as increasing biodiversity, improving habitat, and improving natural flood management, and awarding grant revenue annually accordingly.
- 3.3 ECC's Country Parks service is responsible for managing eight Country Parks, along with three linear former rail trails. ECC owns five of the Country Parks and has leases in place for the other three where it does not own them in entirety. The leases for the sites which ECC does not own in entirety permit all of the land management activities, such as management of species-rich grassland at Great Notley Country Park, and management of wet grassland for wintering wading birds and grassland through native breed grazing at Hadleigh Country Park. There are a variety of important statutory designations across these ecologically and historically significant sites including:
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI - habitats / species of national importance for wildlife and geology, irreplaceable parts of national heritage, protected to preserve and prevent damage and development)
  - Special Areas of Conservation (support internationally important habitats)
  - Special Protection Area (international importance for breeding, feeding, wintering or the migration of rare and vulnerable species)
  - Ramsar sites (a Ramsar site is a wetland site of international importance)
  - National Nature Reserve (Colne Estuary - intertidal mudflats at East Mersea)
  - Scheduled Monuments (archaeological sites of national importance)
  - Grade II Registered Park and Gardens (4 x designed landscapes of historic significance, requiring appropriate protection)
  - Conservation Areas (area of notable environmental or historical interest or importance which is protected by law against undesirable changes)
  - Local Nature Reserves (important for wildlife, geology, education, or public enjoyment)
  - Local Wildlife Sites (substantive nature conservation value, identified for nature conservation value, important, distinctive, and threatened habitats and species)

- Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Site (locally designated site of local, national, and regional importance for geodiversity)
- Ancient Woodlands (a woodland that has existed continuously since 1600 or before)
- 849 hectares Priority Habitat (coastal and floodplain grazing marsh, coastal saltmarsh, deciduous woodland, good quality semi-improved grassland, lowland dry acid grassland, wood pasture, lowland meadows, mudflats, reedbeds)

3.4 The Country Parks play an important part in ECC's strategic objectives around the environment, including through its work on Essex's Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the Essex Local Nature Partnership. Country Parks have a critical role in ECC achieving its Local Nature Recovery targets as areas of high value for nature and by connecting adjacent areas of nature.

3.5 It is proposed to enter Cudmore Grove Country Park, Danbury Country Park, Great Notley Country Park, Hadleigh Country Park (Hadleigh Marshes) and Marsh Farm Country Park into the Countryside Stewardship scheme with the RPA. This scheme will allow ECC to obtain funding of £447,659 in return for ECC managing the Country Parks to meet outcomes set by the RPA such as increasing biodiversity, improving habitat, and improving natural flood management. ECC will be required to enter into a Countryside Stewardship agreement with the RPA to confirm the outcomes and works that it will carry out on its sites. Further details of the activities that ECC will undertake are set out in paragraph 3.7 below.

3.6 The proposed Stewardship Agreement will be for 15 years. This is because parts of the Stewardship Agreement terms relate to funding for woodland improvement and this work will take up to 15 years.

3.7 The Stewardship Agreement sets out multiple funded activities that ECC will need to complete over the course of the 15 year agreement term. Funding associated with the activities will be reviewed and paid by the RPA annually in the first 5 years of the Stewardship Agreement. ECC will be required to deliver some activities in less than 15 years such as grassland improvements and scrub control. A brief summary of the key focuses and activities is set out below:

- **Agreement one – 1 January 2023 – 31 December 2027 / 2037 (5 – 15 years)**
  - **Cudmore Grove Country Park** - management of wet grassland for breeding wading birds, including anti-predator fencing.
  - **Danbury Country Park** – restoration of wood pasture and parkland, including veteran tree management and surgery.
  - **Great Notley Country Park** – management of species-rich grassland.
  - **Hadleigh Country Park – Hadleigh Marshes** – management of wet grassland for wintering wading birds, and management of grassland through native breed grazing.

- **Marsh Farm Country Park** - management of wet grassland for wintering wading and breeding birds, management of grassland through native breed grazing, and scrub control around the Scheduled Monument (medieval saltern).
  - **Agreement two – 1 January 2024 – 31 December 2028 / 2038 (5 – 15 years) (note – this is not being presented for approval in this paper)**
    - **Belhus Woods Country Park** – improvement of woodland, ditches of high environmental value, and restoration of species rich grasslands through native breed grazing.
    - **Hadleigh Country Park – Hadleigh Downs** – restoration and management of species-rich grasslands through native breed grazing.
    - **Thorndon Country Park** – primary focus is restoration of historic wood pasture, and subsequent management through native breeds grazing.
    - **Weald Country Park** – restoration of wood pasture and management through native breeds grazing, and management of species-rich grassland.
- 3.8 Enabling works are required at all sites except Great Notley Country Park. They will need to be completed commence the main works required by the Stewardship Agreement.
- 3.9 These enabling works will be undertaken over the first two years of the Stewardship Agreement. The works will include fencing and animal handling facilities which enable or support the management of the land in the agreed ways. Some of the works required can only happen during set times due to ground conditions and/or the potential for seasonal nesting wildlife.
- 3.10 Funding from the RPA will be used to part fund the enabling works. This is one off funding and it will be applied to all planned enabling activities. It is anticipated that this will cost £213,321, with the RPA offering one off grant funding of £116,129 towards this and ECC funding £125,000. The ECC amount contains a contingency because of potential inflation and variation from initial officer cost estimates through the procurement process. The enabling works will be procured in accordance with ECC procurement policy and a decision taken on entering into the arrangements in a separate Decision.
- 3.11 ECC will put in place a process of monitoring and management to ensure that ECC stays within the funding allocated by the RPA and that it does not spend in excess of the allocation. If costs exceed the funding ECC will be liable to meet these costs. The management process will mean any risks are identified and addressed at the earliest opportunity. In order to ensure the successful delivery of the required level of works and associated outcomes to meet the necessary criteria set out by the RPA, these Agreements have been designed in close cooperation with Natural England advisors, the government’s adviser for the natural environment in England. Proposed works, which are required to

unlock some of the one-off and annual grant funding, could be delayed or not delivered against, which could lead to lower than anticipated receipts.

- 3.12 ECC must ensure that it is compliant with the terms of the RPA funding. Under the terms of the Countryside Stewardship Agreement the RPA reserves the right to claim back against any works or management activity which is not completed to their satisfaction.
- 3.13 In addition to both the environmental and financial benefits of entering into a Countryside Stewardship Agreement, there are other benefits. These include ECC leading by example in its green space management, improving accessibility for visitors within woodland areas all year round, and providing education and engagement opportunities for Country Parks visitors regarding climate and biodiversity matters.
- 3.14 ECC has the legal right to apply for environmental land management funding for the five Country Parks that it owns, along with the contractual rights to apply for Great Notley and Hadleigh Country Parks, which are owned and part-owned by Braintree District Council and The Salvation Army respectively.
- 3.15 It is possible that ECC will cease the Countryside Stewardship Agreement before the 15 year term of the agreement has expired and this right is linked to the rollout and detail of Defra's new Environmental Land Management Schemes that are relevant to these sites. The RPA have confirmed that organisations will be able to move or migrate onto these new schemes if they are more lucrative.
- 3.16 The Countryside Stewardship Agreement covers the funding for the enabling works of £116,129 and funding of £331,530 from the RPA that is linked to ECC achieving the outcomes set out in the Countryside Stewardship Agreement. A total of £447,659 will be available over the first five years of the Agreement period, to fund the delivery of the required management activities.

## **4 Links to our Strategic Ambitions**

- 4.1 This proposal links to the following aims in the Essex Vision:
  - Enjoy life into old age
  - Strengthen communities through participation
  - Connect us to each other and the world
- 4.2 Approving the recommendations in this report will have the following impact on the Council's ambition to be net carbon neutral by 2030:
  - This project contributes towards ECC's ambitions surrounding carbon neutrality by ensuring sites are managed in an optimal way for environmental outcomes, including the use of native breeds for more sustainable grazing wherever possible, reducing the need for mechanical intervention in the medium and long term.

4.3 This report links to the following strategic priorities in the Organisational Strategy 'Everyone's Essex':

- A high quality environment

## 5 Options

### 5.1 Do nothing – continue with existing management plans and funding schemes (not recommended).

5.1.1 The sites being proposed for inclusion in this Agreement are no longer in the 'Higher Level Stewardship' scheme with the RPA, which also stipulated management methods and environmental outcomes for parts of the sites, following their Agreements coming to the end of their term. Sites cannot enter into new 'Higher Level Stewardship' Agreements as this scheme is closed to new applications pending the introduction of a new suite of land management funding schemes. As such, there is no additional external funding to support the environment management of these sites, other than the 'Basic Payments Scheme', which currently still awards some basic grant funding to landowners for eligible land owned on an annual basis, without entering into a Countryside Stewardship Agreement. ECC can continue to access the 'Basic Payments Scheme' for its eligible land whilst the scheme is still operational, regardless of whether it also has a Countryside Stewardship scheme Agreement on place or not.

5.1.2 This option would require no ECC one-off investment but equally would attract no one-off investment from the RPA and would not generate any additional grant revenue to be reinvested in delivering environmentally focused management outcomes. This represents a missed opportunity to receive £116,129 in one-off investment from the RPA, and at least £331,530 in grant payments to offset management costs over the initial five-year Agreement period.

5.1.3 Officers will continue to explore options and opportunities with other external funding sources, including surrounding Biodiversity Net Gain and related schemes, payments for translocation of species, and carbon sequestration. The revenue potential for this is currently not known.

### 5.2 Enter into a Countryside Stewardship Agreement for sites with 'Site of Special Scientific Interest' (SSSI) unfavourable designations only (not recommended).

5.2.1 A reduced scale version of a Countryside Stewardship Agreement could be entered into for the Country Parks with SSSI designations that are in 'unfavourable' condition (Hadleigh Downs and Thorndon), along with those where their current 'favourable' condition is at risk of becoming 'unfavourable' without investment in enabling infrastructure for animal grazing, such as fencing and animal handling facilities (Cudmore Grove). Neither Hadleigh Downs nor Thorndon SSSI's can be entered into an Agreement now due to ongoing



'Higher Level Stewardship' Agreements, so it would only be Cudmore Grove Country Park's Countryside Stewardship Agreement that would proceed in this scenario.

5.2.2 This reduced scale version is not recommended as, although there would still be positive environmental gains that could be achieved, which could also in turn attract funding, it is considered that this represents an opportunity missed to make larger impacts, to demonstrate ECC's commitment to positive environmental and climate action, as well as not addressing several matters which Natural England and the Forestry Commission, both governmental bodies within Defra, expect to see ECC improve and enhance.

5.2.3 This option would require £19,510 ECC one-off investment, attract £31,667 one-off investment from the RPA, and generate £39,201 over the initial five-year Agreement period.

### **5.3 Enter into a Countryside Stewardship Agreement as detailed (recommended option).**

5.3.1 It is proposed to enter into the Countryside Stewardship scheme for Danbury Country Park, Cudmore Grove Country Park, Great Notley Country Park, Hadleigh Country Park and Marsh Farm Country Park. This will enable these Country Parks to be managed in an optimal way for both environmental and cultural heritage benefit, and involves entering into a 15-year Agreement with the RPA which stipulates environmental management inputs, with most of the component parts having 5-year terms.

5.3.2 As detailed in 6.1, this option would require up to £125,000 in ECC one-off investment, attract at least £116,129 in one-off investment from the RPA, and generate at least £331,530 over the first five years of the Agreement period, to fund the delivery of the required management activities.

## **6 Issues for consideration**

### **6.1 Financial implications**

6.1.1 Essex County Council wants to manage its land for enhanced environmental outcomes and this can be delivered through the Country Parks estate. The RPA can award grant funding to support these aims through us entering into a Countryside Stewardship Agreement with them. ECC and the RPA will both invest a one off amount, profiled over 2022/23 and 2023/24 to carry out a number of activities already determined in conjunction with the RPA that improve the Country Parks' infrastructure to enable management of the land in a more environmentally minded manner. This will subsequently generate an annual grant receipt from the RPA of £66,306 until 2027/28 to offset the costs incurred in maintaining and managing the land in the optimum way from an environmental and climate perspective.

6.1.2 ECC have worked with the RPA and determined the works to be carried out and the associated funding required. The Agreement for which approval is sought in this paper involves one off expenditure of £213,321, with the RPA offering one off grant funding of £116,129 towards this and ECC funding £125,000. The ECC amount contains a contingency because of potential inflation and variation from initial officer cost estimates through the procurement process.

Location	2022/23 Activity	One Off Contributions					ECC £ Total	RPA £ Total
		ECC £	RPA £	2023/24 Activity	ECC £	RPA £		
Cudmore Grove Country Park, Colchester	Ditch restoration and hedgerow coppicing	1,968	2,592	Fencing and animal handling and welfare facilities	17,542	29,075	19,510	31,667
Danbury Country Park, Chelmsford	Veteran tree surgery	600	600				600	600
Hadleigh Country Park (Hadleigh Marshes), Castle Point				Fencing and animal handling and welfare facilities	33,883	30,482	33,883	30,482
Marsh Farm Country Park, Chelmsford				Ditch restoration, sluice reinstatement, fencing and animal handling and welfare facilities	43,198	53,380	43,198	53,380
<b>Total</b>		<b>2,568</b>	<b>3,192</b>		<b>94,624</b>	<b>112,937</b>	<b>97,192</b>	<b>116,129</b>
Contingency		735			27,073		27,808	
<b>Initial Investment</b>		<b>3,303</b>	<b>3,192</b>		<b>121,697</b>	<b>112,937</b>	<b>125,000</b>	<b>116,129</b>

6.1.3 Essex County Council will meet the initial investment costs by utilising £125,000 of Public Health grant funding over 2022/23 (£3,303) and 2023/24 (£121,697). This activity meets the terms and conditions of the Public Health grant as Country Parks support physical activity, weight management and mental health agendas.

6.1.4 Assuming all agreed works are completed, ECC will then receive £66,306 annually from 2023/24 to 2027/28 which is to be re-invested into environmental and climate management works at these sites, offsetting the costs for the management regimes. Annual payment is contingent on successful delivery of specific management activities, linked to the funding Agreement, and this will be periodically audited by Natural England, on behalf of the RPA.

6.1.5 A full breakdown of how the annual grant income will be used is shown in the table below:



Location	Summary of management	2023/24 £	2024/25 £	2025/26 £	2026/27 £	2027/28 £
Cudmore Grove Country Park, Colchester	Management of wet grassland for breeding wading birds, including anti-predator fencing	7840	7,840	7,840	7,840	7,840
Danbury Country Park, Chelmsford	Restoration of wood pasture and parkland, including veteran tree management and surgery	9,190	9,190	9,190	9,190	9,190
Great Notley Country Park, Braintree	Management of species-rich grassland	614	614	614	614	614
Hadleigh Country Park (Hadleigh Marshes), Castle Point	Management of wet grassland for wintering wading birds, and management of grassland through native breed grazing	23,159	23,159	23,159	23,159	23,159
Marsh Farm Country Park, Chelmsford	Management of wet grassland for wintering wading and breeding birds, management of grassland through native breed grazing, and scrub control around the Scheduled Monument (medieval saltern)	25,503	25,503	25,503	25,503	25,503
<b>Total</b>		<b>66,306</b>	<b>66,306</b>	<b>66,306</b>	<b>66,306</b>	<b>66,306</b>

6.1.6 ECC is not legally committed to proceeding with any works should there be unacceptable cost rises, however this would mean a reduction in ongoing grant income. Funding claimable per activity is a pre-agreed amount or proportion, thus if the activity can be completed for less, RPA will not seek to claw back any funding; it can be used in the Country Parks.

## 6.2 Legal implications

6.2.1 ECC will be required to enter into a formal legal agreement setting out the terms of the funding for Countryside Stewardship. This is for 15 years and will mean that ECC will have to ensure that it complies with the terms for this period of time.

6.2.2 If ECC does not meet the terms of the funding it will be required to repay the funding.

## 7 Equality and Diversity Considerations

7.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:

- (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
- (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

- 7.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. The Act states that ‘marriage and civil partnership’ is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).
- 7.3 The Equalities Comprehensive Impact Assessment indicates that the proposals in this report will not have a disproportionately adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic

## 8 List of Appendices

Appendix A – Equalities Comprehensive Impact Assessment

## 9 List of Background papers

None.

<b>I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report.</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Councillor Graham Butland, Cabinet Member for Devolution, the Arts, Heritage and Culture</b>	27.03.2023

### In consultation with:

<b>Role</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Executive Director, Corporate Services (S151 Officer)</b>	12.01.2023
<b>Stephanie Mitchener on behalf of Nicole Wood</b>	
<b>Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer)</b>	20.03.2023
<b>Laura Edwards on behalf of Paul Turner</b>	