

Combe Valley Countryside Park, East Sussex, UK - A Green Infrastructure Project Case Study

Frank Rallings Dip TP (Nottm) FRTPI¹

Abstract

Green Infrastructure and its importance for health and well being are key elements of current spatial planning policy and practice which are reflected in HM Government White paper 'The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature'. Combe Valley Countryside Park is a major green infrastructure project located between the towns of Hastings and Bexhill on Sea, East Sussex. The aim of the Park is to meet Natural England's Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt) for the area. This will be achieved by a programme of restoring areas of landfill to recreational use along with sensitive public access to the countryside within the valley of the Combe Haven, adjoining the parish of Crowhurst, and tourist activity along the coast at Bulverhythe. The Combe Valley Countryside Park case study identifies the issues which underlie the implementation of a major green infrastructure project. From the spatial planning point of view it outlines the need to ascertain the views of the community by appropriate research prior to preparing a Development Strategy & Implementation Plan. As a consequence of differing administrative, legal and land ownership interests in the allocated area for the Countryside Park it explains the rationale of the need for partnership working by the three local authorities East Sussex County Council, Hastings Borough Council, Rother District Council along with Crowhurst Parish Council. The case study identifies the practicalities of managing a large scale greenspace project along with the need to reconcile the politics of the urban fringe, meet the aspirations of the local communities, instigate the enhancement of the landscape and biodiversity of the area and work in harmony with stakeholders, farmers and landowners

Keywords: countryside park, development strategy, green infrastructure, landfill restoration, partnership

Introduction

The ongoing major green infrastructure project known as Combe Valley Countryside Park is located between the East Sussex coastal towns of Hastings and Bexhill on Sea which adjoin the English Channel. The Countryside Park (originally named the Pebsham Countryside Park project) was first mooted in 1993 as part of the North Bexhill Strategic Planning Framework (East Sussex County Council/Rother District Council). It emanated from 'strategic gap' planning policies so as to provide a greenspace between the towns of Hastings & Bexhill on Sea. In 1993 the North Bexhill Strategic Framework was adopted as supplementary planning guidance and identified a number of key development opportunities. It promoted the Pebsham Countryside Park between Bexhill and St Leonards (Hastings) with potential for open-air recreation and conservation. This was centred on the Pebsham landfill site within the valley of the Combe Haven. It is an important "green gap" between the two settlements, providing opportunities for the people of Bexhill, Hastings and St Leonards to gain access to fine countryside. The Strategic Framework highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach to the management of the urban fringe to cater for agriculture, landscape and wildlife conservation whilst accommodating public access and recreation.

¹ Senior Lecturer (Town Planning), Brighton Planning School, SET, University of Brighton, Cockcroft Building, Lewes Road, Brighton BN2 4GJ Tel +44(0)1273 642376 E-mail f.rallings@brighton.ac.uk

However it was not until 2003 that a Countryside Park Steering Group was set up to mastermind the restoration of the existing landfill areas and to manage the countryside between the towns. The Steering Group was formed of representatives from the three relevant local authorities Rother District Council, Hastings Borough Council, and East Sussex County Council. The reason for forming the partnership is that the majority of the land for the Park lays within the Rother District Council administrative area for which it is local planning authority, around half the land within the Park area is in the ownership of Hastings Borough Council and East Sussex County Council are the local planning authority for waste & minerals and are responsible for the Hastings to Bexhill Link Road project.

Significant funding from a S106 Obligation from Southern Water, pursuant to the construction of a Waste Water Treatment Works on land within the Park, provided the impetus to commence work on the project. Additional funding from a European Anglo-French INTERREG IIIA transfrontier project 'Access for All' with partners from Lille and Baie de Somme allowed the Steering Group to commission a major public consultation on the proposed park in the Hastings and Bexhill area in 2005 (What do people want? Community Consultation TK Associates March 2006). The funding also allowed for the preparation of a Development Strategy and Implementation Plan for the Park adopted in 2008 along with a business plan. With the INTERREG and S106 funding certain on site improvements to footpaths including the erection of specially designed Pebsham Countryside Park waymarkers were also undertaken.

In 2008 and following on from the recommendations in the Pebsham Countryside Park Development Strategy & Implementation Plan the current Management Board was formed comprising representatives from Hastings Borough Council, Rother District Council, East Sussex County Council and Crowhurst Parish Council.

The proposed Countryside Park covers an area of 642 hectares within Rother District and Hastings Borough. In 2011, following a community survey, it was agreed by the Management Board that the Pebsham Countryside Park Project name should be reviewed. It was felt that a new name for the Countryside Park should be selected which reflected the larger area for the Park than that on the original Pebsham Landfill area. In 2012 the Park was formally named Combe Valley Countryside Park reflecting the wider context of the Park which forms an important greenspace within 1066 Country.

The southern part adjoining Bulverhythe contains a landfill site, a waste transfer station, a household waste site and a waste water treatment works. The northern area comprises the Combe Haven valley SSSI and Filsham reed beds.

The intention is that the project will create a significant green space between the two towns and that the restored landfill site and adjoining land will be able to be used for recreational purposes.

On the north eastern side of Bexhill a town expansion is proposed with in excess of 1,100 homes (associated local services) and some 48,000sq.m of business space (North East Bexhill Masterplan SPD 2009). The Bexhill-Hastings Link Road, if constructed, will link central Bexhill with Queensway in Hastings and will also provide a greenway between the two towns for use by pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders.

The Countryside Park is a long term project which will address the deficiency in green space for the towns of Hastings and Bexhill. The Park will serve an immediate population of 22,500 people and an overall urban population of 130,000 persons. It will provide an opportunity for active recreation, walking, cycling, equestrianism, bird watching, nature studies etc.

The Project

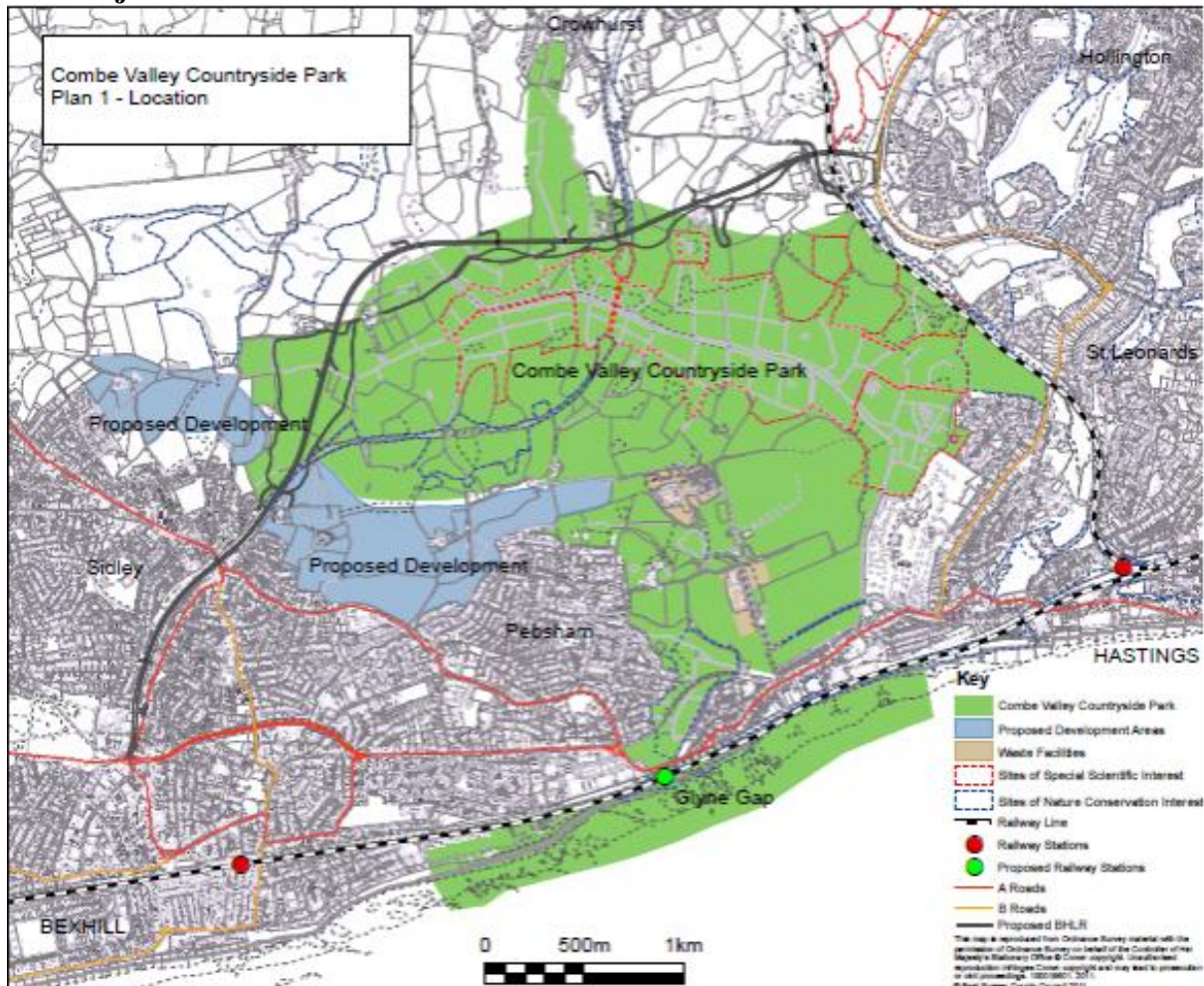


Fig 1 CVCP Location Plan

(ESCC 2012)

The Combe Valley Countryside Park is allocated in the adopted Rother and Hastings Local Plans and emerging Core Strategies. As the proposal relates to a large area of land (642 hectares) in different ownerships it is not designated as a Country Park under the Countryside Act 1968 but is similar in concept to the Cobham Ashenbrook Management Scheme (CAMS) 1997 in Gravesend, Kent. This is a partnership of various landowners and bodies working ‘to undertake a programme of projects to conserve and enhance historic, nature conservation and landscape interests within the Historic Cobham Park and Ashenbank Wood area’.

At Combe Valley the Vision is ‘To create and manage a high quality sustainable, attractive, accessible and multi-functional countryside area to serve the recreational, economic and health and well-being needs of residents and visitors’.

Approximately a third of the land covered by the proposals for the Combe Valley Countryside Park is already local authority owned and managed. Hastings Borough Council owns much of the land in the eastern part of the proposed Park.

Rother District Council owns a relatively small area of land in the western part of the proposed Park, the majority of which is the route of a disused railway line and an area of woodland known as Happy Landings. The remainder is in private ownership, much of it used as grazing land.

East Sussex County Council has purchased land in the northern part of the park as part of the mitigation and compulsory purchase requirements in relation to land assembly for the possible Bexhill to Hastings link road.

Community Consultation

The development of the Park has been informed by the findings of the original community consultation undertaken in 2005 to identify the level of support for the park project and the related aspirations. The methodology used by TK Associates for researching the views of the community in Hastings, Bexhill on Sea, and Crowhurst area was as follows :-

1. A series of five half-day workshops with:
 - i. *Community and resident representatives and councillors*
 - ii. *Land owners*
 - iii. *Interest groups - arts, sports, disability, ethnic, environmental*
 - iv. *Primary school pupils*
 - v. *Young people aged between 12 and 19*
2. Three day-long exhibitions in Hastings, Bexhill and Crowhurst to hear views from a range of local people
3. Questionnaires - placed in local libraries, information points and doctors' surgeries for freepost return as well as online for electronic return – to collect views from the broadest spectrum of people.

This approach proved highly productive. There were 146 attendees at the workshops – equating to over 600 hours' input from community members. In addition, well over a thousand people attended the exhibitions, with 391 submitting questionnaires on the spot. An additional 561 questionnaires were returned by post or email, giving a total of almost a thousand questionnaires. The broad community were updated throughout the consultation by over 30 articles in the press, and items on regional TV and radio.

Most importantly, the feedback gave an extremely clear view of the wishes, aspirations and concerns of local people in relation to any future countryside park.

The research culminated in a report entitled– “*What Do People Want?*” by T K Associates and the key findings were:

- *88% of respondents from Bexhill and Hastings and those outside the local area were in favour of the park*
- *63% of respondents from Crowhurst were against the park*
- *47% of respondents considered Nature Conservation to be the primary purpose of the park (the most frequently suggested primary purpose). 66% wanted to be able to watch wildlife*
- *“Access for All” was the next most popular primary purpose (22%) and 49% wanted greater walking access in the area*
- *Both young and old are keenest on wildlife watching as an activity but the under 30's favoured sports (42%) over walking (24%)*

- *Cycling was very popular with all ages although the under 30's slightly preferred water sports*
- *Horse riding was a close second to cycling overall*
- *Some young people want more skateboarding and BMX facilities*
- *There was significant demand for more angling waters*
- *A significant number of people, particularly from the Crowhurst area wanted no sports facilities*
- *There is considerable concern from farming landowners about likely conflict between farming and park activities*
- *The need for more play facilities was clearly identified*
- *A limited amount of more education and public art facilities were requested by all ages*

The issues raised from the residents of Crowhurst parish at the time reflected the concerns about the proposed Bexhill to Hastings Link road and potential new development at North East Bexhill which, if built, were to be located to the south of the parish. Since the survey the Bexhill to Hastings link road has gained planning permission and has been promised funding from HM Government for a start in 2012/13. With the creation of the Management Board in 2008 a representative from Crowhurst Parish Council has been a member of the Board and the parish are now fully involved in the development of the park and many of the fears expressed in the original consultation have been allayed.

Following on from the aspirations of the community, a Community Development Officer working for Sussex Wildlife Trust in partnership with the Park was appointed in 2010 and she, along with the Park Ranger, has been developing a very successful annual Events programme concentrating on nature activities, wildlife watching, conservation projects and walking activities.

In addition the focus of the community work is in schools and the deprived areas which adjoin the Park. The project abuts some of the most deprived wards in South-East England. *45% of Lower Super Output Areas in Hastings fall into the most deprived 20%, and two are among the most deprived 1% of LSOAs in the Country. 75% have a worse ranking than in 2007. There are two LSOA's in Rother that fall into the most deprived decile. Both are in Sidley ward in Bexhill where multiple deprivations appear to have increased since 2007.* The provision of green infrastructure will help deliver key benefits for health, well-being and social cohesion.

Green Infrastructure Research

The need for green infrastructure at Combe Valley has been identified in a number of studies including the Combe Valley Countryside Park Development Strategy Review and Implementation Plan (2012 -2015) and the East Sussex County Council Strategic Open Space Study and East Sussex County Council Environment Strategy 2011. The importance of the delivery of the Combe Valley Countryside Park green infrastructure is illustrated by the current research findings which are:

- *Application of Natural England's Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt) shows that only 27% of Rother's population are within 10km of a 500ha site and there is significant ANGSt deficiency through Hastings and Bexhill (as demonstrated in the ESCC Strategic Open Space Study)*
- *Rother District Council's open space standards demonstrate severe shortages of open space in Bexhill, particularly amenity open space and outdoor sports provision*

- *The Woodland Trust’s ‘Accessible Woodland standards’ demonstrates a lack of access neighbouring East Bexhill and Bulverhythe*
- *Much of the proposed Countryside Park area is identified as the ‘Combe Haven and Marline Biodiversity Opportunity Area’ demonstrating considerable opportunities for habitat creation, enhancement and restoration*

As can be seen the provision of green infrastructure in this locality will help deliver key benefits for health, well-being and social cohesion in the Hastings, St Leonards and Bexhill on Sea urban area.

Development Zones

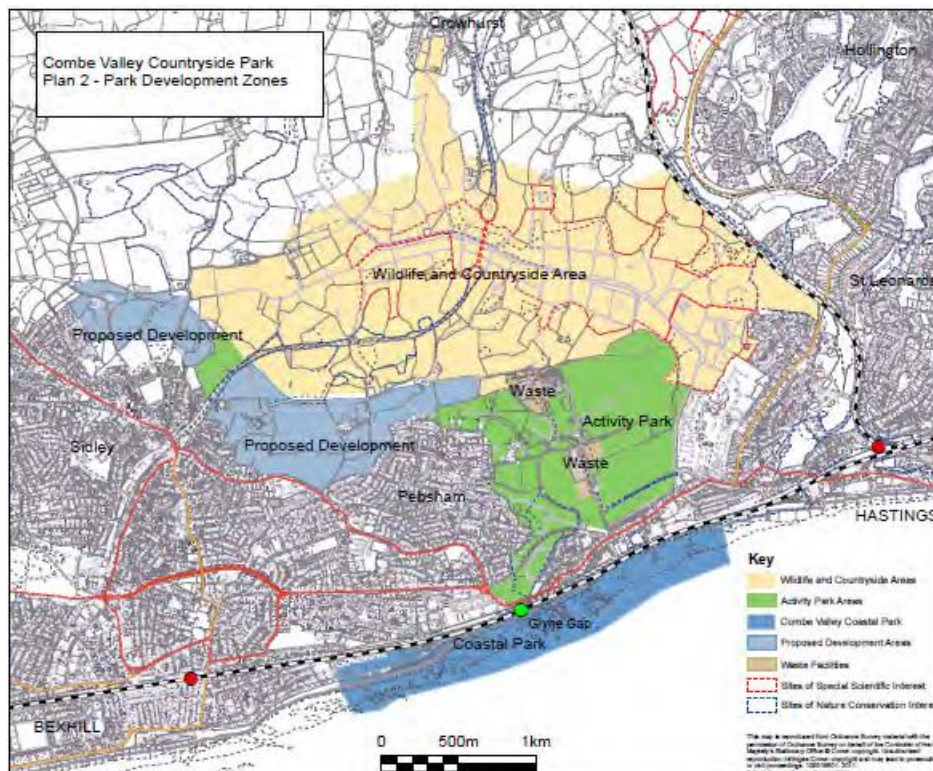


Fig 2 CVCP Park Development Zones

(ESCC 2012)

In physical terms the implementation of the proposed Countryside Park will comprise three defined Development Zones:

The Activity Park (Area surrounding the proposed restored landfill site, adjacent to Bulverhythe & Peabsham)

- *The main “green gap” between Bexhill and St Leonards.*
- *The main activity area and “visitor hub” – managed to maximise recreation and educational opportunities.*
- *Design the landscape to accommodate significant recreational users*
- *Accommodate multi-sports activities*
- *Accommodate an operational hub for the park*
- *Improve rights of way and access into the park*
- *Where compatible with recreational users, enhance the wildlife value of the area.*
- *Provide opportunities for urban/rural edge recreational and tourist activities for the whole community and visitors*

- *Provide the main arrival areas and associated vehicle parking spaces*
- *Provide an area suitable for community events and activities*
- *Engage the community in understanding the waste story*
- *Be the area which provides the main identifiable and appropriately designated entry to the park*

Coastal Park (Coastal Strip at Bulverhythe extending from West St Leonards to Galley Hill Bexhill on Sea)

- *Optimise the recreational beach and greenspace experience of the Coastal Park and green infrastructure linkages into Bexhill and St Leonards*
- *Conserve and interpret the environmental and cultural heritage value of the area.*
- *Provide good pedestrian and cycle links between Bexhill and Hastings via the Connect 2 project and into the Park to the north*
- *Interpret issues of coastline conservation and defence*
- *Support improved access into the park from Glyne Gap*

Wildlife and Countryside Area (Countryside between Bexhill on Sea and Crowhurst including Combe Haven SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and Filsham Reed Beds)

- *Design, develop and manage this nationally important wildlife area with the primary purpose of nature conservation and work with Natural England and the Environment Agency in relation to their strategies for the Combe Haven*
- *Maximise the opportunities to view wildlife from footpaths and hides around the area whilst minimising disturbance*

In addition, eventually, the Countryside Park project will result in the creation, restoration and enhancement of large areas of BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat supporting many protected and threatened species. Within the Park BAP habitats include: *Coastal Floodplain & Grazing Marsh, Reedbeds, Lowland Fens, Ponds, Ancient and Wet Woodland, Coastal Vegetated Shingle, Maritime Cliffs.*

In the southern part of the Park where the landfill and other waste activities are located there is significant opportunity for enhancement and active use. The remaining landfill is in fact a land raise which after restoration will result in a landscaped hill with an opportunity for a single path and viewpoint in due course. Health and safety issues, due to methane control, will result in limited and controlled public access in the future. In 2013 the relocation of a household waste site from a site adjacent the land raise will, in due course, give the opportunity of providing a new car park adjacent to the proposed hill and provide access to the proposed Pebsham circuit footpath network.

As part of the Community consultation in 2005/6 The Recreational Demands Study (2006) identified a range of facilities for which there was demand and capacity to accommodate in the Park. These facilities tended to fall into either urban fringe or rural fringe in character. The zoning of the areas in Park allows for accommodating both types of facilities. The community and visitor facilities are primarily planned to be located within the Activity Park. Where appropriate there is some scope for landowners around the Park to develop visitor facilities which complement the Park.

Spatial Planning

Regeneration proposals for Bexhill on Sea and Hastings identify the significance of the countryside park project to making the most of the relationship of the two towns to the surrounding countryside and creating a green infrastructure environment that will attract new business and tourism.

The Countryside Park is a fundamental part of the existing and emerging planning strategies for both Rother District Council and Hasting Borough Council. The extent of activities in the overall park depends on whether the Bexhill to Hastings Link Road is constructed as does the development of new houses and businesses at North East Bexhill. However the northern countryside and wildlife parts of the Park are currently accessible from the existing footpath network including the 1066 Country Walk and will remain so. Further new linkages into the Park adjacent to the new development including, a ‘greenway’ route, for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders, from Bexhill to Queensway Hastings will only be created if the Link Road and North East Bexhill development take place.

The Development Strategy for the Park is to create a community and visitor “hub” on the area to the south of the new hill off Freshfields Road within the Countryside Park area. The intention of the “hub” is to provide a landscaped Activity Park with car parking, improved footpath network, and sporting, recreational and tourist facilities.

Conclusion

In the UK and Europe the increasing importance of green infrastructure is being recognised through a series of national and local policy statements and evidence based research by governments, and a range of other statutory and non-statutory organisations. The benefits are identified in terms of health and well-being, community development, and climate change outcomes. The Combe Valley Countryside Park development is a significant project in East Sussex which meets the recommendations as set out in many of these documents.

HM Government White Paper ‘*The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature*’ (2011) has particular relevance for the Combe Valley Countryside Park, insofar as it recommends that a healthy natural environment is a cost-effective tool that can help local authorities to:

- *support economic and social regeneration*
- *improve public health outcomes*
- *improve educational outcomes*
- *reduce crime and antisocial behaviour*
- *help communities adapt to climate change; and*
- *improve quality of life across an entire area*

The White Paper highlights the need for effective partnership working that can bring about these multiple benefits and sets out a vision to be adopted for local partnerships who will link action to protect and improve the natural environment, with wider national and local social and economic priorities. Such partnerships are being encouraged to make links with Local Enterprise Partnerships and the new Health and Wellbeing Boards, the East Sussex version of which is currently being established.

A report by the Faculty of Public Health in association with Natural England (2010) entitled *Great outdoors: how our natural health service use green space to improve well being:an action report*, outlines how high quality well planned and managed green space delivers direct benefits to people’s health and wellbeing. It also delivers indirect benefits because of

the activities and outcomes it promotes and enables. These include promoting better mental health, enabling participation in physical activity, enhanced opportunities for outdoor play for children and families, supporting food growing and encouraging greater social cohesion through shared activities that centre around common areas of green space. They also provide opportunities to learn about the environment and to volunteer. The report recommends that local policy makers, town planners, public health practitioners, the voluntary sector and local communities themselves should be strengthening collaborative working to develop green space and make better use of it for the benefit of all.

HM Government's Department of Health '*Healthy Lives, Healthy People: Our strategy for public health in England*' (2010) highlights the importance of an active population, recognising the contribution it can make to improving health and reducing health inequalities, the significance of which were highlighted in The Marmot Review '*Fair Society, Fair Lives*' (London 2010). As a result it outlines an approach that promotes and enables equality of access for all empowering local government and communities to lead on creating healthy neighbourhoods.

The first planning policy for a Countryside Park between Hastings and Bexhill was put forward in 1993 as a way of reusing a landfill and landraise site for the benefit of the surrounding population. For various reasons relating to debates about strategies regarding town expansion at Bexhill and, in particular, a fourteen mile by pass around Bexhill and Hastings which was rejected by the Government in the late 1990s no significant work took place on the Countryside Park idea until the Steering Group was set up in 2003.

Since then, however, a major amount of work has been undertaken starting with the original Community consultation, the preparation of a Development Strategy and Implementation Plan, the formal inclusion of the proposed park of 642 hectares in the Rother District Council and Hastings Borough Council Local Plans and emerging Core Strategies. Funding has been provided from S106 Obligations from Southern Water and Biffa and INTERREG III European funds. In addition East Sussex CC, Rother DC and Hastings BC contribute funds annually to the project.

The Management Board has been in existence since 2008 with the addition of a representative from Crowhurst Parish Council. Since then there has been a focus on involving the community in the project. A Community Development Officer working through Sussex Wildlife Trust has been appointed to engage the local community including schools, third age, socially excluded etc. A programme of Events in the Park in conjunction with the Ranger and local organisations has been organised for the last three years to promote the Park and its benefits. A Stakeholders Group was also set in 2010 to allow a dialogue between the politicians and officers from the Management Board with landowners, farmers and businesses in matters relating to the development and management of the Park.

Finally in 2012, following community feedback the Pebsham Countryside Park Project ceased as a project and was renamed Combe Valley Countryside Park. A logo reflecting a dragonfly (a species found within the park) launched the new Park in March 2012 with the tag *New Name, New Era*. A major programme of works using S106 funding is being implemented in the next eighteen months which focuses on upgrading existing paths, gates and bridges to ensure good links from the urban area to the countryside and to provide improved circuits within the Park. In addition, improvements to access points into the park, along with Combe Valley Countryside Park waymarkers, information boards and direction

signs are part of the project plan. The Park will be also promoted by improved publicity, Events programmes and a website www.combevalleycountrysidepark.com.

In conclusion, an idea that started twenty years ago on the basis of the tenet '*from rubbish to recreation*' has now blossomed into a much larger green infrastructure project which will benefit the towns of Bexhill on Sea and Hastings and reflects current thinking on health, well being and town planning.

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