

**GREAT FEN PROJECT
(Report by Director of Environmental & Community Services)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report accompanies a presentation which will cover the following matters:

-  The Great Fen Partnership
-  Existing Great Fen Governance
-  Background Research
-  Vision
-  Progress:
 - General
 - Heritage Lottery Fund
-  The Future:
 - Strategic Activities
 - Governance Review

Copies of the slides will be available to the Panel.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Great Fen Project is one of the most significant habitat restoration projects ever undertaken in Britain by the acquisition and restoration of land adjacent to two existing National Nature Reserves, Holme Fen and Woodwalton Fen. Connecting these two reserves will create a haven for wildlife. The Project, however, is by no means exclusively about wildlife as it will create a massive green space for people, opening up new opportunities for recreation, education and business. Agriculture will also remain an important aspect; although over the life of the project the intensive arable activity will decrease, replaced in part by grazing and other economic activity.

- 2.2 The Great Fen Vision is:

“A restored fenland landscape providing a variety of habitats for people and wildlife, now and in the future”.

- 2.3 The Great Fen Project Aims as stated in the Strategy and Action Plan are:

-  Help safeguard two very important National Nature Reserves. These are legally protected sites, one of which is of international importance for its wetland habitats and species.

- ✚ Create over 3,000 hectares (over 4200 football pitches) of new wildlife habitat, making a major contribution to local and national targets set out in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.
- ✚ Contribute to diversification in the local economy, creating opportunities for new jobs and income streams.
- ✚ Enhance flood protection in the Middle Level drainage system.
- ✚ Create access for a wide range of users in an area largely devoid of public footpaths.
- ✚ Become a significant tourist destination.
- ✚ Contribute to important Government Public Service Agreement targets.

2.4 The Project is currently governed under the terms of a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) between the five partners: The Environment Agency, Natural England, The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough, The Middle Level Commissioners and the Council. Agreement to the MoA was first approved by Cabinet in June 2002 and updated in July 2006 and September 2007.

2.5 The Project aims and objectives fit closely with those of the Council, particularly:

- ✚ Provision of strategic open space (related to the growth agenda and access to the countryside).
- ✚ Diversification of the economy, especially in NW Huntingdonshire.
- ✚ Promotion of healthy lifestyle choices.
- ✚ Conservation and enhanced local heritage.
- ✚ Protection and improvement of wildlife habitats.
- ✚ Adaptation and mitigation in the face of climate change.

The Project aligns with the Council's key strategies, including:

- ✚ Sustainable Community Strategy
- ✚ (Planning) Core Strategy
- ✚ Local Economic Strategy
- ✚ Environment Strategy

2.6 With regard to 'spatial planning' the significance of the Project has been highlighted and given statutory force by inclusion in the now adopted Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). The RSS is part of the local 'Development Plan', a legal entity and as a result the Council's Local Development Framework must be consistent with that Strategy to be judged 'sound' at subsequent Examinations.

2.7 The Great Fen Project is also recognised in the Green Infrastructure Strategy for the Cambridge Sub Region whereby within this District it is linked with other areas including Paxton Pits and areas around Grafham Water into an extensive network of strategic green space.

2.8 The Project is funded from a variety of sources including private donations and contributions from Partners. Significant resources have been provided from public sources including Growth Area Funds (CLG), Economic Development (EEDA) and more recently the Heritage Lottery Fund in recognition of the national importance of the Project. In total some £15.6m has been raised.

3. THE FUTURE

- 3.1 In considering matters raised by Councillors and Parish Councillors at a meeting held on 6 June, the Great Fen Steering Group gave a response which is attached as Appendix 1.
- 3.2 Progress since the response will be outlined in the presentation to the Panel.

4. CONCLUSION

✚ The Great Fen Project aligns well with local, regional and national policies.

✚ The Council is a full partner in the Project

✚ Further and active consideration is being given to:

- New more robust governance arrangements.
- A communication and information strategy.
- Land assembly and land management.
- Further research and master planning.

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Great Fen Project

**Response to the Four Propositions put to Councillors:
Briefing on 6 June by Councillor Swales**

New Governance Arrangements

The Project Partners currently operate under a Memorandum of Agreement which has served the Project well for the last few years. However, the Partners have agreed that the current governance arrangements are no longer fit for purpose and they are committed to a more robust agreement which establishes the partnership as an enduring institution. We are currently undertaking a review of mechanisms to identify the most appropriate form of governance that is acceptable to all Partners and that matches the aims and objectives of the Project over the coming years. Each Partner is taking legal advice on this.

The Partners' representatives on the Steering Group have agreed that a new agreement should be in place by 1 April 2009, but this is subject to independent legal advice being sought by individual Partners.

Communication

The Partners are committed to providing information about the Project and to ensuring all interested parties are consulted and kept informed of progress. The current ways in which different stakeholders can receive or seek information include:

- Personal contact with the Great Fen Project Manager, Campaign Manager, Development Officer or Ramsey Heights Countryside Classroom Centre Manager as well as Natural England / Great Fen reserves manager.
- Personal contact with partner representatives on the Steering Group
- The Great Fen Project Newsletter which is published twice a year
- The Great Fen Project website and project partners' websites
- Communications between the tenants and the landlords are through the landlord's agent
- News items in local press and other publications such as Ramsey Matters
- Guided walks which are undertaken on a regular basis and which can be requested (450 people were given guided walks of the area between April-June 2008)
- Talks/presentations to local community groups and societies
- Community events in the Project area and other venues (e.g., British Bird Watching Fair, Peterborough Green Festival, Ramsey Heritage Weekend)

Since the Project's inception, we have undertaken strategic consultation work with key stakeholder groups and the general public and will continue to do so. Our capacity to undertake further outreach, consultation, education and community engagement work will be greatly enhanced from January 2009 onwards with the employment of new dedicated staff funded by Heritage Lottery Fund.

In addition to these established links we propose to provide a regular email briefing to Parish, District and County Councillors.

We would also welcome your views on how you would like us to communicate with you in the future.

Land Assembly

In order to achieve the long-term aims and objectives of the Great Fen Project, the partners wish to eventually secure control over all of the land within the Project area. However, there are areas of priority land which:

- Lie close to, and between, Holme Fen and Woodwalton Fen National Nature Reserves, for purposes of nature conservation and water level management;
- Will provide opportunities for water management, for purposes of flood protection; and/or
- Offer valuable opportunities for visitors and visitor facilities, for purposes of recreation, education and socio-economic benefit.

These priorities have guided land acquisition subject to its availability and our approach to fundraising. The following statements outline how we will take forward land purchase and tenancies in the future.

1. The Project partners will be examining opportunities for changing tenancy boundaries on land owned by the Wildlife Trust, formerly part of the Holmewood Estate, where this better achieves project aims and objectives. However, this can only be achieved with the voluntary involvement and cooperation of tenants.
2. If a tenant wishes to sell the interest in their land and terminate their tenancy early, the Wildlife Trust, as landlord, will enter into negotiations. This could result in the granting of a new tenancy to another farmer or the early reversion of the land. These notifications will be subject to commercial confidentiality.
3. The Partners will focus their proactive approaches to landowners who own properties within the higher priority areas as described above.
4. The Partners will hold discussions with any landowner in the project area that approaches the project about selling their land.
5. As has already been demonstrated in the Project area, the Partners will seek to involve the vendor or other local farmers in the re-creation of wildlife habitat. Constraints notwithstanding, this could involve granting new tenancies.
6. As with all commercial negotiations these would be confidential. The Partners will not divulge the nature of any agreements between interested parties.

Masterplan

The social, economic and environmental benefits of the Project flow from the acquisition and appropriate use of land. Now we have greater certainty over

what will happen in the Project area over the coming years, the Partners are developing a masterplan which sets out what the Project area will be like in the future. This in turn will help inform discussions on issues such as visitor facilities, access routes/infrastructure and connectivity to local towns and villages. The intention is for a Great Fen Project masterplan to be finalised by spring 2009.

The masterplan will inform the context for the development of socio-economic benefits. The Partners will also be engaged in projects of benefit to local communities. Examples include:

- Enhanced flood storage in the project area;
- Improved access to and around the project area for recreation, learning and improving health/quality of life;
- The provision of education/training/community facilities and opportunities at Ramsey Heights Countryside Classroom;
- A grazing project working with local farmers;
- An investigation into the use of hay, coppice and reed for power generation.

The Partners have also established a Visitor Facilities Working Group to bring forward short and long-term proposals to enhance visitor facilities and the consequent social/economic benefits. These proposals will inform the Masterplan.