

ESSENTIAL REFERENCE PAPER B:

APPENDIX 1 – Environment Scrutiny Report –

Specific site information update - August 2011

Southern Country Park, Bishop's Stortford

The management plan for this park was considered in great detail involving public events and consultation with all those that had an interest in the park. The park is now in the third year of the development programme determined by this crucial document.

The final plan set out a wide range of objectives and targets many of which could only be achieved with external funding and that required the enthusiasm and cooperation of local residents.

The list of improvements that have successfully been achieved during the consultation process, and as part of the planned actions within the current management plan, includes:

- The awarding of Green Flag status, annually from 2008 to the present day
- Resurfacing of the principal footpaths across the park to create a new “easy access” network for all visitors
- A new and exciting play area designed for older children (funded by section 106 contributions)
- Changing the way regular maintenance work such as grass and woodland management is undertaken to create new and better habitats for wildlife
- The introduction of sheep grazing in parts of the park to improve grassland habitats
- A wetland restoration project that included works to:
 - Improve the diversity of species in the nationally significant reed bed
 - Restore the eastern and southern bank of the balancing pond with marginal planting creating a wide boggy zone that controls access to the water’s edge and minimises wave erosion
 - Create a specially designed wildfowl feeding area that separates this activity from the areas now set aside for fishing
 - Build eight “easy access” fishing platforms including one specifically designed for disabled visitors and schools

- Create a new wetland habitat behind and around these platforms limiting access to the waters edge between the fishing swims
- Remove a sunken gabion from the lake (the old duck nesting island) to improve safety
- Restoration of the small pond with improved plants and safer access out of the water and the creation a new spring-fed pond beside the main lake
- Construct a viewing platform and boardwalk link adjacent to the small pond
- Create a dew pond in the corner of the activity field that provides a new semi-dry habitat in the park where the grass regime has also been modified from close cropped to conservation grassland.
- The design and installation of three permanent orienteering courses in partnership with a local orienteering club
- A dog free long grass meadow for young children to play in complete with grass maze and tree arbour
- A new dog agility course to provide dog owning visitors with an alternative area to exercise and have fun with their dogs
- A new football kick-about area with an all weather surface
- A health walk programme in partnership with Countryside Management Service
- A vibrant chalk bank inhabited with a growing number of plant species each year
- Regular wildflower and butterfly surveys conducted by volunteers in partnership with local naturalist groups
- A geo caching installation for keen followers to hunt for hidden 'treasures' using GPS tracking
- A resurfaced car park with more attractive and robust security
- Several new kissing gates to improve access and control motor bikes
- Improvements to the main entrance making it more attractive and welcoming as well as safer and easier to access
- New interpretation boards across the park that provide information to visitors about habitats and facilities
- New street signs on the highways around the park to guide visitors and help promote the park
- An extremely successful Friends of Southern Country Park group that has helped significantly to bring the park to life with their presence on site, ideas and practical tasks

The 'Friends of Southern Country Park' group was formed in 2009 and now has 36 members, including a Committee of six. The members

arrange their own work / task programme with the support and guidance of the Council. Since the first task in May 2009, a total of 42 have been completed with a further six planned for later in 2011 and two for early 2012. These tasks have included hedge laying, woodland management and creating new steps and pathways. The work completed by the Friends can be identified within the park by small round plaques with the 'Friends logo' on them. The Friends provide a vital resource within the park as they are able to respond to the public and provide immediate feedback to the Council from park users.

The management plan continues to guide the final objectives for the programmed 5 year period. It has proved to be a valuable communication tool to attract outside investment and ensure that improvements are developed consistently and effectively in a sustainable manner.

The Ridgeway Local Park, Hertford

The Ridgeway Local Park, whilst continuing to be a focal open space for the estate and popular with residents, has been undergoing an incredible transformation and has been dramatically improved over the last few years.

It has been developed from an old fashioned 1950's recreation ground into a vibrant local park which caters for the needs of a wide range of visitors and local residents.

This open space was brought forward in the Development Programme when the opportunity to bid for external funding and a partnership project arose.

The Sele Estate has been a social priority in East Hertfordshire, with the highest levels of Council or Social Housing in the District and nationally high levels of divorce, separation and poor health. It has the highest level of deprivation in East Herts based on national indices and was recognised as an area needing environmental improvements.

The initial phase of the park development project delivered a new Multi Use Games Area in the park and a complete redesign of the landscape. The consultation with local residents at this time led to the creation of the 5 year management plan that has controlled the further development of the park.

Following the award of the first Green Flag in 2009, The Ridgeway Local Park successfully retained the prestigious award in 2010 and 2011. The judges have been consistently complimentary about the park's development and the quality of the management plan.

The Improvement Programme has continued delivering the development of the park through both internal and external funding sources. In 2009/10 over £100,000 of external funding was brought in dependant largely on the quality of the management plan. Working with Groundwork Hertfordshire, the Council engaged with the community to successfully complete a natural play area for older children and improve access into the lower Dell area of the park. The play element was funded in partnership with the County Council through the Play Builder project set up by central government to improve the quality of play across the country.

The new 'Dell' play area has:

- a giant embankment slide
- a large dramatic climbing frame
- a bird hide to meet and shelter in
- challenging rope swings
- a deep sand pit with exhilarating climbing logs recycled from Pishiobury Park.

Some of the access based improvements were

- a new easy access pathway into the lower Dell area created to allow buggies and less mobile visitors a convenient route into the new play area
- inset seating has been installed on the way down the pathway
- a large tree trunk recycled from one of the other parks in the district has been placed to provide additional seating, or climbing for the more adventurous

This element was funded by a community landfill grant and has greatly improved the area to the rear of the existing children's play area and Multi User Games Area. This lower Dell area has been transformed from an overgrown hollow not accessible to anyone into a wide open space that is accessible for all and that creates a welcoming transition from the built up environment of the estate to the countryside beyond.

As the Green Flag Judges noted, there is a real sense of local ownership of the site from local residents and the Police Community Support Officers. The successful completion of these major improvement works has been very well received by the local community.

A “Winter Fun Day” was held on 4 December 2010 in partnership with Groundwork Hertfordshire to celebrate the completion of the works and to finalise some of the shrub planting scheme. Local residents helped to plant 5 oak trees and new shrubs in the newly created borders running along the easy access pathway into the lower Dell area. The event was well attended by the local community despite the cold weather.

The upper grassed open space, younger children’s play area and Multi User Games Area continue to be a great success with both local children and their parents. Several Council Services worked closely with the local Housing Association and the Police to promote the park as part of the Sele Community Action Day 2010 - a football match and barbeque were held on the site.

More recently in July 2011 the park hosted a Community Fun Day organised in partnership with the local Extended Schools Consortium, Youth Services and the Police. The event provided the opportunity for a wide range of local groups to engage with the public to offer their services and support. It was also an opportunity for local school children to showcase their singing talents. Despite the weather, attendance was good and positive feedback received.

Through our work with the Countryside Management Service, Groundwork Hertfordshire, local housing association and the Police, a robust partnership framework has been developed to promote this valuable green space for the benefit of the local community and other users.

The current management plan and operational action plan continue to guide further development of the park.

Hartham Common, Hertford

An initial version of the management plan has been drafted for consultation and follows an event held on site in 2009 to engage with the local community, seeking their views about the park and how they would like to see it improved.

Key feedback from this consultation was that park users wanted the Council to:

- enhance the appearance of the main entrance leading in from the town
- improve the easy access network of footpaths around the park
- develop ideas to introduce a wetland nature reserve
- make better use of the park's rivers both for nature and as a visitor attraction
- introduce new play and leisure facilities
- provide visitors with a better understanding of what the park has to offer by introducing sign-posted walks, interpretative notice boards and leaflets

The Town Council have been briefed on the key proposals to be included in the draft management plan. In response to these initial proposals, they have endorsed the principal of a coordinated approach and agreed in general with the many suggestions. They emphasised the importance that the park should be recognised as part of one of the Green Fingers (Lea Valley) and asked that more consideration was given to the built environment within the park. They shared the aspirations to make better use of the rivers with paddling points and improved natural margins and were keen to see the restoration of the bridge link to what used to be the pitch and putt area.

The document requires some fine tuning to bring it to the next stage where it can be shared with key stakeholders for comment before being set in place to begin the improvement programme.

Officers are also considering the impact the new supermarket may have on the open space and how this development can be used to improve the site.

However, the park's development has not entirely stood still;

Play:

As part of a separate project and after a series of consultation exercises and negotiations a new skate park was procured and installed in 2007. The displacement of teenage equipment on the chosen skate park site also led to the development of a new older children's play area in the park. Both these projects were delivered to a high standard and have been extremely popular with local residents and visitors from further afield. Improvements have also been undertaken in the younger children's play area with the trialling of a new safer surfacing material and replacement sand in the play pit area. This play area is also designated for major improvements in 2012 as part of the Play Area Development Programme.

Footpath improvement:

Groundwork Hertfordshire were commissioned by Hertfordshire County Council's Rights of Way Unit to carry out improvement works to the footpath and cycleway through Hartham Common in Hertford. The project was developed in partnership with East Herts Council and the improved pathway stretches between the bridge linking to Mill Road and Hertford Lock.

The route forms part of the National Cycle Network and was identified through the Rights of Way Improvement Plan as requiring improvement. It was also identified as a key project proposal by the Hertford River Corridors Partnership (Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust, Groundwork Hertfordshire, the Countryside Management Service, Environment Agency, Hertford Civic Society and East Herts Council).

The path is well used by walkers and cyclists and gives an opportunity for all to access this site and beyond into the wider Kings Mead nature reserve, Hertford Town Centre and recreational facilities.

Meadow Restoration:

Officers from East Herts Council and the Countryside Management Service developed an exciting new project with the Environment Agency (EA) to restore part of Hartham Common back to Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitat i.e. flood plain grazing marsh or flood plain meadow.

The EA had identified £90,000 funding to restore a 3ha area of wetland meadow and create an area of important wildlife habitat along the Beane and Lea rivers' edge within the park. The project is part of the larger Hertford River Corridors Project which is a partnership between Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust, the Countryside Management Service, Herts

Rights of Way, Groundwork Hertfordshire, Hertford Civic Society, Herts County Council - Biological Records Centre and East Herts Council.

Some initial consultation found that the original plans to open the bund along the river edge and enable the field to flood during high water events could not go ahead. There was insufficient evidence to reliably reassure neighbouring properties that this might not cause slight flooding to their gardens.

The project was therefore modified to create similar benefits to flora and fauna in the area by installing a series of ponds and arranging to re-graze the field.

The initial works in the park have been completed. The next phase of the project is to consider introducing grazing and improving public access to this area of the park.

Other areas of improvement that have been achieved without conflicting with the direction that the Management Plan will take when it is adopted for action are:

- Football pitches have been relocated and an improved relationship with the clubs through Leisure Services has been developed
- Landscape features around the newly improved leisure centre have been upgraded. This includes replanted shrub beds and thinned tree lines to afford views from the refitted gym without losing the screening affect from the park
- The existing play areas has been partially revamped with some items of new equipment and improved safer surfaces

Grange Paddocks / Red, White & Blue, Bishop's Stortford

Grange Paddocks is seen primarily as a sports ground but has the potential for much more. It also forms an important link between the Red, White and Blue Open Space to the north, the old town tip to the south, the Town Council's Sworder's Field and ultimately Bishop's Stortford Castle Grounds. These sites all form a green finger that provides for a pedestrian link out from the town.

The initial intention prior to full consultation is to develop and make the most of the park's natural assets. The Environment Agency have indicated interest in helping to improve the river system to increase its

capacity to sustain a wider range of wildlife and to ensure that they retain their wider function of distributing water effectively as part of the County's natural flood drainage system.

An objective to facilitate play in the park has been informally in place for some time. The Playbuilder Scheme that funded the new play area at The Ridgeway was also planned to benefit Grange Paddocks. Arrangements were in place to develop a project to install a new BMX facility in the park but unfortunately the Playbuilder Scheme was withdrawn by central government.

Whilst this project has therefore had to be put on hold, the initial work to scope its potential will still be useful in the future should further external funds be identified.

The implementation of a cycle path and improvements to the existing car parks are in the Capital Programme and currently at the Planning stage. They are set to deliver some important access improvements to the park and its sports facilities.

Work has been started to formulate the Management Plan for this site by arranging for a survey and an initial description of aspirations based primarily on the environmental needs of the park. This has been developed by the Countryside Management Service and has been provided in the form of a map based proposal.

A needs survey has been carried out and the findings included in the plan. Some final work is now required to complete a tidy up of the draft management plan before it is at a stage that can be shared firstly with internal stake holders.

Pishiobury Park, Sawbridgeworth

Pishiobury Park is Grade II listed in the English Heritage register of Historical Parks and Gardens and, as part of the Stort Valley, is mentioned in the South Hertfordshire Landscape Character Assessment. East Herts Council purchased the park in 1980. An Advisory Group was formed in 1998 consisting of officers from the Council and the Countryside Management Service, a Town Councillor and representatives from local Residents' Associations. A plan was written to guide the management of the park for 5 years from April 2001.

Given the historical significance of the park and the responsibility that the Council has in determining its future it was decided that a specialist consultant would be commissioned to prepare a Restoration Plan to follow on from this original document. This linked directly to one of the aims agreed by the earlier Advisory Group to enhance the parks' ecological and landscape heritage by commissioning a Historical Landscape Assessment. It followed after this plan was published in 2005 that it then went on to provide a worthy framework to deliver the requirements of the Parks Development Programme.

The plan provided clear conclusions from its findings to advise the Council what action needed to be considered as part of the long-term management of the park. It suggested clear aims for future cohesive management of the wider historic landscape. It explored the various periods of the parks history and considered the relevant importance of each period. The landscape designs of Capability Brown are traditionally felt to be important but other periods such as the keeping of deer during the 16th and 17th century and the earlier settling during the Neolithic period needed to be explored and given some weighting.

Other areas of the park's management were also given clear direction for future development, including:

- The tree belt "enclosure" of the park that is understood to have been an important feature of the 18th century design
- The introduction of cattle grazing in the park
- The style of infrastructure across the park including the timber fencing around the tree copses, tree guards and furniture
- The car park
- The potential conflict between what might be appropriate for the park in terms of its landscape character and what modern visitors expect from it

The works to complete the Restoration plan and deliver these objectives have now been completed. Additional significant improvements have also been achieved. The wide range of improvements delivered to date includes:

- New park furniture commissioned from a local timber specialist to our own design that meets closely with the objectives of the restoration plan

- The picnic area has been opened up and enhanced to fit much better in the landscape and to provide a greatly improved facility for visitors
- An attractive new bridge replaces an old one that had restricted access. This was delivered in partnership with our Engineers and with close guidance from the Environment Agency
- A project to rejuvenate an existing pond to add to the biodiversity of the site was completed
- In conjunction with this project the redesign of an enclosed spring fed pond was undertaken to create a bio-diverse and usable area
- Grazing in the park was reintroduced with the support of a local grazier that specialises in providing a unique conservation grazing service to local authorities. The rare breeds fit perfectly into the park's historical setting and greatly benefit its ecological development
- A grazing guidance document was researched and published on the Council's web site to provide local residents with comprehensive information on why the animals benefit the park and how they are managed safely
- Natural England's Countryside Stewardship Scheme continues to help finance some of the conservation based improvements
- An operation with the local Police to discourage anti-social behaviour has been completed to deal with misuse of the park by a very small number of users
- The car park has been redesigned and modified to present a more attractive appearance that discourages anti social behaviour
- New parkland trees have been planted and protected with tree guards designed to fit into the parks landscape
- The shape of the woodland "roundels" have been redefined with the introduction of a far less obtrusive system to protect them from the cattle
- A leaflet has been produced and recently updated that provides information to local residents and visitors from further afield about the park including some attractive walks
- An innovative project has been completed to create a dramatic and more welcoming approach to the park's two main entrances

An updated management plan for 2011 to 2016 that sets out an Action Plan to manage the remaining targets is being developed. This potentially includes a circular woodland walk, another bridge and some

new board walks. This will be developed in consultation with the newly formed Friends of Pishiobury Park group.

This new and well informed Friends group was developed in late 2010 and has a fully formed committee structure. It is now attracting its own funding through grant applications. The Friends have undertaken six practical tasks as a group since November 2010, including hedge and tree planting, woodland management and installing new benches around the park. In addition they have organised eight free 'walks and wildlife events' for the public. These events have been very well attended and are supported by the Council. Both the Friends and the Council have received positive feedback from the public on the improvements to the park and the events.

A 'Meet the Animals of Pishiobury Park' event was first held in 2010 to introduce the public to the cattle grazing in the park and promote the park itself. The event was part of the free family fun events organised by the Council as part of Love Parks Week. In 2011 the 'Meet the Animals' event was organised with the assistance of the Friends and had over 250 families and children attend. Lots of positive feedback was received, with many visitors newly discovering the park.

Hertford Castle Gardens

Hertford Castle is a well known and popular open space that attracts interest from a wide range of organisations and all age groups. It has undergone a series of changes recently relating to ownership, some of which have delayed the preparation of the management plan. It was considered important to ensure that the ownership responsibilities were concluded before the draft management plan was completed and consulted upon.

Traditionally, the Council had responsibility for the whole of the Castle Grounds, part of which it owned and part (the area around the house) that was leased from the landowner. This goes back to the days when the castle was an East Herts Council Office. The building is now solely used by the Town Council and when the lease came up for renewal, in 2009, the Town Council took over the lease and is now responsible for the building, the gardens behind it and an area 15 metres in front of it. Under a separate arrangement with the County Council, it is also responsible for the Moat Gardens in Castle Street. Officers are currently working with the Town Council to consider how these areas will be maintained in the future.

The management plan will help to set out a framework for future developments in the park lead by both authorities. The Council has brought about some landscape improvements to the park over recent years that have been carefully in keeping with the parks character. Some of the key activities for future consideration include:

- how to enhance the appearance of the main entrance leading in from the town
- pedestrian and vehicular access across the park
- how to conserve and enjoy the park's rivers both for nature and as a visitor attraction
- an exploration of new play and leisure facilities
- a better understanding of what the park has to offer to visitors by introducing sign-posted walks etc
- a continued programme of horticultural and arboricultural improvements and assessing the health, aesthetic quality and historical significance of the plants in the park
- a review of the parks infrastructure
- a look at how works in the park are funded and prioritised
- the potential to improve wildlife habitats and how the high level of ornamental care is balanced with opportunities for ecological improvements

Full consultation with stakeholders will be undertaken before finalising any plans to improve the park further.

The management plan has been drafted for consultation with key partners and is soon to be considered by Hertford Town Council in preparation for a formal meeting to receive their comments. This draft document will then be modified to accommodate information gained from this element of the consultation and then published for public viewing.

The draft plan contains a range of initial aspirations developed by officers to provide some ideas for the future development of the park. These range from small changes to those that would require significant external funding but will provide consultees with a starting point for comments and further ideas.

This is the standard approach adopted as part of the programme to ensure that all views are thoroughly considered before the completed

management plan is taken forward to prepare a working action plan and to seek funding opportunities.

Bishop's Stortford Castle Gardens

This park, whilst being fairly small in comparison to our other major parks, is an important asset. It is complex in terms of the needs it provides for and the historical context that it must respect.

It will be the last of the major parks to consider in relation to the Improvement Programme but certain issues are already in hand. A mature avenue of trees for instance is in need of replacement due to disease and the potential risk of injury to visitors. A plan of action has been formulated and will feature prominently in the management plan for consultation with stakeholders.

An architectural survey was undertaken in 2008 commissioned by the Council's Conservation Officer with external funding. This provides a thorough and fascinating historical background to the park and explores the management issues that will need to be addressed in relation to the ancient mound (Motte) that forms a central feature in the park.

More recent discussions with English Heritage have indicated that they would be keen to support the development of the park with a view to ensuring that the historical significance of this important national monument is maximised.

Works have been carried out to redesign the annual bedding display around the memorial to maximise the impact of this colourful feature. Shrub beds around the park have been replanted where needed and areas that were previously heavily vegetated have been thinned and opened up to create light and improve views into the park. Safe access to the mound for the public has also been reviewed and procedures modified in partnership with the Town Council.

The mound, which needs cutting four times per annum, had been identified as a health and safety risk for the grass cutters due to the steepness of the banks. Our main contractor made arrangements to cut these mounds (and as a result of this, all steep slopes within the district) by the use of a specialist remote controlled bank cutting machine which can operate on slopes of up to 60 degrees. This was agreed as best practice for this site in consultation with English Heritage.

Surveys have been conducted internally to identify the themes and issues that will need to be considered in more detail as the management plan is developed.

Some of these issues include:

- Securing the stability of the castle remains at the top of the mound
- Considering the best way to enhance and utilise the water features either side of the park
- Considering the landscape character of the park and the significance of the ornamental planting schemes and mature trees
- Development of closer partnership working with the Town Council who manage the adjacent open space (Sworder's Field) complete with its paddling pool and play areas
- how the main access points to the park function and whether they can be improved in terms of the "welcome" they offer to visitors
- The park's infrastructure including fencing, seating and other architectural features
- The links that the park has with the Green Finger extending out to the north of the town

The park is part of Bishop's Stortford's "Green Finger" including the Town Council's Swarder's Field, Grange Paddocks and Red, White and Blue open space. The Service will work closely with the Town Council to progress a shared vision and effective management plan for the site.

King George V Recreation Ground

The King George V Recreation Ground in Ware has benefited from significant improvement works in the last few years.

As a result of ideas brought forward by local young people talking to the Police Community Support Officers, the Council worked with Riversmead Housing Association to fund a new Multi User Games Area for the park. A compact enclosed area designed for kicking a ball about or playing basket ball in all weathers.

The location of the Multi User Games Area was chosen with specific advice from the Police and the Housing Association. The main considerations were to ensure that it was in a position that the Police could easily patrol, not too close to properties that back on to the open

space and near enough to the existing play area to fall in with our existing inspection and cleansing regime.

It has been a great success with young people and at its opening ceremony was host to a celebrity freestyle football demonstration.

The park was also selected as a Big Lottery Fund "Playing on the Wildside" project. This project was about working with local children to design and build an adventurous play area that took into account their interests, needs and vision so they would have ownership of the play equipment and would look after it.

Our project partners Child UK, worked with local children through the summer to start the initial work on the project and then consulted with all local residents. This gave everybody the chance to get involved and to share any thoughts they may have about the development of the open space in general. To ensure that the consultation was effective, over 50 different young people were involved in the process and many of these also worked with our supplier to design and even build some of the installations.

The resultant new play area provides an exciting range of challenging and fun equipment for a wide range of ages and has transformed the park from a somewhat old fashioned and tired space to one that is now valued and respected by the local community. The project provided the opportunity to make some significant changes to the overall landscape across the park and to engage with residents to carry out a "clean up" of fly-tipped garden waste.

The park was selected successfully under the Town Award Scheme by the Ware Society. This year the panel of judges considered eight nominations in all and decided to make the award to the King George V play development scheme. In the opinion of the judges, "It was felt that this initiative whilst not being a 'development' in the normally accepted sense of the Award Scheme had nonetheless made a significant contribution to its surroundings and upgraded the quality of the area. The design, materials and setting were entirely suited to purpose and the scheme undoubtedly made a significant contribution to the neighbourhood community in an area of the town that is often overlooked".