

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF LEISURE TASK AND FINISH SCRUTINY PANEL
HELD ON TUESDAY, 12 SEPTEMBER 2006
IN COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 6.30 - 10.05 PM**

Members Present:	Mrs H Harding (Chairman), Mrs P Brooks (Vice-Chairman), M Colling, Mrs A Grigg (Planning and Economic Development Portfolio Holder), Mrs J Lea, J Markham, S Murray, Mrs P K Rush, Mrs P Smith, J M Whitehouse and T Richardson
Other members present:	K Angold-Stephens, P Spencer and C Whitbread
Apologies for Absence:	P Turpin
Officers Present	D Macnab (Head of Leisure Services), Mrs L MacNeill (Assistant Head of Leisure Services), P Sutton (Asst Head of Planning Services (Forward Planning & Environment)), P Hewitt (Countryside Manager), Ian White (Senior Planning Officer) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance:

16. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that Councillor T Richardson would be substituting for Councillor P Turpin.

17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor S Murray declared a general personal but non-prejudicial interest by virtue of being the Council's representative on the Roding valley Meadows Local Nature Reserve Management Committee and the nature reserve having a partnership with Roding Valley High School. He was also a non active member of the Friends and Walkers association.

Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor Mrs Grigg declared a general personal but non-prejudicial interest by virtue of being the Council's representative on the Roding Valley Meadows Local Nature Reserve Management Committee.

Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor J M Whitehouse declared a general personal but non-prejudicial interest by virtue of being an ordinary member of the Essex Wildlife Trust.

18. NOTES FROM LAST MEETING - 31 JULY 2006

The minutes of the meeting held on 31 July 2006 was agreed as a correct record.

19. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel noted the Terms of Reference and Work Programme, which they considered still to be relevant and would not require any amendment.

20. FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF RODING VALLEY MEADOWS LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

It was noted that the Head of Leisure Services had received correspondence from the Grange Farm Trust who could not attend tonight's meeting. It was explained and accepted that the Panel would need at some time to invite the Chairman and/or Vice Chairman of the Trust to consult them on their views about the future management of Roding Valley Meadows, prior to any final decision. It was recognised that as Landowners on the current Reserve and Landowners on the potential extension to the Reserve (including the location of the possible Interpretation Centre) the Trust's agreement was necessary on future management options.

The meeting welcomed Chris Johnson, a representative local user of the reserve and former chair of the Roding Valley Wildlife Group; and two members of the Liaison Group, Roger Warner, Chairman of the liaison group and Jennifer Morgan a member of the liaison group.

The Liaison group indicated that:

- they were unhappy with the fact that there was an extension to the cattle grazing in the reserve;
- they would not like to see the contract with Essex Wildlife Trust (EWT) renewed as they had issues with coppicing, hedgelaying, fencing, the use of barbed wire, and the cutting back of scrub;
- the wild flower species are declining;
- only half the reserve is fenced off; and
- they were now getting on better with the new Warden, but indicated that it would be better for the Council to employ its own warden;

Chris Johnson commented that he thought that EWT were best qualified to manage the reserve, but a number of restrictions should be placed on them as they had a lot of species loss (down to poor management techniques) and some bad PR over fencing and hedging issues. He also thought that the reserve had been used as a test bed for a number of procedures.

In answer to some questions from the Panel, Roger Warner said the Liaison group generally communicated with EWT through the council contact officer and the liaison meetings. He could contact the warden via his mobile phone. He thought that when EWT first took over the reserve they were not very good at liaising with the public and would generally do things their own way, eventually things did get better, but over the last few years things had deteriorated, with problems arising over coppicing of Willow trees, the elimination of scrub land, over grazing of cattle, not managing the hay meadows and not enforcing old agreements.

They were also concerned about the reduction of species and the loss of wetland. This resulted in the loss of a large number of ground nesting birds that used the wetland habitat.

Chris Johnson summed up by saying that he thought that EWT treated the reserve as a sort of farmed park. It should be an area that is allowed to grow wild.

The Chairman drew this part of the consultation to a close and thanked them for their time and for giving their views and opinions to the Panel.

Next the Panel welcomed Judy Adams, the Chairman of the Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Management Committee, Alan Heath (Volunteer and part of EWT management), Neil Bedford (EWT staff member) and Margaret Chalk part of the Management Committee and a Loughton Town Councillor.

Judy Adams started by giving her personal view of what the LNR Management Committee does. They were established in 1986 to liaise between EWT and Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) and meet on a quarterly basis. They have a user liaison group that feed into the Management Committee, which has a remit to carry out an agreed policy and to report annually to the Council. She said that the reserve needed to be positioned so it can bring both external funding and internal resources. It is important to the Council as it brings in national recognition. The committee has a responsibility to respond locally and to recognise that it is the custodian of a small part of England's natural heritage.

In response to the questions that the management committee has failed over the last 21 years to take account of local opinion, has not successfully managed the SSI side of the reserve and that the liaison group was outnumbered in its make up by outside interests Judy Adams replied that they had got better over time. The Warden is the key to liaison with the public as he meets them daily. As for the SSI part of the reserve the Government has set a target of 95% for favourable conditions for SSSIs, which is not an easy target to meet. It was a challenge to manage the land. The Consultative Liaison Committee was a step in the right direction and a great way of accessing a wide range of people's views. An example of greater understanding was that 15 years ago they coppiced a hedge row and were criticized by the local people, however, two years later it was a better hedge. They are currently trying to grow sedge grass (ice age vegetation), which is important scientifically and needs to be cared for, EWT has the know how to do these kinds of things. In the future EWT should try and bring local people into the scientific side of the reserve.

Asked whether cattle were necessary as part of the management for the site, the Panel were told that it was important to manage the hay meadows and to promote the wild flowers. Grazing is an integral part of managing the site, as it's difficult to use cutting machines on the reserve. Hay is currently very difficult to sell and its production will probably diminish over time.

It has been said the reserve looks more like a park than nature reserve, this may be due to the fact that EWT have introduced hedging and put in a path for wheelchair users to be user friendly. As for the loss of scrubland, this is due to the fact that it is necessary to cut back overgrown hedges to their original lines, to prevent encroachment onto the meadows.

One of the criticisms levelled at EWT is a lack of monitoring and they would accept this as a fair one, it would take a lot of time and manpower to monitor effectively and they are looking for a simpler system that works. EWT adopted an English Nature devised system for grassland monitoring, and first used it successfully three years ago. It is to be repeated.

When asked about potential future income resources for the reserve it was thought that haymaking would not bring in any substantial income, but there was the possibility for making and selling haylidge, which is more profitable.

The Chairman thanked the LNR representatives for their time and the help they gave to the panel.

The panel next welcomed representatives from the Essex Wildlife Trust (EWT), John Hall the Director of EWT, Patrick Bailey the Warden of the Roding Valley Nature Reserve, Ken Adams the Botanical Recorder for Essex and Alan Heath (Volunteer and part of EWT management). It was noted that EWT is a charitable volunteer organisation that provides advice and education and specialises in managing numerous sites across the County. It was explained that with respect to the Roding Valley Meadows EWT work to a five-year work programme. Mr Hall stressed that EWT are keen to continue to look after the reserve.

The Warden explained that a lot of people use the reserve including joggers, walkers, education groups, dog walkers and horse riders. The meadows are fenced due to the cattle but the gates of fields not occupied by the cattle are kept open to enable open access to the public. It has a historical and wildlife interest and is important both to the local people and to wildlife, both flora and fauna. Roding Valley meadows are the last chunk of flowering water meadows in Essex, is unique in the country and has to be preserved for the County and the Country.

Ken Adams explained that so far they have collected about a half a million records on rare plants in Essex. The meadows need the cattle to graze it, as it is important for the plants. EWT will need some flexibility to manage the meadows if they take it on again. The current issues facing the reserve are:

- Grassland management – ideally to be managed by grazing;
- Water – no running water on the reserve, it has to be brought in by tank, causing ruts in the meadows. There is a need to install watering points;
- Risk of fire – needs more cutting of scrub on site and disposal of hay off site;
- Vandalism – it's not as bad as it was, but still needs to be tackled by use of a user group who would report incidents;
- Local public concerns – public needs to be kept informed;
- Storage of machinery – a building is needed; and
- Monitoring – this needs to be developed further.

Mr Hall said that the EWT in reality needs about £30,000 a year to look after the Roding Valley Meadows, this is the current cost incurred by them. Mr Hall went on to explain that they also bring around another £30,000 of added value to the management of the Reserve. However, Mr Hall gave an undertaking that EWT could continue to manage the site in the future at the same level of financial support from the District Councils per the current grant of £25,000. Any additional money is raised by local fundraising. For instance money for the path for disabled users was raised by them. They did not want to put car-parking charges on the site as local people should be able to use it at no charge.

Future management plans need to allow for flexibility and needs to improve fund raising but they will need tenure on the site for this of about 20 years. EWT see it as a partnership project with the local council, local people and the Grange Farm Trust.

Asked what were the main reasons why EFDC should choose EWT to retain the contract Mr Hall replied that there would be a stronger working partnership with them and they bring a lot of expertise, the site is a challenge and there must be a balance, not just benefits for wildlife but the local people as well.

Mr Hall was asked why he had only asked for the same amount of money (£25,000) from the council as present and what was the real overall figure he was looking for. He replied that he knew that EFDC was strapped for cash for countryside services and ideally would like to increase the staff there by a half a post, so may be looking at £40 to £45,000 per annum. However he is prepared to apply for grants to get further financing.

The Chairman thanked the director and officers of the Essex Wildlife Trust for their participation and help given to this panel.

The Panel next welcomed Paul Hewitt from EFDC's Countrycare section who gave the panel a presentation of the role of Countrycare in the district and at Roding Valley Meadows, a copy of which is attached to these minutes.

Mr Hewitt was asked about EWT and their role in the site over the last 20 years. He replied that it was a complicated site to look after. They had started out with some 'less than professional' wardens and had problems at the start, but they have got over it, and now have a closer liaison with the council. Also in their favour they have the specialist knowledge and equipment needed.

Countrycare could run the reserve but it would incur additional cost, as they would need the right number of staff and the right equipment. In Paul Hewitt's view a better option would be to stick with EWT as they already have the specialist knowledge and equipment. As a charity they also have access to a lot more funding, but will need a 20-year contract to access it.

Asked about possible improvements to the running of the Reserve Mr Hewitt commented that in his opinion the management committee was too large and tended to go off on tangents, they need to keep to the management plan. In order to make EWT work more effectively, the management committee needs to be sharpened and it would need a strong Management Plan. They are going the right way on the conservation side, but have not necessarily monitored the site adequately and reported formally at appropriate frequencies to the Council. In future there is perhaps a need to be clearer with EWT as to the Council's aspirations with respect to the development of the Nature Reserve. The Panel considered that there was value in this notion and that any future management agreement needed to focus on outcomes and be more rigorous in terms of contractual obligations.

Countrycare considered that the current Warden, Patrick, would be very difficult to replace as he is very competent, enthusiastic and always informs the Council what he is doing.

The Chairman thanked Mr Hewitt for his interesting presentation and his candid views on EWT. The Panel then went on to discuss the options open to the Council.

The Panel thought that a yearly report should go to full Council so that it got proper feedback from who ever will take on the running of the reserve.

They had three options:

1. Retain largely the status quo with an extension to the EWT Agreement;
2. Do not renew the Agreement with EWT but rather bring the Management of the Reserve back In-House to Countrycare; or
3. Develop a new Agreement with Essex Wildlife Trust, which is stronger on the outcomes and expectations that the Council desires and formalises in some way Partnership working with Countrycare.

CONCLUSION

There was a general consensus amongst the Panel based on the site visit and the evenings dialogue that the Reserve was clearly a valuable resource for the Council and local people and that in the future it should be not only protected but hopefully invested in to achieve its maximum potential. It was recognised that historically there had been mistakes in the running of the Reserve but in recent years things were much improved. Whilst currently Essex Wildlife Trust are largely self evaluating their performance, in future any new Agreement had to include performance measures which could be reported formerly back to the Council.

It was noted that:

- Grange Farm Trust's interests were important but to date they had been a non-contributory partner in financial terms and have benefited from having their land managed largely at no cost for the last twenty-five years. It may in future be possible for Grange Farm Trust to be a potential source of funding for improvements.
- The Grange Farm Trust need to be consulted and be a partner in any new management arrangements particularly as the Terms of the Section 106 Agreement on the Grange Farm site allow for additional nature conservation land and a provision of an Interpretation Centre to serve the Reserve.
- Any grants that EWT receive go directly to them, but it must be spent in our locality.
- EFDC would not like to overburden Countrycare by giving the management of the reserve to them.
- This would be an opportunity to sharpen up the management plan in the new agreement, it should be more mission based and not over complicated.
- Currently the management committee agrees EWT's management plan.

RECOMMENDATION

The Consensus of the Panel was that a preferred future management option that they would recommend would be to offer Essex Wildlife Trust a new Management Agreement for a length of twenty years (in order to attract external funding) but that the new Agreement should provide a greater monitoring, evaluation of management practices and more frequent and direct reporting to the Council. In addition partnership working with Countrycare should be formalised within any new Agreement, hopefully to promote joint working across all the Council's local Nature Reserve where appropriate. The issue of break clauses within the Agreement to be investigated.

If this initial recommendation finds favour with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, a further comprehensive report will be presented to the panel at a future meeting containing a detailed proposition, based on further consultation with the Grange Farm Trust, Essex Wildlife Trust and Countrycare.



21. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The detailed arrangements for the visit to Copped Hall were presented to the members present.

22. DATE OF NEXT MEETING



Next meeting to be held on 28 September 2006, with the Head Teacher and Chair of Governors of King Harold Secondary School.

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Roding Valley Meadows LNR Epping Forest Countrycare

Paul Hewitt, Countryside Manager
Epping Forest District Council





Overview



Countrycare was established in April 1986 (as a temporary 3 year project) same time as the Roding Valley Meadows were being declared an LNR and the Essex Wildlife Trust started management on the reserve.



Explains why EWT are partners.






Resources




Countrycare staffing until March 2007 5 full time staff inc
 1 Countryside Manager, 2 Assistant Countryside Managers,
 1 Countryside Assistant and 1 trainee (until March 07).
 Army of volunteers.
Project budget of £12k for 2006/07 before any grant income.

Work Output 2005/06




- Organised average of 3 walks, talks and projects days a week throughout the year.
- 121 practical days = 1,200 days.
- Managed 36 different sites across 20 parishes.
- Largest 15h most > 3h, often difficult sites to manage.

Local Nature Reserves


- 9 of 37 LNRs in Essex (08.2007)
- 8 declared since 2000 area 90.72 h
- Roding Valley Meadows is by far the biggest 56h
- LNRs major focus for Countrycare - 42 project days, undertaken on the LNRs last year.
- Countrycare manages the other LNRs in partnership with or on behalf of Leisure Services, Land Drainage Section and Nazeing PC.
- Funding of £10k annually – Countrycare and partners- with average income of £9K per year of external grants for 8 LNRs since 2000.





Countrycare's current role with RVM LNR

- **May 2005** – Planning Services via Countryside Manager took over from Leisure Services as coordinator between EWT and EFDC.
- **Budgets** – Spending control officer, grant to EWT then responsible for small works and print budget - £3,270
- **Green Flag applications** etc
- **Coordination** of the Management and Liaison Committees.
- **Assisting with events, walks** etc – e.g 2006 Museum exhibition
- **Liaison** with EWT and Warden, Patrick Bailly - assisted with his recruitment and probationary period.
- **Practical assistance** if needed – e.g 4 volunteers in 2005/06
- **Patrolling** if required – Countrycare trainee is volunteer warden.
- **Extra staff** to help Patrick if he needs assistance H&S issues of lone working for a solitary warden.

Epping Forest Countrycare



Bring back in house? – The issues



- Countrycare expertise and community focus; local connection and accountability.
- Fresh approach new ideas.
- Bringing all 9 LNRs under Countrycare management would require expenditure on new machinery to avoid reliance on external contractors
- In house machinery would allow improvements to other LNRs/wildlife sites and may release volunteer time.
- Increase in Countrycare staff would give greater flexibility in terms of site management.



Epping Forest Countrycare

Resources Equipment






Options

- **In house** - Countrycare would need the specialist machinery tractor , haymaking and forage harvester – obvious major capital cost implication £25 - £40k with ongoing revenue costs.
- Storage for such equipment? Already an issue and a problem for EWT that needs resolving. Countrycare based at Town Mead Depot, Waltham Abbey – 5 miles – Little suitable available room.
- **External** - Employ specialist contractor for hay cutting?

Resources - Staffing

- **Countrycare would need extra staff** – min of one if Countrycare's current work commitments are not to suffer dramatically.
- **Very seasonal** and labour intensive in the summer. Trust relies on volunteer labour to assist the warden e.g tractor driving – would this be acceptable if EFDC were in control.
- **Would the existing warden be prepared to transfer to EFDC?** Currently employee of EWT.
 - No?**
 - recruitment issues – skills shortage on the market.
 - Yes?**
 - Housing issues, Council Officer taking housing stock? EWT warden is effectively on call 24/7
 - Single status/job evaluation implications – member of staff would come into the Countrycare structure as an ACM – significant salary difference.

An Alternative?

Partnership working - there could be an even closer working relationship between EFDC and EWT – Countrycare could further assist on RVM LNR and EWT's two other reserves. EWT could assist EFDC on the other LNRs and significant wildlife sites.

Increased resources - does the reserve need more resources to enhance its full potential? Extra equipment primarily for the RVM LNR would allow better timing of management, and EWT could assist with management of other EFDC LNRs (haymaking where EFCC currently pays contractors)

- **Increased commitment** - Countrycare could spend more time on the RVMs assisting with sensitive labour intensive projects such as hedgerow and scrub management.



A difficult decision

- Not an easy reserve to manage. there are complex ecological issues at play, multi functional use and close to high area of population.
- Whatever decision is taken we must remember what a special and unique place the meadows are. As a SSSI EDFC has a legal duty to maintain them appropriately and their management must be the priority.