

Report title: Country Parks	
Report to: Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee	
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Purpose of Report

To update the Committee on activity, performance, and strategic direction of the Country Parks service, within the wider Culture, Heritage and Green Spaces service, in the Environment and Climate Action directorate.

A presentation will be given at the meeting, with the information provided in this report to accompany the presentation.

2. Background

The Country Parks service is responsible for managing eight Country Parks, along with a number of former railway line trails. ECC owns five of the Country Parks and has management agreements in place for the remaining three, with a variety of statutory designations as detailed:

- **ECC owned:**
 - **Cudmore Grove Country Park (Colchester)**
 - 44.5 hectares / 110 acres
 - Site 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 (Essex Estuaries - SACs *support internationally important habitats*)
 - Special Protection Area (Colne Estuary - SPAs *are of international importance for breeding, feeding, wintering or the migration of rare and vulnerable species*)
 - Ramsar site (Colne Estuary - *a Ramsar site is a wetland site of international importance*)
 - National Nature Reserve (Colne Estuary - *intertidal mudflats at East Mersea*)
 - Scheduled Monument (Tudor Blockhouse – *SMs are archaeological sites of national importance*)

- Local Wildlife Site (*substantive nature conservation value, identified for nature conservation value, important, distinctive, and threatened habitats and species*)
 - 35 hectares Priority Habitat (*coastal and floodplain grazing marsh, coastal saltmarsh, deciduous woodland, mudflats*)
- **Danbury Country Park (Chelmsford)**
 - 21.5 hectares / 53 acres
 - Scheduled Monument (*Icehouse*)
 - Grade II Registered Park and Garden (*designed landscape of historic significance, requiring appropriate protection*)
 - Local Wildlife Site
 - Priority Habitat (*deciduous woodland, wood pasture*)
- **Marsh Farm Country Park (Chelmsford)**
 - 160 hectares / 395 acres
 - SSSI
 - Special Areas of Conservation (*Essex Estuaries*)
 - Special Protection Area (*Crouch & Roach Estuaries*)
 - Ramsar site (*Crouch & Roach Estuaries*)
 - Scheduled Monument (*Medieval Saltern*)
 - Local Nature Reserve (*important for wildlife, geology, education, or public enjoyment*)
 - Local Wildlife Site
 - 103 hectares Priority Habitat (*coastal and floodplain grazing marsh, coastal saltmarsh, deciduous woodland, mudflats*)
- **Thorndon Country Park (Brentwood)**
 - 223 hectares / 552 acres
 - SSSI
 - Scheduled Monuments (*Old Thorndon Hall and Gardens, Former Parish Church and Churchyard of St Nicholas*)
 - Grade II Registered Park and Garden
 - Conservation Area (*area of notable environmental or historical interest or importance which is protected by law against undesirable changes*)
 - Local Wildlife Sites (*multiple*)
 - Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Site (*locally designated sites of local, national, and regional importance for geodiversity*)
 - Ancient Woodlands (*multiple - a woodland that has existed continuously since 1600 or before*)
 - Priority Habitat (*deciduous woodland, good quality semi-improved grassland, lowland dry acid grassland, wood pasture*)
- **Weald Country Park (Brentwood)**
 - 212 hectares / 523 acres
 - Scheduled Monument (*Iron Age Hillfort*)
 - Grade II Registered Park and Garden
 - Conservation Area
 - Local Wildlife Site

- Priority Habitat (*deciduous woodland, good quality semi-improved grassland, lowland dry acid grassland, wood pasture*)
- **Agreements with 3rd parties:**
 - **Belhus Woods Country Park (Thurrock)**
 - 88 hectares / 218 acres
 - Grade II Registered Park and Garden
 - Grade II Listed Building / Feature (*Stench Pipe*)
 - Site of Metropolitan Importance (*a site of importance for nature conservation within London*)
 - Local Wildlife Sites (*multiple*)
 - Ancient Woodlands (*multiple*)
 - 40 hectares Priority Habitat (*deciduous woodland*)
 - **Great Notley Country Park (Braintree)**
 - 42.5 hectares / 105 acres
 - 0.5 hectares Priority Habitat (*deciduous woodland*)
 - **Hadleigh Country Park (Castle Point)**
 - 188 hectares / 465 acres
 - SSSI
 - Special Protection Area (*Benfleet and Southend Marshes*)
 - Ramsar site (*Benfleet and Southend Marshes*)
 - Scheduled Monument (*Heavy Anti-Aircraft Gunsite*)
 - Local Wildlife Sites (*multiple*)
 - Local Geological Site (*safeguarding some of the best local sites for geology*)
 - Ancient Woodland
 - 127 hectares Priority Habitat (*coastal and floodplain grazing marsh, coastal saltmarsh, deciduous woodland, good quality semi-improved grassland, lowland meadows, mudflats, reedbeds*)
- **Trails:**
 - **Blackwater Rail Trail (Maldon)**
 - 14.5 hectares / 36 acres
 - Scheduled Monument (*Wickham Bishops Timber Trestle Railway Viaduct*)
 - Conservation Area
 - Local Wildlife Site
 - 8 hectares Priority Habitat (*deciduous woodland*)
 - **Colne Valley Rail Trail (Braintree)**
 - 2 hectares / 5.5 acres
 - Local Nature Reserve
 - **Flich Way (Braintree)**
 - 39 hectares / 97 acres
 - Conservation Area
 - Local Nature Reserve
 - Local Wildlife Site (*multiple*)
 - Ancient Woodlands (*multiple*)
 - 14 hectares Priority Habitat (*deciduous woodland*)

3. Links to our Strategic Ambitions

- a. The service links to the following strategic priorities in the emerging Organisational Strategy 'Everyone's Essex':
 - A high-quality environment
- b. The Country Parks service 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
- c. The service links to the following Organisational Strategy objectives:
 - Improve the health of the people in Essex County Council
 - Help to secure sustainable development and protect the environment
- d. Feedback from Essex Residents' Survey:
 - Parks and Open Spaces are the highest scoring (60%) response to the question 'What makes your area a good place to live?'
- e. Essex's Local Nature Recovery Strategy:
 - ECC has a statutory obligation to create a LNRS and an officer has been recruited to coordinate this work
 - The strategy will identify areas of nature value and a Nature Recovery Network will be identified to connect these
 - Country Parks have a critical role as areas of high value for nature and as "stepping stones" to connect adjacent areas of nature
 - The Trails are critical "wildlife corridors" across the county creating important parts of the Nature Recovery Network
- f. Essex Local Nature Partnership:
 - The newly formed and independent Local Nature Partnership is setting targets to deliver the independent Climate Action Commission targets of creating wildlife areas to cover 30% of Essex
 - Country Parks will be exemplar wildlife areas and have the potential to also work on adjacent land to extend these wildlife areas
 - Country Park visitor numbers and visitor centres offer opportunities for the LNP and other Climate Action initiatives to promote their important work to interested parties

4. Visitor numbers

Across Country Parks, 1,433,608 visited in 2020/21, which was 53% higher than 3-year average due to the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns and associated restrictions. In 2021/22 the Country Parks attracted 1,043,510 visitors, 11% higher than 3-year average (excl. 20/21).

Visitor number figures are calculated based on car parking tickets sold, multiplied by a factor of 2.7. This calibration seeks to adjust visitor numbers to allow for more than one person in some cars, non-compliance, season ticket holders paying once annually, and people accessing by other transport means.

	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Belhus Woods	140,797	180,913	104,522	116,076
Cudmore Grove	123,814	143,411	102,373	120,871
Danbury	60,353	109,860	50,452	54,524
Great Notley	136,320	149,707	152,129	175,943
Hadleigh	97,235	118,541	82,382	81,929
Thorndon	283,171	415,757	236,579	235,159
Weald	201,820	315,419	163,995	186,770
Total	1,043,510	1,433,608	892,432	971,272

Note - Visitor numbers are not captured for Marsh Farm Country Park as there is no charge for car parking at this site, due to a lack of visitor facilities.

5. Financial

The breakdown of the financial performance across Country Parks is set out in the tables below. Please note this covers all Country Parks, central Country Parks management, and a management agreement for The Woodland Trust to manage Hainault Forest. Excluded are service-wide Marketing, Events and Business Development functions, as well as ECC central overheads.

2020/21 income performance was heavily affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Visitors had a vastly reduced choice in where they were able to go due to COVID-19 restrictions, and as a result car parking income outperformed the norm by a significant amount. In addition, there was a substantial amount of one-off grant funding received from both the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) income guarantee scheme.

It is considered that 2020/21 performance cannot be replicated and represents an anomalous position for comparison purposes of both visitor numbers and income generation. In addition, significant work has been undertaken in the past two years to unpick unrealistic targets that the Country Parks service had assigned to it, and 2021/22 and 2022/23's budgets represent a more accurate picture of the base funding requirements for the service.

There is an ongoing financial challenge in resourcing maintenance. There is currently little capital assigned directly to Country Parks in 2022/23 and beyond. Traditionally it has been difficult to secure funding from the Core Estate Capital Maintenance Programme, and so work is ongoing to identify funding for an appropriate programme of investment for this area. Beyond basic upkeep from revenue budgets, maintenance and lifecycle costs are required for car parks, play areas, pathways, toilet blocks, plant equipment, visitor centres, cafés, and mountain bike trails. Lack of revenue or capital investment over a prolonged period is now visible at most locations, which has a detrimental impact on visitor experience and visitor numbers, as well as Health and Safety.

	2021/22 <i>(*P11 forecast)</i>	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Expenditure - Staffing	1,205,118	1,348,405	1,308,158	1,178,711
Expenditure – Non-staff	2,326,438	1,121,852	940,364	1,031,696
Total Expenditure	3,531,556	2,470,257	2,248,522	2,210,407
Income	(3,148,990)	(3,567,371)	(2,082,065)	(2,277,353)
Net Cost	382,566	(1,097,113)	166,457	(66,946)

A more detailed breakdown by category of spend is set out in the table below.

	2021/22 <i>(*P11 forecast)</i>	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Expenditure - Staffing	1,205,118	1,348,405	1,308,158	1,178,711
Expenditure - Premises	1,320,980	392,626	276,156	266,802
Expenditure - Supplies and Services	678,824	430,336	359,435	528,966
Expenditure - Transport	107,164	97,284	96,464	104,932
Expenditure - Miscellaneous	219,470	201,606	208,308	130,996
Total Expenditure	3,531,556	2,470,257	2,248,522	2,210,407
Income	(2,053,699)	(2,342,768)	(1,994,045)	(2,175,487)
Grants Inc.	(1,095,291)	(1,224,603)	(88,020)	(101,866)
Total Income	(3,148,990)	(3,567,371)	(2,082,065)	(2,277,353)
Net Cost	382,566	(1,097,113)	166,457	(66,946)