

Leybourne Lakes Country Park Development Meeting

Thank you for your email with notes of the meeting before Christmas that took place on this subject.

Cllrs Pam Ayrton and David Thornewell found the meeting useful and were pleased to attend. I have been asked to thank the borough Council for arranging it. It was considered to be constructive and we look forward to a further one in due course.

The notes of the meeting have been circulated to my parish councillors and I have asked to confirm the parish council's general views at this stage. This letter will just cover the issues we feel are really important and not seek to comment on everything discussed at the meeting.

As the notes start off by recording the ethos of the site as a country park is important and whilst there has always been a balance to strike between the various uses such as fishing, windsurfing, diving, scout use, and informal recreational pursuits plus the wildlife value of the site its status as a country park to us is paramount.

By way of background country parks came into being as a result of the Countryside Act.1968 with the purpose of providing places with a natural rural atmosphere as opposed to the formal parks of towns and urban areas. The idea was provide easy access to the countryside for those living in built up areas.

At the same time the development of the Medway Gap then via KCC planning documents...Town Maps...was proceeding apace and one for our area was allocating new land for housing at various sites including 900 homes at "North Larkfield" between the M20 and Leybourne Way. There was local pressure for a country park to cover the lakes between Leybourne/Larkfield and Snodland to serve the growing area which resulted in KCC producing a study which proposed a country park over a somewhat wider area than what is now the country park. Sadly though Government funding could not be achieved and the plan remained just an idea.

The parish council was therefore very pleased when the borough council took up the issue when it had become the local planning authority and achieved the country park with a planning arrangement with Berkley Homes allowing them to build The Lakes site and fund the provision of the park we have today.

It opened in 2003 and has proved very popular meeting the needs of the local population and with the additional housing taking place and planned locally we consider its importance will only increase. Indeed we note the visitor satisfaction surveys record over 90 per cent satisfaction.

However we have been aware since it opened and indeed before there was from a visitor perspective a need for a well-designed visitor centre and especially a cafe overlooking the lake. This was an issue during the planning stages and at one time the redundant but well designed visit cabin was thought by many to be an interim answer though it was turned down on the costs of relocating it.

The Legal Agreement of 9th December,1999 between TMBC and the then landowners and developers provided a balance of £1,492,316 part of which was for a "visitors centre to serve members of the public visiting the country park land". We are aware that about £700,000 of this sum remains.

The parish council remains keen to see this provided particularly the cafe and notes most of the KCC country parks have such a facility. These are usually run by third parties and we had the envisaged that would be the position here too.

The council also wishes to stress the importance of the wildlife aspect of the country park with the "Snodland" stream running along one boundary; The water fowl on the lakes; the existence of the protected water voles; and that part is considered to be of wildlife interest. Indeed until quite recently

there was mention at user meetings of seeking Nature Reserve status. There are also the SS1 sites in the vicinity and these are the sort of issues being highlighted in the recently issued "A Green Future" document by the government.

We also wish as mentioned at the meeting that no motorised water sports should be undertaken at the park. Such unauthorized use had been an issue after sand and gravel extraction ended while the lakes were still in private ownership. Disturbance was caused to the houses close to Melbourne Way and for this reason the clause 4.23 in the Legal Agreement was inserted.

We are pleased there is no intention to charge for entry to the park. The site is crossed by three public paths namely MR 84, 88, and 99 and the parish council would be against entry charges.

We note the Borough solicitor is looking at any other restrictions which apply to the park including those in the planning permission TM/99/0032/FL.

The parish council understands the park currently costs the Borough £120,000 net and this with the issue of the Visitor Centre has led the council to look at other management arrangements including outsourcing the management to a third party.

The parish council currently contributes an annual sum of £5000 towards the costs of the park as was originally agreed back when the parish council was involved in the arrangements setting it up and that involved a liaison meeting involving Snodland which has now ceased its payments. The parish council has made provision again in its recently passed 2018/19 budget. It will as indicated at the meeting keep the matter under review depending on what future management arrangements are made. It would ask that liaison with the two parish councils and indeed users should continue including if management is outsourced.

We note that if a Lease arrangement were adopted the freehold of the land would remain with the borough council and we regard that as crucial. We also think any lease should be to a specific organisation with 5 yearly reviews as suggested at the meeting. And any lease should prevent assignment without TMBC approval.

We note the council has received internal advice that there must be a tendering arrangement. We would have preferred negotiations with specific bodies who it was previously assured could manage the country park. Such as the way the Leisure centre is run.

It should be recorded that some members of the parish council are doubtful if a commercial body can be found who can not only manage the country park with that status including building and running a visitor centre as well as doing it at no cost to the council. Or indeed making a payment to TMBC. There is a feeling this could only be done by compromising the country park and members have asked if there is a country park we could visit which is run in this way.

Parish councillors do though understand the pressure the borough is under to both reduce costs and increase income so understands why it wishes to test the position.

Lastly on a related issue the parish council was involved in an early stage in supporting the North Downs initiative and is pleased the country park is within the project area. It was also pleased a launch took place within the park last year. It is keen as we have told them to improve the public paths leading into and out of the country park including waymarking so it fits into the countryside path system locally. It is prepared to make a modest contribution towards such work and holds £500 for this purpose. A cafe would of course mean the park could be used for walk starts/ends.

On the issue of the country park being a meeting point for walking, the Council also wishes to record the importance of the Health Walks taking place on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. It would wish these to continue and these too could provide potential customers for a café.