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| <b>AGENDA ITEM 6</b>  |  |
| <b>EDEH/09/13</b>   |  |
| <b>Committee:</b>   | <b>Economic Development, Environment and Highways Policy &amp; Scrutiny Committee</b>              |
| <b>Date:</b>  | <b>21 March 2013</b>   |
| <b>SCRUTINY REVIEW ON COUNTRY PARKS (Minute 6/ August 2012)</b> |  |
| <b>Enquiries to:</b>  | <b>Christine Sharland, Governance Officer<br/>01245 430450<br/>christine.sharland@essex.gov.uk</b> |

In August 2012 (Minute 6) the Committee approved the Task and Finish Group's final scrutiny report on Country Parks, which was focussed on Phase 1 of the project looking at the future of Cressing Temple and Marsh Farm. The Committee had visited the sites in March 2012, and the Group had considered the opportunities for these particular sites in the future. It was also confirmed that the Group would reconvene to input into Phase 2 of the Council's project to consider other Country Parks.

Following the Committee's meeting on 17 January Members of the original Task and Finish Group met the country parks project team to discuss a range of options available for the County Council's future management of country parks across Essex. A note of that meeting is attached at the Appendix to this report.

**Action required by the Committee:**

**The Committee is requested to note the Task and Finish Group's recent engagement in Phase 2 of the Country Parks Project.**

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## Appendix

### Notes of Country Parks Task & Finish Group meeting held on Thursday 17 January 2013

#### In attendance:

##### Members

Simon Walsh, Chairman  
Barry Aspinell  
David Kendall  
John Roberts

##### Officers

Olivia Shaw, Fast Track Manager,  
Tim Dixon, Head of Country Parks  
Julie Nash, Operations Manager – Country Parks  
Julie Ellis, Change Director  
Christine Sharland, Governance Officer  
Sophie Campion, Committee Officer

#### Phase 1 Update

The Marsh Farm attraction part of the site had progressed through to a successful tenant for the lease subject to Cabinet approval. The anticipated start date would be the 1 April 2013.

Crossing Temple had resulted in an unsuccessful procurement and this opened up an opportunity to explore the options further and go back to the interested parties to see why some had not progressed through the process. Initial focus would be on marketing the opportunity for the catering concession.

#### Phase 2

Will look at Great Notley, Cudmore Grove, Danbury, Belhus Woods, Thorndon & Weald Country Parks. The presentation outlined key data for each of the Parks, including size, visitor numbers, facilities, current partners/stakeholders, gross income & gross expenditure.

The net costs, currently £350k, would have been £1million prior to charging for car parking.

The presentation set out examples from other Local Authorities and Third Sector organisations, with a wide variety of models and experiences.

#### Question 1 – How do we want to take ownership of the Country Parks forward?

Members considered that ECC should retain ownership of the Country Parks and keep overall control.

The Parks should keep the principle of their current environment and local facilities and any commercial development should take place within that principle. There was a recognised need to make money but without affecting the environment or access to the Park.

The appropriateness of options for each Park should fit the landscape.

**Question 2 – What are our priorities when managing the Parks?**

Health & Wellbeing and opportunities to link with health authority budgets.

A lot of people are not aware of the facilities and some can be difficult to access via public transport.

There is a need to ensure that literature is available where applicable, such as where sites have trails to follow.

**Question 3 – Is it essential that we keep our Parks as ECC managed, branded and marketed assets?**

Members considered that Parks should be looked at on an individual basis in this regard. One view was that it did not matter who managed the Park as long as the responsibility was clear if something went wrong.

For restaurants ECC should be looking for tenants. Whereas partnerships were appropriate for other aspects.

Options for an added experience at the Park should be considered to enhance the visitor's experience as long as it didn't adversely affect the overall environment.

**Question 4 – What balance do we want to strike between the Parks as visitor attractions and community assets?**

Members felt that it was important to encourage attendance from a wider area, whilst balancing this with local people feeling that it is their Park too.

The volunteer base should be encouraged so as not to lose them.

Any proposals put forward for each Park should involve local Members and consultation.

Investment would be needed to make money backed up by a business case.

**Conclusion:**

It was clarified that there would not be the necessary capital to keep investing but ECC wants to safeguard options for the Parks.

The next stage of the process would be to apply a SWOT analysis for each Park and bring that back to the Group for consideration.

- A short report would be submitted to the March meeting of the EDEH P&S Committee to report on the Group's activities so far.

- The next meeting of the Group would be arranged for April 2013 to consider the SWOT analyses. The Chairman would meet with officers in the meantime if necessary.
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