

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

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In September 2009, Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) and then Cabinet considered a draft illustrative Masterplan for the Great Fen Project, which had been approved by the Project's Steering Group as a basis for consultation. A copy of the previous accompanying report is appended for information - Appendix 2.

1.2 The Partners have carried out extensive consultation. The key outcomes of that consultation are set out in Appendix 1.

1.3 In commenting on the draft plan, Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) "welcomed the production of the report on the next stage of the Great Fen Project and expressed its on-going support for the Councils involvement". The Panel also made the following points:

- i) The absence of any reference in the document to business planning and long-term financial forecasting;
- ii) The financial viability of a visitor centre;
- iii) The condition of the B660 and the need for its improvement;
- iv) A concern that there would be no long-term financial liability arising on the Council from the cessation of grants.
- v) The Panel were encouraged that some local landowners/tenants had become actively involved in land management.

These matters are also commented on in Sections 2 and 3 below.

1.4 The Project Partners have now considered the representations arising through the consultation and have approved the final version of the document which is available on the intranet and in the Members Room.

2. SUPPORTING/BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2.1 The approval of the Masterplan is a key milestone in the development of the Project, although it should be recognised that it is a spatial plan, based on robust evidence and not a business plan. It is intended to be flexible, responding in particular to land ownership and control and the future availability of resources. The Partners have now embarked on developing a new Action Plan, referred to in the

Masterplan, detailing the implementation and prioritising activity over the next five years. Each element of the Project will only be committed as and when the appropriate resources become available. In some cases, such as the visitor centre, it will be necessary to develop a full and robust business case. In others, such as management of the land already taken into restoration, this can be carried out within existing identified resources.

- 2.2 In response to Overview & Scrutiny Panel's concern over financial exposure, the Council's involvement and responsibilities are governed by a new Collaboration Agreement considered by Panel on 14 July 2009 and approved by the Cabinet on 23 July 2009. This limits the exposure essentially to an annual contribution of £20,000 towards project management and development costs. The Council does not own land within the Project and therefore is not exposed to the consequential responsibility or management and maintenance.

3. IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 During the consultation, there was general support for much of the content of the Masterplan. Therefore, a lot of the text has remained as in the draft. This includes the background material and information on the type of habitats to be created. There have been detailed changes, for example the map of visitor facilities has been updated with information supplied by consultees. Access maps amended to show access and links beyond the Project boundary and the network of proposed bridleways extended into the south of the Project area. A composite map of key proposals has been included.
- 3.2 The section of the plan on the proposed visitor centre has been revised with illustrations of the type of facility that it is envisaged will be provided. The text has also been amended to reflect the continuing importance of farming activity within the Project area and to reflect the importance of the heritage of the Fens. The revised plan also makes it clear that the manner/phasing in which areas will be brought forward for restoration is heavily influenced by the land ownership and tenancy arrangements which exist.
- 3.3 It is acknowledged that the B660 has its limitations. However, it is the only classified road giving access into the Project area. Further work has been commissioned on the proposed visitor centre and it is not envisaged that additional traffic will cause a problem, at least for the foreseeable future. This further work on the proposed visitor centre, parking and layout will be available later in the year. Whilst inevitably most people will access the main visitor facilities by car, increasingly other modes of transport will be encouraged and provided for and other opportunities, for example links from remote parking sites, may become more viable as visitor numbers eventually build up.
- 3.4 A number of the comments arising from the consultation relate to more detailed level of planning which will be taken forward as individual proposals within the area come forward.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 The approval of the Masterplan is an important step in the evolution of the Great Fen Project. It will assist in the Project outcomes being

aligned with the Council's policies and strategies, particularly the realisation of economic development opportunities, access for a growing population to strategic open space, flood protection and response to climate change.

5. RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 5.1 **To note the Great Fen Masterplan approved by the Project Steering Committee as amended following consultation.**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

 Great Fen Masterplan

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Key Findings from Great Fen Masterplan Consultation

- There was a good level of support from the general public for the provision of land for wildlife and for Fenland restoration.
- A number of people raised concerns about land being taken out of agricultural production, with particular reference to the needs of an increasing population.
- There was a common concern that people could have a negative impact on wildlife.
- The visitor centre was a very popular aspect of the masterplan. There were many suggestions for potential activities and facilities to attract a range of users, including walking trails, boat rides, sailing, fishing, natural adventure areas and bike tracks.
- There was general support for the notion of visitor gateways and village based facilities, and suggestions were made for some potential locations.
- There was some concern that the impact of traffic on local roads needs to be assessed prior to building a visitor centre or providing other facilities.
- A number of people were concerned that there was not enough parking in the masterplan.
- There was some concern that some parking/ potential parking areas would not be secure (e.g. Holme Fen, St Andrew's Church).
- A number of people suggested Park and Ride facilities including those, such as boat trips, which might provide a better experience than a bus.
- Many people brought up the issue of public transport as being a key factor in enabling many people to visit and get around the local area, including local people, older people, people with disabilities, and tourists (e.g. from Cambridge, Peterborough). Links to rail services were highlighted as being important.
- Many people highlighted the provision of leisure and recreation facilities as a good aspect of the masterplan.
- Some updates to the map were highlighted (e.g. missing Bed and Breakfasts, pub no longer at Ramsey Mereside).
- Many people thought that better accessibility to the area was a good part of the masterplan.
- Off-road bike and walking links from communities were viewed as of key importance for many people. Almost 29% of questionnaire respondents wanted to travel to the area by bike, and 22% wanted to walk there. Suggestions were made for some additional links not included on the masterplan. It was suggested that there should be clearer and stronger links to the Peterborough Green Wheel.
- Some people suggested separate provision for dog walkers, and others suggested dog activity areas.
- A number of people felt that the bridleway access could be increased, particularly with a north to south link and circular route provision.
- A range of activities were proposed which were not incorporated specifically in the questionnaire. These included adding information on heritage and archaeology shooting (clay pigeon and wildfowl), adventure play area, archery, enjoying the peace and quiet, wilderness camping, swimming and access via all terrain wheelchair.

- A number of people raised questions as to how the Great Fen Project would be phased, and also how it would be funded in the future.
- The need for better local promotion was highlighted. Suggestions included more links with the local media, as well as information to local venues and schools.
- A number of people highlighted the improvements for the local economy and tourism as good aspects of the project. Some people wanted to see a more unique attraction to draw in tourists. Others emphasised the needs for developing links with local tourism and businesses at this stage.
- Stakeholders suggested a range of amendments and additions to the text in the masterplan report, including emphasising the importance of farming, and adding information on heritage and archaeology

Overview & Scrutiny
(Environmental Well Being)

8th September 2009

Cabinet

17th September 2009

GREAT FEN MASTERPLAN
(Report of Director of Environmental & Community Services)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report introduces the draft illustrative Masterplan for the Great Fen Project which has been approved by the Project's Steering Group on the basis for consultation. It is now intended that the Great Fen Project Partners will consult widely on this document before finalising it early in 2010.

1.2 The illustrative Masterplan is a spatial plan – it sets out where new physical features could be created and illustrates where existing features are retained. It shows, amongst other things, open water, wetlands, woodlands, footpaths and cycleways, buildings and car parks. It is intended to convey something of the new character which could be created. Subject to final approval it will form the basis of a new action plan which the partners will develop next year to guide the on-going development of the project.

1.3 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. The Project partners are:

- Environment Agency
- Huntingdonshire District Council
- Middle Level Commissioner
- Natural England
- The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough

1.4 The Great Fen Vision as recast in the Masterplan is:

A vast swath of restored, accessible fenland landscape providing a rich variety of habitats for people and wildlife, offering an unforgettable encounter with nature now and in the future.

- 1.5 The aims of the project have been revised during the Masterplan process as follows:

Natural Environment:

- ✚ To create a new resilient fenland landscape which delivers major wild life benefits and achieves high standards of sustainability in all respects.

Social:

- ✚ To create an accessible, inspiring and tranquil environment for recreation, education, health and wellbeing.

Economic:

- ✚ To contribute to diversification and development of the local economy, consistent with environmental and social objectives.

Climate Change Adaptation and mitigation:

- ✚ To plan, design and manage the Great Fen to benefit climate change adaptation and mitigation.

These aims are expanded in more detail in the accompanying text.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 A report was presented to Overview & Scrutiny (Service Support) in November 2008, this dealt with progress with the project; the governance arrangements; the linkage of the project to the Council's own aims and objectives; the statutory status of the project in relation to the Regional Spatial Strategy and the, then, emerging Council's Core Strategy; funding achieved and future direction. In considering the last point, reference was made to a meeting of County, District and Parish Councillors and the response of the Project partners. That response covered:

- ✚ New and more robust governance arrangements (Cabinet received a report on this at their last meeting);
- ✚ A communication and information strategy;
- ✚ Land assembly and land management
- ✚ Further research and Masterplanning.

In respect of this latter matter the report referred to Partners developing a Masterplan which sets out what the project area will be like in the future and informs discussions on issues such as visitor facilities and access. It had been hoped to complete the Masterplan earlier in 2009, however, the robust nature of the studies and stakeholder involvement required led to a revised programme as mentioned above.

- 2.2 The masterplanning process has also involved the bringing together of a wealth of information in a baseline study, fieldwork analysis and consultation with a wide variety of interest groups and stakeholders

- 2.3 As part of the stakeholder involvement contributing to the development of the draft Masterplan a seminar for County and District Members was held in June 2009 led by Professor Robert Tregay of Landscape Design Associates who had been engaged to produce the Masterplan.
- 2.4 The Masterplan document, the text for which is appended, is set out as follows:
1. Introduction
 2. The Masterplanning process
 3. Strategic Drivers
 4. Physical Geography and Ecology
 5. People communities and heritage
 6. Engaging local stakeholders
 7. Aims
 8. The illustrative Masterplan
 - Habitats
 - Landscape character and structure
 - Land management
 - Visitor gateways
 - Access and circulation
 9. The heart of the Great Fen: The visitor centre and surrounding Landscape
 10. Next steps

Members will also have received the various map layers making up the Masterplan. The published version laying out the text and including photographs, will be available to Members and sent under separate cover in due course. (Note: the reference on page 23 of the text refers to the Masterplan itself not being available – however, this is simply a composite of the map layers).

3. RECOMMENDATION:

Overview & Scrutiny (Environmental Well Being):

- To comment on the draft Illustrative Masterplan as a basis for public consultation.

Cabinet:

- To endorse the publication of the Masterplan for public consultation in the light of any comments from Overview & Scrutiny (Environmental Well Being).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Great Fen Baseline Study – LDA 2009

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