CABINET **7TH September 2006**

PAXTON PITS NATURE RESERVE
(Joint Report by the Head of Legal & Estates and the Countryside Services Manager)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report seeks approval to the extension of Little Paxton Nature Reserve by way of acceptance by the District Council of leases of land adjacent to the Reserve following the termination of gravel extraction operations.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The Little Paxton Nature Reserve currently consists of 240 acres (edged with a thick black line on plan A appended hereto). Further gravel extraction proposals nearby provide the opportunity to increase this to over 700 acres making it one of the largest nature reserves in Cambridgeshire. The existing Nature Reserve and the additional land comprise the area within the black line on plan B, also appended. The other areas, such as North and South Lakes, will remain in private ownership, but will be available for other potential leisure uses operated by the private sector.

2.2 The additional land is jointly owned by Oxford University Chest and Thornhill Settled Estate. Aggregate Industries UK is currently seeking planning consent for the extraction of gravel and the associated restoration. A Section 106 Agreement is being prepared which will incorporate the following key elements:

- £180,000 to cover staffing costs up to 2021
- provision and maintenance of a vehicle for use around the reserve up to 2021.
- £20,000 worth of materials for construction of additional facilities such as a car park
- retention of redundant quarry buildings to develop as volunteer/education facilities
- 29 kilometres of footpaths, bridle paths and cycle ways
- an environmental management plan under which habitats of reed bed, wet woodland and wet meadow will be created

2.3 On completion of the restoration it is proposed that several leases will be granted to the District Council on the following terms:

(i) the leases to be for a minimum period of 80 years with options to extend;
(ii) the rent to be a peppercorn; and
(iii) other terms to be agreed

3. IMPLICATIONS

3.1 Financial

3.1.1 The cost of leases of the additional land to the District Council will be covered by the provision to be made in the Section 106 Agreement and from income generated from activities on the site.

3.1.2 The sources of Income could include:

- agricultural grants – it should be possible to obtain approximately £20k per annum and it may be possible to apply for grants for specific projects;
- selling franchises – for example for cycle hire;
- events; and/or
- fund raising – the Friends of Paxton Pits have indicated that they would be willing to increase fund raising activity.

3.1.3 Until 2021 the Section 106 monies will cover staff costs. The maintenance of the paths and cycle ways will be the responsibility of the County Council. Therefore the income that the site generates needs to cover any materials required on site, staff costs after 2021 and any costs relating to the buildings, if the buildings are in use then.

3.2 Economic Development

3.2.1 Currently about 120,000 people visit Paxton Pits each year from all over the country. This figure is expected to increase as the reputation of the Reserve and the facilities and opportunities it offers become more widely known.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The offer of further leases of land in this area represents an opportunity to extend considerably Paxton Pits Nature Reserve at no direct cost to the District Council. Not only will there be ecological benefits but it will also provide a major leisure attraction for the area.

4.2 Once completed, the Nature Reserve and the adjoining land in private ownership will provide a complex of lakes and public open spaces covering some 1,500 acres in total situated between the River Great Ouse and the A1 stretching from Little Paxton to Diddington. It will have a network of footpaths, bridle paths and cycle ways covering the whole area.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 It is recommended that the Director of Central Services, after consultation with the Executive Councillor for Resources & Policy, be authorised to approve detailed terms for the leases.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

County Council Planning application number: H/05007/03/CM

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