

## **Sheppey Area Committee 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2025 - Bartons Point Update**

Following Members' ambitions to explore opportunities to improve the offering at Barton's Point Coastal Park, the Council sought Expressions of Interest (EOI) in May 2022 to manage the various elements of the site including the Boathouse, Toilet and Shower Block, Boating Lake, Former Pitch and Putt Course, seasonal Camping Ground and Car Park to combine to make an overall leisure offer.

The EOI process generated considerable interest and having reviewed the submissions and undertaken commercial negotiations a preferred operator was identified, with ambitious plans for the site, including use of the lake for an inflatable adventure course and accommodation pods. Given the nature of these plans, involving considerable capital investment, any lease agreement would be subject to securing planning permission. A key risk in securing such was the ecology and bio-diversity on the site and the ability to mitigate any concerns that might be raised, in the event of a changing and more intensive use of Bartons Point for leisure.

Consequently, a specialist company, Bakewell, were instructed to undertake a year-long suite of ecological surveys to fully understand the ecological value of the Park, the potential to mitigate against harm and ultimately secure a planning permission for more intensive use. These surveys were completed in April 2025, with the final report to follow.

### **Survey Findings**

Bakewell's surveys revealed the park's exceptional biodiversity, emphasizing the complex and fragile relationships among species, particularly invertebrates and nesting birds, around the brackish lake and adjacent grasslands. The lake's brackish nature—resulting from a mix of freshwater and saline influences from its proximity to the Thames and Medway estuaries—creates a rare habitat supporting specialized species. Key findings include:

- **High Species Diversity:** The surveys identified a rich array of invertebrates and nesting birds, with the lake and grasslands forming a delicate ecosystem reliant on stable environmental conditions.
- **Fragile Ecosystem:** The interdependent relationships between species are highly sensitive to disturbances, such as increased human activity or habitat alteration.
- **Brackish Lake Significance:** The lake's unique salinity supports rare aquatic and semi-aquatic species, making it a critical ecological feature.

### **Planning Legislation and Considerations**

Under UK planning law, developments impacting ecologically sensitive areas must comply with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which emphasizes biodiversity protection and the need for a Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) of at least 10% for new developments (effective since February 2024 under the Environment Act 2021).

The surveys indicate that the proposed inflatable waterpark would increase site usage, potentially disrupting the fragile ecosystem. Key legislative and regulatory considerations include:

- **Environment Act 2021:** Mandates BNG, requiring developers to enhance biodiversity through measurable improvements.
- **Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended):** Protects species identified in the surveys, such as nesting birds and potentially great crested newts, requiring mitigation measures for any development.

- Natural England and Kent Wildlife Trust: As statutory consultees, both organizations are likely to object to the waterpark proposal due to its potential to harm protected species and habitats. Kent Wildlife Trust, managing over 9,500 acres across 90+ sites, prioritizes conservation and has significant influence in planning decisions.
- Local Planning Policy: Swale Borough Council's Local Plan emphasizes sustainable development and habitat protection, aligning with objections to developments that threaten biodiversity.

### **Bakewell's Recommendations**

Bakewell's conclusions highlighted the challenges of securing planning consent for the waterpark or any other intensification of use, due to the site's ecological importance. They noted the following:

- Statutory Objections: Natural England and Kent Wildlife Trust are likely to oppose the application, citing impacts on protected species and the brackish lake's ecosystem.
- Alternative Uses: The park's unique biodiversity supports educational and environmental initiatives, such as interpretive trails or research programs.
- Biodiversity Net Gain Opportunities: Enhancing grassland species diversity could generate BNG credits, providing an economic incentive for conservation-focused management while meeting legislative requirements.

The ecological surveys underscore Barton's Point Coastal Park as a critical biodiversity hotspot, particularly due to its brackish lake and diverse species. Due to the park's ecological significance, the Council has been advised that planning consent for future uses on the park will need to carefully consider the park's sensitive and unique ecosystem. Any planning application for intensification of use faces significant hurdles in obtaining planning consent due to potential ecological impacts and likely objections from Natural England and Kent Wildlife Trust.

This presents a very substantial challenge for any efforts to diversify and intensify use of the site for commercial operators and has led the Council's preferred bidder to reconsider its position. The relevant Council service committee will be presented with options for the long-term future of the site, which will now need to be considered in light of the ecological survey's findings. The park's unique characteristics may present opportunities for conservation-focused initiatives, such as educational programs or BNG credit generation through grassland enhancement but it has to be considered about how to deliver this.

During this period, the on-site Boathouse café has been let to an operator to provide a food and beverage offer at the site and this will continue for the 2025 season to allow for the next decisions to be made.