

# Environment Select Committee

## Scrutiny Review of the Future of Countryside Sites



**12 March 2015**



Stockton-on-Tees  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Big plans, bright future

Cover Photo's:      Honeypot Wood  
                              Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park  
                              Wynyard Woodland Park

Environment Select Committee  
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council  
Municipal Buildings  
Church Road  
Stockton-on-Tees  
TS18 1LD

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### **Select Committee – Membership**

Councillor Cooke (Chair)  
Councillor D. Wilburn (Vice Chair)  
Councillor Brown  
Councillor Kirby  
Councillor McCall  
Councillor Rigg  
Councillor Walmsley  
Councillor Womphrey  
Councillor Woodhead

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Select Committee thank the following contributors to this review:

Graham Clingan, Countryside and Greenspace Development Manager, SBC  
Jeremy Garside, Chief Executive, Tees Valley Wildlife Trust  
David Kitchen, Chair, Teesside Environmental Trust  
John Mann, Administrator, Teesside Environmental Trust  
Dave Munt, Chair, Billingham Angling Club  
Johanne Parker, Consultation Officer, SBC  
Tommy Pybus, Countryside Ranger, SBC  
Brian Scrafton, Chair, Friends of Ropner Park  
Craig Willows, Care For Your Area Service Manager, SBC

Contact Officer: Graham Birtle, Scrutiny Officer  
Tel: 01642 526187  
E-mail: [graham.birtle@stockton.gov.uk](mailto:graham.birtle@stockton.gov.uk)

## Foreword

It is with great privilege that I am able to introduce this report, the final scrutiny review carried out by the Environment Select Committee. The Committee has enjoyed a varied program over the last four years and this review is no exception.

We take for granted the open spaces around us at our peril. They need good stewardship to enable them to prosper and develop and within Stockton Council there continue to be dedicated officers who more recently have only been constrained by the reduced funding they and the rest of the Council have had to endure.

The Committee saw for itself just a few of the available sites in the borough and is aware that there are so many more some of which suffer only from a lack of promotion which Members hope to rectify as part of its recommendations.

Thanks are given to the representatives of partner organisations that work alongside the Council for the full and honest discussions when talking about possible future scenarios.

## Cllr Cooke - Chair



## Original Brief

### **Which of our strategic corporate objectives does this topic address?**

Provide clean streets, attractive parks and green spaces

### **What are the main issues and overall aim of this review?**

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.

The study will review the current management of countryside sites and consider 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. It will also explore the opportunities which may exist for further partnership working, taking into account on-going reductions in the Council's resources.

### **The Committee will undertake the following key lines of enquiry:**

- 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? For example, within the area of the Tees Heritage Park, or the area around the Tees Estuary covered by the North Tees Natural Network partnership?

## 1.0 Executive Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 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.
- 1.3 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).
- 1.4 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.
- 1.5 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.
- 1.6 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.
- 1.7 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.

- 1.8 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.
- 1.9 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.
- 1.10 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. The Chairs of BAC and FoRP informed Members that the best functions delivered dealt with insurance matters, legal issues and funding.
- 1.11 Members heard that there were great opportunities for more volunteers and there was potential to expand and contribute to each of the existing sites. Views were also sought regarding development plans, and possible changes to the partnership models used. It was highlighted that the Chief Executive of TVWT would have left more responsibility for overall land ownership and management with SBC.
- 1.12 The Administrator from TET highlighted a range of issues relating to points which should be addressed before taking on the responsibility of any countryside sites. The range of issues included:
- Managing public expectations
  - Governance and management arrangements
  - Skills and access
  - Capital and revenue funding
  - Land Tenure
- R1 The Committee recommend that 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.**
- R2 The Committee recommend that 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.**



- R3** The Committee recommend that the Council should continue to explore opportunities for external partners to carry out management functions and deliver associated services at countryside sites.
- R4** The Committee recommend that 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.
- R5** The Committee recommend that 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.
- R6** The Committee recommend the Council 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.

## **2.0 Introduction**

2.1 Parks and countryside management and maintenance featured as part of the Efficiency, Improvement, and Transformation (EIT) Review of Sport, Leisure and Recreation carried out by the Arts, Leisure and Culture Select Committee in 2010.

2.2 The review recommended that:

- the Council should transfer management responsibility, subject to agreement with Tees Valley Wildlife Trust (TVWT), for Billingham Beck Valley Countryside Park and Cowpen Bewley Countryside Park, and that further consideration be given to the transfer of other countryside sites to alternative providers as appropriate;
- the Countryside Ranger Service be reconfigured to focus on maintenance activities in future and therefore cease educational activity;
- the £25,000 research element of the Countryside and Greenspace Professional, Consultancy and Hired Services budget be removed; and
- the Countryside and Greenspace Environmental Development budget be reduced by £15,000 per annum;

2.3 The recommendations have been implemented except for the transfer of Billingham Beck and Cowpen Bewley Country Parks to TVWT was not achieved.

2.4 This review would examine 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?

2.5 It would also determine how the Council could build on its strong track record for developing and managing country parks, nature reserves and other countryside sites and develop, manage and promote sites on an area-by-area basis for nature/activity-based tourism and recreation

## **3.0 Background**

3.1 The countryside service has undergone significant budget reductions from within Direct Services and across other service areas in recent years. For example, the Countryside Ranger Team in Care For Your Area now comprises 3 full-time equivalents (FTEs), compared with a team of 12 FTEs in post in 2009. Other operational budgets have also been reduced which has limited the capacity to manage and maintain the Council's open space assets, including its countryside sites.

3.2 The range of sites across the Borough are identified and designated on the basis of their local nature conservation value. Through the Tees Valley Nature Partnership a process is in place for monitoring their condition, with sites being recorded as being in 'positive management' if conservation

management work has been implemented up to five years prior to the reporting period.

- 3.3 There are currently 56 Local Wildlife (and Geological) Sites within the Borough, 18 of which are under the ownership of the Council (for a location map see appendix 1). The data for the past 4 years is set out in the following table:

	No. SBC-owned sites*	No in positive management
2010/11	18	15
2011/12	17	15
2012/13	18	16
2013/14	18	14

\* Includes two sites under management of Tees Valley Wildlife Trust: Hardwick Dene and Portrack Meadows

- 3.4 This demonstrates a good level of performance overall, although with decreased staff and financial resources there have been changes to the habitat management regimes for some of these sites which may in time begin to reduce their conservation value. Portrack Meadows presents a particular challenge, given that until 2013 this site was under the management of Tees Valley Wildlife Trust. That management agreement has now expired and the Council will need to determine what future management arrangements are appropriate.
- 3.5 Work continues to manage habitats, pathways, buildings and other infrastructure at all countryside sites, but it is difficult to maintain previous high standards with reduced staffing and other resources.

#### 4.0 Evidence

##### Site Visits

- 4.1 On 15 September 2014 the Committee undertook site visits to a number of countryside sites. The brief information about the sites visited is from the Tees Valley Local Action Forum web site.



- 4.2 Charlton's Pond, at the rear of Hereford Terrace, Billingham is an area that measures eight hectares (20 acres), consisting of wetlands, amenity

grassland and woodland. The site was the first nature reserve of any standing in Teesside, with part of the area designated a bird sanctuary in 1968.

- 4.3 The ponds cover around 6 hectares and the remainder is taken up by amenity grassland, scrub and poplar/willow woodland. Angling is allowed on the site, the fishing rights being held by the Billingham Sportsman's Angling Club. The remaining section is maintained as a quiet wildlife sanctuary area.



- 4.4 Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park is an area of woodland located on the edge of Billingham. The site was reclaimed from former brickworks, landfill and ex-agricultural land.

- 4.5 Rapid development has led to the site's large variety of habitats and wildlife. These include grassland, a lake, a series of ponds and a beck flows around the boundary. The abundant wildlife consists of 80 species of bird, waterfowl, toads, newts and dragonflies in and around the ponds and 18 species of butterfly, hares, foxes and small mammals in the grassland.



- 4.6 The Castle Eden Walkway was opened to the public as a Country Park in 1981. Based on a section of the old Stockton to Wellfield railway line, it started life as one of several nature trails throughout the country established on old railway track beds.

- 4.7 In 1983 the old Stationmaster's house was opened as a Visitor Centre and in 1989 an extension, built as a faithful reproduction of the previously demolished waiting room, was added.
- 4.8 Over time it has expanded in line with its popularity. The purchase of more than 81 Hectares of woodland and farmland, has virtually doubled the size of the site and is now known as the Wynyard Woodland Park and Planetarium.



- 4.9 Hardwick Dene is an area of what was once pastureland and orchards that has now been surrounded by the urban expansion of Stockton-on-Tees. The site consists of four distinct sections – two steep sided wooded valleys, separated by a roughly triangular area of grassland, and a further area of herb-rich, unimproved grassland.
- 4.10 Orchids, Ragged Robin and Devil's-bit Scabious are among the many species of wildflower that can be found here. There are 19 species of butterfly, most notable being the White-letter Hairstreak, a Local Biodiversity Action Plan species.

## COUNTRYSIDE SITES PERFORMANCE

- 4.11 The Committee wanted to understand and review the range of quantitative measures and qualitative information which can be used to help assess the Council's performance in relation to countryside sites. The performance information was presented under the following sub-headings:
- Development of sites and facilities
  - Management / maintenance
  - Promotion / visitor information

### Development of sites and facilities

- 4.12 Over a number of years the 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. Since 2009 the Stockton-on-Tees Green Infrastructure Strategy and associated Delivery Plan has provided the strategic framework for this work.

- 4.13 The table at Appendix 2 details expenditure on major capital schemes delivered at countryside sites since 2009. It gives an indication of the types of projects undertaken and the measurable outputs achieved, which include some large-scale habitat creation/restoration projects (e.g. Pickards Meadow) and several kilometres of paths established or improved (e.g. Thornaby and Ingleby Barwick Circular Trails).
- 4.14 Of a total capital spend of £855,800 approximately 80% has been secured from grants and other external funding sources. The Committee learned that if the £175,000 Council contribution to the Wynyard Woodland Park play area was excluded, the Council has secured over 98% of the total costs of other works from external sources.
- 4.15 It was also highlighted that many of these projects are delivered at relatively low cost with the involvement of partner organisations such as Groundwork, Nacro (the crime reduction charity), Probation Services and other non-commercial organisations. In such cases the labour costs are significantly lower than would be the case if schemes were implemented by commercial contractors.
- 4.16 The importance of the future management and maintenance implications of capital schemes needed to be considered. In some cases there may be a need for additional works which require increased revenue funding, but there are also situations where capital schemes replace high-maintenance or deteriorating assets and have the effect of reducing maintenance costs in the short, medium or long term.
- 4.17 Under current arrangements the Countryside and Greenspace Team within Direct Services is responsible for overseeing the implementation of most of these schemes. Since 2011/12 the team has achieved an annual fee income generation target of £33,541 across all areas of work, partially off-setting staff costs associated with this work.
- 4.18 The Committee wished to congratulate everyone involved in securing the levels of funding that had been received for the open spaces in in the Borough. 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.
- 4.19 The issue that was of concern regarded a reducing 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.

### Management / maintenance

- 4.20 Along with most other parks and major green spaces, most countryside sites require management interventions and on-going maintenance. The management plans identify the broad management approaches that will be adopted and the specific actions and maintenance operations which will help to achieve those objectives.
- 4.21 The Committee heard that the plans have not been updated in the last few years as it has not been possible to allocate staff resources, and consequently they are at least partially out of date and do not reflect the level of staffing and other resources currently available to manage and maintain these sites.
- 4.22 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 can also make it difficult to measure performance.
- 4.23 The lack of clarity can extend to the funding as the Council is successful in ascertaining capital investment but this is not always matched to revenue costs so the department is looking to ensure wherever possible revenue neutrality. The capital schemes also need to be considered collectively to achieve an integrated approach ensuring consideration to revenue implications. In the current financial constraints placed on local government revenues are not as easily available so the departmental strategic plans must therefore reflect capital and revenue costs.
- 4.24 The Committee recognises the need for management plans but they need to be fit for purpose and up to date or, at a minimum, provide management principles. As such it would be necessary to find a way to ensure that taking into account the reduced and limited resources that are available.
- R1 The Committee recommend that 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.**
- R2 The Committee recommend that 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.**
- 4.25 In order to explore further the way in which management plans and functions can be delivered along with associated services at countryside sites the Committee met with senior representatives from a variety of voluntary or community organisations that operate in the borough.

- 4.26 Dave Munt (Billingham Angling Club) indicated that there is a strong development and link with SBC Youth Services and the vision is to work further with Youth Services and develop some sort of building on the site, possibly modular to enhance what is already on offer.
- 4.27 Billingham Angling Club receives an amount of funding from the Environment Agency but without other partner funding it was stated that it was a struggle to meet the costs of legal fees that SBC charge.
- 4.28 Brian Scrafton, Friends of Ropner Park (FoRP) stated a reliance on SBC to keep the park looking as it does and CFYA for the upkeep of the pavilion as he represented a very small organisation run by a committee of volunteers apart from in the café which has SBC staff. The Friends do make a small profit which is mostly reinvested.
- 4.29 The Friends benefit from SBC in that the Council has always printed the newsletters that FoRP produce and therefore pay for their production whilst FoRP print all other material.
- 4.30 The problem FoRP now faced was the design of the pavilion as it was never envisaged that the café would be so popular. The layout of the building would benefit from alteration but it is unknown how to get money to alter it.
- 4.31 Jeremy Garside, Tees Valley Wildlife Trust (TVWT) represents an independent charity covering the whole of the Tees Valley to which a lot of the members are supporters who only contribute by their annual donation. The organisation has then to work quite hard to generate other funds on an annual basis from a variety of sources. A small amount of funding comes from SBC although it was claimed, probably not enough to cover the costs of managing some of the issues on a daily basis. TVWT's involvement in future partnership ventures would probably leave more responsibility for overall land ownership and management with the Council rather than TVWT taking a long leasehold for a site.
- 4.32 Bowesfield and Preston Farm sites are directly opposite TVWT holdings and were identified as providing a great opportunity for extending joint arrangements in terms of ownership. TVWT's work at Hardwick Dene was cited as a good example of shared ownership that could be replicated on smaller, more dispersed sites. A suggestion was made to look again at the range of activities on offer as there might be ways that TVWT could run education activities and events at any of SBC's sites
- 4.33 However, people's awareness of TVWT may be limited as a Teesside University survey found that approximately 140-150 people every day visited Portrack Marsh or Bowesfield but only 10% knew TVWT managed the sites. The aim now is to engage with those people more in order to gather their support. TVWT are increasingly working with friends' groups and have a grant project funded by Heritage Lottery supporting four sites around Stockton, 20



across the Tees Valley, to develop friends' groups to develop and increase the role and responsibility they have for maintaining smaller green spaces.

- 4.34 David Kitchen is Chair of Teesside Environmental Trust (TET) which was established in April 1998 with the aim of providing a nature reserve of international importance at Saltholme.
- 4.35 The organisation only holds land for ecological improvement. It is considering partnership with SBC at Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park, the old brickworks, and Cleveland County tip. It was suggested that this would take up to 15 years to turn the site into something TET would want it to be.
- 4.36 With just over 100 active volunteers, some of whom work for 40 hours for nothing, TET still look to increase the number of volunteers.
- 4.37 John Mann, Administrator to TET raised some general points about SBC relationships with the voluntary sector. These were:
- Provide a structured form of partnership agreement. Whether that's a very formal lease with all that might entail underpinned by a memo of understanding or business plan a voluntary organisation would need to know very early on to know what is expected.
  - Clarity of funding should be known but that could be linked to the partnership agreement or business plan.
  - Provide access to some of the skills and knowledge that exist in the local authority.
  - Consideration of how to manage public expectation if the voluntary sector were to take on responsibility for particular sites as they don't have the resources of a local authority.
  - Ensure links to the Council at all stages.
- 4.38 The Committee was grateful to the organisations which provided their perspectives on relationships with the Council and was interested to maintain or increase the voluntary sector involvement with the Council to deliver the best open spaces for residents and visitors.
- 4.39 The Committee recognise the differences geographically and managerially that exist at each of the sites so no generic solution or approach is considered appropriate or wanted by the Committee. In addition it is not the intention of Members to simply cut revenue spend and outsource to the third sector as has been shown to have taken place in other local authorities. Instead flexibility needs to be maintained when considering the full spectrum of management functions which could be considered including asset management, fixed term asset management, and service level agreement/revenue support management.
- R3 The Committee recommend that the Council should continue to explore opportunities for external partners to carry out management functions and deliver associated services at countryside sites.**

## Promotion / visitor information

### *Customer satisfaction*

- 4.40 In Spring 2014 Viewpoint, Stockton Council's residents' panel provided comments and opinion regarding the subject of parks and green spaces in the borough. Johanne Parker, SBC Consultation Officer provided the Committee with information and results that were statistically weighted to be representative of the borough's population by age, gender and location of residence.
- 4.41 Previous resident surveys and Viewpoint Panels demonstrate that the public have been generally highly satisfied with the Borough's parks and green spaces (83% satisfied in 2013). Approximately half the borough's residents visited parks and green spaces at least once a month, and the vast majority of residents visited sites during the course of a year (Appendix 3).
- 4.42 More recent data from Viewpoint 36 (spring 2014) on 'Parks, Green Spaces and Outdoor Recreation' shows similar high levels of satisfaction, although respondents were less satisfied with country parks, nature reserves, and woodlands compared to the Borough's formal parks (Appendix 4).
- 4.43 Respondents were asked to state from a list of parks and countryside sites across the Borough which they had heard of before receiving the questionnaire. Perhaps unsurprisingly the most well-known countryside sites were Wynyard Woodland Park (known by 84%) and Billingham Beck Valley Country Park (82%). Local Nature Reserves such as Hardwick Dene & Elm Tree Wood LNR and Black Bobbies' Field LNR were known by just 17% and 15% of respondents respectively.
- 4.44 The Viewpoint survey also provided some useful information on the relative popularity of different countryside sites (Appendix 5). The data for the Borough's three country parks shows that more people visit (and carry out repeat visits) to Wynyard Woodland Park compared to Billingham Beck Valley Country Park and Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park. In total 64% of respondents had visited Wynyard Woodland Park, with 34% having visited Cowpen Bewley, despite both being in relatively accessible locations, within easy reach of urban populations.
- 4.45 87% of respondents were satisfied with the Borough's parks and green spaces with the vast majority (90%) having 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).
- 4.46 With such satisfaction levels the Committee wondered what could influence the level of voluntary or community involvement of residents at the sites.

*Volunteer and community involvement*

- 4.47 Individual volunteers carry out a number of practical tasks at the Borough's country parks and other countryside site. The ranger staff provide appropriate training and supervision for these activities. The total number of volunteer days has reduced over the past few years, e.g.

April 2010 to March 2011:	3054 volunteer days
April 2013 to March 2014:	1830 volunteer days

- 4.48 This reduction in volunteer days reflects the reduced staffing in the Countryside Ranger Team over this period and therefore a more limited capacity to manage volunteer activity. This trend has continued into the current financial year when, for example, the separate volunteer sessions for the River Tees Area and Local Nature Reserves have been combined into a single weekly session.
- 4.49 As a result of this the contribution that volunteers are able to make to the maintenance and management of countryside sites has reduced, potentially leading to poorer standards of maintenance and/or increased pressure on paid staff. Providing supervision and support for volunteers is a time-consuming role so a reduction on volunteer activity does potentially free up some staff time for other work.
- 4.50 The Ranger Team is able to offer some limited 'corporate volunteering' opportunities, but not able to support the kinds of 'community-led' projects it did so in the past.
- 4.51 In addition to supervised volunteer activities some countryside sites such as Stillington Forest Park and Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park have 'friends' groups. However, there are fewer friends groups associated with countryside sites compared with the Borough's urban parks and green spaces.
- 4.52 The Viewpoint survey specifically asked "...Thinking about the whole Borough and the area within 10 minutes' walk of home, most said:
- They are keen to take part in **one off local environmental projects** (66%)
  - They were least keen to **play an active role in a park 'friends group'** (44% found this appealing)
  - **Being able to volunteer in a flexible way**, as and when they had time and opportunity, was most appealing (69% said this)
  - The thing most likely to discourage volunteering to help maintain/manage the Borough's parks and green spaces was the prospect of **volunteering directly with the Council** (12% said this)

- R4 The Committee recommend that 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.**

### *Education and Events*

- 4.53 Prior to 2011 the Countryside Ranger Service was able to coordinate an extensive programme of events, educational visits and other community activities.
- 4.54 As with the volunteer and community involvement the reductions in staffing means this Ranger-led activity no longer takes place. Some school visits and other events do occur at the country parks in particular, but these are generally unsupervised by the rangers.
- 4.55 It is known that school groups also visit other sites in the Borough operated by organisations such as Tees Valley Wildlife Trust and RSPB, and these organisations also run events and other activities for the public. For example, last year approximately 4,000 children benefitted from RSPB educational provision at Saltholme.
- 4.56 Preston Park is a premier destination point for events in Stockton Borough but the Committee believe that more could be made of the other sites that feature in this review. For example, the infrastructure at Wynyard Woodland Park could allow for more events to be held there. As has already been highlighted in surveys, limited awareness of other sites means they might not reach the popularity they deserve. The Committee want to maximise the community value of sites as set out in its key lines of enquiry in the scope of this review and therefore want to see their increased promotion.
- 4.57 Brief information on the Borough's country parks and some other countryside sites is provided on the Council's web site. In the past the Council produced leaflets for the main sites, including site plans and other information, as well general publications to promote parks and countryside sites, trails and events. Such leaflets are now out of print and the Committee was informed that leaflets could not be made available to download from the website since some of the information is out of date.
- R5 The Committee recommend that 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.**
- 4.58 Many of the sites have a range of on-site signage, providing information and helping to interpret the special features of each site. While some of this information is of high quality, it was felt that there is a general lack of consistency in approach and style across the sites. Some information is out of date and the signs do not always reflect recent developments.
- 4.59 Councillor Cooke suggested the use of new technology as a way of providing visitors to countryside sites and parks with more/interactive information about the place visited. He had found the use of Quick Response (QR) Codes when

visiting sites elsewhere a useful addition. This would also allow for updating of information at minimal cost.

4.60 In the Viewpoint survey 9% would be keen to use an App or Internet downloads. This figure although small at this time could grow with the proliferation of smartphone and tablet computer use.

**R6 The Committee recommend the Council 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.**

#### *Green Flag Award Scheme*

4.61 The Green Flag Award scheme is the benchmark national standard for parks and green spaces in the UK and is one of a number of accreditation schemes that recognises excellence in the management of public space. It was first launched in 1996 to recognise and reward the best green spaces in the country. The Committee wondered whether if the award was reinstated it would increase the number of visits and levels of use at the various sites.

4.62 Various Stockton Council parks and other green spaces held Green Flag status between 2005 and 2011. Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park and Billingham Beck Valley Country Park were the first Council-owned sites to be awarded Green Flag status in 2005, with Wynyard Woodland Park, Charltons Pond and other parks achieving that status slightly later. Since 2011 the Council has not applied for Green Flag status for its parks.

4.63 Officers considered that the Green Flag requirements and the Council's management plans are closely aligned and that if the Council applied for Green Flag status it would probably be achievable even with reduced resources in Stockton's green spaces as they still are of a high standard. A lot of work went into management plans and often the background information doesn't change so it is the action plans that need to change to reflect the changed financial circumstances.

4.64 With the lack of the supporting resources to maintain Green Flag status the Committee was interested in considering involving other agencies and voluntary groups to provide some level of support and therefore asked the voluntary sector representatives that attended a meeting on 8 December 2014 for their views.

4.65 Jeremy Garside (TVWT) had considered applying for Green Flag status at Hardwick Dene as it would create a benchmark but the maintenance of those standards over time brought diminishing returns. It raised the question as to whether one was chasing a standard for the sake of it after a few years. In conservation/wildlife organisations the Green Flag Award is seen as a local authority scheme.

- 4.66 John Mann's perception was that it wouldn't influence him going to a park or woodland as the Green Flag doesn't carry the same weight as a blue flag used to denote a high standard for a beach.
- 4.67 For Dave Munt (Billingham Angling Club) the Green Flag was a useful educational tool whilst Brian Scrafton (FoRP) doubted whether any park user would understand what it's all about.
- 4.68 In Viewpoint 36, 82% of Stockton Borough residents surveyed said they or other members of their household would choose to use a particular park or green space if it had 'Green Flag' status (like some beaches have 'Blue Flag' status if they are considered to be the best quality).
- 4.69 The Committee accepted the views of officers, the voluntary organisations and residents and whilst unable to recommend that Stockton Council apply for Green Flag Status anywhere in the borough Members were keen to maintain, where possible, Green Flag standards in order to benefit residents.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

- 5.1 Stockton Borough benefits from the plethora and miscellany of managed outside spaces which are there for residents and visitors to enjoy. The satisfaction levels that have been awarded in surveys for countryside sites reflect the hard work and dedication that staff and volunteers provide. In whatever way possible the Committee wishes to provide its support to the continuation of such sites and the effort that goes into them from all concerned.
- 5.2 The Committee believes in flexibility being given to specialist officers who are involved on a regular basis with the challenges and opportunities that the sites raise and therefore Members do not wish to be prescriptive about how the stewardship of sites are tackled. The Committee has every confidence in the future of countryside sites and that they will bring many years of enjoyment to their visitors.

**APPENDIX 1**

