

# **Wycombe District New Local Plan Examination**

## **Additional statement by the Little Marlow Lakes Country Park Community Partnership**

### **Background**

The current policy to develop the Little Marlow Lakes Country Park has its origins in the Little Marlow Gravel Pits Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG), published by Wycombe District Council (WDC) and Buckinghamshire County Council (BCC) in 2002 following extensive public consultation. From the outset it was recognised that development of the country park would be a long term project. At that time about two thirds of the 330ha site was still subject to gravel extraction and processing permissions. Other large areas were subject to enforcement action to rectify various shortcomings in meeting the approved restoration and aftercare requirements. Gravel extraction and processing ceased circa 2013/14. A number of restoration and aftercare planning obligations and enforcement cases remain outstanding at the time of writing.

### **Delivery of the Country Park**

The Little Marlow Lakes Country Park was formally designated by WDC under the provisions of the Countryside Act 1968 in 2017.

The attachment to this submission summarises some of the initiatives that have been taken to facilitate and progress development of the country park since publication of the SPG.

### **Country Park Vision and Masterplan**

Fundamental to the vision and masterplan for the country park set out in the 2002 SPG were the following concepts:

- “to harness the potential that exists in the area, rather than introducing major new development”
- That “the area will remain predominantly open in character with clustering of activities (and any new buildings) being located in areas where development already exists.”
- The recognition that “there may be special circumstances when some limited, small scale, related ‘enabling’ development may be justified” provided they also can “be justified as part of a comprehensive approach”.

These concepts (principles) have been adhered to through the planning process by both WDC and appeal inspectors since publication of the SPG. In particular, the concept of retaining the openness of the “Parkland and Northern Open Zone” proposed in the SPG Masterplan has been maintained, despite repeated applications for developments that would have breached Green Belt policy. The SPG Masterplan envisaged the retention of the north-west (Westhorpe Park) corner of the country park as open space parkland and the restoration of Westhorpe Park ‘to provide a quality landscape setting for the entrance to the Country Park and Westhorpe House”.

### **The future of Westhorpe Park**

The proposals outlined by the major corporate players currently advocating business development in the Westhorpe Park corner of the RUR4 policy area are totally inconsistent with both the above principles and the SPG Masterplan. Importantly, it must be noted that these parties have not attempted to propose, or even explore, a development strategy that might meet these SPG principles within the area’s current Green Belt designation. Instead they have proposed a *grand slam*

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approach of withdrawing that area from the Green Belt in order to develop what can only be described as an intensive business park development (albeit no doubt based on achieving high sustainability standards).

It should also be noted that the former Westhorpe House Business Park (as referred to in the Turley submissions) no longer exists. Following an approved change of land use, the listed Westhorpe House and its associated buildings are currently undergoing renovation as a prestigious development of 33 private apartments within a parkland setting. This change of use, from a corporate HQ to a private housing development complex adjacent to the Westhorpe Park Homes settlement, is consistent with the concept of restoring the Westhorpe Park area as set out in the SPG. The setting of this quality parkland development and of the renovated historic Westhorpe House itself would be significantly undermined if the north-west corner of the country park between Westhorpe House and the A4155 were withdrawn from the Green Belt and redeveloped as a major business park.

The Turley submissions also attempt to show the wider Westhorpe Park area in a very negative light by alleging that the rural quality of the area is reduced “by the urbanising effect of the busy roads and large scale modern office buildings at Marlow International Business Park and [the no longer existing] Westhorpe House Business Park”. In fact, the rural quality of the land owned by the parties that Turley represents has been far more adversely affected by the serious failure of those landowners and their predecessors since publication of the SPG to manage the property responsibly to prevent degradation from its previous restored pastureland status (see photo below).



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As well as potentially providing a quality landscape setting for the entrance to the country park and Westhorpe House, restoration of the north-west corner of the country park to public open space in a parkland setting would have other benefits. It would enhance the setting of the adjacent AONB and also the principal gateway into the historic riverside town and tourist destination of Marlow. It would help meet the principal purpose of a country park as set out in the Countryside Act 1968 - *to provide or improve opportunities for the enjoyment of the countryside by the public*. It would provide a reasonably large area of open space for informal public recreation close to the urban boundary of Marlow in which families could walk safely and perhaps picnic or, for example, kids could fly a kite; thereby fulfilling some of the most widely appreciated benefits of country parks in general.

#### **In conclusion**

The advocates for business park development at Westhorpe Park argue that the Council's aspirations for development of the RUR4 site have failed to be realised and that an alternative strategy based on withdrawal of some RUR4 land from the Green Belt should be adopted. We totally reject that argument from interested parties that have not sought to engage with the Council and the local community to help implement development of the country park in accordance with the strategy outlined in the 2002 SPG and the planning policies that followed.

The two councils that jointly approved the 2002 SPG are to be applauded for their boldness in setting out such a forward looking vision at that time. We believe that the range of steps taken recently by the two councils and others, or under consideration, provides sufficient encouragement that a country park on an operational and viable scale can be delivered over the Plan period without withdrawing any of the RUR4 land from the Green Belt.

**August 2018**

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#### Attachment

#### DELIVERING THE LITTLE MARLOW LAKES COUNTRY PARK

In recent years the **Wycombe District Council** has taken a number of steps to help facilitate the delivery of the Country Park. These include:

- The formal designation in October 2017 of the Country Park under the Countryside Act 1968
- The relocation of the District's Athletics Centre and running track into the country park, with shared facilities for country park visitors.
- The provision of a new network of permissive footpaths and permissive cycle-path access within the country park as a developer contribution arising from the former.
- Circa £33K Section 106 funding for country park facilities (contribution to the costs of providing Thames-side fishing 'platforms' for public use and country park signage, way-marking and interpretation boards).
- £25K developer contribution funding towards 'management and maintenance' cost of the country park.
- Transfer of responsibility for the management of the Riverwoods Open Space recreational and picnic area to Marlow Town Council.
- The allocation of £120K CIL funding to facilitate delivery of the country park (including funding for a Country Park Delivery Officer).
- The recent appointment of More Leisure Community Trust to operate and increase the recreational use of the Westhorpe Farm Lane athletics centre and site.

**Buckinghamshire County Council**, in addition to its enforcement and aftercare monitoring roles:

- Has used Section 106 funds to provide footbridges and disabled access gates on PROWs within the country park.
- In 2014, approved a revised restoration scheme for the former Spade Oak Quarry minerals site (developed in liaison with Lafarge-Tarmac and the Little Marlow Lakes Country Park Community Partnership) based on creating a large area of new wetland habitat as an extension to the Spade Oak Nature Reserve. Further lengths of new permissive paths are due to be made available as part of the scheme approval.
- Has leased to the Little Marlow Parish Council the public car park at Coldmoorholme Lane and assisted in the provision of 6 additional parking spaces.

Since the Country Park supplementary planning guidance was issued in 2002, a number of **local community organisations and private landowners** have initiated a number of actions/projects to assist in the development of the country park. A significant role has been played by the Little Marlow Lakes Country Park Community Partnership (originally formed in 2003 with encouragement from the Council ) and its 10 member organisations.

- LM Parish Council and Lafarge signed an agreement in 2002 which led to the creation of the permissive path around Spade Oak Lake. This was this council's 'Millennium Project'.
- Marlow Angling Club (MAC) negotiated fishing rights at Spade Oak Lake in addition to those already held for Westhorpe Lake, Fieldhouse Lake and the Riverwoods Open Space stretch

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of the Thames (all within the country park). MAC members help maintain the access routes to these sites and routinely address maintenance and H&S issues as part of their site bailiffing activities. (London Angling Association holds the angling rights for the stretch between Spade Oak Meadow and Riverwoods. Public fishing is permitted along the 400m of riverbank owned by the Environment Agency.)

- Two private land owners co-operated with the Community Partnership in the development of 'Spinny Path', a permissive path through a woodland strip that links the PROW between Marlow and Westhorpe Park to the Thames Path.
- Community Partnership member organisations periodically conduct volunteer path clearance/maintenance events along the Country Park's permissive paths. Volunteers organised by the Chiltern Society and the Thames Path National Trails Office help to maintain the Thames Path and other PROWs within the Country Park.
- The Bucks Bird Club has for many years maintained the main habitat areas (e.g. reedbeds and wetland spit areas) at Spade Oak Lake and managed the 5 Tern nesting rafts which it funded.
- The Bucks Bird Club were also instrumental in the design and location of two interpretation boards at Spade Oak Lake.
- The Bisham Barn Owl Group monitor and maintain the several Barn Owl and Kestrel nesting boxes, all on private land.
- Kyrece's Legacy charity has installed 10 lifelines alongside the Thames through the Country Park (with funding contributions from the Council, the Community Partnership and private landowners).
- Local volunteers help maintain Spade Oak Wharf and collect mooring fees on behalf of the Thameside Preservation Trust.
- The Community Partnership worked with Lafarge Tarmac to develop a revised restoration scheme for Spade Oak Quarry (approved by BCC in 2014) to help facilitate the development of the Country Park. This has provided a baseline for the future development of a new mosaic of wetland habitats. As part of this, Tarmac constructed and bridged a new channel to connect the western and eastern sides of Spade Oak Lake to provide a new wetland habitat and also security protection for the wet woodland and water-bird habitats to the south of the channel. Tarmac also installed two bird screens and provided three new Tern nesting rafts.
- Ecoconsult were commissioned by the Community Partnership to conduct walkover surveys of eight key Spade Oak Quarry/Nature reserve areas in order to evaluate their longer term habitat development potential .
- The Community Partnership is currently liaising with the Environment Agency on the development of a Management Plan for improving the habitat and amenity value of the EA's 400m of Thames-side land.
- Representatives of the Community Partnership were instrumental in securing a significant level of additional funding (from a currently undisclosed source) which will be available for environmental improvements within the country park.

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