

Re-opening of Essex Country Parks cafés in response to COVID-19

Forward Plan reference number: 'Not applicable'

Report title: Re-opening of in-house managed cafés at Essex Country Parks in response to COVID-19	
Report to: Councillor Simon Walsh, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Action and Mark Carroll, Executive Director, Place and Public Health	
Report author: Samantha Kennedy, Director Environment and Climate Action	
Date: 8 July 2020	For: Information
Enquiries to: Dee O'Rourke, Head of Culture, Heritage, Tourism and Green Spaces	
County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report sets out the next stage to the ongoing phased re-opening of Essex County Council's Country Parks, in order to effectively support government guidance regarding social distancing. The intention is that we continue to increase access to the Country Parks in a considered way to ensure the safety of our staff and visitors.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To introduce the gradual re-opening of café and kiosk facilities, in line with national government guidance, focusing on take-away provision, commencing from Monday 13 July 2020.

3. Summary of issue

- 3.1 On 22 March 2020 Essex County Council took the decision, in response to the Coronavirus pandemic, to close its car parks and facilities buildings at all ECC Country Parks, to ensure the safety of its staff and visitors. This was in line with national guidance around gatherings and social distancing and was in direct response to scenes of overcrowding in Country Park car parks, and large groups in open spaces where people were unable to maintain social distancing. ECC's Country Parks are generally accessed by car, unlike local city parks, and this approach avoids unnecessary journeys.
- 3.2 On 18 April 2020 Robert Jenrick, the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government, stated that all parks should be open in order that residents could access green spaces and places to exercise. On 24 April, the Minister wrote directly to ECC to request we open our Country Parks.
- 3.3 We nevertheless continued with our policy and the Country Parks remained closed. During this time, residents were able to access the Country Parks near them, on foot or by bike, using the public rights of way within the parks. ECC's other green spaces include some 30 woodlands and ex-landfill sites and have

Re-opening of Essex Country Parks cafés in response to COVID-19

remained open to the public throughout the lockdown phase. ECC encouraged residents to avoid unnecessary travel and use woodland sites and open spaces close to their homes and enjoy these whilst practising social distancing.

- 3.4 On 11 May 2020, Government issued new guidance, stating 'Day trips to outdoor open space, in a private vehicle, are permitted. You should practice social distancing from other people outside your household.' On this basis Country Parks' car parks and toilet facilities re-opened on Thursday 21 May, with additional controls in place to maintain the safety of staff and visitors. The opening hours of the car parks and facilities were limited from 8am - dusk to 9am - 5pm to reduce numbers during the initial phase and to ensure controls proved effective.
- 3.5 Opening hours of the Country Parks' car parks and toilet facilities successfully reverted to 'Business as Usual' hours of 8am – dusk from Thursday 11 June. At the same time, third party tenants and partners were invited to re-open, pending appropriate risk assessments and controls being in place and being in line with wider Government guidance. ECC managed cafés remained closed however to ensure the re-opening continued in a phased and controlled manner.
- 3.6 ECC plans to begin re-opening its ECC managed cafés and kiosks, and introduce catering vans, for take-away provision only from Monday 13 July.

4. Expanded Re-Opening Phase

- 4.1 ECC will begin re-opening its in-house cafés and kiosks, and introduce two catering vans, for take-away provision, from Monday 13 July.
- 4.2 ECC's catering provision will include the following:
 - Café at Belhus Woods Country Park
 - Café at Weald Country Park
 - Café at Great Notley Country Park
 - Kiosk at Cudmore Grove Country Park
 - 2 x catering vans to be deployed where need is greatest or support events.

In addition, there are the following third-party tenants and partners with cafés and tea rooms at some of our Country Parks, some of whom are already operational again:

- Essex Wildlife Trust at Thorndon Country Park, North
 - The Salvation Army Tea Rooms at Hadleigh Country Park
 - The Booking Hall Café at Rayne Station along Flitch Way, near Great Notley Country Park
 - Tiptree Tea Room at Cressing Temple Barns
 - Phoebe's Pantry and Cake Shop at Marsh Farm Country Park
- 4.3 Risk assessments have been produced for staff to return to ECC buildings, and detailed risk assessments will also be produced and refined for the specific

Re-opening of Essex Country Parks cafés in response to COVID-19

risks faced at each outlet. Training will take place with all staff by way of a 'return to work' and to ensure all staff are aware and understand the new ways of working and all additional controls in place.

- 4.4 Cafés will have strict restrictions on the number of people allowed inside at any time. As members of the public are welcomed inside an outlet, careful consideration will be given to visitor flows and separate entry and exit. The exact detail of this will vary site to site depending on the layout of the outlet, relative ease or difficulty of encouraging social distancing, and offer.
- 4.5 All staff working in cafés and catering vans will wear appropriate PPE in accordance with guidance provided by ECC's Public Health Consultants, to protect members of the public as well as to provide visible assurance to prospective customers. Customers will be asked to remain socially distanced when queuing and only one person will be allowed to approach the serving counter at any one time. Perspex screens are to be installed within café serving points, although catering van hatches are high enough that social distancing can be achieved without the need for an additional screen.
- 4.5 The toilets at Country Parks continue to be monitored by site staff, ensuring that social distancing measures are adhered to and the numbers of people accessing the facilities is limited at any one time. The toilets will also continue to be cleaned twice daily which has been working well.
- 4.6 There continues to be extensive signage displayed across all the parks and barrier tape where necessary to cordon-off any out-of-access areas. The signage sets out clearly that social distancing measures remain in place and that people should adhere to Government guidance regarding socialising.
- 4.8 Ensuring that communications remain clear about the social distancing and safety controls remains essential, to ensure that members of the public are aware of the reduced facilities available at the sites, the revised social distancing requirements and the possibility of limited access to the sites if they reach capacity.
- 4.9 A detailed communications plan is attached, see Annex 2.

5. Next steps

- 5.1 Communications will start to be issued ahead of Monday 13th July 2020 confirming the start of the re-opening our cafes at our Country Parks across our websites and social media channels.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 **Expenditure on staffing**– due to ECC's corporate approach regarding continuing to pay 'as and when' and Matrix colleagues throughout the pandemic, the catering staff will return to post from redeployment, in line with the current expenditure forecast.

Re-opening of Essex Country Parks cafés in response to COVID-19

Great Notley Country Park will require new staffing as the café returns in-house, in line with the 2020/21 budget assumptions.

- 6.2 **Contracted cleaning costs will not increase** – a contract was placed with Mitie for contracted cleaning of toilet facilities twice per day for 3 months upon parks re-opening. There is no additional requirement to this order.
- 6.3 **Car parking income**– by re-opening more of the facilities, the parks should enhance visitor numbers, in turn driving an increased car parking yield to that closer to the budget
- 6.4 **Catering income and net income** – as per 6.1, with the exception of Great Notley Country Park staff costs have been incurred throughout the lockdown period. Re-opening the catering facilities will generate an external income contribution to offset this cost. The internal catering management has recently been reviewed and it is currently under a standardisation programme to offer a ratified menu and offering across the country park estate.

Reopening the facilities will be done on a “soft-start” menu basis allowing optimum returns from a reduced offering initially, in order to comply with the government guidelines, and allow the new catering offering time to establish. Forecast revenue and recovery will follow as the catering team deliver the new menu and understand the visitor acceptance of the reduced options only in the short term.

The value of catering staff anticipated to be recovered is £5,500 per week across all the sites/vans.

7. Risk management implications

- 7.1 Staff will receive ‘return to work’ training as required across ECC, adapted for COVID-19 and inclusive of any and all site specific and job specific training required, in line with the risk assessments.
- 7.2 Risk Assessments have been produced for all outlets and will be updated following approval of this paper.
- 7.3 There is a risk of social distancing guidelines not being adhered to, and of other anti-social behaviours. It should be noted however that staff cannot and must not enforce social distancing, only encourage it. Signage is in place throughout the Country Parks and there is an emphasis on visitors’ personal responsibilities as well.
- 7.4 There is a risk that visitors will not use catering outlets as frequently as before the pandemic, this risk is mitigated by ECC already paying the staff who will be working in the outlets, thus meaning a profit position, in terms of comparing operating against not operating, focuses on income against cost of sales.

Re-opening of Essex Country Parks cafés in response to COVID-19

Annex 1. Country Parks Recovery Plan – Updated 12/06/2020

No.	Proposed Measure	Benefits/Issues/Further info	Responsible	When	Status
1.	ECC Country Parks' cafés will begin re-opening from Monday 13 July 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This date is reliant on being able to bring staff back to the buildings in adequate time to assess and prepare the site specific control measures. Great Notley catering outlet is a new ECC offer, having been brought back in house before lockdown. 	Head of Service / Ops Managers	13-07-2020	Live
2.	Produce Staff Guidance notes and Generic Covid Risk Assessment (RA) for Staff: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dealing with members of the public Clarity on staff responsibilities and behaviours H&S advice Corporate First Aid advice Work related Violence Policy Corporate Comms Guidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Park Operations Managers to produce Guidance Notes and site specific Covid-19 RA. 	Ops Managers, MR	19-06-2020	Complete
3.	Rotas to be produced to reflect the desire to limit number of staff working on the same shifts in the same outlets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operations Managers to produce and finalise rotas with site staff. 	Ops Managers, PDMs	26-06-2020	Complete
4.	Parks and outlets will be managed in line with social distancing guidance and staff will not engage in any close contact or confrontation with the public.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff will remain 2m away from their colleagues and members of the public at all times. Distancing markings displayed on the floor where practicable. If members of the public become confrontational the advice is to walk away and contact the police on 999 or 101. All Staff to be supplied with ECC Work-Related Violence Policy. ECC Customer Behaviour Posters to be displayed at all sites and in all outlets. 	Ops Managers, PDMs	Ongoing	Live

Re-opening of Essex Country Parks cafés in response to COVID-19

No.	Proposed Measure	Benefits/Issues/Further info	Responsible	When	Status
5.	Toilet Facilities will remain open for the public.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Toilets will be cleaned 2 times daily by contractors. Park Staff to open toilets at 8am and supervise queuing during busy periods. Signage installed at entrances to toilets to encourage social distancing when using toilet facilities. Spray paint markings where practical at 2m to be deployed to encourage SD queuing for toilets. Toilets will be locked at dusk, or earlier if specific local issues arise around social distancing or anti-social behaviour. 	Mitie, PDMs	Ongoing	Live
6.	First Aid. ECC corporate Information for First Aiders – advice on CPR and Covid-19 will be supplied to all First Aiders across the service.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All First Aiders have a “Duty of Care” to protect individuals but in the first instance must protect themselves. 	Trained First Aiders	Ongoing	Live
7.	<p>Country Parks have been advised by ECC Public Health Consultants that CP Staff are to practice 2m social distancing and as such PPE is not essential for staff safety.</p> <p>Surgical face masks and gloves are to be worn by catering staff in some instances due to the additional risks, and perceived risks, involved with food production and handling.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standard surgical face mask (not fluid resistant) advised for food preparation by ECC Public Health Consultant. 	DS, Ops Managers, PDMs	13-07-2020	Live
8.	All Country Parks have a direct contact number with a Beat Officer, Police Liaison Officer or Safer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All but one site has had difficulty obtaining direct numbers for police and have been advised to phone 101. 	PDMs	12-05-2020	Completed

Re-opening of Essex Country Parks cafés in response to COVID-19

No.	Proposed Measure	Benefits/Issues/Further info	Responsible	When	Status
	Neighbourhood Team Officer who covers the Park.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Park Staff have had a very low response rate from police attending sites and moving on the public when on site. 			
9.	All activities that breach Government guidance and do not cease when addressed by rangers, will be reported by site staff to the police with a Crime Ref Number obtained for Parks records.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Police may not be able to attend. 	PDMs	Ongoing	Live
11.	Great Notley visitor centre air flow system isolated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Isolated to reduce risk further, although system draws fresh in from outside so risk considered low. 	PS	21-05-2020	Completed
12.	Third party tenants and partners permitted to recommence trading activity at Country Parks with immediate effect, including cafés, subject to specific Government guidance relating to their trade and/or activities, and Risk Assessments being shared which detail controls and social distancing measures being adopted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Risk Assessments required from all tenants proposing to recommence. 	Ops Managers, PDMs	Ongoing	Live

Re-opening of Essex Country Parks cafés in response to COVID-19

Communications Plan

i	<p>OVERVIEW & AUDIENCE</p> <p>This communication plan specifically relates to the Country Parks' cafés owned and operated by ECC under the Explore Essex brand. The proposed communication plan has been drawn up in conjunction with EE operational areas and had been designed to ensure that timely and accurate communications are delivered.</p> <p>Key stakeholder groups (the 'audience') are identified as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff – Country Park and café staff • Staff – all ECC • General Public
ii	<p>COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY</p> <p>It is imperative that messages are consistent across all stakeholder groups and that communication around the re-opening of Country Parks is managed in a way which supports the maintenance of public order, protects infrastructure in and around the sites and most importantly, ensures the safety of our site staff and visitors.</p>
iii	<p>INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS</p> <p>Internal communications are crucial to ensuring that a consistent message is delivered by all representatives of ECC. Corporate Communications will therefore be a key stakeholder in ensuring that the messages agreed in the comms plan are cascaded to all staff, particularly anyone who may be 'customer' facing.</p>
iv	<p>EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS</p> <p>External communications will be limited in the first instance to email bulletins, website updates and social media posts and a press release from central communications.</p>
v	<p>KEY MESSAGES</p> <p>The key messages to be included in communications to the public are as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <p>1. ECC managed cafés and kiosks to re-open</p> <p>Not all Country Parks have an ECC managed catering outlet and communications will need to be clear if any third party outlets are not re-opening.</p> <p>Social Distancing</p> <p>Social distancing should be adhered to at all times, members of the public are asked to remain 2m apart from anyone outside of their immediate household.</p> <p>2. Toilet facilities</p> <p>Toilet facilities will be open and we have implemented an enhanced cleaning regime.</p> <p>3. No BBQs</p> <p>BBQs will not be allowed at <u>any</u> of our sites until further notice.</p> <p>4. Car parks will be open, but we will encourage payment via contactless.</p> <p>In order to help reduce the amount of contact with our parking machines we encourage all visitors to pay for parking via the MiPermit mobile and online app. However, pay-and-display will be available. Explorer pass holders will be able to use their Explorer Passes as normal.</p>