

Whitlingham Country Park: Next Stage of Development
Report by Chief Executive

Summary: This report considers the next stage of the development of the education and visitor facilities at Whitlingham Country Park and how best the Authority can engage with that process.

Recommendation: That a small task and finish member working group to work with the Whitlingham Trustees and officers on developing the ideas for the expansion of the educational and visitor facilities at the site.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Broads Authority is in a long term partnership with the Crown Point Estate through the Whitlingham Charitable Trust in the development and management of the Whitlingham Country Park. In 2011 the Authority took the decision to deepen its involvement in the Park by designating it as one of three visitor hubs where the understanding and enjoyment of the Broads would be promoted.
- 1.2 In March 2012 the Crown Point Estate issued a brief for a design competition to select an architect to create a masterplan for the former Plant Site. The competition was in two stages; the first involved the preparation of a vision statement for the site and the second the submission of conceptual design proposals for the site and development of the vision statement.
- 1.3 Subsequently, the brief for the second stage of the competition, then run by the Crown Point Estate and the Whitlingham Charitable Trust, was widened to expand both the site area to include the whole Park and to include additional educational and visitor facilities required by the Whitlingham Charitable Trust. The prime objective of the Estate and the Trust at Whitlingham was to achieve:
 - (a) expansion of facilities supporting educational activities for a range of activities including school and community groups and students, including new toilet facilities for the public visiting the Park; and,
 - (b) the provision of overnight accommodation and other income-producing uses consistent with the ethos of the Country Park and the Broads.
- 1.4 Seven architectural practices were invited to submit proposals. Three Norfolk based practices, Feilden and Mawson LLP, Hudson Architects and LSI Architects LLP were shortlisted at the beginning of June, and their ideas were presented to the public in July.

- 1.5 The exhibition of proposals ran for two weeks at the Whitlingham Visitor Centre. 68 formal consultation responses were received. The most requested facilities were public toilets and education facilities. Other responses were:
- an enlarged visitor centre and café;
 - a restaurant;
 - better cycle and pedestrian links to the city;
 - an amphitheatre or event space;
 - better interpretation of wildlife and nature focused events.
16. The most popular accommodation was a campsite. Lodges or “glamping” were also supported, together with a hostel or accommodation for school groups. There was little support for a hotel or use by caravans. By far the greatest concern was parking and traffic on the surrounding roads. Other concerns were:
- the proposed uses should not be exclusive – the park should be for everyone regardless of financial means;
 - better maintenance of paths is required;
 - tighter control on dogs or dog exclusion zones would be welcome;
 - there should not be a hotel or other large structure (other than an education/ visitor facility) in the park.
- 1.7 The ideas presented by the architects have been the subject of a viability assessment by GVA Grimley. This has supported some activities, for example a campsite and youth hostel, and not others, for example a hotel.

2 Next Steps

- 2.1 The expectation by the Trust is that the development of improved educational and visitor facilities will be a joint project with the Authority. If the Authority continues to rent the facilities and be responsible for their operation then there needs to be a clear input into the design brief and construction of any new or extended buildings. There are a number of significant issues to resolve around new buildings at Whitlingham:

A. The asset

1. What new or additional buildings would the Authority want / need, and so determine what the asset needs to be?
2. Who will own it?
3. Who will manage it?
4. Who will use it? To do what?

On the assumption that it will be joined to/ associated with the existing flint barn there are allied matters over the current lease for the barn (runs to March 2014) and the current sub-lease to the caterer (runs to November 2013). This may generate additional issues around dealing with power needs, waste stream needs, access, security etc.

B. The building project

1. Who is in control? Who can 'sign off' the stages/ make decisions?
2. Who manages the project – strategic and day to day?
3. Who are the stakeholders? Those that must be involved, could be involved, and will have influence over decisions
4. Likely timescale?

C. Resource needs

1. What is available now and what needs to be found in terms of money, time and effort, expertise?
2. What funds might be raised, bearing in mind the charitable status of the Whitlingham Trust? (is this a £50k, £150k, £250k, £500k or £1m (+) project?)
3. Who is responsible for raising the funds?
4. Who will be interested or constrained in contributing funds or help? Competition with other Authority needs for funds.

D. Associated aspirations and/or opportunities

1. How does this fit into the Crown Point Estate's aspirations and next steps?
2. Planning permission guidance
3. Accommodation aspirations from Estate and others?
4. How may it affect the viability of the Outdoor Education Centre?
5. Once built, what are the resource commitments into the future for its management and use?

- 2.2 There are three Broads Authority members on the Whitlingham Charitable Trust: Sholeh Blane, Julie Brociek-Coulton and John Sharpe. As Trustees their prime responsibility is to the Trust not the Authority. It is therefore suggested that two further Broads Authority members join a Member Working Group of five members to steer the Authority's input and report back to the Authority as it develops.

Background papers:	None
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Broads Plan Objectives:	None
Appendices:	None