

Essential Reference Paper 'B'

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY REPORT – UPDATE OF PLANS AND PROGRESS – MAY 2014

This paper presents the operational outline of work to be carried out to deliver the aims and objectives identified in the High Level Action Plan accepted by Council on 16 October 2013. The proposed plans and progress are described under each of the seven agreed headings.

Action 1.

Identify specific projects to support the Council's Health and Wellbeing and Ageing Well agendas
To improve existing and introduce new facilities which provide opportunities for all ages to undertake healthy exercise and encourage participation in sports, subject to availability of resources

- **Hertfordshire Health Walks Programme**

Continue commissioned programme to develop this initiative through the Countryside Management Service including the expansion of the scheme in and around Hertford. Health Walks are currently run in some of our parks in Bishop's Stortford and Hertford lead by trained volunteers.

- **Audit & review of trim trails & grass marked running tracks in open spaces**

Audit to be undertaken to review current trim trail equipment and running tracks and to identify potential for further simple grass marked running tracks in open spaces. New trim trails may be dependent on external funding. Running tracks will be installed within existing budgets. There are currently 3 trim trails and running tracks; Hartham Common, Hertford, Grange Paddocks, Bishop's Stortford and Sacombe Road, Hertford. Projects will be identified during the initial audit in 2014-15 and will be completed over a five year programme.

- **Audit & review of 'kick-a-bout' areas and goals in parks and open spaces**

Undertake an audit and review of current provision and condition of the kick-a-bout areas and goal posts in the parks and open spaces. This will identify if current provision is adequate, what could be done to improve these areas and whether additional sites are needed. The trial all weather grass surfacing on the kick-a-bout area at Southern Country Park did not perform sufficiently well to replicate elsewhere. Other options will be explored to extend usage times and improve playing conditions including the rotation of pitches within a space, allowing effective goal wear repair without interrupting play. The audit is to be completed in 2014-15. Identified improvements will be implemented during this five year programme.

- **Collect usage data for the parks & open spaces in East Herts**

Use 'people counters' to collect data to ascertain the number of users of parks and open spaces. The equipment can be put to more specific use to measure popularity of existing facilities that we are aiming to expand such a trim trails. The data collected will be used to

target future improvement projects and to help attract external funding for projects. Data has been collected at The Pines, Hertford and the tennis courts in Castle Gardens, Bishop's Stortford. The equipment will be relocated this year to expand the collection of data to the wider area of the Castle Gardens in partnership with the Town Council.

This will be an on-going project with the aim to collect comparable usage data over a period of time for the major parks and areas identified for projects.

- **Work with volunteers to guide improvements and support the initiatives to get more people into our parks**

Our work with the Countryside Management Service (CMS) supports and expands upon this initiative each year. We aim to work closely with our directly engaged friends of parks groups and to support other voluntary groups which interact with our open spaces. We have two very successful Friends Groups working to help improve Southern Country Park and Pishiobury Park and are currently developing a third group at Hartham Common. An example of other volunteers is a group of residents who engage with us to look after an open space at The Firs in Bishop's Stortford.

CMS provide guided walks with volunteers on some of our key open spaces as part of their Walks and More initiative. This is in addition to the Health Walks initiative. Friends Groups provide opportunities to work in the outdoors, socialise and keep fit. They help us to ensure local residents have a greater awareness of facilities and are engaged in parks development. They provide a particularly accessible outlet for older and retired residents to remain active.

- **Improve access for all including the older and younger people in our community**

Through our management plans, risk assessments and audits we aim to ensure our parks are "multi-purpose" and not aimed exclusively at any one group. Last year we audited Southern Country Park with assistance from a local Member with experience of disability and a colleague from Community Engagement. Some minor but important improvements were made to ease access from the car park to the footpath network. An externally funded project is under way to make some significant footpath improvements at Foxholes. See: <http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=26387> We are exploring a project to improve parking and access for both residents and fitness training companies at Bishop's Park in Bishop's Stortford. Our shorter circular walking route and interpretation at Hartham Common will provide a manageable circuit for less abled visitors.

- **Review of signage and interpretation boards in the parks and open spaces**

To identify current signage and interpretation / information boards in our parks and open spaces. Then deliver a pilot scheme having explored the options to identify a consistent East Herts brand whilst still capturing the uniqueness of our larger parks.

A consistent mapping style and interpretation boards has been created for Southern Country Park through the delivery of the management plan. We are currently developing signage at Hartham Common as the pilot for this work. CMS are delivering this project having secured external funding for a significant proportion of it. We are also carrying out an access audit Pishiobury Park as identified in the management plan with the aim of improving signage both inside the park and at key connecting routes in the wider area. Smaller sites such as Foxholes will be upgraded with a style of notices chosen for replication at similar sites. A programme of renewing signage will be on-going but dependent on funding and need.

- **Aspire to Green Flag management criteria on all our parks**

Our risk assessments and attention to good access serves to minimise anti-social behaviour and ensure parks are welcoming and not intimidating for older people. We review access to all our parks and ensure, for example, that there is sufficient seating to make longer routes manageable. Attractive displays at entrances and carefully located play spaces ensure that old and young can enjoy parks without conflict. More details of the Green Flag criteria can be viewed on page 17 of one of our management plans at: http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/media/pdf/j/b/Appendices_1_-_4.pdf

Action 2.

Identify opportunities to improve formal sports provision on open spaces with the Council's Leisure Services Contractor
Work with Everyone Active to identify potential business cases to improve provision within available resources and to meet identified need

- **3G Sports Pitch Project**

We aim to support the expansion of sports facilities which meet emerging needs as the profile of sports needs change both nationally and locally. We are currently working with Leisure Services to support the delivery of a project to consult with local people and install an all-weather playing surface for football at Hartham Common.

- **Explore avenues to work with the community to deliver services**

We are currently supporting Leisure Services to develop a community partnership with a local football club to improve facilities and manage sports provision at Presdales Recreation Ground in Ware.

- **Build upon the work carried out to date to improve the quality of football pitches**

We will introduce a quarterly quality assessment of football pitches and further improve expertise in maintenance and controlling usage. Our Contract Compliance Officer has been trained to carry out a nationally recognised quality test. This will help to guide the improvement of standards and facilitate optimum usage of pitches.

High quality training of contract staff in pitch management has been completed and we are working closely with Leisure Services to improve programming and pitch rotation. Overplay of some pitches or at certain times of the year can contribute to long term decline in pitch quality. Performance Quality Standards provide a complete clearly defined and measurable picture of the surface, sub-surface and playing aspects.

- **Expand provision of "free to use" orienteering courses**

We are working in partnership with a local group of enthusiasts affiliated to the British Orienteering Association to create marked courses for expert and novice use. Courses have already been created at Southern Country Park and Hartham Common. The routes are unobtrusively marked and supported by maps which are downloadable from our web site. This provides opportunities not only for running but also walking routes and exploring parts of our parks which might otherwise be missed. The next route for completion is covers Grange Paddocks and the Red, White and Blue open space.

We are also working with Leisure Services to support the activity of Geocaching in our parks. We have evidence from web comments that this provides an increased enjoyment and awareness of parks. See <http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=16891>

- **Introduce new facilities to capture the imagination of our residents and provide new opportunities for exercise**

We listen to residents and scan the market for new and innovative products which meet with our aspirations to provide opportunities to keep active. We have installed a new trim trail and running track at Sacombe Road in Hertford in partnership with a local developer. We have been asked to consider outdoor table tennis tables and aim to incorporate this into our plans to continue developing our major parks. We are upgrading a Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA) in Watton at Stone to the latest specification. Other emerging interests lie in petanque courts and natural play.

Action 3.

Improve the integration of open space improvement plans with the Development Management process to determine how Section 106 contributions are allocated
To make better use of available funds and share projected schemes and aspirations for open space improvements with Development Management

- **An initial matrix of needs for the 120 significant open spaces across the district has been drafted with reference to existing management plans**

This approach will be researched in more detail and modified as a live and developing information source in partnership with Development Management and Community Services.

- **Current 106 projects**

Open space improvements are being funded through section 106 contributions at Great Innings to include play development and improvements relating to anti-social behaviour. Access improvements will be implemented on the balancing pond at Southern Country Park. A new play area and cycle path is planned at Buryfields in Ware.

Action 4.

Deliver the plans to ensure that minor sites in towns fit with the management plans of the major parks in the context of green infrastructure planning
To encompass a network of open spaces in each main town within the wider programme of improvements. This will focus on access, interpretation and healthy activity

- **Major parks have benefitted from a programme to create Green Space Action Plans that define their character and identify what needs to be improved**

Management plans have been completed and reviewed for Southern Country Park in Bishop's Stortford, The Ridgeway Local Park in Hertford and Pishiobury Park in Sawbridgeworth.

New management plans have been published for Hartham Common and Southern Country Park & Beyond (described below)

The draft management plan for Castle Gardens, Hertford will be ready this summer for consultation with the Town Council who now manage most of the site.

The draft plan for the Castle Grounds, Bishop's Stortford is being revised with support from CMS in consultation with the Town Council to form an alternative master plan with the aim

of securing joint external funding. This will include the green finger of parks to the north of Bishop's Stortford town centre stretching across Grange Paddocks and Red, White and Blue open space.

All management plans are reviewed periodically and where appropriate republished after the initial period of development. The development of The Ridgeway in Hertford proved to be a popular success culminating in the award of a Green Flag. The current management plan is now due for review. A new concise action plan will be created to reflect any outstanding work or new aspirations for the site.

- **Expand the “And Beyond” project– circular walking routes to link together and promote open spaces**

Southern Country Park & Beyond establishes and promotes linking routes to Northern Parkland, Thorley Wedge, Bishop's Park and The Firs in Bishop's Stortford acting as a template for other parks to create a network of interlinked green spaces across the district. The scheme improves access, public participation and biodiversity. See Southern Country Park & Beyond 2013 -2018 document at:

<http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=10075>

We will develop a similar scheme; Hertford and Beyond linking sites such as Hartham Common, The Ridgeway, Farm Close, Millmead, Foxholes and The Pines.

These projects are supported by CMS and build upon work to engage volunteers from our friends groups to work in partnership with each other and to stretch activities beyond the boundaries of their parks.

A similar scheme may be possible to link key open spaces in Ware with an “urban” walking route taking in sites such as King George Recreation Ground, The Bourne and Buryfields.

- **Develop further woodland management plans and activities**

We now have in place a programme of works to maintain our woodlands on a rotational basis in line with good practice.

Woodlands and shelter belts are crucial to the environment but also play an important role in providing leisure activities and linear routes between some of our open spaces.

We will be working CMS training contract staff to ensure their operational skills are supported with good conservation knowledge. We will be developing more detailed work programmes and management plans for individual woodlands which have unique requirements. A single page plan will suffice for some sites, others may require a more in depth approach. The current Foxholes access improvement project was funded largely by the Forestry Commission and includes our first specialist woodland management plan.

<http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=26387>

- **Biodiversity and nature conservation**

Our major management plans all address the need to consider the creation and conservation of habitats in our parks. We also aim to work on some specific projects. CMS are developing a project on the Lee and Mimram rivers in Hertford. Improvements in Hartham Common will include extended grazing and the naturalisation of the channel. Work at Hertford Castle may be considered to stabilise the river banks and conserve the adjacent trees.

Successful acquisition of the Osier beds in Pishiobury Park will provide the opportunity to improve a rare wet woodland habitat,

Our Friends groups carry out an impressive range of survey work including the monitoring of bats, reptiles, butterflies and wildflowers.

Conservation grazing, grass management and wildflower planting are being continually developed. Our incumbent contractor has planned works to support some of these initiatives to be delivered as part of the contract extension.

Action 5.

To improve the play value of existing sites through innovative approaches that appeal to young people

Re- audit of all Council owned play areas identifying any remaining gaps in access, age provision, healthy activity and landscape design

A programme of development has been completed in accordance with the original audit to identify specific equipment needs across the district. This focussed on the main play elements of swinging, rocking, rotating, balancing, climbing and sliding.

- **Play audit**

This new audit will identify the successes and failures from the initial improvements in play provision to inform the on-going Open Space Development Programme. The information will be used to guide projects and aspirations over the next five years. We will identify areas for social gathering and natural play development, along with health and well-being. We aim to build on success of previous improvements and develop projects that will not necessarily be based upon formal equipment. Providing children with imaginative spaces and the opportunities to find ways to play more intuitively will be explored. This might include den building, water play, assault courses, sculptures or climbing features. The audit and review will be completed 2014-15. We will continue to explore opportunities for additional funding.

- **Continue programme to replace older equipment as it wears**

It is important to follow up any play upgrade project with an on-going assessment of equipment through our risk assessments and annual RPII inspections. We will apply the same audit techniques to the replacement of older equipment as it reaches a point where it is beyond reasonable repair or has reduced in play value. Children's tastes and needs will change over decades. We will ensure that a good mix of equipment is provided on each play area and across the network of play in each region of the district. We will be trialling a technique to carry out specialist testing of certain equipment. This will identify weaknesses such as stress fractures which might otherwise go undetected.

Action 6.

Work with partners and across directorates to identify needs and deliver projects to ensure sustainable drainage legislation and water framework directive requirements are incorporated into plans when developing open spaces

Liaise with other departments to support the water framework directive and engage with stakeholders and partners to ensure emerging projects take this objective into consideration

- **We will be working with other services and external agencies on a number of potential projects to support this target**

A recent example is the flood alleviation and pond creation at Obrey Way in Southern Country Park detailed in our Parks Achievements information. This project will be completed this year.

Future work may include the Hartham rivers project, the use of sustainable surfacing where appropriate (loose aggregate as opposed to non-porous tarmac), a replacement bridge at Hertford Castle, river improvements at Grange Paddocks, the creation of ponds at Red, White and Blue open space and wetland access improvements at Pishiobury Park.

Action 7.

Develop partnerships and encourage local groups and organisations to better utilise our open space resources

To explore the potential for adding value to and identifying potential income sources in our open spaces by facilitating more “things to do” such as boot camps and local events and explore collaborative ways of managing our open spaces.

- **Maximise promotional activities and marketing to ensure residents are aware of the wide network of open space facilities available across the District.**

We will expand upon existing initiatives working with our volunteer groups and contractors. For example, we work with the police to support their “end of term” activities on our open space at The Ridgeway as a diversionary project to minimise anti-social behaviour during this potentially volatile period. We currently organise annual Get Park Active events and facilitate other activities such as Park Fest with Friends of Pishiobury Park and other community events.

- **Encourage greater use of our parks by organisations who provide outdoor fitness**

We will facilitate opportunities for external partners and companies such as Boot Camps. We have recently developed a partnership with Regimental Fitness who hire a number of our open spaces. Our parks are beginning to be used for more activities as we promote our enthusiasm and simple booking arrangements. This currently includes personal trainers, mum’s buggy fit and Nordic walking.

- **Consider how our parks can be improved to encourage less-abled visitors to access and enjoy them**

We will be working with a group of disabled volunteers in conjunction with colleagues from the Boxmoor Trust to audit some of our parks. We aim to use the opportunity to work with disabled people to improve our awareness of issues that might not come to light through more technically based assessments

We are also currently working with CMS to audit and improve access to Pishiobury Park.

- **Parish Paths Project**

CMS work independently to deliver community led improvements to the Rights of Way network. This crosses over as a direct benefit to us when it facilitates working with local Friends Groups such as at Southern Country Park for example on networks outside the park boundary.

- **Work closely with neighbouring authorities to explore joint initiatives and share knowledge**

We meet regularly with Hertfordshire Parks Managers through the Hertfordshire Association for Chief Officers sub group and through the Eastern Region Parks and Open Spaces forum. We use an annual Green Flag celebration event to promote the work carried out district wide to improve open spaces. This is closely linked with a wide network of voluntary work. We are exploring the potential for a district wide promotional tool to “map” facilities and parks.