



Notes from Interest Group Workshop

15 November 2005

Introduction:

The following are notes documenting the Interest Group Workshop, held from 15.00 to 18.00 on Tuesday 15 November in Marlborough House, Warrior Square, St Leonards.

They are being circulated to those who attended and posted on the Pebsham Countryside Park project web site (www.eastsussex.gov.uk/pebsham) for anyone with an interest to view.



This workshop was part of the consultation programme for the

development of Pebsham Countryside Park. Undertaken by TK Associates on behalf of East Sussex County, Hastings Borough and Rother District councils, the consultation seeks to understand the attitudes, concerns and aspirations of local people in relation to the proposed creation of a countryside park.

Meeting notes:

1. Opening presentations:

Peter Mead (Hastings Borough Council) started the meeting by outlining the project and park area, followed by an overview of the consultation process by Tariq Khwaja (TK Associates).

Then Alison Burgh of recreation market consultants Acorn presented examples of other country parks. She outlined the impact they have on the surrounding communities and local economies and her view of the lessons for the Pebsham Countryside Park project. The presentation slides are available on the project web site.

2. Questions raised after the introductory presentations:

Question: What are the chances of an additional rail station in the area?

Response: There are two possible new stations - at Wilting Farm and Glyne Gap. Both are in the concept stage, but have got no further yet.

Question: Before we can be consulted, we need to know the outcome of environmental studies. It may be that it is so sensitive an area that it should be left alone; we can't come up with ideas without knowing this information. Have the relevant surveys been done?

Response: Technical studies are certainly being undertaken but this is not likely to generate information that prevents us developing a countryside park. We know the SSSI is at the heart of the park and the hope is to enhance it. It is likely that the more active parts of the site will be on the southern side, catering for sports or other activities. The northern side may be more focused on quiet recreation. With regards to archaeology, the area is covered in it: we have gone a long way with desk and field studies but no excavations as yet. Archaeology will not prevent the park developing. We know that water is another key factor, as it is important for flood prevention.

Question: When will information be available, if at all?

Response: The information will certainly be made publicly available; it's just not in final format at present and is also in-depth and in many parts. The best thing would be to let us know which issues you are interested in and we can share those parts with you.



Question: You talk about recreation activities but which activities are you planning and whom will they be aimed at?

Response: No decisions on that have been made yet – that is what this meeting is about, to throw that question out to all of you.

Question: What can you do and not do with regards to health and safety and environmental issues?

Response: There are issues with digging into the site, with the gases on the landfill, and to do with water. We certainly need to ensure we understand and address these.

Question: With regards to the flooding, is the land formally used as flood plane?

Response: Yes it is a flood plane valley, and it is underwater for a good period of time.

Question: On the future of the Coombe Haven area, with sea level rises, will the sea reclaim the land eventually?

Response: There is a stabilisation project at Glyne Gap, so no, the sea will not come in and reclaim the land here.

Question: We need to look at the future generation for sports ideas; however, any sports will be excellent. My interest is in archery but I am concerned about affordability. What costs would be involved?

Response: We are looking at offering local activities for local people and looking at a blend of activities. We would need to look carefully at the costs and affordability.

Comment: Maybe we could share facilities between our respective clubs.

Comment: We have a vested interest, as we fly down there now. We want to continue to be able to use the area.

Response: The idea is to bring more activities to the park, where possible without losing any of those that are popular today.

Question: What timescale are you looking at for the project?

Response: Early works have already started on pathway improvements, but other facilities will take longer to create. We are looking at a ten year plus time period for the project overall.

Comment: You are just out to exploit and market the countryside that's already there. This is just a way of making money.

Alison: It's more about protecting the land and making the most of it in a sustainable way.

Question: How economically viable does the park have to be? Presumably there has to be a balance. Policing, lighting, rubbish collection and the like are all expensive.

Response: Yes we would need to strike a balance and it cannot be developed in a way that makes it a long-term burden on the local authorities.

Comment: Health and safety aspects will be key.

Comment: I love the valley and have walked it many times. It is like a mini Amazonia and vulnerable in landscapes terms. It has an economic value and would be used if preserved. Nature conservation is important and many people want the valley to be properly maintained. I am interested in cycle lanes. I notice from the local paper that 90%+ of people so far have said it should be maintained for nature conservation.

Comment: It is a concern that the SSSI to the south can be developed near to as that's not compatible with bird watching and wildlife.

Response: It is a big area and the scale of the site gives many opportunities to develop activities that are far enough away from the SSSI.

Question: What are the real prospects of access to the park for disabled people? How realistic is it?

Response: It is vital as we want every body to be able to access park. Ideally a route or routes can be developed for all people to use. One option is to use the old railway line for disabled access as it is flat and leads to a great vantage point with views over the valley.

Comment: I have lived here for 40 years off and on and the green area has always been a valuable divide between Hastings and Bexhill. But I know developers would love to get their hands on the area for building. I would like to ask if we are really able to do nothing with this area as some are suggesting; I presume this is not an option if we want to conserve the green space and resist the pressures to build houses.



3. Group exercises to discuss concerns and aspirations:

The attendees were then split in to teams of four or five and asked to spend 30-40 minutes discussing concerns about the project as well as opportunities and aspirations. Each group presented their ideas as follows:

A. Concerns

1. Nothing should be rushed. It all needs careful consideration and a theme park approach must be avoided at all costs.
2. We must not assume that the Link Road is inevitable. It will destroy the valley. We need to improve public transport, but unfortunately more cars from people visiting the park are just inevitable.
3. We have heard lots of schemes being mooted in Hastings that have never happened in the end. We would love this one to happen in our lifetime.
4. Anything that is built must not leave a scar on the landscape – when it becomes unfashionable and is removed. Remember that everything goes out of fashion eventually and becomes redundant.
5. Traffic, access and parking are major issues: we could organise events but how can people get to these events?
6. Cycle tracks through the SSSI are a concern.
7. Walk ways must be maintained but not to spoil the SSSI.
8. The proposed new housing estates in north Bexhill are major concerns with hundreds of new houses, along with the Link Road – they will spoil the park by bringing traffic and noise. The housing estates will bring people with dogs going on the land. It's fine for people to enjoy the area but not to abuse it.
9. Wheelchair access must not be taken over by cyclists.
10. Clear markings are needed to get around the park: some town people are not confident getting around the countryside.
11. Braille is not the best idea for the blind, as not all people read it, it gets corrupted etc. Handrails would be good.



B. Opportunities & aspirations

1. We could use the park for educational purposes, maybe joining with Plumpton College and University Centre Hastings. We could involve young people and have trainee Rangers
2. Clay Pigeon shooting is a good sport for all kinds of people including the disabled. We could develop UCH as a sports college to create something unique as nowhere else is clay pigeon shooting as a university course although similar sports are provided as such elsewhere. We could link in with BMX facilities and share facilities with the Bowmen.
3. We need to use the natural resources – work with what is already in the park.

4. We could create a mile-long straight strip of land for use for kite bugging, running etc as well as model aircraft. It could accommodate existing and new activities.
5. We could build on existing equestrian facilities, incorporating both lit and unlit areas.
6. Wheelchairs and disability access must be developed right at the beginning of the project: it cannot be added on as after-thought.
7. We are working on a 'Biopark' idea to use the existing assets of park, the woodland, coppicing and landfill to form a power source to maintain park and supply energy to many houses nearby. This fits in with the Kyoto agreement and could attract funding. This could be open to the public and a flagship of sustainable development.
8. We have an opportunity for a large-scale outdoor concert arena.
9. A 'Friends of the Park' scheme.
10. We need different routes for all abilities. We need to offer facilities for the young and the old.
11. Doing nothing is not an option; management of the area is a must.
12. The Link road is inevitable, so we need to accept that and accommodate suitable parking for access to the park by visitors and local people.
13. Let's have bird watching screens and hides...it could become a haven for bird watchers...and cycle tracks and bridle trails. We should link these trails with the Greenways and link to the sea.
14. The local colleges could get involved with the green projects. We could create an environmental centre to promote best practice. We could have green MBAs and workshops and lectures on best practice – e.g. dinosaur footprints.
15. Could the landfill site be dug out in the middle to create a fantastic open air concert area like an amphitheatre overlooking the sea?
16. The park's identity needs to be established as a country park, to give it legal protection and ground rules.
17. Removal of the Link Road idea will enhance the conservation area.
18. We should incorporate cycle tracks, skateboarding tracks and non-motorised sports (but nothing with motors).
19. A buffer zone is needed between the landfill area where activities could be developed and the SSSI, in order to protect the SSSI.
20. We should plant more trees in accordance with Kyoto. We need to enjoy the area for what it is, not attempt to 'prettify' it.
21. With 1,800 acres, there should be great scope for everyone's needs and particularly for equestrian activities. There are around 70 horses and six livery yards in the area already with opportunities for new bridle ways and horse-riding around the perimeters and horse competitions, including dressage. These could generate income.



We could have rangers on horseback to cover more areas. There are opportunities for horse-drawn carriages around the park which would be ideal for the elderly and disabled. And kids love to see and touch horses, it makes them happy. We could have pony club activities and school visits. Sea access is important to enable riding along the beach - this is a good draw for tourists too.

22. Archery covers all ages and types of people. Disabled and blind people can do it. We need all activities to be compatible and, for this, planning is essential. We could lay on tournaments for everyone to have a try.



23. There's also good scope for arts events in the park area. We must make sure anything put on the site can be easily removed: make it semi permanent, so when it's out of date it can be taken away easily without leaving terrible scars on the landscape.

24. BMX bikes/cycles – great to have them but they need to be away from the housing.

25. The park should be designed with family access in mind. Picnic areas and events regularly updated. An adventure playground, sculpture walks – touch sensitive walks.

26. Pebsham should be used for BMX and moto-cross. The more rural north area could be maintained for the future. The housing issues and ecology of area should be sorted out.

27. Let's have some provision for water sports. A 3000m, six-lane rowing course with an adjacent hotel and training facility would enable the park to attract local and regional events and become eligible to hold international and Olympic events. The Amateur Rowing Association has a strategy document which gives details. All coastal water sports have difficulty recruiting young people through age restrictions on the sea. Managed water would be easier to hold schemes for people as young as 10 years old. Water sports appeal to all age groups (the oldest member is 71) and are excellent exercise.

4. Questions and comments raised after the exercises

Comment: Paths have just got to be created for disabled people. People are going to have to accept that a wheelchair needs a flat route and a smooth surface.

Comment: Health and safety is an issue. In case someone has an accident in the park, we will need ambulance access, especially in the area earmarked for more activities. Also, the SSSI floods quite badly which must be considered.

Question: Will it be a Countryside Park or Country Park?

Response: This is not decided. A Country park is recognised as having a legal status under the countryside act 1968, whereas a countryside park does not have that formal status.

Comment: Development of circular foot paths important, so people do not have to retrace their steps. With the flooding issues diversions may be needed. We may need summer and winter paths.

Comment: Site visits should be arranged for everyone involved in decision making and planning to experience the area and not make decisions from their desks.

Response: The Steering Group members have certainly walked around the area and got their feet wet.

Question: Some people cannot walk it, so can we come up with a virtual tour to represent the site – is that at all feasible?

Response: That idea will be looked at.

5. Close:

To close the session, Tariq Khwaja asked, acknowledging the complexity of the many of the issues highlighted for attention, for a show of hands from those in favour of developing the area as a managed countryside park. All but three raised their hands. The three dissenters emphasised that they were in support of re-development of the Pebsham tip area, but not the other parts of the site.

Tariq thanked everyone for attending and contributing their ideas. He explained that notes from the session would be circulated to all who attended and published on the project web site (www.eastsussex.gov.uk/pebsham). He encouraged attendees to get their colleagues, friends and neighbours to complete questionnaires by the final deadline of 15 December.

The formal part of the meeting closed at 17.45.

Background notes:

The Pebsham Countryside Park Project aims to create a high quality, sustainable park in the 600 hectare green space between Hastings, Bexhill and Crowhurst. It is designed to create a recreational area for local people and to attract visitors, thereby helping to regenerate the area.

The project is a collaboration between East Sussex County, Hastings Borough and Rother District councils. The early stages are part-financed by the European Union's ERDF fund, with the project run in partnership with French countryside initiatives in the Lille region and the Somme.



The consultation exercise is being undertaken for the local authorities by TK Associates (www.tkassociates-uk.com). Further views about the project can be sent to TK Associates, by email to pebshamviews@tkassociates-uk.com, or by post to 16 Florence Road, London W5 3TX.

Further information about the project can be found at www.eastsussex.gov.uk/pebsham or by contacting Toni Roberts at troberts@hastings.gov.uk or 01424 451432.

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