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### PLANNING FOR LEISURE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT CASE STUDIES - THE SEVEN SISTERS  
COUNTRY PARK AND THE BENTLEY WILDFOWL RESERVE

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## TWO LOCAL GOVERNMENT CASE STUDIES

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This consideration of two rather different case studies of leisure provision in the countryside of East Sussex highlights some of the practical issues which arise in planning, acquisition, management and development. The first case is the Seven Sisters Country Park, which comprises 692 acres of the South Downs on the coast between Eastbourne and Seaford. This forms one of a number of public landholdings in the heritage coast which lies between the two towns. The second case is about ten miles north of this, and comprises a Wealden farm upon which a wildfowl reserve and other public attractions have been established.

### ACQUISITION

Local authority acquisition of country parks and similar places nearly always arises from grasping an opportunity rather than deliberate planning. Suitable sites may either come on to the open market, or be offered for sale to the authority, or be offered as a gift. Whichever is the case, the local authority has to study the feasibility of using the site for recreation from the policy, practical, financial and managerial points of view. This may have to be done very quickly and more or less in secret before the Council can be given proper advice. If the Council is unable to maintain secrecy on the feasibility study because of political divisions requiring extensive debate at this stage, it will often be impossible to proceed e.g. if the land is coming to auction.

(a) Seven Sisters Country Park

The acquisition of this site was provoked by action taken by the County Council to discontinue a caravan site under the provisions of the Caravan Sites Act of 1960. It is interesting that this caravan site was originally brought under control in 1935 through an agreement under Section 34 of the 1932 Town & Country Planning Act, which helped to prevent extension on to the surrounding land. The caravan site operator sought and failed to obtain further permissions on appeal and in 1967 the Discontinuance Order proceedings were initiated. The Order went to inquiry in 1969 at which time the Countryside Commission's evidence stated "this stretch of Downs and cliff is one of the finest pieces of scenic landscape of any extent along the South Coast to as far west as Dorset and is probably the finest..." The Order was confirmed in March 1970, to come into effect three years later.

Later that year the owner of the estates containing this caravan site asked two planners, Michael Dower and Elizabeth Chesterton, to advise on the possible development and use of the land. They suggested three options - the sale or lease of part of the land to the County Council for recreation and other development; its retention for recreational use; removal of all recreational use in favour of farming. In September the owners approached the County Council with a view to sale.

The County Council was heavily influenced by the advice of the Countryside Commission which suggested purchase for a country park under the Countryside Act of 1968 rather than purchase for access to open country under the National Parks and Access to Countryside Act of 1949, even though it would have to be shown that a country park could be managed for the benefit of a large number of day visitors without damaging the fine scenery. As has so often been the case, many local people, when they got to hear about the proposal, were against it because they thought a "country park" meant a noisy, busy, amusement park in the countryside.

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The feasibility work showed that it would be possible to remove the caravan site and to manage part of the land as a dairy farm and part as a country park. Income sources, costs, access and car parking arrangements, and requirements for capital expenditure on buildings were all assessed. The DV, Ministry of Agriculture, DOE, Sussex Naturalists' Trust and National Trust were all brought in on the discussions.

Within four months the Countryside Commission and DOE had been asked for support for the country park acquisition, maintenance grant, and borrowing authorisation. The County Council had agreed planning permission for a change of use to country park. The local and national press had become interested - and critical - because of misunderstandings.

The original submitted proposals envisaged a dairy farm of 279 acres and a country park of 669 acres, but as grant (25%) could only be made available for country park purposes, the area was reduced to 636 acres to be acquired under sections 7 and 33 of the Countryside Act and 57 acres (north of the main road, the A259) under sections 5, 11 and 103 of the National Parks Act. On 13 March 1971 the DOE confirmed the proposed expenditure and grant of the 636 acres, and the purchase of the property was completed on 30 March with one day in hand within which finance could be made available. The remaining 57 acres was acquired later in the year and possession of the land gained on 11 October following agreement on tenant right valuation of £11,000. The breakdown of the acquisition cost of £250,000 was:

2 houses, 5 cottages, boathouse, 3 sets older farm buildings	£51,000
Modern farm buildings	£27,000
Land and caravan site (compensation for caravan site believed to have been £50,000)	£172,000

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With so little time to put the arrangement together it is hardly surprising that many of the important decisions on management policy were deferred and there was little public involvement in the events. Nowadays one could not postpone these matters so easily.

(b) Bentley Wildfowl

The acquisition of Bentley Wildfowl began in 1977 with a letter from the widowed owner to the Chief Executive of the County Council, asking him to tea! She then explained that she wished to give the wildfowl reserve, which her late husband had set up, to the County Council as it was not possible for her to maintain it alone. The 15 acre reserve contained about 1,000 wildfowl of more than 100 different species, in pens and running wild among young trees, and lakes dug by the owners in the heavy clay ground. It was open to the public with a charge, and teas were served in a cottage nearby. The site is somewhat off the beaten track, access being from a lane between two main roads north of Ringmer.

The Chief Executive asked me to prepare a feasibility report in great secrecy so that the staff looking after the birds would not know. As the owner wanted educational use of the site, the Education Officer was brought in. Our studies indicated that considerably more visitors could be attracted but that there would be substantial management costs.

As discussions proceeded, the owner extended her offer to include her very substantial country house and its furnishings, provided she could retain a flat upstairs. The house is of both historic and modern architectural interest, having been substantially extended by Raymond Erith during the last twenty years. The estate also comprised about 75 acres of other land, two cottages, numerous farm buildings, and extensive gardens, making a very attractive place for a family day out.

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In order to retain secrecy, our feasibility study was discussed by only a handful of elected members before the offer was informally accepted. As the study showed a continuing small deficit on running the place, and the deficit has proved to be much larger because of an unexpected decline in tourism, this secrecy has turned out to be a political liability for the individual councillors involved.

There was a delay in concluding the transfer of the property, mainly due to the owner's absence abroad and the usual legal and financial problems. This lost the County Council a whole summer's income and, together with consequential run-down of the estate, created problems later.

The County Council was clear that it would not want to take over Bentley in the capacity of trustees, and initially suggested to the owner that she might prefer to safeguard the preservation of the property, especially the wildfowl, by setting up a trust. This she did not want to do, presumably for tax reasons, and the property was an outright gift to the Council without any intention that it should be kept in trust. This has the effect of avoiding the need for agreement with the Charity Commissioners when any proposals are brought forward and hence makes management easier for the Council.

Some time later the Charity Commissioners heard of the matter when an organisation called "The Friends of Bentley" was formed and sought charitable status. It took many months of legal argument to persuade the Commissioners that the County Council was not in the status of trustee and hence not subject to the controls which go with that status. During these months the development of the property was held up. Thus, despite the care taken over the original transfer, the problems and delays to the local authority of "charitable status" were not entirely avoided.

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## POLICY-MAKING

Following acquisition, it was necessary to establish management and development policies for both sites. Both had come to the authority because of a wish to retain their intrinsic quality and character, and this had been set out in written documents for agreement by committees. Yet the public, especially neighbours and specialist visitors, had to be reassured about management proposals. The publicity material needed to attract visitors and had to be designed so that it properly conveyed the quality and character. The improvements necessary to cater for visitors had to be of the same quality and anything on the properties falling short of that had to be improved or replaced. For instance, neither site had adequate car-parking, or toilets for visitors.

At Seven Sisters it was decided that in order to protect the character of the area vehicles should not be allowed to leave the main road and go down to the beach by means of the existing private road. So as soon as the caravan site was closed, the road gate was locked and access is only possible by foot, bike or horseback. A leaflet was published which indicated that the beach and clifftop was a "remote zone"; the farm buildings on the main road with their car parks, proposed visitor centre and toilets were an "activity zone". There was public consultation and public meetings to discuss these policies.

The policy had to include provision for recreation in order to satisfy the requirements of the legislation concerning grants for country parks. Yet this is probably the one country park in Britain which is a delight to the naturalist, and exists as much for conservation as recreation. It is far from being a typical country park. For instance, there were plans to bridge the river near the beach so that those using the coastal footpath could avoid a three-mile detour inland and back, but this would have encouraged access from Seaford to such an extent that the fragile ecology would have been imperilled, and the idea has been abandoned. Work has been done to restore natural chalk grassland.

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Some years later the enthusiasts of hang-gliding tried to use the park for that purpose but it was thought that the gliders would disturb birds and small mammals. Advice was obtained from counsel to the effect that the byelaws and park policies were sufficient to prevent this kind of public use of the country park, and the hang-gliding people were persuaded to accept the prohibition without going to court.

When the GPO wanted to lay a cable across the park they were asked, in return, to construct a lagoon by the beach which could be controlled by sluices and would attract birds. This has been done although its effectiveness in holding water is not as great as was intended.

Similarly, the visitor centre, created within one of the old barns in 1974, has its display centred on wildlife interest. There is no charge to enter the centre, which is open much of the time in summer, and winter weekends, and takes two-thirds of its staffing costs from sale of books, maps and hand-made country goods. Almost 60,000 visitors a year come in, and it is estimated that total visitors to the park number about 250,000.

In an attempt to confine the park to those who enjoy its character, the commercial potential for passing trade has been ignored. You cannot get tea, food or drinks there. There are no shops. A single ice cream van is permitted in the car park only to prevent such vans from parking on the nearby highway. It is not allowed to sell ice creams in wrappings so that litter is minimised.

Whilst the existence of the country park is not a secret, there is no specific advertising of its attractions. Special events are not permitted. School parties are encouraged only if they behave themselves. This somewhat severe regime comes rather as a surprise to those familiar with leisure facilities elsewhere but it works very well in practice and is supported by local people and visitors alike.

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Similar care was taken at Bentley where it was decided that the general character of the place as a small country house and reserve should not be changed. The house retains its furniture and pictures, and visitors can walk through to view these. We have not yet found any economic use which is consistent with the retention of this character.

Some of the farm buildings have been converted into a shop, tearoom, toilets, displayroom, and more recently a motor museum has been set up in a modern barn. All this has been done most carefully with the retention of quality in mind. However, the place is intended to pay as it goes and therefore considerable thought has been given to its marketing.

The birds alone attracted about 30,000 visitors a year but it is only possible to break even on management costs at double this figure. The road access could probably manage about 80-90,000 visitors depending on when they came. Hence our aim is to get about 80,000 visitors a year, spread through the week, and this has meant considering other attractions. A very long list of possibilities was explored and mostly rejected because the schemes were financially not viable, would attract too many people, would disturb the birds, would be inconsistent with the character of the place, would be difficult for a local authority to manage, or simply could not be capitalised at present.

We settled upon a motor museum as a viable product and have let a concession for this. The tearoom is established but not very profitable on present numbers. Attempts to let space to craft-workers are also not profitable at these numbers. The shop makes a small profit.

Nowadays there is no clear distinction possible between recreation and education. Both sites were acquired with educational benefit in mind and are visited by school parties. The educational benefit might be seen as justifying the costs of running them by the public sector, although at

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Bentley children have to pay. Both places would benefit if they had educational staff on site, substantial project equipment and classrooms but finance for these has not been forthcoming. Some project material and guidance to school parties is provided.

At Seven Sisters the development costs were quite small, being mainly the visitor centre, toilets and car parks. They were grant-aided by the Countryside Commission. At Bentley the development costs are much larger because more attractions are needed, and are aggravated by the need to spend substantial capital on water supply and repairs. There is negligible grant aid available and no net income until all the necessary development work has been done. What looked like an attractive gift has turned out to require a very substantial injection of capital before its potential can be realised. The probability that there will eventually be a good return on this capital does not make it any easier to raise in the public sector at the present time.

Thus in considering development policy in both places we have been constrained by their character which has to be retained, by the shortage or absence of capital investment, by their capacity to take large numbers, by the potential number of visitors in the area, by the absence of good ideas and proliferation of bad ideas.

Because of the democratic process much time is taken in arguing about these matters in committees, and sometimes at public meetings. It takes time to persuade inexperienced councillors and public that there are practical managerial difficulties about pursuing some ideas, or that changes cannot be immediate. Alterations to established policy are very difficult. There is frequent criticism from councillors and officers who are one remove from the decisions but aware of their financial consequences. This keeps those responsible on their toes and should lead to good policies. Alternatively it may lead to inertia.

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## MANAGEMENT

The first consideration in management has been to look after the countryside. Both places include considerable agricultural land. The County Council has no statutory powers to run farms and has not the finance for working capital. The provisions of the Agricultural Holdings Act 1948 would make it difficult to have a tenant farmer in occupation, and this leads to difficulties in facilitating public access and use. Policy changes can be very difficult. Fertilisation and ploughing can change the character of downland turf, as well as upsetting visitors.

At Seven Sisters a full agricultural tenancy has been given on 27 acres and the remainder is let on short-term grazing licences with restriction on use, one licensee being the tenant. The tenancy provides a working base, cottages and barns but is not itself viable without the licence.

In order to improve the grassland at Bentley, cropping licences have been granted with the consent of the Minister of Agriculture in order that the land can be ploughed up, sown with a corn crop and subsequently laid down to a permanent pasture. Existing pasture is let on agricultural grazing/mowing licences. Both systems avoid the granting of security of tenure. As public access across these fields is mainly confined to footpaths, it has been suggested that the land be sold, but in view of the low value of a detached area of farmland without buildings, this has not been done. To sell might prejudice long-term potential without bringing any great benefit, and would harm relations with the donor.

In view of these arrangements, the prime tasks of County Council staff are to look after visitors, maintain buildings, and keep the birds at Bentley.

Before 1974 Seven Sisters Country Park was managed by a sub-committee but the new County Council took the view that all management should be carried out by professional staff. Policy and development matters were to be the responsibility of the County Planning Officer, with management under the County Estates Officer. Whilst this division of responsibility sometimes

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causes frustration, it has ensured that the Park has been developed and managed with all points of view in mind. For some years the Visitor Centre was separately managed by the planning department as its presentation of interpretive information on the countryside is related to similar work elsewhere and to tourist promotion. Also the professional skills and publications needed largely originate in that department. Recently the responsibility has been transferred to the Estates Department so as not to have two managements on one site.

From the beginning the management and development of Bentley has been seen as an integral part of the promotion of tourism in the county. Acquisition was justified because of the benefits to tourism and not because it was a valuable gift. As tourist promotion is the planners' responsibility, the management was put under an inter-departmental team led from the planning department and comprising estates officer and education officer. This cumbersome arrangement has been simplified and the planners are now responsible, with advice from other departments on tap.

The difference between the character of the two sites is also reflected in the staffing arrangements. At Seven Sisters there is a head ranger and two assistants who keep the place in order and look after the visitors. At Bentley there is a manager, a birdkeeper, three manual staff and part-timers to issue tickets and clean the house. Supervision of visitors to the house is the matter of an arrangement between the Council and the local parent teachers' association who provide volunteer custodians in exchange for a contribution to their funds.

The management duties are obviously very broad in such places, including a mixture of commercial promotion, visitor handling and day-to-day supervision of estate work. People with the necessary skills are not easily found for a place of this size where it is not possible to put together a complementary team. It might be more sensible to run it as one of a group of such places but the County Council has nothing else similar at present.

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One of the major problems, that was not foreseen, has turned out to be that of security. Whilst on the open downland at Seven Sisters a fierce ranger can do wonders, it is not easy to avoid theft in a wooded bird reserve. Eggs and whole birds can be slid into camera boxes. The house has been fitted with the usual devices to protect its contents but the insurance valuation proved much greater than expected and the premium is a substantial burden. There is also a general security problem around farm buildings containing machinery.

The recent inclusion of a motor museum involved a heavy insurance premium because the vehicles are borrowed, and often very valuable. The buildings had also to be adapted to allow hasty removal of vehicles in the case of fire whilst avoiding risk of theft at night.

Wildfowl are liable to disease and vermin. Fences can keep out foxes but not mink or owls. The water supply has twice been polluted by effluent from a farm upstream of the dam which serves the reserve. All this means that there is no stable asset in the wildfowl reserve and it could deteriorate or disappear overnight. One has to plan development with this contingency in mind.

An added difficulty has been that it is customary in the trade to buy, sell and exchange birds and eggs between reserves. Only those involved know what is going on and it is possible for a certain amount of dishonesty to creep in to the pricing of birds, or for birds to be switched en route between reserves. We do not believe that this has happened at Bentley but elected councillors and officers are in a difficult position if allegations are made.

#### Letting Concessions

In both places we have sought to let concessions to those who wanted to run self-supporting enterprises. The margin of profit available on such enterprises is not high and is easily swallowed up by some unexpected event. Having negotiated a modest concession at Seven Sisters to a man who wanted to run a butterfly farm, we found he could not get permission to invite the public into the building because it was allegedly not safe.

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It is an old barn and repairs have involved listed building consent. The County Council benefit from the concession has gone in the works and the concessionaire has had to wait a year to start his business.

We have had trouble with unreliable concessionaires and it is difficult to draft contracts which avoid losses in such circumstances. At Bentley we felt that separate charging for entry to each enterprise would reduce total income so we have a single ticket and negotiated share-out. This is fine on a year-by-year basis, but new negotiations are needed when special events are held and these can be difficult.

The difficulties are greater where the concessionaire puts capital into the scheme, as has happened at Bentley where the person setting up the motor museum has first converted a large barn. The County Council would have found it easier to do the work itself but could not provide the capital under the present control system. It also finds that the overall costs of such small-scale works are very high due to the working practices of local authorities and the need to abide by every rule and regulation. The private sector can find short cuts more easily but may have to replace the work sooner.

There is a kind of performance about public sector provision which does not match the changing fancies of the recreational public, or the need to retain management flexibility. One might take the view that a public/private partnership is needed to achieve maximum flexibility and minimise the need for public sector finance. But there appear to be no proper legal arrangements for ensuring that the quality of input from such partners is maintained. It is too easy for management to fail, for development to be of poor quality, or for promotion to take the wrong line.

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## PROMOTION

When it comes to promoting an attraction everyone believes themselves to be an expert, and councils are very open to ill-informed opinion. Agencies are not necessarily expert at promoting and marketing something out of the ordinary, although they will not admit this. Those with most skill are too much in demand to bother with places like Bentley. Local authority officers are too far from the marketplace to take the job on easily. Moreover, the funds available from a small enterprise are never sufficient for adequate promotion.

Experience of these difficulties has led to a very careful appraisal of each year's promotion with as much use of free publicity and special events as possible. Routine advertising is essential. The costs of maintaining poster coverage and specialist advertising have proved daunting and we do not have a charismatic personality to attract interest. Like any other job, it can be learned.

In doing this we have found that few people understand the differences between advertising, which is one-way, and marketing which involves identifying the markets and adapting the product to these. One finds the private sector is often little better at making this distinction and many countryside recreation facilities are not marketed properly, including those for which no charge is made.

This inadequacy leads to over-use of some sites and the under-use of others with all the consequent problems of visitor management and impact upon the community. For instance, it would have been easy to try to do too much at Seven Sisters and spoil it. Yet hidden in the Downs we have a set of barns standing virtually unused and quite capable of accommodating more people had we the time and resources to use them properly. They are an untapped resource whilst we devote our energies to making Bentley profitable.

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Bentley itself is a classic case of under-use which could be marketed in many ways if capital and management were available. It could take pressure away from more congested places. But the means of doing this are not to hand at present and we continue with our sobering deficit of £40,000 p.a. on what was a free gift. Yet it is a very nice place to visit.

If one is to make good use of our countryside recreation resources one needs to add the skills of marketing to those of the surveyor, lawyer and planner and to use these selectively to attract or discourage appropriate visitors to each place, or to adapt each place to meet demand. It is in this area rather than the traditional professional fields that one observes the greatest deficiencies at present although no profession can be entirely satisfied with what is happening.

#### CONCLUSIONS

These two case studies serve to confirm some conclusions which have actually arisen from a much wider experience of local authority provision for outdoor leisure in the countryside. These conclusions concern planning rather than management as this is appropriate for this conference.

1. Because leisure demand fluctuates, it cannot be assumed that a profitable enterprise will remain profitable. In consequence the only outdoor leisure facilities which can be planned by land use planners in the same way as housing or industry are those of a supposedly permanent attraction such as Lands End, the top of Snowdon, or Cheddar Gorge. Otherwise, planners must react to, or seek, opportunities and find ways of handling decline as well as growth of facilities.
2. Financial and planning arrangements should be such as will avoid the community being left with a mess when things go wrong and yet will encourage the provision of all the facilities required.

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3. One does not set up a facility and then leave it alone. Adaptation to meet changing needs and demands requires a continuing flow of investment, new ideas and managerial changes. Because charity law obstructs such changes, the property should not be held in trust. Alternatively, charity law might be altered to facilitate holding such property in trust for an amalgam of educational and recreational uses, which would benefit both private and public provision of facilities.
4. Where landowners have sites with potential for leisure provision which is comparatively modest and only developable with public approval, they may be well advised to offer the opportunity to the local authority which may be better able to minimise the risks. Such offer might involve negotiation of a share of any profits and an input of capital by the landowner.
5. Good management is easily obstructed by local opposition to minor permissions and licences whether or not the property is in public ownership. The requirement to obtain these permissions and licences does not necessarily ensure a high standard of facility, or public health, or good visitor management, although it may contribute to public safety. Several branches of the law should be reviewed so that the delay arising from these matters can be eliminated once overall policy for the site has been settled.
6. There is no proper planning law to control temporary uses, of different types, on much the same site and the use of present law to control this prevents recreational opportunities being taken up. One understands neighbours being fearful of what may happen if owners have sites, including local authorities, enjoying freedom to do what they like on a temporary basis, but it is not always possible to plan in advance and these events can generate useful income and much enjoyment.
7. The public acceptability of these facilities, and therefore the attitude of planning authorities, depends upon their management. There is little expertise in such management in this country at present and no proper arrangements for training.

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8. Because of management inadequacies, the arrangements for each site are often the subject of extensive legal agreements between owner and local planning authority, owner and licensee, or partnership in development. In practice it is very difficult to achieve adequate remedy if these agreements are breached and one wonders if all the time spent drafting them is worthwhile. Success depends more upon goodwill than anything else. Too many local authorities are failing to understand this and to take a share of the risks inherent in any leisure investment.
  
9. The problems would be many fewer if outdoor leisure facilities were managed by a highly competent agency of established reputation, comparable with the National Trust, rather than by a host of separate public and private bodies.

One final comment: both the cases I have described have amounted to the protection and up-grading of recreational facilities originally provided by the private sector and now no longer manageable. This is a common but most unhappy role for the public sector. The attitude to private sector recreational development proposals is partly conditioned by the way in which the public sector has been left to sweep up afterwards. Against this can be set the present view that public authorities cannot afford to spend money in this way. This is the reality which tempers the heady optimism of those who provide facilities, be they landowners, developers, councillors, or the professionals working for these people. One will get little more leisure development until attitudes change.

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