

A Country Farm Park for northern Uttlesford?



Uttlesford has a rapidly increasing population in need of access to the countryside. Since the year 2000 the population has increased from under 68,000 to over 93,000.

Despite being a rural area, the amount of open access countryside is much less than in other Essex districts. With the exception of three small nature reserves created by Walden Countryside, it has not increased at all since the year 2000.

Walden Countryside hopes that Uttlesford District Council will explore this proposal and consider ways in which it can increase the availability of access countryside. All other Essex District Councils have created country parks and local nature reserves but as yet Uttlesford has no such District Council asset.

Walden Countryside is a not-for-profit Community Interest Company that owns Noakes Grove nature reserve (the open access nature reserve nearest to Saffron Walden) and manages two others, one in Hempstead the other in Wimbish.

Walden Countryside is the only conservation body to have created any new nature reserves in Uttlesford since 1991.

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Proposal summary

Uttlesford District Council is the only Essex district council not to have created a country park or local native reserve.

There is half the acreage of public access countryside in the north of Uttlesford than in the southern half.

If UDC can find the funding for the capital costs of creating a country farm park, once established it should be self-funding.

A farm park is preferred since traditional mixed farmland is rich in wildlife and is the habitat that has suffered the greatest level of loss – about 97% over fifty years compared with almost no loss of ancient woodland.

Loss of traditional (non-intensive) farmland is almost entirely responsible for the dramatic decline in insect and song-bird numbers.

Walden Countryside believes that the following priorities can be achieved with 100 -200 acres, managed as a public access, traditional, mixed farm:

- Creating an area of high biodiversity and wildlife conservation value.
- Giving access to the general public to an area of traditionally farmed countryside, with year-round interest, for quiet recreation on foot.

- Producing food by traditional, wildlife friendly, agriculture for consumption by local people.
- Involving volunteer labour in the management of nature reserve and access land by traditional, non-intensive, methods.
- Providing educational and open-air play opportunities for children.

These have all been achieved on Hatfield Forest's 1049 acres and, on a tiny scale, on the nine acres of Noakes Grove near Saffron Walden, by combining traditional farming with public access and wildlife conservation.

If Uttlesford District Council wishes to investigate this proposal further, Walden Countryside would be delighted to help in any way it can.

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Any Essex District Council can provide a combination of Local Nature Reserves and Country Parks. These are all District Council funded, in addition most districts have substantial country parks funded by Essex County Council or the City of London Council (Epping Forest) or national government (Lee Valley Park).

Table 1 District Council managed Country Parks and Local Nature Reserves in Essex

District	Number of Sites	Total Acreage
Basildon	8	485
Braintree	3	225
Brentwood	4	276
Castle Point	7	344
Chelmsford	3	689
Colchester	6	813
Epping Forest	8	47
Harlow	4	290
Maldon	4	92
Rochford	4	376
Southend	4	530
Tendring	3	334
Thurrock	4	506
Uttlesford	0	0

Note Maldon & Epping Forest have under 100 acres provided by their District Councils, but huge areas provided by other branches of Government: Epping Forest, Lee Valley Park and Marsh Farm.

Access countryside for the residents of Uttlesford

Unlike all other Essex district councils, Uttlesford District Council has not been able to provide its residents with any council managed Country Parks or Local Nature Reserves.

Essex County Council has designated the Flich Way linear walk and cycleway as a country park, although it is very much smaller than the large ECC country parks in the south and east of the county.

The National Trust's Hatfield Forest is a National Nature Reserve of huge importance for wildlife conservation. It also functions as a *de facto* Country Park. Thus southern Uttlesford has 1274 acres of countryside access land over 80% of it provided by the National Trust.

In the north of the district, only the "Right to Roam" Forestry England woodlands provide significant areas of access land – over 80% of the 574 acre total.

Existing countryside access land in Uttlesford

The tables below show the blocks of land to which the public have access and are managed in ways that promote wildlife interest. In most cases these are known as nature reserves (NR) or country parks (CP) but there are also Right to Roam (RR) designated areas and common land (CL) which are important, especially in the north of the district. The sites carry some designations of their biodiversity value: in decreasing order of importance: National Nature Reserves (NNR),

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Local Wildlife Sites (LoWS).

These sites are managed (and often owned) by Essex County Council (ECC), Town Councils (TC), Forestry England (FE), National Trust (NT), Essex Wildlife Trust (EWT) , Woodland Trust (WT) Birchanger Wood Trust (BC) and Walden Countryside (WC).

Uttlesford DC is not on this list as at present, as explained above it is the only district council in Essex not to have any local nature reserves or country parks. Creating one should be a high priority and it should be in the north of the district to address the imbalance of conserved access land in the two halves of the district.

Table 2 Public access countryside in northern Uttlesford

Name	Acres	Habitats	Type	Designations
Great & Little Bendysh Woods	224	Ancient woodland wide rides, ponds	FE	LoWS and RR
Rowney Wood	204	Ancient woodland wide rides, ponds	FE	LoWS and RR
West Wood	58	Ancient wood, ponds	EWT	SSSI, NR
Little Hales Wood	45	Ancient woodland wide rides, ponds	FE	LoWS and RR
Shadwell Wood	18	Ancient wood	EWT	SSSI, NR
Noakes Grove	9	Flower-rich grassland, ancient woodland	WC	LoWS (in part), NR
Ellis Green	8	Traditional orchard and grassland	WC & CL	NR & CL
Kings Field	6	No chemical input pasture, brook, ancient hedges	WC	NR
Harrison Sayer	2	Grassland	EWT	LoWS, NR
Total Area	574			

Table 3 Public access countryside in southern Uttlesford

Name	Acres	Habitats	Type	Designation
Hatfield Forest	1049	Ancient wood, pasture	NT	SSSI, NNR
Garnett s Wood	60	Ancient woodland	ECC	NR
Birchanger Wood	49	Ancient wood	BWT	
Fritch Way	40	Old railway line, linear park	ECC	CP
Aubrey Buxton	24	Woodland & grassland	EWT	NR
Chelmer Valley Park	20	Grassland, river	TC	CP
Sawbridgeworth Marsh	20	Marshland (mainly in Hertfordshire)	EWT	NR
Linnets Wood	12	Plantation wood	WT	NR
Rushy Mead	11	Wetland	EWT	NR
Turner's Spring	8	Ancient wood	EWT	N
Sweetings Meadow	2	Orchard	EWT	NR
Total area	1295			

Northern Uttlesford has less than half the area of access land compared with southern Uttlesford, which is why we think any access land created by UDC should be in the northern half of the district.

This document seeks to persuade Uttlesford District Council that it can create a significant sized block of countryside access land in the northern half of the district at an affordable cost and with high benefit to its residents.

Why the area should be farmland

Traditional mixed farmland, with limited or no use of artificial fertilisers or pesticides, is very rich in wildlife and is the terrestrial habitat that has suffered the greatest level of loss. This loss has been in the region of 97% over fifty years compared with almost no loss of ancient woodland, some of which is protected in almost all the existing countryside access land in Uttlesford.

Loss of traditional farmland is almost entirely responsible for the dramatic decline in insect and song-bird numbers.

The other advantage of a traditionally farmed habitat is that, starting with a block of intensively managed farmland almost devoid of wildlife, a biodiverse habitat of flower and insect-rich grassland and croplands can be created in a few years. In contrast, a new wood takes thirty or more years to mature and it is then just a plantation wood. It will never be a biologically rich ancient woodland.

Financial matters

Creating such a farm park requires an initial, substantial, capital investment to obtain the land and for start-up costs. That achieved, there is an excellent chance that the enterprise would be financially fully self-sufficient.

Capital costs

100 acres of normal agricultural land, devoid of any development potential, has a market price of at least £1 million. There are several ways in which this might be met:

- Uttlesford District Council could meet it from its own resources (maybe with support from sources such as the Heritage Lottery Fund)
- UDC could set up a large-scale section 106 agreement enabling the developers of a number of new housing projects to jointly fund a single piece of access land of benefit to the whole community, rather than small bits of green space of value only to the occupants of the new houses and often expensive to maintain.
- If a landowner can be found willing to grant a secure agricultural tenancy on a suitable block of land at a normal annual farm rental, then the only capital outlay would be the start-up costs for equipment, farm stock etc. To be self-funding from then on would mean achieving an income sufficient to pay the rental as well as an income for the farm manager and the costs of managing the farm park.

- ***Suggested nature of the farm***

For maximum biodiversity interest and year-round interest for visitors, the farm should be a mixed one with livestock fed largely on pasture land and cereal products grown on the farm.

- A detailed farm plan and income projections can only be produced once the size and nature of the land is known.
- Sources of income would include:
Government farm grants (Basic Farm Payment and Countryside Stewardship).
- Sale of farm produce (probably direct to visitors).
- Car-parking fees (assuming visitors arriving on foot or by bike have free entry)

Public access and enjoyment

With the splendid exception of Hatfield Forest, almost all the public access countryside in Uttlesford is woodland. These woods provide good opportunities for family or dog walks and are rich in wildflowers in the spring but they do not provide the variety of habitats, and year-round features to enjoy, that traditional farmland does.

Both Hatfield Forest and Noakes Grove have demonstrated that free-ranging livestock can co-exist with open access by the public. They both help with habitat management and provide some income.

Producing local food

The biodiversity and public interest benefits of traditional farming necessarily produce foodstuffs. The sale of this direct to the end consumers will produce part of the income needed to manage the farm-park and will add interest for visitors.

At present only Hatfield Forest in the south and the three small Walden Countryside reserves in north Uttlesford produce and sell food.

Volunteer involvement.

Walden Countryside has demonstrated that it is possible to maintain small flocks of sheep on two nature reserves using only volunteer labour.

A much larger farm-park would require a full-time farm manager but there would be plenty of opportunity for volunteer involvement.. Not only does this reduce running costs but providing satisfying and healthy voluntary work opportunities is a social benefit in itself.

Educational Use

Outdoor education can be provided by school visits, forest schools or "Wild Child" clubs. The more open and varied habitats of a farm-park and the opportunity to interact with animals, provide interest for children year round. These can generate income through grant-aid via Countryside Stewardship and a number of charities or there could be a charge to parents.

What next?

We hope that UDC will be sufficiently interested in this proposal to investigate in detail how it could raise the necessary capital and start-up costs and the availability of a suitable block of land. Walden Countryside would be delighted to assist with this work if there is any way UDC feels we could help.

About Walden Countryside

Walden Countryside has prepared this proposal for the creation of a country park and nature reserve in the hope that Uttlesford District Council will consider taking on this project for the benefit of its residents.

Walden Countryside is a not-for-profit community interest company which works in the northern half of Uttlesford. It is the only organisation in Uttlesford to have opened new, public-access, nature reserves this century. It is run entirely by volunteers. It is also the only organisation in north Uttlesford using farm livestock to manage the wildlife habitats on its nature reserves.

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