ASHFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Conningbrook Lakes Country Park
Ecological Management Plan

February 2014

Conningbrook Lakes

Contents

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APPENDICES

ACCRONYMS

ABC - *Ashford Borough Council*
ALT – Ashford Leisure Trust
EMS - Ecological Management Strategy (Oct 2012, Bioscan Report Ref: 1353R5fv*)*
KWT – Kent Wildlife Trust
MKF – Mid Kent Fisheries

I. Introduction

1. This Ecological Management Plan is submitted pursuant to planning condition 6 attached to Planning Application No. 12/01244/AS which requires:

> *'Prior to the commencement of the development hereby approved an Ecological Management Plan in accordance with the details set out in the Bioscan Ecological Management Strategy (Bioscan Report Ref: E1353R5fv) and Bioscan Ecology and Nature Conservation Report shall be submitted to and approved by the Local Planning Authority in writing and shall thereafter be implemented in accordance with the approved details unless otherwise agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority.'*

2. When fully implemented Conningbrook Lakes Country Park and the associated residential area will comprise of five discreet management compartments (See Appendix 1). These compartments are identified in the *Bioscan Ecological Management Strategy (EMS)* for the Conningbrook Lakes development as a whole, which was prepared by Bioscan on behalf of the Brett Group, following extensive consultations with *Ashford Borough Council (ABC)* and *Kent Wildlife Trust* (KWT).

3. The *Bioscan Ecological Management Strategy* provides the general framework for good ecological management and will serve as a reference point for the future development of specific management plans for the respective 'compartments' of the country park which are:-

- Compartment 1 - Northern field, lake and adjacent section of river
- Compartment 2 - Residential area
- Compartment 3 - Lake, river and wet woodland within LWS
- Compartment 4 - Southern grasslands and adjacent river
- Compartment 5 - Recreational lake and activities centre

4. Ashford Borough Council will appoint and conclude management agreements with three 'operating partners' to manage the different component parts of the country park, as follows:-

- Ashford Leisure Trust (ALT) – will manage access by water sports clubs and associations onto the main lake, and will also be responsible for land management of compartment 5.
- Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT) – will manage Compartments 1, 3 and 4, whose primary purpose is for nature conservation.
- Mid Kent Fisheries (MKF) – will manage fishing activities on the main lake and northern lake, including the management of 'swims' (designated fishing zones).

5. The ‘management agreements’ between ABC and the three operating partners will require each operating partner to develop and deliver a *management plan* for the respective management compartments. Each *management plan* will be required to take account of and be consistent with the ‘Bioscan Ecological Management Strategy’.

6. Ashford Borough Council will monitor the management agreements in place with each partner, and each operating partner will be required to attend quarterly performance review meetings with the Council’s named contact to monitor the management agreement and delivery of the management plan.

7. A Steering Group chaired by ABC will be formed to support and coordinate the operations of the country park. Each of the operating partners will be required to attend and participate.

II. Summary of the Early Works

8. The Early Works Planning Application involves works in all four compartments within the Country Park (see Appendix 2), as follows: -

Compartments 1 and 3
Installation of a new culvert and repair of an existing culvert, to facilitate vehicular access across the whole site for management purposes including conservation management in areas of the site that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Compartment 4
Creation of a gap in the existing ‘spit’ of land and installation of a floating pontoon bridge to facilitate better use of the lake for water sports activities.

Compartment 5
Construction of a temporary access road (and associated parking spaces and turning area) linking the Julie Rose Stadium to the lake edge, and installation of four storage containers, viewing shelter, signage, life buoys and floating pontoon.

9. Fencing and gates will also be installed around the whole country park site to delineate public access areas and control proposed livestock. All preparatory works (including site clearance, removal of trees/bushes etc.) will be completed prior to the bird nesting season.

10. These works will enable the council’s site operating partners to manage public access to the country park and the commencement of water sports activities by accredited clubs and associations in an effective, safe and economic manner.

III. Ecological Management Plan

11. As outlined above, each of the three operating partners will be required to develop and deliver a *management plan* consistent with the *Bioscan Ecological Management Strategy* for the respective management compartments.

A. Nature Conservation Areas

12. Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT) will manage the designated nature conservation areas (compartments 1, 3 & 4), which includes a section of the River Stour Ashford to Fordwich Local Wildlife Site (LWS). Although the primary function of these compartments is nature conservation, the management plan will also take account of the requirements for informal recreation (including fishing, walking & cycling) and education as secondary functions.

Compartment 1 – Northern field, lake and wet woodland

13. Compartment 1 is located to the north of the proposed residential development and has been designated as an area for conservation / habitat mitigation, which will include the creation of an area of wet woodland and two ponds as part of mitigation works associated with the loss of existing habitats due to residential development.

14. This compartment comprises species-poor, semi-improved grassland, much of it on backfilled land that has been used mainly for sheep grazing which has maintained a low sward and limited its diversity. This compartment also contains a lake ('northern lake') on its southern boundary, which was created from quarrying works, but is now used by Mid Kent Fisheries for breeding coarse fish for restocking the main lake. On the northern edge of the lake is a wide belt of emergent vegetation and to the north of the lake itself an area of wet woodland. The compartment also contains a small number of mature trees, including a line of balsam poplar trees beside the River Great Stour to the east and a small number of self-sown trees along the boundary with the railway line to the west.

15. The main negative features of this compartment as identified in the Bioscan *Ecology and Nature Conservation Report* are its limited flora diversity as a result of intensive grazing, the large carp population in the lake which is probably detrimental to invertebrate and amphibian populations. In the future, the compartment is likely to suffer a high degree of recreational pressure from the new residential development in compartment 2.

16. During the early years' access period the management of this compartment will generally be limited to maintaining the existing grazing regime. In the longer term, once the ecological mitigation works have been completed by the developers of the residential development

in compartment 2, KWT will incorporate into the Management Plan the following broad management aims as identified in the Bioscan Ecological Management Strategy:-

- Encourage the natural regeneration and development of the grassland by relaxing the current grazing regime and implementing traditional hay meadow management either by grazing or mowing;
- Allow the grassland to develop an outgrown and tussocky character to enhance its suitability for reptiles;
- Encourage the development of the emerging vegetation through rotational cutting
- Manage with a view to eradicating non-native species such as Himalayan balsam and goat's rue.
- Minimal management of newt ponds due to the likely presence of protected great crested newts, although ponds to be reviewed annually to ensure they continue to serve their function.

17. KWT will liaise closely with Mid Kent Fisheries (MKF) who will manage all fishing activities within the Country Park (including on the main lakes and the 'northern lake') to ensure good ecological management of lake edges.

Compartment 3 – Lake and wet woodland with LWS

18. This compartment is located south of the northern meadow (Compartment 1) and is at the heart of the River Great Stour Local Wildlife Site (LWS), which also extends along the river to the north and south. Its main ecological features are the presence and juxtaposition of key habitat types for invertebrates, a relatively large area of continuous reedbed and wet woodland and a large area of open water ('eco-lake') for waterfowl with associated marginal habitats. The compartment also has a high level of bat activity and the grassland supports all three reptile species recorded on the site.

19. The main negative features of this compartment as identified in the Bioscan *Ecology and Nature Conservation Report* are (a) a relatively uniform age structure within woodland and a lack of mature and over-mature trees; (b) limited woodland ground flora due to a closed canopy; (c) large carp population within the lake with probably detrimental impact on invertebrates and amphibians and (c) limited floral diversity of grasslands due to intensive management.

20. In the long term the management of the interface between the residential area (Compartment 2) and the 'eco-lake' will be a key challenge.

21. During the first year of the early years' access period, grazing will continue to be used to manage the grassland areas, under the supervision of Kent Wildlife Trust (who will 'oversee' the current grazier). KWT will also incorporate into the proposed management plan

the following broad management aims as identified in the Bioscan Ecological Management Strategy:

- Open up and improve the age structure of woodland through rotational cutting of trees, while identifying and retaining trees suitable for future role as mature standards within woodland;
- Consider implementing a rotational cut of reedbed;
- Maintain and possibly increase open ground habitats for invertebrates through cutting back of scrub;
- Consider agitating / harrowing the surface of the sandy soils to limit vegetation development;
- Manage with a view to eradicating non-native species such as Himalayan balsam and goat's rue;
- Encourage the natural regeneration and development of the grassland by relaxing the current grazing regime and implementing traditional hay meadow management either by grazing or mowing;
- Ensure fencing and (future) vegetated swale (alongside compartment 2) function as a barrier to access into the LWS from the future residential development;
- Maintain outgrown and 'tussocky' character of grassland for reptiles and consider adding log piles using wood generated from woodland management.

22. KWT will commence management of the compartment along these lines during the early years' access period, while also taking into account planned flood mitigation works associated with the implementation of the Brett Planning Permission in compartment 2.

Compartment 4 – Southern grasslands and lake edges

23. This compartment comprises a belt of species-poor grassland to the east and south of the 'eco-lake' (compartment 3) and main lake as well as the margins of each lake. The compartment is bordered on the east by the River Stour, whose banks form part of the River Stour Local Wildlife Site.

24. The main ecological features of note are the presence of wader scrapes at the southern end of the main lake and a larger area of emergent vegetation adjacent to the island and causeway (spit). The grassland supports all three reptile species found on the site, while the lakes provide a sizeable area for bat foraging (especially by *myotis* species). Two otter spraints have been identified on the river bank at the southern end of the main lake.

25. In common with all the grasslands throughout the site, floral diversity has been limited by intensive grazing and mowing, while the relatively recent cessation of gravel extraction has limited the establishment of marginal vegetation around the lake edges.

26. KWT will incorporate into the management plan the following broad management aims as identified in the Bioscan Ecological Management Strategy:

- Manage with a view to eradicating non-native species such as Himalayan balsam and goat's rue
- Encourage the natural regeneration and development of the grassland by relaxing the current grazing regime and implementing traditional hay meadow management either by grazing or mowing
- Manage vegetation in scrapes in late summer, after the nesting season, to maintain appropriate sward structure for nesting and feeding waders
- Maintain and possibly increase open ground habitats for invertebrates
- Consider introduction of rotational cutting of emergent vegetation to maintain structure and improved diversity in the long term.

27. It is envisaged that conservation grazing will be an important element of management of these areas, although in the early years it may be necessary to reduce existing grazing pressure to allow 'recovery' of areas that have until now been intensively grazed by sheep. At the same time, management of this compartment will take into account the planned flood mitigation works (enabling works) associated with the implementation of the Brett Planning Permission in compartment 2, which will involve the removal or lowering of existing bunds alongside the River Great Stour.

28. This compartment includes Brett's 'retained land' and 'haul road'.

B. Recreational Lakes and Activities Area

Compartment 5 – Recreational lakes and activities area

29. Compartment 5 includes two large inter-connected lakes that were the most recent to have been quarried and are therefore characterised by limited marginal vegetation. The compartment will form the core of formal leisure and recreational activities in the Country Park, including non-motorised water sports, swimming, triathlon and angling.

30. The land adjacent to the western side of the lake will eventually contain the planned 'activity hub' and children's play area, but during the early years' period the infrastructure will be limited to a temporary access road from the Julie Rose Stadium, storage containers, parking area and floating pontoon launch area.

31. Ashford Leisure Trust will oversee, manage and develop public access, sports, recreation and leisure programmes in the country park, including the main lake. Mid Kent Fisheries will liaise closely with ALT to ensure that fishing is well coordinated with other activities on the main lake.

32. Despite the limited amount of marginal vegetation and the impact of high recreational pressure, there are nonetheless opportunities for environmental enhancement provided these are compatible with the primary functions of formal recreation and play including angling.

33. ALT will also be responsible for landscape maintenance of Compartment 5 from the entrance to the Country Park up to the lake edge and up to and including the boundaries of Compartments 2 and 4, as well as park infrastructure (i.e. litter and dog bins, paths and parking areas, park furniture, gates and fences, signage and life buoys, slipway and pontoon, storage areas & buildings etc.).

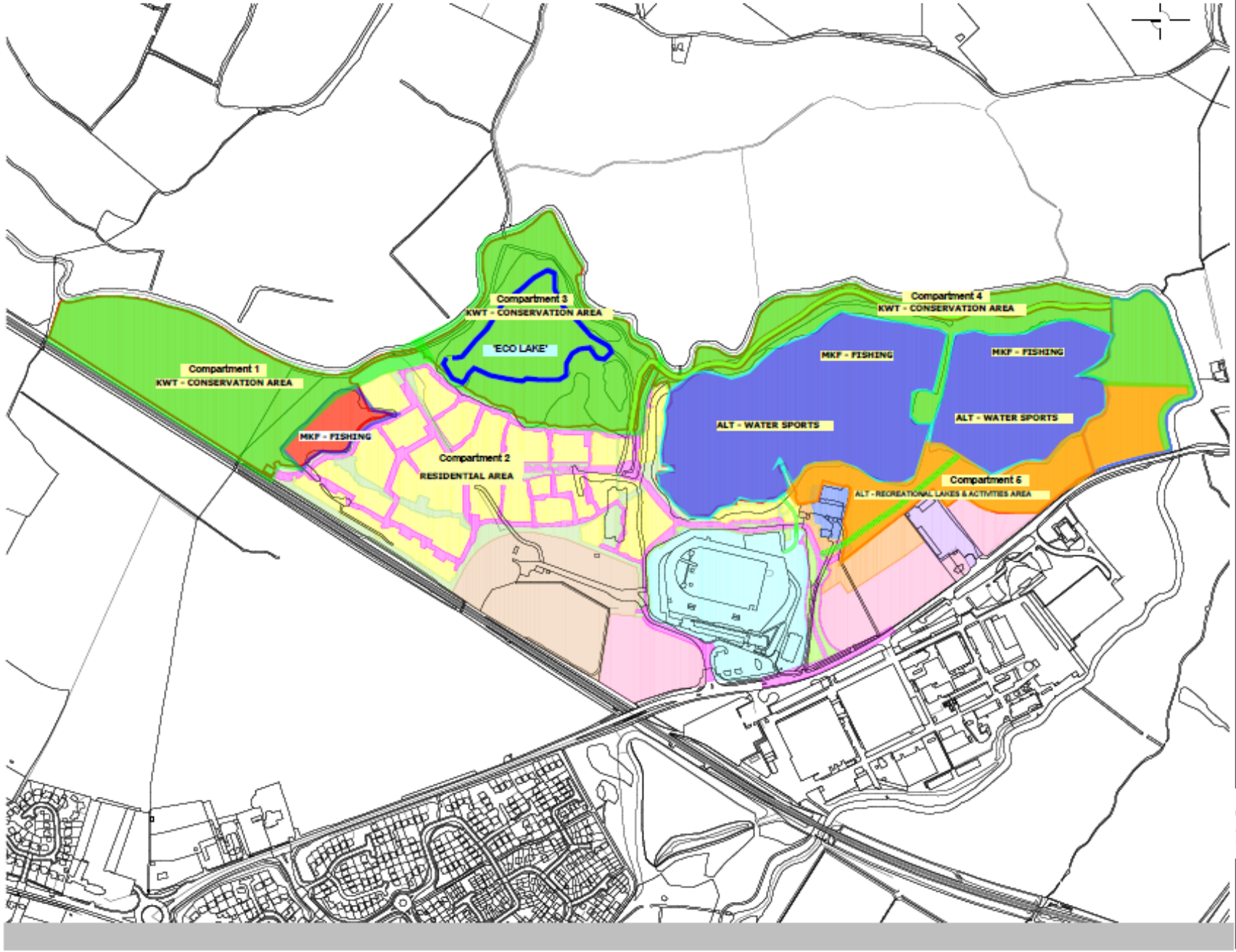
34. In managing the activity and amenity areas in this compartment, ALT will be guided by the Bioscan Ecological Management Strategy (EMS). ALT will also liaise closely with Mid Kent Fisheries and Kent Wildlife Trust with respect to the management of lakes edges and contingent areas as appropriate, and where specialist ecological advice is required.

35. During the first three months following the signing of the management agreement between ABC and ALT, ALT will in consultation with ABC prepare a draft 'Management Plan', which will include landscape maintenance and management of all the land within Compartment 5. The management plan will also incorporate the following broad management aims as identified in the Bioscan Ecological Management Strategy:

- Manage with a view to eradicating non-native species such as Himalayan balsam and goat's rue
- Cut hedgerows on alternative sides on a two-year rotation (subject to health and safety considerations) to allow the tress to flower and fruit every year
- Maintain strip of coarse grassland adjacent to hedgerows and other features (where possible) for reptiles and invertebrates
- Maintain areas for invertebrates and reptiles (e.g. log piles and exposed mud banks) to provide opportunities for children's education and discovery.

36. ALT will also liaise closely with Mid Kent Fisheries (MKF) and the Kent Wildlife Trust to ensure best ecological practice in the management of lakeside 'edges' within Compartment 5.

APPENDIX 1; CONNINGBROOK LAKES COUNTRY PARK - MANAGEMENT ZONES

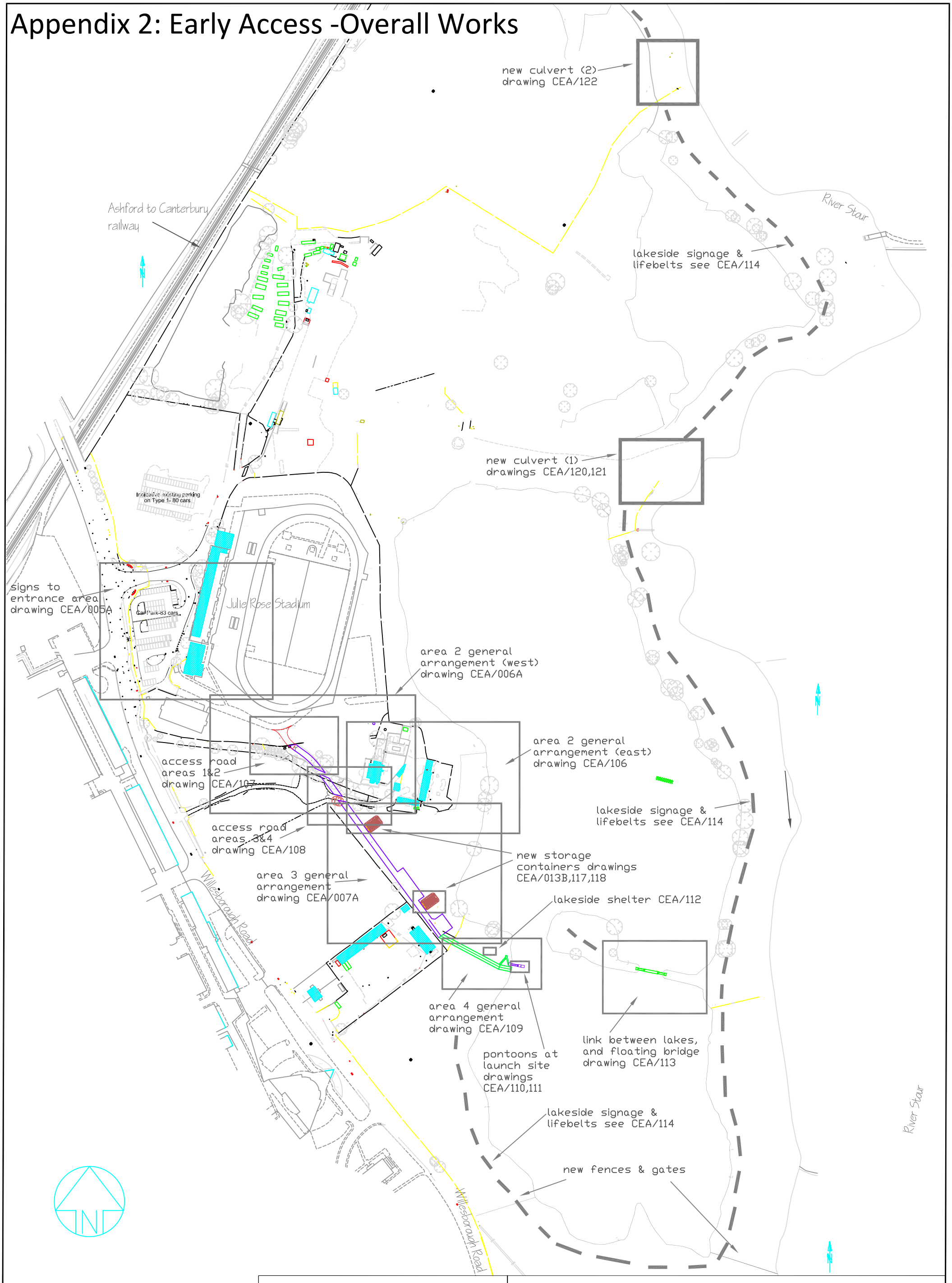


Key to Management Zones

- Areas managed by Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT)
- Northern Lake - managed by Mid Kent Fisheries (MKT)
- Main Lake - managed jointly by Mid Kent Fisheries (MKT) & Ashford Leisure Trust
- Areas managed by Ashford Leisure Trust (ALT)

Terry Jones
Cultural Services - ABC
March 2014

Appendix 2: Early Access -Overall Works



ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL
PROJECT OFFICE
Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford, Kent, TN23 1PL
tel : 01233 331111 fax : 01233 330639

PROJECT	CONNINGBROOK EARLY ACCESS
DRAWING TITLE	PROPOSED EARLY ACCESS WORKS- OVERALL WORKS

DRAWN	AUTOCAD FILE	DATE	SCALE	DRG.No.	REV.
GV	-	AUG 13	1/3000@A3	CEA/004	C