

Meeting of:- Cabinet

On:- Monday 25th September 2006

Agenda Item No.:-

Topic:- Discovery Centre and Gt Notley Country Park

Type of Report:- Non-Key Decision

Executive Summary:-

This report provides Members with an update on preliminary discussions held with Essex County Council's Country Parks Service on proposals for the development of a partnership for the future operation of the Discovery Centre and Country Park at Gt Notley.

It outlines the potential for the creation of an outstanding countryside recreation facility and flagship Country Park at Gt Notley that will directly benefit local communities and visitors to our District. The proposed partnership supports the joint protocol of 'Working Better Together' that was recently signed by our respective Authorities and provides the option to explore in more detail, opportunities for sharing services through more joint working.

The County's Parks Service currently manages 7 other Country Parks and has a wealth of knowledge and experience. This would enable the facility to be marketed more widely and developed using capital investment from County to finance different initiatives. This will offer an increased range of activities whilst still retaining and protecting ecologically sensitive areas of the Country Park, whilst generally promoting further interest in sustainable recreational activities.

Further to preliminary discussions, it is proposed that a formal joint working party be established with Officers from Braintree District Council and Essex County Council to explore in detail the potential case for operating Great Notley Country Park on a partnership basis with a view to offering benefits to both authorities.

Ideas for the Development for the Country Park

The location of Great Notley Country Park being adjacent to excellent transport routes makes it easily accessible to a substantial population in the District and from north, east and west Essex. The development of the Country Park will offer the potential to considerably increase the number of visitors, with a corresponding potential for increased income:

The Country Park is ideally placed to become the gateway to the Flich Way (already owned by ECC), which offers safe cycling and walking through 15 miles of mid-Essex countryside. The current immature landscape offers potential for the creation and design of adventure play facilities linked to health trail facilities.

The options for development include:

- Extending the Discovery Centre to provide accommodation to re-locate ECC's Field Archaeology Unit from its current premises in the old Police Station at Fairfield Road Braintree, using the capital receipt to finance the work and other areas of development in the Country Park.

- The extension and internal alteration of the Discovery Centre to provide bistro style refreshment /catering for 100 indoor covers and 60 outdoor covers.
- Extending the waymarked all weather routes across the Country Park.
- Construction of an Adventure Play Trail through the mounded section of the Country Park.
- Provision of Sensory Trail along the existing boundary route.
- Provision of Cycle Hire Centre based at the Visitor Centre for exploring the car free Flich Way.
- Extension of the existing car parking to provide all weather parking for 300 cars and seasonal parking for a further 250 spaces. Parking for coaches will be provided.
- Introduction of car parking charges to generate income to support the operating costs.

Other issues for consideration:

- Responsibility for the operational management, income and costs of the Park including existing Braintree DC staff.
- Governance arrangements for the Country Park (Management Board).

Benefits

The proposed partnership will provide a clear vision and secure the long-term future of the Discovery Centre and Country Park. Its facilities will continue to cater for all ages providing leisure, educational and recreational opportunities that will directly benefit their health and quality of life.

Other benefits will include:

- Offering better access to a broader range of activities.
- Attracting visitors from outside the District to help raise awareness and the profile of BDC and ECC.
- Improving the Country Park's naturalness and ecological value to maintain its 'rural feel', 'quiet', informal' and 'natural' areas.
- Maximising income generation that will address the current budget shortfall.
- Provide better value for money.
- Promoting biodiversity through direct management of habitats and the local environment.
- Increasing Customer satisfaction with Parks and Open Spaces.
- Promoting wider use of walking and cycling as a forms of transport.

The Next Steps

It is proposed that a formal Working Group of officers from BDC and ECC be established to agree Heads of Terms and produce an outline Business Case and Project Plan for the development of the Discovery Centre and Country Park along the lines set out above.

Options: N/A

Risks: None identified at this stage. These will form part of the Business Case.

Recommendation[s]

That an Officer Working Group comprising representatives from this Council and Essex County Council explore in detail the potential case for operating Great Notley Country Park on a partnership basis and produce a Business Case and Project Plan for consideration by Cabinet at a future meeting.

Background Papers:- None
Financial Implications:- None at this stage. Full financial appraisal to be included in the Business Case.
Equalities Implications:- None at this stage
Legal Implications:- None at this stage

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