

CABINET ITEM COVERING SHEET PROFORMA

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

12 MARCH 2015

REPORT OF ENVIRONMENT SELECT COMMITTEE

CABINET DECISION

ENVIRONMENT – Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Rose

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE FUTURE OF COUNTRYSIDE SITES

1. Summary

The report presents the Environment Select Committee findings and recommendations following the Scrutiny Review of the Future of Countryside Sites.

The main issues and overall aim of this review was to consider:

- How can the Council build on its strong track record for developing and managing country parks, nature reserves and other countryside sites? What facilities, assets and activities should be developed and maintained, to maximise the community, environmental and economic value of these sites?
- Given the increasing budgetary pressures, what alternative management arrangements could be put in place for the Council's existing countryside sites, and how might the Council encourage greater partnership working between the public, private and third sectors to ensure the sustainable management of these sites in the future?
- How can these sites be developed, managed and promoted on an area-by-area basis for nature/activity-based tourism and recreation?

2. Recommendations

The Committee recommend that:

1. An overall strategic plan and updated site management plans for countryside sites should be prepared, reflecting the Council's broad strategic objectives and should aim to target capital and revenue resources effectively in light of revenue restrictions.
2. External funding for physical improvements to countryside sites should be sought where these are in line with the Council's strategic objectives and taking into account implications for future revenue funding.
3. The Council should continue to explore opportunities for external partners to carry out management functions and deliver associated services at countryside sites.
4. Where resources allow, the Council and its partners should continue to encourage community and volunteer involvement in countryside sites, helping to support the positive management and development of these assets and benefiting the individuals involved.
5. All the council's countryside sites be promoted and, where possible, used to host a range of recreational, cultural and educational activities, maximising economic, social, health and environmental benefits.
6. Explore the possible use of modern technology to enhance visitor experience at, or about, the various countryside sites e.g. QR codes on information boards and signs that allow mobile devices (phones, tablets) to deliver additional information.

3. Reasons for the Recommendations/Decision(s)

Stockton Borough has a wide range of countryside sites, including 3 large country parks, 12 Local Nature Reserves, 1 National Nature Reserve, and a number of other nature reserves and countryside sites.

In Spring 2014 Viewpoint, Stockton Council's residents' panel provided positive comments and opinion regarding the subject of parks and green spaces in the borough. Many are owned and managed by the Council, but partners such as Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, Natural England, RSPB and the Forestry Commission are also responsible for the management of some of these sites. The provision of a range of publicly accessible countryside sites helps to make the Borough a greener and healthier place to live, work and visit.

The main issues and overall aim of the review is to consider the current management of countryside sites and how they might be managed, promoted and developed in the future, with regard to the objectives set out in the Stockton-on-Tees Green Infrastructure Strategy.

4. Members' Interests

Members (including co-opted Members with voting rights) should consider whether they have a personal interest in the item as defined in the Council's code of conduct (**paragraph 8**) and, if so, declare the existence and nature of that interest in accordance with paragraph 9 of the code.

Where a Member regards him/herself as having a personal interest in the item, he/she must then consider whether that interest is one which a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the Member's judgement of the public interest (**paragraphs 10 and 11 of the code of conduct**).

A Member with a prejudicial interest in any matter must withdraw from the room where the meeting considering the business is being held -

- in a case where the Member is attending a meeting (including a meeting of a select committee) but only for the purpose of making representations, answering questions or giving evidence, provided the public are also allowed to attend the meeting for the same purpose whether under statutory right or otherwise, immediately after making representations, answering questions or giving evidence as the case may be;
- in any other case, whenever it becomes apparent that the business is being considered at the meeting;

and must not exercise executive functions in relation to the matter and not seek improperly to influence the decision about the matter (**paragraph 12 of the Code**).

Further to the above, it should be noted that any Member attending a meeting of Cabinet, Select Committee etc; whether or not they are a Member of the Cabinet or Select Committee concerned, must declare any personal interest which they have in the business being considered at the meeting (unless the interest arises solely from the Member's membership of, or position of control or management on any other body to which the Member was appointed or nominated by the Council, or on any other body exercising functions of a public nature, when the interest only needs to be declared if and when the Member speaks on the matter), and if their interest is prejudicial, they must also leave the meeting room, subject to and in accordance with the provisions referred to above.

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SUMMARY

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The main issues and overall aim of this review was to consider:

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee recommend that:

1. An overall strategic plan and updated site management plans for countryside sites should be prepared, reflecting the Council's broad strategic objectives and should aim to target capital and revenue resources effectively in light of revenue restrictions.
2. External funding for physical improvements to countryside sites should be sought where these are in line with the Council's strategic objectives and taking into account implications for future revenue funding.
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4. Where resources allow, the Council and its partners should continue to encourage community and volunteer involvement in countryside sites, helping to support the positive management and development of these assets and benefiting the individuals involved.
5. All the council's countryside sites be promoted and, where possible, used to host a range of recreational, cultural and educational activities, maximising economic, social, health and environmental benefits.
6. Explore the possible use of modern technology to enhance visitor experience at, or about, the various countryside sites e.g. QR codes on information boards and signs that allow mobile devices (phones, tablets) to deliver additional information.

DETAIL

1. Stockton Borough has a wide range of countryside sites, including 3 large country parks, 12 Local Nature Reserves, 1 National Nature Reserve, and a number of other nature reserves and countryside sites. Many are owned and managed by the Council, but partners such as Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, Natural England, RSPB and the Forestry Commission are also responsible for the management of some of these sites. The provision of a range of publicly accessible countryside sites helps to make the Borough a greener and healthier place to live, work and visit.
2. The main issues and overall aim of the review is to consider the current management of countryside sites and how they might be managed, promoted and developed in the future, with regard to the objectives set out in the Stockton-on-Tees Green Infrastructure Strategy.
3. In Spring 2014 Viewpoint, Stockton Council's residents' panel provided comments and opinion regarding the subject of parks and green spaces in the borough. 87% of respondents were satisfied with the Borough's parks and green spaces with the vast majority (90%) having had heard of 'Preston Park' (Eaglescliffe) and over three quarters having heard of 'Ropner Park' (Stockton), 'Wynyard Woodland Park' and 'Billingham Beck Valley Country Park'. By contrast just one in ten had heard of 'Green Vale Local Nature Reserve' and 'Honey Pots Wood' (Whitton).
4. Stockton Council has invested in the development and improvement of country parks and other countryside sites, as part of a wider programme of capital projects across the Borough's parks and greenspaces. Between 2008 and 2015 capital works at countryside sites has totalled £855,800. Of that 80 per cent has been secured from grants and other external funding sources.
5. There is however future management and maintenance implications of capital schemes when they require increased or ongoing revenue funding. There are also beneficial situations where capital schemes have replaced high-maintenance or deteriorating assets reducing maintenance costs in the short, medium or long term.
6. The consistent message from the Committee was for the continuation of external funding. Officers highlighted that any uncertainty was with regard to government agency funding as other sources of funding showed no signs of ending.
7. The issue that was of concern regarded the dwindling revenue budget. It was apparent the need to reduce, wherever possible, the ongoing revenue implications that are linked to capital investment if the Council was no longer in the position to increase the availability of revenue funding. The Committee agreed with that assessment and specified the need to explore every scheme individually to see whether it would reduce ongoing maintenance requirements.
8. The management planning process has an important role to play in helping to identify priorities for any given site and determining how resources are deployed. The Committee supported the need for management plans but recognised that they need to be fit for purpose and up to date. As such it would be necessary to find a way to ensure that taking into account the reduced and limited resources that are available.
9. In the absence of current, 'live' management plans there can be a lack of clarity regarding the overall management objectives for a given site and the specific actions required to achieve those objectives. Consequently it was stated that it is also difficult to measure performance. The Committee is generally supportive of reinstating the Green Flag status so long as it had minimal impact on officer time and resources.
10. The Committee took evidence from representatives of Billingham Angling Club (BAC), Friends of Ropner Park (FoRP), Tees Valley Wildlife Trust (TVWT), and Teesside Environmental Trust (TET) in order to ascertain external views of partnership working.

11. A range of issues were highlighted relating to points which should be addressed before taking on the responsibility of any countryside sites which included:
- Managing public expectations
 - Governance and management arrangements
 - Skills and access
 - Capital and revenue funding
 - Land Tenure
12. Members heard that there were great opportunities for more volunteers and there was potential to expand and contribute to each of the existing sites.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

13. None at this time but subject to opportunities for external partners to carry out management functions and deliver associated services at countryside sites.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

14. None

RISK ASSESSMENT

15. This review of the Future of Countryside Sites tree preservation orders is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS

16. Environment and Housing: Create better open spaces

Supporting Themes:-

17. Stronger Communities: Strong Community Involvement / Increased community pride
18. Older Adults: Older people at the heart of community leadership and development / The welcoming community

EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT

19. This report is not subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment because it relates to Council policy.

CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD/COUNCILLORS

20. None

Name of Contact Officer: Graham Birtle
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Education related?

No

Background Papers

None

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors:

Not ward specific

Property

None