



High Woods Country Park Management Plan 2017 - 2020

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1.0 Introduction and Site Description

High Woods Country Park is an extensive park located north of Colchester's town centre within the suburbs of Mile End and High Woods, and lying close to the town's main railway station. Surrounded by busy roads, new housing and businesses, it provides a vital green retreat for local residents where they can relax, play, exercise and enjoy the attractive woods and scenic countryside. The park also provides a pleasant route on the way to and from a cluster of nearby schools, and for commuters to the station. Since 2012 the park has boasted a Natural Play Zone, designed with the help of local people.

The park was opened in 1987 after land acquired as a result of housing development was combined with land already owned by Colchester Borough Council. In 1991 a visitor centre was built and opened which was extended in 2012. Since 2000 the park has expanded to its present 150 hectares. The care taken by Colchester Borough Council in planning its layout has ensured it has become a well-used and much loved local park. The on-going commitment of the Council to maintain the high standard of woodland management and the addition of new play areas, car park and public toilets, as well the wildflower meadows and cycle paths means the park is more popular than ever.



1978 High Woods, East Wood & Brinkley Grove within farmland (from west)



2008 High Woods Country Park & Brinkley Grove within housing (from west)

Address & Contact Details

High Woods Country Park, Visitor Centre, Turner Road, Colchester CO4 5JR.

Visitor Centre tel. no. 01206 853588

BIG Garden tel. no. 01206 855287

E-mail countryside@colchester.gov.uk

Web site www.colchester.gov.uk/countrypark

O. S. grid reference of visitor centre: TL 997271.

Purpose of this plan

This management plan sets out what management strategies are currently in place for the park and what improvements could be made to further enhance it. Although the current period of financial restraint means there is a need to be realistic and pragmatic, the plan maintains an aspirational approach, and identifies potential avenues of additional funding.

The plan also identifies the need to do more to identify the range and significance of the park's biodiversity, so that strategies can be put in place to protect and encourage it.

Wards

Mile End and Highwoods. The boundary between the two wards lies on the line of the north-south stream.

Soils & Hydrology

Lying on fluvial sands and gravels interleaved with clays. A heavy loam with seasonal seepage lines is a feature of the central and south-western areas. Some of the woodland soils are free draining as are those on the slopes north-east of the lake and on the rising ground east of the marsh.

Two small watercourses join on the north-west boundary to form an unnamed tributary of the River Colne. It follows a widening valley. Midway it flows into an on-line lake, which acts as a storm water reservoir for the Highwoods estate. Although attenuated at the discharge point from the lake the volume of water entering the stream at times of heavy rain can be flashy. The stream spreads forming a marsh on the southern boundary before leaving the park through a sluice and an underground conduit.

Tenure & Rights of Access

All of the area covered by this plan is owned by Colchester Borough Council. Anglian Water has way leave access to sewers which run from Highwoods to Turner Rise through the country park, and to the water main which follows the public right of way from Turner Road to Pampas Close on the Highwoods estate. Ardleigh Reservoir Committee has way leave access to their high pressure water pipe which crosses the southern marsh and leaves the park to the north of Friars Grove.

The entrance off Broadlands Way to the south, a public footpath, crosses Network Rail land to enter the park north of the pedestrian tunnel through the railway embankment. Access furniture and signage was erroneously installed on Network Rail land over 20 years ago without any subsequent challenge.

Many public rights of way cross the park and form the main arterial access routes from north to south and east to west.

Designations & accreditations

High Woods Country Park currently holds;

- Green Flag Award.
- Anglia in Bloom Gold Award and overall winner.
- Country Park Accreditation.
- Walking for Health accreditation scheme.
- Anglia in Bloom overall winner for Best Garden for Special Needs.
- Trip Advisor Excellence award.

High Woods Country Park is a gem. There are trails to walk and ride and a visitors centre to visit. There is an activity wall for younger children. Every weekend there are Ranger guided short walks throughout the Park.

On a sunny day it is a haven for a family picnic or like us if you just enjoy a quiet walk in the woods you can even see some deer if you're quiet enough.

It is on your door step if you live in the Colchester area and is truly worth a visit...after all it doesn't cost anything unless you want to help support the park itself and if you're that keen they are always in need of volunteer staff".

TripAdvisor feedback 2016

"An obviously well-loved and well maintained park....The children's play areas are an excellent addition....It is to be hoped that the numbers of volunteersis maintained or even improved on, as this is one of the great successes of this park.

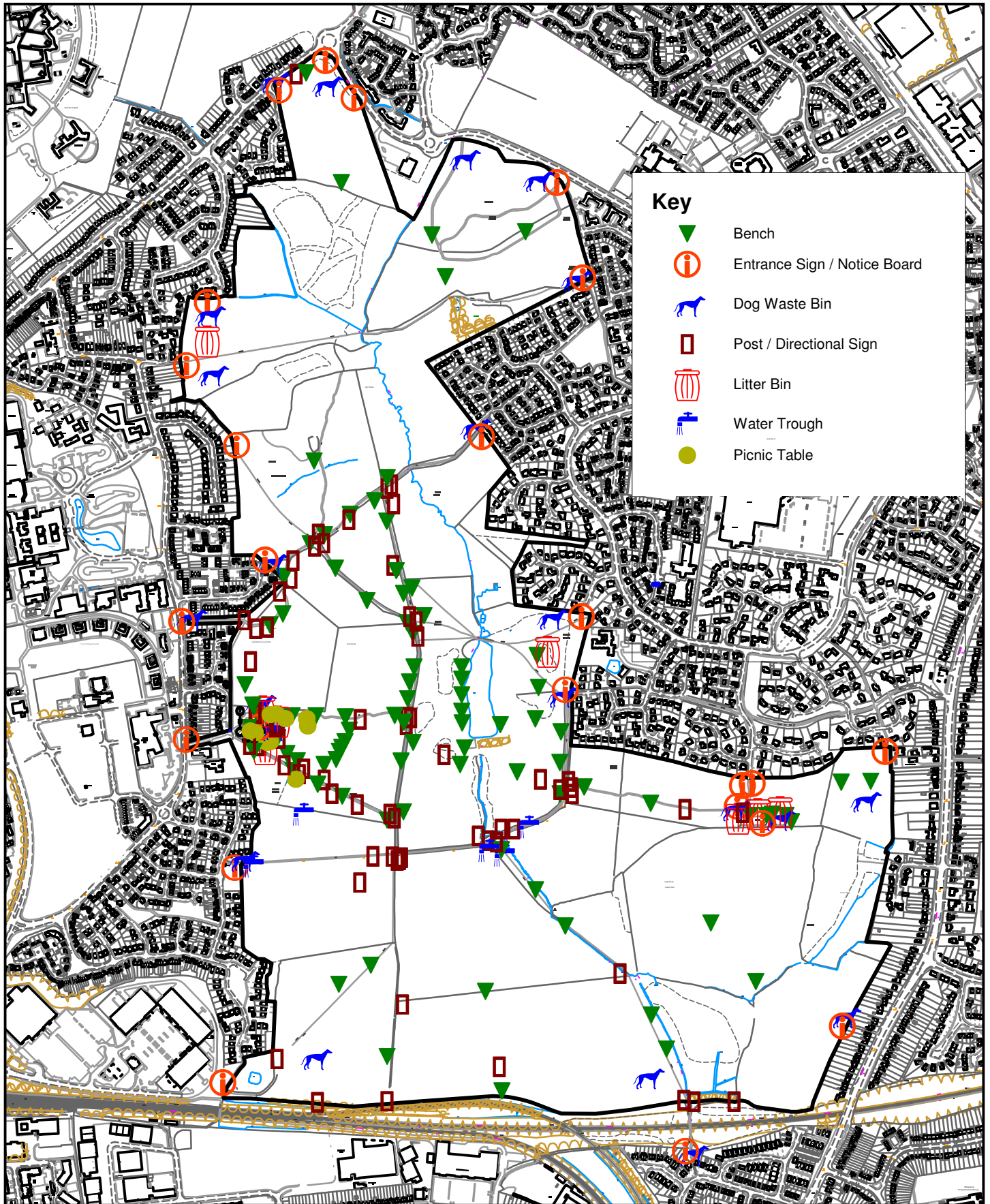
The range of habitatsand the position within the urban setting make this an educational location second to none in the Colchester area".

Green Flag judge's comments 2015





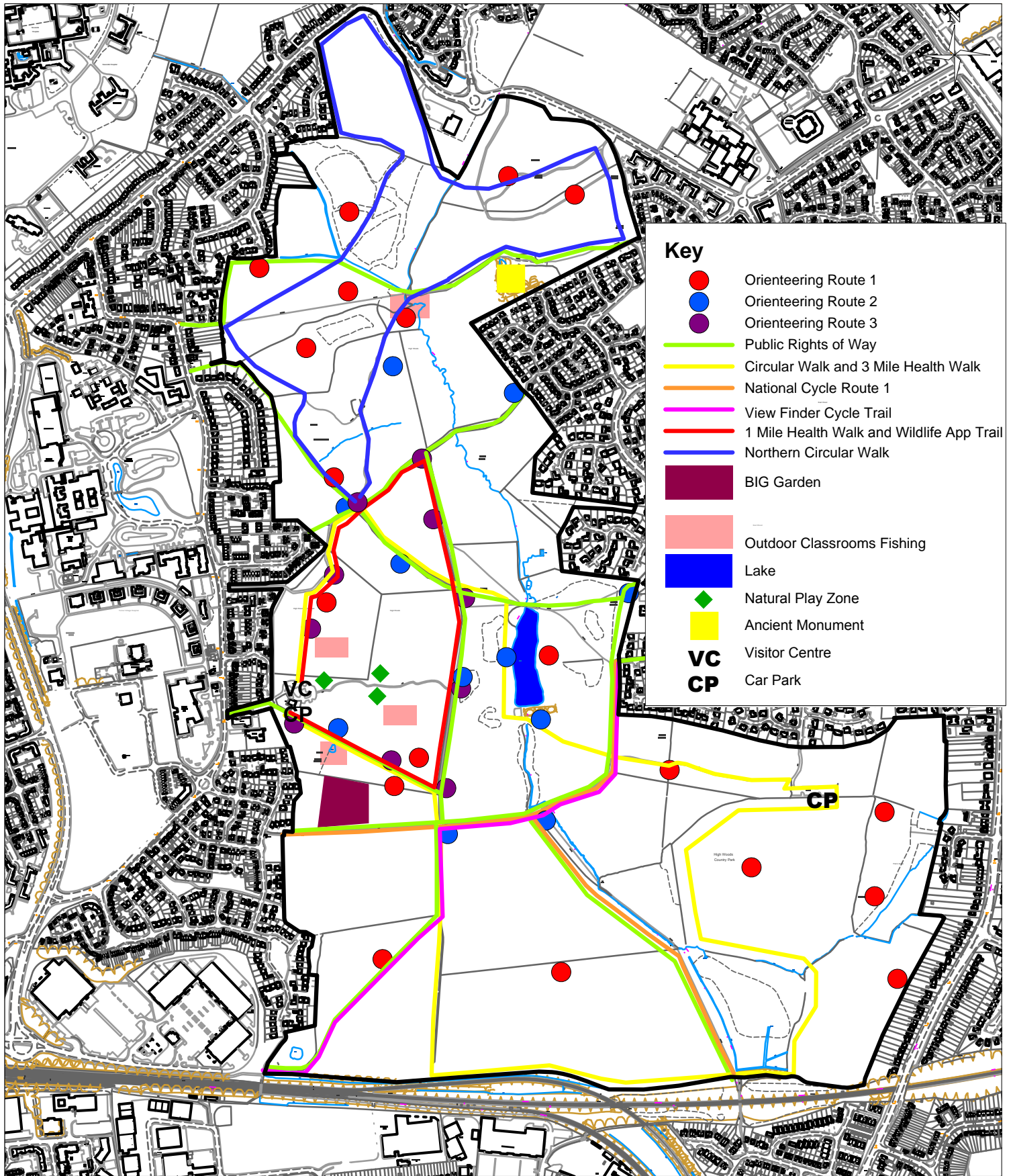
1.1 Furniture Asset Map



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1.2 Recreation and Access Asset Map



Key

- Orienteering Route 1
- Orienteering Route 2
- Orienteering Route 3
- Public Rights of Way
- Circular Walk and 3 Mile Health Walk
- National Cycle Route 1
- View Finder Cycle Trail
- 1 Mile Health Walk and Wildlife App Trail
- Northern Circular Walk
- BIG Garden
- Outdoor Classrooms Fishing
- Lake
- ◆ Natural Play Zone
- Ancient Monument
- VC** Visitor Centre
- CP** Car Park

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Not to scale

11/12/2008

1.3 Park features, facilities & infrastructure

Benches

- Over one hundred benches located throughout the park. All tagged with a reference number, inspected regularly and in good order.

Bins (litter and dog waste)

- Litter bins provided at key entrances emptied twice weekly. They are in good order.
- There is a dog waste bin near to at each park's entrances.
- Dog waste bins are emptied weekly or more often as required.

Boma

- For many mobility-restricted walkers, access to the countryside is limited to 'easy-access' trails. The Boma 7 - a lightweight off-road all-terrain wheelchair - opens the park up, offering disabled and older walkers the real possibility of access on an equal basis with non-disabled walkers and cyclists.
- Since 2012 the park has provided a permanent home for a Boma 7, for use by the 'Friends of the Boma' (local supporters and promoters).

Car parks

- Customer surveys show that approximately half of visitors live in the surrounding area and walk or cycle to the park.
- For those who do drive to the park there are two car parks with a combined space for approximately 120 vehicles. Accessed from the Turner Road and Chanterelle entrances. The former is a pay and display car park overseen by the North Essex Parking Partnership whilst the latter smaller car park is available to park-users free of charge.
- Both car parks are locked and unlocked daily. From 1st April to the end of September
- 7:00am and 10:00pm. Between 1st October and the end of March 7:00am and 7:00pm.

Compound/store

- The compound and yard is used by park staff and volunteers only. It is security fenced and locked at all times. It is covered by the park's CCTV system and there are signs on the gates warning the public to keep out.

Community garden

- BIG Garden is a community vegetable garden and orchard near the Visitor Centre that promotes health and well-being for the local community by producing food in a sustainable way.
- People of all ages and abilities are welcome to volunteer. It provides a supportive setting for people with a range of health needs to learn practical and personal skills.
- Designed and constructed in 2006 with a Heritage Lottery grant. Colchester Borough Council is providing funding to the end of September 2017.
- Maintained using organic techniques. Wildlife habitats developed to encourage beneficial predators. Heritage fruit tree varieties are conserved.



Cycling

- Permitted throughout. Good surfaced paths for general use with links to external network. Section of National Cycle Route 1 (NCR1).

Dog walking

- Dog walkers welcomed in line with the Code of Good Practice. Facilities include dogs-on-lead-zones, a watering point, dog waste bags and 'dog parking' at the Visitor Centre.

Entrances

- The majority of the twenty one entrances around the park's perimeter support welcome signage and dog waste bins.
- Several entrances have been designed to allow easy access for cyclists and mobility-restricted users. Other entrances comprise of wooden field gates, kissing gates or / and motorcycle inhibitors.

Events

- An annual programme of themed and specialist events, and guided walks. The park is popular venue for third party community events.

Health Walks

- Led by trained volunteer leaders on alternate Friday and Sundays. Attended primarily but not exclusively by older people seeking health benefits associated with walking. Walking for Health nationally accredited scheme.
- Venue for commercially run Nordic Walking sessions.

Lake and fishing

- Popular and well stocked fishery with sheltered swimming platforms. Fishing is permitted by annual permit or day ticket only in line with the Park's Fishing Regulations. New permits and renewals are administered by the Council's professional support services.
- Fishing season runs from 16th June – 15th March. Park staff and private security firm bailiff the lake.

Orienteering

- Three orienteering courses of differing lengths and degrees of difficulty; beginner, intermediate and full permanent. Developed with the Essex Stragglers Orienteering Society (SOS). Maps available from the Visitor Centre. Short course waymarked and used by schools. Training and competitive events organised by SOS.



Outdoor classrooms

- Six outdoor classrooms for staff-led and self-led environmental education sessions, forest school and other activities. Bookable spaces for private use in line with hire agreement and payment.
- Main use is by the Visitor Centre Officer who is the lead officer for educational visits and forest schools.
- Trees in the outdoor classrooms are subject to an annual gross defect survey and inspected by Rangers.

Paths and trails

- Approximately 20km of paths in the park comprising cycle paths with fibredeck wearing course and footpaths constructed from hoggins, type 1 MOT, planings or earth. Many are part of the network of public rights of way.
- An annual programme of resurfacing works and a dedicated budget ensures paths are maintained to a good standard.
- Three circular walking trails around the park, each colour-waymarked and of differing lengths.
- Newly installed in 2015 a 1 mile all-season Nature Trail app for families. Comprises a wildlife quiz and ten QR code marker points along the way.

Play zone

- Natural Play Zone installed in 2011 following extensive public consultation with local schools and drop-in events.
- Implemented with £45,000 award from DCFS Playbuiders programme along with
- £10,000 of Section 106 funds to provide play equipment for children 8-13 years.
- Spread over three woodland locations near the Visitor Centre car park and providing natural play opportunities.
- Patrolled and litter picked before 10am daily by staff. RoSPA accredited equipment inspections are carried out weekly.

Pond seating and dipping area

- Situated within woodland near the Visitor Centre. Comprises seating and decking, and dipping platforms. One of the platforms was replaced in 2014 and other will be replaced in 2017.
- Popular with education, community groups and family groups.
- Annual maintenance of the pond and its margins ensures its biodiversity and recreational value.



Signage and information

- New good quality welcome signs were installed at the car park entrances in 2013. Welcome signage at the other entrances is to be installed in 2017.
- Directional signage at key points and external white-on-brown tourist signs on approach routes. Consideration will be given to improving these when resources are available.
- Visitor information panels and community notice boards at the visitor centre and car parks were installed in 2011.
- Wildlife information panels mounted in the Visitor Centre along with camera boxes in 2015.

Toilets

- Old toilet block rebuilt in 2012 following a successful capital bid.
- The new larger toilet block, situated adjacent to the Visitor Centre, includes disabled and baby changing facilities, and waterless urinals.
- Opened and cleaned by cleaning company daily except for public holidays.



Visitor Centre

- Opened in 1991 and refurbished in 2012. Comprises offices and storage for staff and volunteers, and provides information and retail for visitors.
- Open daily 1st April – 30th Sep and weekends 1st Oct – 30th Mar and run by a team of visitor centre staff and volunteers.
- Planned maintenance carried out in compliance with Condition Surveys and responsive repairs by the Council's Technical Services Team.
- Monthly inspections of fixtures, fittings and fabric. All portable electric equipment and fire extinguishers (2 x AFFF and 1 x Carbon Dioxide) are tested annually.
- Security provided by intruder alarm system, CCTV and private security key holder.
- Contractors working in and on the Visitor Centre must hold a permit to work and – if working in hazardous areas – complete the 5Cs Register

Watercourses

- In addition to the ponds, lake and marsh there are many ditches and drains that run through the country park. Their clearance and maintenance is the responsibility of the park team.



1.4 Historical background and land use

The park was opened in 1987 after land acquired as a result of housing development was combined with land already owned by Colchester Borough Council. In 1991 a visitor centre was built and opened off the Turner Road. Since 2000 the park has expanded to its present 150 hectares.

Before 1987 the park was a mixture of woods, and arable and pastoral farmland, situated within the curtilage of the former medieval Royal Forest of Kingswood. Originally valued for its native timber and underwood much of the woodland was converted to plantations of sweet chestnut coppice within the last two hundred years or so.

An earthwork, of undetermined origin, is situated within the woodland and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The northern woods retain some of their medieval boundary wood banks and ditches. Some veteran trees occur, mainly alongside boundaries and linear features. Fields to the south have yielded roman coins as well as musket balls associated with the 1648 Siege of Colchester. Discarded brick and tile waste can be found to the north indicating past links with the historic local brick-making and pottery industries. More information about the history of the park can be found in the 'Landscape in the Making' (R Mash) booklet.

1.5 Biodiversity and Landscape

One of the aims of Colchester Borough Council's Parks and Green Space Strategy is: "to support the protection and enhancement of biodiversity in accordance with the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC)". Most of High Woods Country Park is designated a Local Wildlife Site and as such supports a wide variety of habitats and species. These include diverse woodlands, hedgerows, grasslands, marsh and wetlands which in themselves support over 100 species of bird, 300 species of invertebrates, including 100 species of butterfly and moth, and 300 species of plant and fungus.

Reptile Action Plan

The common lizard, slow worm and grass snake populations in Britain have declined over the course of the last century. This rapid decline has been caused by a combination of factors, including: loss and fragmentation of habitat due to urbanisation, agricultural intensification and poor management. As a result, all three species have been designated Species of Principal Importance under NERC. Specific areas within High Woods Country Park have traditionally been home to a healthy population of reptile species, and there are a number of factors which make it an ideal habitat for them:

- It forms part of a wider mosaic of varied habitats.
- Its open informal character, varied landscape and habitat network means the reptiles can move freely.
- The presence and maintenance of suitable basking areas, winter hibernacula, breeding sites and warm egg laying sites.
- The abundance of amphibian and insect prey.

The Action Plan below has been designed to maintain and hopefully increase the population of these often hidden and endangered creatures.

In addition to preserving and improving habitat for reptiles, the policies instigated under this Action Plan will improve the overall biodiversity of the park; this campaign to protect the park's reptiles will also be used as a way of involving and reconnecting the public with wildlife and green spaces.

Proposed Activities

- The creation of additional “grass snake piles” or mounds in suitable areas ensuring that dung and other decaying herbaceous material is included within the structures in order to provide a greater number of sites containing potential egg laying opportunities.
- Manage scrub in areas of known slow worm populations to ensure a varied grassland/scrub mosaic for basking and foraging.
- Create additional hibernation areas by creation of log piles with arisings stacked on top (in areas of known slow worm and lizard populations).
- Continuation of reptile survey work.
- Ensure that all works on sites known to support reptile populations should follow Reptiles-Guidelines for Good Practice.
- Informing and involving the public in survey work.

Desirable Activities

- Improve abundance of amphibian prey with creation and management of ponds for grass snakes.
- Improve abundance of insect prey through appropriate management regimes to create grassland mosaics and scrub for slow worm and lizards.
- Provide additional basking areas by placing rock debris and wood piles or creation of bare southern facing slopes.
- Increase connectivity of known sites to the wider landscape and green wildlife corridors.



Woods and Trees

High Woods Country Park supports a variety of woodland types covering over 50 hectares, including ancient semi-natural, younger broad leaved woodland, 19th century plantations and coppice. Since 1987 Colchester Borough Council has managed the old woods and increased woodland cover to the south through tree planting. Wherever possible trees and woods are managed sustainably. For example, timber is sold as firewood, or left as standing dead wood habitat. At least five per cent of all felled timber and wood is left on the ground or in piles as habitat for invertebrates and fungi. Some of it is used as an educational resource to show visiting school children the ecosystems to be found in the park.

Following the storms of the late 1980s coppicing was reintroduced in the Central Valley and Brinkley Grove with resultant public safety, and improvements for landscape and wildlife. Over the last decade this approach has been more planned and extensive helped by the introduction of a five year Felling License and a no-cost coppicing contract. Notable species that have returned or prospered as a direct result include the white admiral butterfly, common cow-wheat and heather.

The main aims of future woodland and tree management are to:

- Protect and improve their biodiversity.
- Maintain them as a visitor amenity and educational resource.
- Take all reasonably practicable precautions to ensure trees are in a safe condition.

These aims will be achieved by a Woods and Trees Plan in the following ways:

- Review the extent and success of recent woodland management works and the no-cost coppicing to decide future priorities.
- (Depending on the outcome of this review) continue coppicing sweet chestnut coppices, sycamore clearance and thinning.
- Obtain a new Felling License from the Forestry Commission for 2017 – 2022 to enable future works.
- Maintain the glades enlarged between 2011 and 2015, and their connections.
- Retain partially shaded, climbing and trailing honeysuckle (the sole food plant of the white admiral butterfly).
- Leave standing wood and dead wood in situ wherever safe to do so.
- Provide visitors with on-site information about woodland management work.



Grasslands

High Woods Country Park contains approximately 50 hectares of conservation grassland – mainly on the slopes to the south - which has, for many years, been maintained by a local farmer for hay and grazing. This arrangement will end on 31st December 2016 to be replaced by a new one with new partners, the Essex Grazing Project and Natural England, and involve a Farm Business Tenancy and a Countryside Stewardship Agreement that it is expected to run until 2026. It is likely that with these new arrangements there will be some changes to the way the grasslands are looked after that will lead to their improvement along with some new opportunities for involving volunteers and the public, and benefits to biodiversity.

Previously Boat Field, Old Ley Field, Farthing Bottom, The Slipe and Further Meadow were managed as summer wildflower meadows and grazed in rotation by sheep from October onwards.

The agriculturally improved grasslands of the Southern Slopes (which support breeding skylarks), Woodcock Down (home to common lizards) and Brinkley Grove Field were cut annually for hay in late July.

Wetlands

There are a considerable number of small ponds, ditches and streams within the park in addition to the fishing lake. Collectively they support important assemblages of plants and animals.

The fishing lake, which acts as storm water balancing pond, is the largest area of open water in the park. It has no draw-down zone so supports a relatively narrow band of emergent plants at the edge, mostly reed-grass, reedmace and yellow flag. There are also few floating plants and the water is turbid due to the high silt content. It supports populations of common wildfowl and freshwater fish including carp.

Woodland ponds supports significant amphibian populations, particularly significant is the palmate newt population. The ponds in the more open locations support an important dragonfly and damselfly fauna. Long-winged conehead, short-winged conehead and roesel's bush cricket are present in the enclosed wet grassland by the Turner Rise South pond.

The 4 hectare marsh – formerly grazing pasture supports up to 40 species of birds including reed bunting, willow warbler, bullfinch and snipe. The pond within the marsh is silted and supports submerged plants such as fennel pondweed and horned pondweed. Areas of reedmace and reed are managed as fringe vegetation.

The narrow stream flowing through the north of the park – with its natural meanders - is used by schools to study erosion and deposition. In places the stream bottom is gravelly, the banks steep and the flow slight whilst in other places it is silty and shaded. After heavy rain there is a substantial flow of water from the lake causing erosion to the steep sided banks to the south. The water quality of the stream of the stream is generally good.



Hedgerows

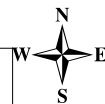
There are over 6.5 kilometres of hedgerows consisting mainly of hawthorn and mixed native species with standard trees. Some of the hedges derive from the old farmed landscape - and have been layed, gapped up or copped - others the result of more recent planting. They are important, ecological units within the park providing links between areas of woodland and important valuable habitats in their own right.

Heathland

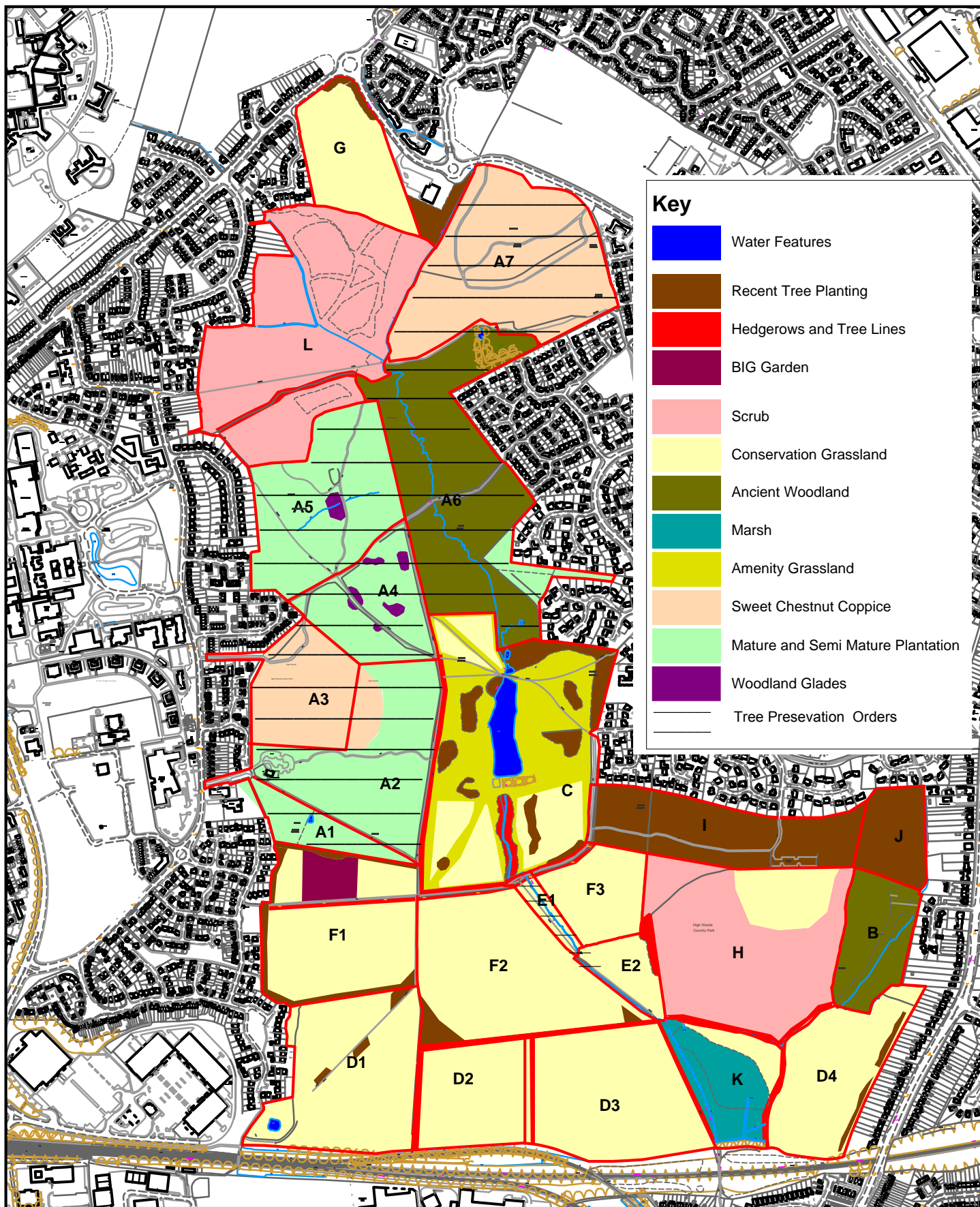
In the past there were significant areas of heathland on the acid soils within the park and beyond its northern boundary. Small areas have been restored through tree clearance, natural regeneration and germination of heather seed on disturbed ground.

Scrubland

Woodcock Down, Tubswick and the Parkland all contain areas of dense and scattered scrub. All have benefits for wildlife particularly where the scrub is varied in age and species, and where sunny grassy rides and bays are present. The scrub provides nesting sites for birds such as whitethroats and nightingales. Good berry years attract large flocks of winter thrushes.



1.6 Landscape Compartments Map



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2.0 Policy Context

Colchester Borough Council's vision is a "Rich heritage, ambitious future". Park Management Plans contribute towards the Council's priorities set in the Strategic Plan 2015 – 2018 including:

- A vibrant heritage and sustainable economy
- Welcoming places for strong and active communities
- A thriving visitor attraction

Management Plans are also one of a number of tools used to deliver the objectives set out in the Strategic Plan Action Plan.

Colchester Borough Council's vision for High Woods Country Park is: "To work with the community to create a nationally recognised, vibrant and safe country park that promotes biodiversity, health and learning, and is accessible to all". A four year action plan designed to achieve this vision is provided in Section 5 and an overview of priorities is given in Section 4.1.

3.0 Neighbourhood, Volunteering and Community Use

3.1 Stakeholders and partners

Park staff working with Community Zone Teams staff target their resources and that of volunteers in reducing antisocial behaviour, littering, dog fouling, and fly-tipping in the park. This is achieved through a combination of facilities, education and enforcement. Crime and antisocial behaviour in High Woods Country Park is infrequent and it is considered a safe environment for families according to the 2015 Customer Satisfaction Survey.

Park Rangers work with the Essex Youth Offending Service (YOS) to provide work for young people who have offended and to help prevent them getting into further trouble which also benefits the local community. This includes regular work days in the park to clear vegetation, edge paths and litter pick.

Park Rangers also work in partnership with The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) in Essex, the community volunteering charity, taking positive action to improve the environment of the park. Local people of all ages from all backgrounds are welcomed.

The park is a work placement provider for 16+ students from Writtle University College providing industry experience in countryside management, grounds maintenance and management, and rangership. Park staff also provide shorter placements and supervise 14+ students from local schools helping them to gain workplace experience.

Stakeholders, partners and supporters in the park include:

- Colchester Countryside Volunteer Rangers (CCVR)
- Big Friendly Gardeners
- Kardia Health and Wellbeing Ltd
- Walk Colchester
- Colchester Natural History Society
- Essex Wildlife Trust
- Essex Stragglers Orienteering Society
- St Helena Hospice
- Queen Boudica Primary School
- Colchester in Bloom

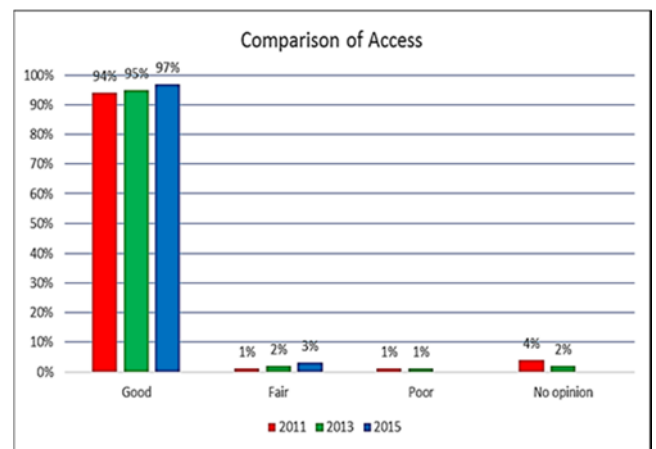
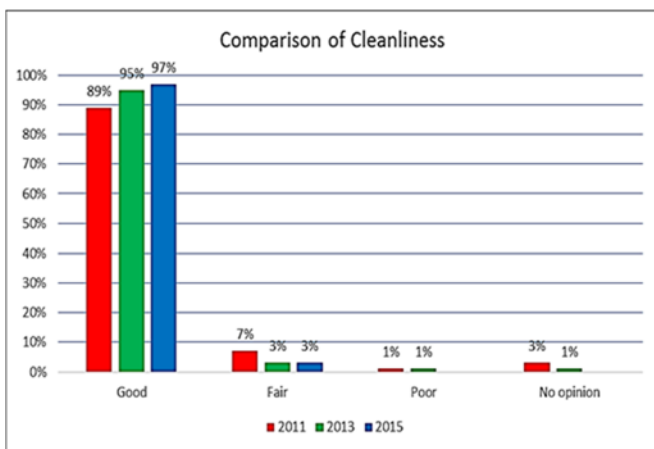
3.2 Consultation

Since 2004 Customer Satisfaction Surveys have been completed across parks and recreation grounds in Colchester, including High Woods Country Park. Park users are interviewed using a standard questionnaire, or customers can complete the survey on-line. This identifies patterns of use and customer improvement ideas which are recorded in an annual report and fed into the Action Plan. The next survey is due in summer 2017.

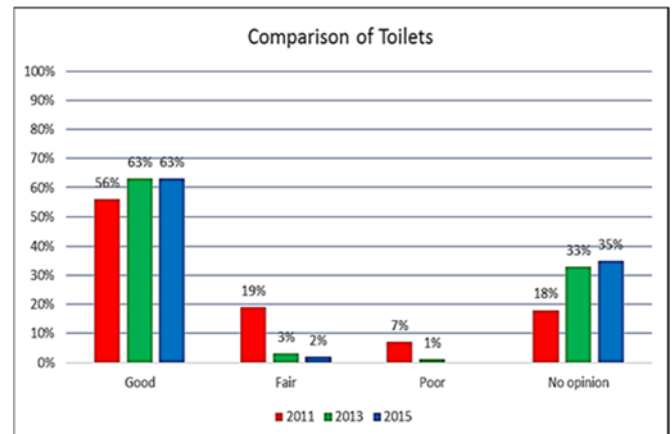
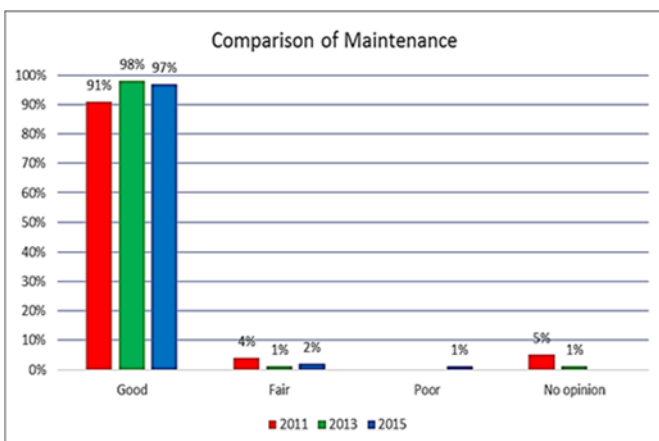
Extensive consultation is carried out with residents and stakeholders regarding significant changes to, or projects in, the park. For example the Natural Play Zone installed in 2011 followed consultation with local schools and drop-in events held in the park.

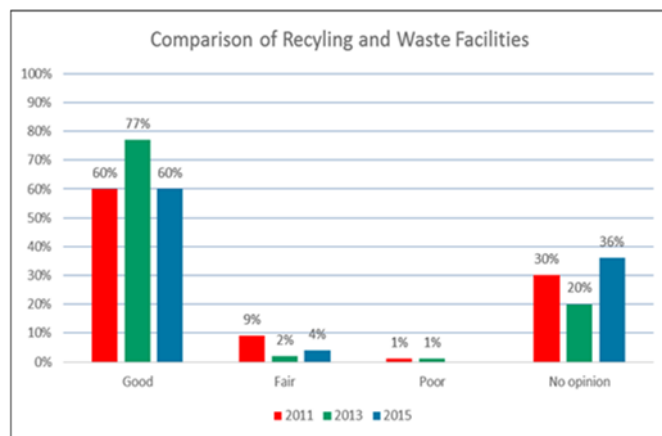
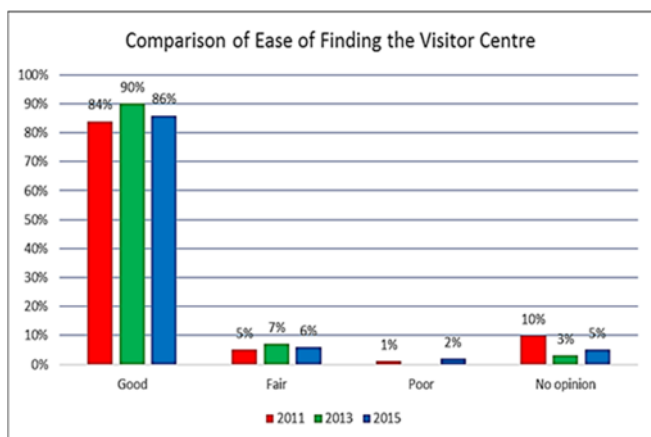
Key findings 2015 Customer Satisfaction Survey:

- Main motives to visit the park are to go for a walk, to walk the dog, get some fresh air and family outings.
- The most popular methods to visit the park are by car (51%) and walking (47%), visiting by bike and on public transport has decreased.
- 96% of respondents said that they felt safe whilst visiting the park.
- The quality of service from staff and volunteers in the park and visitor centre received good results (83%), an improvement on 2011.
- Satisfaction with the park is high with 88% of all participants classifying it as good.
- Satisfaction with the park’s accessibility, cleanliness and maintenance has also increased over the last 5 years. In 2015 all were rated at 97%.



- Satisfaction with the toilets has increased. In 2011, 56% of the people rated the park’s toilets as good. In 2015 this was 63% an increase of 7%.





Satisfaction with finding the Visitor Centre and recycling / waste facilities declined slightly in 2015, which may reflect improvements still due to take place. More signage especially to the visitor centre from the east is planned for 2017.

- A number of visitors requested more litter and dog bins - undertaken in 2016. Concerns about the amount of dog fouling has decreased but received the highest number of written comments.
- An increasing trend is the number of requests for path improvements – away from the central area many are muddy during winter – which reflects increased use and recent wetter winters.

Recommendations

- Improve signage as planned.
- Improve muddy paths / sections of path.
- Improve recycling / waste facilities at the visitor centre.
- Work with Community Zones on reducing dog fouling.

3.3 Events

- The park is not licensed for the performance of plays, films, live music, recorded music and dance. However, Colchester Borough Council does encourage community groups and event organisers to use the site as a venue, and to apply for Temporary Events Notice Licenses if required. The park is a popular events venue especially for charities, filming, education and sports.
- Colchester Borough Council has a team that seeks events at local venues and helps organisers comply with legislation. Park staff organise and promote an annual programme including events for families e.g. Easter and Halloween as well training events for young people e.g. Fishing for Beginners, Young Ranger Club and nature events.

3.4 Volunteering

Colchester Borough Council promotes many different ways to volunteer in the park including:

- Joining Colchester Countryside Ranger Service (CCVR) and Big Friendly Gardeners (BFG).
- Joining the Monday volunteering group.
- Receiving volunteers from The Conservation Volunteers in Essex to carry out practical work conserving the landscape, amenity and wildlife of the park.
- Volunteering to work alongside the community gardeners or in the visitor centre.
- Volunteering to be a Health Walk Leader which includes a free training day.

Training days for prospective volunteers are held throughout the year by park staff. Application is by means of an on-line application. For more information about volunteering go to section 4.2.

3.5 Contribution to health and wellbeing

One of park's aims is to promote and develop its role in contributing to the town's health and wellbeing. There are worrying trends relating to the nation's health. Obesity and less active lifestyles have led to a rise in preventable diseases which is placing increasing pressures on the National Health Service. High Woods Country Park provides a wealth of opportunities for exercise. Evidence shows that a brisk walk in a local green space every day can reduce the risk of heart attacks, strokes and diabetes by 50%, fracture of the femur by 30%, colon and breast cancer by 30% and Alzheimer's by 25%. Add to this the positive impact of exposure to nature and green space on stress and mental health and the full picture in relation to health and wellbeing and access to green space can start to be understood.

High Woods Country Park offers activities that contribute to the national and local health agenda:

- Play areas, including natural play equipment.
- Opportunities to volunteer and feeling part of a local community.
- Gardening for health sessions in the Big Garden.
- Organised health walks on Fridays and Sundays.
- Waymarked and publicised trails, including a Wildlife App trail for families.
- Grassed areas for informal sports.
- Events and activities.
- Permits for health and fitness clubs.
- Permits for Forest School activities.
- Permits for fishing.
- Use of the Boma.



4.0 Current Management

4.1 Vision for the park

One of the aims of Colchester Borough Council's Parks and Green Spaces Strategy is: "to develop the range, quality and accessibility of public open space to encourage social inclusion, improve community health and enhance biodiversity". The management of High Woods Country Park contributes towards achieving this aim.

Despite the current financial climate, Colchester Borough Council has been successful in obtaining capital funding to ensure the infrastructure of its parks and green spaces is fit for the 21st century and meets customer needs.

Improvements to High Woods Country Park in the last five years have included:

- Resurfacing of cycle paths including National Cycle Route 1.
- Creation of a Natural Play Zone 8 – 13 year olds. Introduction of weekly RoSPA inspections.
- Building of a new toilet block with disabled and baby changing facilities.
- Refurbishment of staff accommodation at the Visitor Centre.
- Enlargement and new management of the park to the north.
- New welcome signs installed at car park and pedestrian entrances.
- New Woodland Tree Policy and gross defect tree survey.
- Introduction of a Felling License and no-cost coppicing contract.
- New wildlife panels and cameras installed at the Visitor Centre.
- Expansion of the Big Garden and formation of a Friends group.
- Introduction of an off-road all terrain wheelchair / scooter.
- Completion of the path maintenance programme set out in the 2010 management plan.
- Introduction of a wildlife trail app.
- Repair of lakeside erosion.
- Connection of the network of glades.
- Refurbishment of the main car park and introduction of pay and display.
- Establishment of Forest Schools outdoor classrooms.
- Introduction of standard operating procedures for work activities and tasks.
- Removal of the majority of the sycamore from the woods.
- Creation of the first Nordic Walking Park in the UK.
- Establishing park as a TripAdvisor business.
- New directional signage installed near the visitor centre.
- Introduction of new farm tenancy arrangements and Countryside Stewardship Agreement.
- New visitor information panels in the car parks.
- Installation of new litter and dog waste bins.



The program to improve the park’s infrastructure and facilities is not yet complete. The base budget - if sustained – should continue to provide a satisfactory resource for relatively low-cost cyclical maintenance. However, higher cost improvement works and non-cyclical maintenance will probably require additional funding / partnerships. This applies to the following:

- Sustaining and developing the Big Garden beyond September 2017.
- Further repairs to structures and banksides caused by water erosion.
- Installation of new surfaced paths to the north and east side of the park.
- Tree surveys and tree safety works in response to major storm events.
- An improved catering offer at the Visitor Centre.
- Establishing a major visitor attraction e.g. high ropes adventure course.
- Forming a new arrangement for management of conservation grasslands.

4.2 Staff and volunteers

The park is managed by a team, based within Community Services. Management operations are diverse and include visitor services, estate management and maintenance, enforcement, nature conservation, access, retailing, gardening, education and events. In addition to High Woods Country Park, the team has responsibility for another 270 hectares of country parks and nature reserves in Colchester.

| Staffing | Full time equivalent |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Country Parks Manager | 1 |
| Countryside Rangers | 3 |
| Visitor Centre Officer | 1 |
| Visitor Centre Assistants | 0.6 (Apr – Sept) |
| Community Gardeners (Big Garden) | 1 |
| Total | 6.6 |

Rangers are also responsible for the day-to-day use, safety, fuelling and maintenance of fleet vehicles, machinery and equipment. A number of relevant procedures are in place including:

- Daily Vehicle Checks.
- Annual driving license checks.
- 6 monthly servicing of the vehicles at the transport workshop.
- Annual servicing of machinery by local specialist companies.
- Annual review and update of the Tools and Equipment Inventory.
- Daily patrols and fishing permit checks.
- Weekly play zone equipment inspections.
- Monthly Visitor Centre health & safety inspections.
- Daily toilet cleaning (Kingdom Cleaning Services Ltd).

Colchester Borough Council provides marketing, communications and fund-raising support. It has also been accredited with Investors in People, reflecting its commitment to its staff. The Country Park values its staff and offers training and development linked to an appraisal scheme. This scheme has been developed to manage individual performance and support the delivery of organisational goals. It sits alongside the Council’s talent management tool, CareerTrack; outcomes and insight gained from appraisal discussions feed into the CareerTrack matrix and succession planning.

CCVR (see 3.4) were formed 20 years ago. They are an external constituted group with 70-80 volunteers, led by a committee which has been successful in attracting external grants for training to help develop the service. The work of the CCVR is directed and overseen by the 3 FTE

Countryside Rangers and other staff who plan and run maintenance, services and facilities of Country Parks / Countryside Sites. Recruitment and training takes place throughout the year.

CCVR activity incorporates - Health Walk volunteers / Weekend volunteers / Visitor Centre volunteers / Monday conservation volunteers / Big Garden volunteers.

The delivery of site maintenance is a critical part of site management. In the absence of the CCVR essential site maintenance / management would have to be delivered by external contractors. The approximate annual contribution of CCVR activity on behalf of Colchester Borough Council was 2,500 volunteer days in 2015/16 which equated to £187,500 based on Volunteering England's formula.

4.3 Maintenance specification

Id verde (trading as The Landscape Group) was awarded a 7-year grounds maintenance contract (GMC) with Colchester Borough Council, which began on 1st April 2016. A full grounds maintenance specification and standards was written and applied to High Woods Country Park summarised below and including:

- Grass maintenance.
- Hedge maintenance.
- Litter clearance.
- Site security

| Item Code | Quantity | Unit | Description | No. of occasions |
|-----------|----------|----------------|---|------------------|
| B502AG13 | 12492 | m ² | Cut grass — rotary no collections | 4 |
| B502AG3 | 98256 | m ² | Cut grass — rotary no collections | 8 |
| B502SLG | 1540 | m ² | Strim grass | 3 |
| B502WW1 | 5990 | m ² | Cut woody vegetation — rake & dispose of arisings | 1 |
| B502WV2 | 8000 | m ² | Cut woody vegetation — no collection | 1 |
| L1001LPB | 7510 | m ² | Litter pick | 12 |
| L1003GCP | 2 | Each | Lock and unlock gates | 365 |
| L201LCP | 7 | Each | Empty litter bins | 82 |

In addition to the GMC a range of smaller firms are employed under the terms of a Small Works Framework to implement an array of premises based maintenance and improvement works.



4.4. Expenditure and income

High Woods Country Park base budget 2016/17

| Year | Site | Salaries £'000 | Premises £'000 | S & S & Trans £'000 | Income £'000 | Direct Cost £'000 |
|---------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| 2016/17 | High Woods Country Park | 102.7 | 73.7 | 25.5 | (70.0) | 131.90 |

The Country Park salaries budget includes 1.5FTE Countryside Ranger and 0.5FTE Country Parks Manager to reflect the resource that is required on sites other than High Woods Country Park. The Big Garden is not included in the ongoing base budget; it is funded from Community Enabling monies until September 2017 and, if external funding cannot be achieved, the service may cease.

Premises related costs includes the costs associated with the physical aspects of the site:

- Programmed grounds maintenance through the GMC including some S106 obligations.
- Responsive maintenance including response to vandalism and deterioration.
- Tree and woodland management.
- Utility costs; gas, electric water.
- Toilet cleaning / Site security / NNDR /Business Rates.

Supplies services and transport include:

- Materials for resale through Visitor Centre.
- Telephones / Uniforms.
- Tools, equipment and general office expenses.

The following supplement the park's ongoing base budget:

- Income derived from sale of items at the Visitor Centre.
- Car parking income.
- Public events.
- Educational sessions.
- S106 commuted sums allocated to specific items and offsetting expenditure.
- Agri-environment grants.
- Farm business tenancy rents.
- Fees and charges for fishing permits, health & fitness businesses, forest schools and other commercial uses.

4.5 Future opportunities for income generation or cost savings

- Increase parking charges - charges at High have remained constant since their introduction. They are convenient round figures and avoid frequent requests to the Visitor Centre for change.
- Increase income from retail - the Visitor Centre annual income is variable as it is reliant on seasonal sales with particular impact of ice cream sales. The sales breakdown is:
 - 81% food and drink (of which 41% ice cream, 20% hot drinks).
 - 12% novelties.
 - 7% maps, brochures, crafts, seeds and miscellaneous.
- Increase income from catering - the current catering offer is limited and reliant on Visitor Centre staff and volunteers making teas and coffees. There is no food preparation. Options include:
 - Continued or developed in-house.
 - Quality vending offer.
 - External catering including mobile catering and concession.

- Alternative maintenance arrangements. Livestock grazing is an important aspect of grassland management. Current gazing arrangements will cease on 31st December 2016 and discussions are advanced with ECC through the Essex Grazing Project for new farm business tenancy arrangement. This form of management significantly reduces management costs.
- A Countryside Stewardship agreement has been successfully negotiated with Natural England on the back to the new farm business arrangement above.
- An innovative approach has been taken regarding the works associated with the park's woods. The requisite felling licences have been obtained and a no-cost contract has been awarded for woodland management including coppicing to enable essential works to be carried out at no cost to Colchester Borough Council with the contractor being responsible for the delivery of works and disposal of resulting timber. These arrangements have proven to be successful and it is hoped that the arrangement will continue in future.

Commercial ideas that have been considered but not to the extent of a full business case:

- Segway - A potential operator was not forthcoming.
- High Ropes – Similar to Thetford Forest (Go Ape) and Braintree's Sky ropes at Notley Country Park. Sustainability is a concern and very high installation costs, limits on numbers possible due to insufficient parking.
- Improved catering offer as per above.

Potential service reductions:

- The Visitor Centre opens daily from April – end September and at weekends October – end March. This could reduce during the summer and or cease in the winter. Any savings would have to be offset by any loss in income.
- Grounds Maintenance - Countryside sites including the High Woods Country Park made contributions to the corporate £200k budget reductions of grounds maintenance programmed works in 2014/15 and 2015/16. A further budget reduction target of £50k in the grounds maintenance contract for 2017/18 has been identified and countryside sites and will need to deliver a proportion of this.

4.6 Performance monitoring and standards

The service uses the following to plan its work, monitor its performance and meet the standards required of an excellent Green Flag park:

- Analysis of Customer Satisfaction Surveys.
- Annual work planning and personal appraisal.
- Industry accreditation, schemes and awards.
- Daily inspection and patrol.
- Monthly quantified statistics.
- Independent inspection of play zone.
- TripAdvisor feedback. Currently rated Great 4.5/5.
- Measure of qualitative benefits associated with various projects.
- Compliance with Colchester Borough Council's Financial Regulations, audit and Standard Operating Procedures.
- Certificates of Competence of staff kept up-to-date.

4.7 Marketing

Marketing of High Woods Country Park forms part of Colchester Borough Council's Marketing and Communications Plan and is achieved by:

Informal Marketing

"Word of mouth" recommendations, satisfaction received by visitors and interest articles in local newspapers all raise awareness of the services offered and encourage re-visits.

To get the benefits of informal marketing staff:

- Use results from Customer Satisfaction Surveys to provide feedback and guide management decisions.
- Encourage interaction with visitors.
- Analyse customer comments and complaints to ensure a high level of visitor satisfaction.
- Seek to regularly publish an 'interest article' in local newspapers, bulletins, newsletters and social media.

Targeted Marketing

Targeted marketing is undertaken either by type of visitor, service or event in the following ways:

- Park leaflet available as a download or hard copy available from the Visitor Centre.
- Working closely with the Communications and Marketing team by providing events information and the impact of works.
- Monitoring the park's TripAdvisor site to obtain feedback and update customers www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction_Review
- Advertising as many events as possible in local newspapers, social media and www.visitcolchester.com
- Ensuring outlets are provided with a supply of leaflets published to promote the annual programme of Country Park Events.
- Ensuring up-to-date information on all events, educational services, fees and charges, self-serve forms and attractions on www.colchester.gov.uk/countrypark.
- Producing regular information posters on services and events at poster sites in the Country Park

4.8 Safety, security and dog control

Customers view the park as a safe and secure place because:

- It is surrounded by residential housing so benefits from significant surveillance from local residents.
- There are many and varied types of users which means that it is busy especially in the summer months.
- Dogs-on-leads zones apply to the central Parkland area and car parks. Other provision relating to dogs is described below.
- The play zone is situated near to the main car park and Visitor Centre and is visible from the main path to the lake.
- It is patrolled by Rangers and volunteers, who monitor it during the week and at weekends. They ensure dog owners act responsibly, bailiff the fishing lake, deal with rough sleeping and ensure the site is free of graffiti, littering and vandalism.
- The presence of private security staff during the evenings in spring and summer.
- A Woodland Tree Management Policy (2014) applies and guides staff as does a set of procedures derived from the Colchester Borough Council's Tree Policy (below).
- Both car parks are locked by grounds contractor in the evening 365 days a year.
- Rangers undertake an annual survey of park's boundary to check for encroachment and tipping by residential properties.
- Staff are accredited first aiders.
- Management activities and operations are done in accordance with a comprehensive set of Standard Operation Procedures set out in the Country Park's Safety Handbook (2014)

In October 2016 a Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) against the anti-social behaviour of dog fouling in public areas was introduced across Colchester Borough. It applies to all public land and enables Colchester Borough Council to continue enforcing against dog fouling following changes in national legislation. PSPO notices have been installed in the park.

The Council's Community Zone Wardens have the power to issue a Fixed Penalty Notice in the park for dog fouling including a fine of £50. If a dog owner fails to pay, court prosecution and a £1,000 fine can result.

In addition to enforcement the park provides dog waste bins at its many entrances and supplies bags from a dispenser located at the Visitor Centre. As a result dog fouling is not generally a problem in the park.

The park is a wonderful place to exercise dogs and dog owners derive significant health benefits from this exercise. The published Country Park Dog Walking Code requires that all dogs are kept under control, and on a lead in the car parks, around the Visitor Centre, near livestock, runners and cyclists.

Tree work is prioritised so as to deal effectively in the first instance with areas of highest volume of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, e.g. play areas, picnic areas, outdoor classrooms, fishing swims, car parks, neighbouring roads, and properties and gardens. The park is divided into three risk zones based on a complete survey that was undertaken in 2015. Ongoing gross defect surveys are carried out by professional arboriculturalist and there is an active programme of remedial work. In addition trees are inspected regularly by Countryside Rangers to establish the risk of falls which are heavy enough to cause serious injury/damage. Trees are made safe, in so far as is reasonably practicable and a record is kept of these activities.

4.9 Environmental management and sustainability

A high number of environmental principles apply to High Woods Country Park:

Inputs

- Peat is not used. New plantings grown in peat-free medium.
- Only pesticide used is glyphosate based for the control of nuisance vegetation and the treatment of cut tree stumps. A precautionary approach applies - 'no pesticide use at the Country Park if an alternative method can be used'.
- Rangers hold Certificate of Competence for Safe Use and Storage of Chemicals plus Use of Hand Applicator.
- Pesticides stored in a locked and appropriately signed store.
- No fertiliser use on the hay meadows.

Green waste and recycling

- Majority of the green waste generated – timber and wood, hay and other soft vegetation – is used, re-used or recycled. Majority of cut timber and wood taken as part of no-cost contract. Remainder re-used as habitat piles or recycled as stakes and edging or chipped and used to treat path surfaces or to make mulch.
- Approximately 450 bales of hay made each summer and used as winter feed for livestock.
- Approximately 20 cubic metres of ragwort is pulled, dug or cut from the Country Park and other countryside sites each year, and disposed to landfill. Ragwort, defined as a specified weed under the Weeds Act 1959, is industrial waste. Its disposal must comply with Waste Management Regulations and it is policy to do this in line with Defra's guidance (PB 11050).
- Waste tea bags from the Visitor Centre used for composting. Big Garden waste is composted.
- The recycling of plastics is to be increased.
- Paper and cardboard recycled.
- Small recycling facility for glass, cans and paper next to the Visitor Centre.
- Vegetable beds in the BIG Garden mulched to assist with moisture retention.
- Office paper waste is recycled.
- Use of building and surfacing products from recycled / salvaged materials e.g. recycled plastic picnic benches.

Other waste

- Rubbish bins provided, but restricted to car parks, Myland Chase and Field View entrances.
- Litter bins emptied twice weekly.
- Collection of litter at entrances, car parks and lake area.
- Visitors encouraged to take a responsible attitude to rubbish disposal.
- Clinical waste removed using sharps boxes and disposed to nearby Microbiology Laboratory.

Carbon

- Low energy light bulbs used in Visitor Centre.
- External security lights kept to a minimum and work on sensors / timers.
- Vehicles and machinery regularly serviced to ensure maximum operational efficiency

Biodiversity and Economic

- Large proportion of the park managed for biodiversity.
- Visitor Centre gives choice of Fairtrade drinks ensuring that economic sustainability is passed back to producers.

4.10 Safety and risk assessment

- All staff and volunteers using power tools, equipment and off-road vehicles trained to industry standard.
- Staff undertake risk assessments on all equipment and machinery used.
- Safety Handbook – based on risk assessments – sets out standard operating procedures for all operations, activities, tools and equipment.
- Cutting machinery is only used by trained staff and volunteers. Chainsaws are only used by staff.
- All staff are provided with, and required to wear, appropriate safety equipment.
- All parks vehicles on a vehicle servicing and maintenance schedule, managed by the Riverside Truck Rental Ltd on behalf of Colchester Borough Council.
- Use of fleet vehicles is done in accordance with Colchester's Vehicle Users Handbook.
- Fuel, equipment and machinery stored in a secure compound.
- Chemicals used are managed in accordance with the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) regulations.
- All staff handling pesticides hold PA1 and PA6 Certificates of Competence.
- Staff carry out regular inspections / audits of infrastructure, trees, Visitor Centre and general tools and equipment.
- Parks and Recreation maintains the play equipment and has installed most of the town's playgrounds over the past 25 years.
- Staff carry out weekly play equipment inspections, testing fixings, supports and components of equipment, and report faults or required repairs.
- Staff hold Certificates of Competence in Routine Playground Inspection to RoSPA standards.
- Colchester Borough Council carries out a full independent inspection of its play areas annually.

5.0 Aims and Action Plan 2017 - 2021

| Action | How | Resources | Timescale | Review |
|---|--|---------------------------|-----------|--------|
| Buildings, infrastructure and facilities | | | | |
| Repair existing surfaced paths | Surfaced paths and driveways will be repaired as required. | In-house | 2017 - 21 | |
| Install new surfaced paths | Priorities for new paths are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friar's Grove Plantation. • Tubswick to Squirrel's Field. • Field View Close to Brinkley East. | S106 and external funding | 2017 - 21 | |
| Put up entrance panels | Welcome panels will be installed at all pedestrian entrances. | In-house | 2017 | |
| Put up Visitor Centre panel | Welcome panel will be installed on the Visitor Centre frontage. | In-house | 2017 | |
| Put up directional signage | Directional signage to Visitor Centre will be installed in the east and north of the park. | In-house | 2017 | |
| Put up information panel | A 'what can I do in the park?' panel will installed at the Visitor Centre. | In-house | 2018 | |
| Install bridge | New bridge to be installed from The Slipe to Further Meadow for visitors and cattle. | S106 funding | 2017 | |
| Stream and lake banks | Gabion baskets or plastic piling will be installed to prevent/repair eroded banks of the stream and lake. | S106 funding | 2017 | |
| Tree survey | Risk Zones will be surveyed annually in accordance with Woodland Tree Policy. | In-house | 2017 - 21 | |
| Dipping platform | A new dipping platform will be installed at Yovone's Pond. | In-house | 2017 | |
| Benches, fences and other furniture | All furniture will be checked regularly and repaired as required. | In-house | 2017 - 21 | |

| Action | How & where | Resources | Timescale | Review |
|--|--|---|-----------|--------|
| Health, wellbeing and education | | | | |
| Big Garden | Continue to work with The Big Friendly Gardeners group and other partners to come to a satisfactory solution regarding the future of Big Garden. | Community Enabling funding up to September 2017 | 2017 | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|----------|-------------|--|
| Safety, security and dog fouling | | | | |
| Improve security | Continue to work with Castle Park to come to an improved security arrangement | In-house | 2017 | |
| Dog fouling | Continue to work with Community Zones to reduce dog fouling | In-house | 2017 - 2021 | |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|------------------|------|--|
| Environmental sustainability | | | | |
| Wood recycling | Log saw and splitter will be purchased, and volunteers will recycle cut wood for sale at Visitor Centre. | CCVR fundraising | 2017 | |
| Recycling facility | The area will be improved to help recycling | In-house | 2018 | |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|--|-------------|--|
| Marketing | | | | |
| Information board | Install board to promote recreational activities available on-site at visitor centre/toilets | | 2018 | |
| Park leaflet | Amend and reprint leaflet to show yellow route and other walking routes as one-way on leaflet | | 2019 | |
| Customer Satisfaction Surveys | Carry out surveys to help identify visitor issues and priorities. | | 2017 & 2019 | |

| Action | How & where | Resources | Timescale | Review |
|-------------------------|--|---|-------------|--------|
| Biodiversity | | | | |
| Meadows and pastures | Work with The Essex Grazing Project to establish new management arrangements. Complete Farm Business Tenancy and incorporate requirements of Countryside Stewardship Scheme. | In-house. Volunteers to be trained as livestock checkers. | 2017 - 2018 | |
| Silt out marsh | Create some deeper areas by machine to maintain open water in the marsh | In-house | 2018 | |
| Reptile action plan | Deliver the plan as set out in section 1.5. | In-house | 2017 - 2021 | |
| Lake overflow structure | Work with Engineering to design a scheme for filling or re-designing overflow | No funding allocated | 2019 | |
| Biodiversity surveys | Survey selected fauna to guide future management so as to maintain and where possible enhance the value of the park for wildlife. | In-house | 2017 | |
| Woods and trees plan | Deliver the plan as set out in section 1.5 | Mix of no-cost coppicing contract & in-house | | |

| | | | | |
|--------------------|---|---------------------------|-------------|--|
| Income | | | | |
| Increase income | S106 funding and external grant bids for capital works such as tackling erosion, installation of new paths and Big Garden. Income from Visitor Centre will be increased. | To be undertaken in-house | 2017 - 2019 | |
| Visitor attraction | Investigations will continue to attract a visitor attraction e.g. high ropes adventure course. | To be undertaken in-house | 2018 | |

6.0 Monitoring and Review

The Country Parks Manager will review the management plan annually to decide on changes and alterations for the following year. This review will incorporate a discussion with staff looking after the park, and on comments and advice from Green Flag judges. Progress will be measured against the Action Plan.

All country parks staff will be made aware of the High Woods Country Park Management Plan. Where individuals are given specific tasks in relation to High Woods Country Park, it may be appropriate to include the tasks in their Personal Development Plan and, and monitor them through the appraisal process.

User surveys based on Customer Satisfaction Surveys and TripAdvisor comments will be carried out on a regular basis and scores will be used to monitor changes in approval ratings amongst park users.