

19 JANUARY 2015

REVIEW OF THE FUTURE OF COUNTRYSIDE SITES

SUMMARY

This paper provides the outline of the scope and interim findings of the review of the future of countryside sites.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Environment Select Committee consider the interim findings of this review and use the available evidence to draft recommendations for inclusion in the final report.

BACKGROUND

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.

DETAIL

3. 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.
4. 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;
5. The recommendations were achieved except for the management transfer. Negotiations with TVWT were positive and agreements were reached in principle. However, complex land ownerships and legal restrictions and covenants proved insurmountable. Therefore

the transfer of Billingham Beck and Cowpen Bewley Country Parks to TVWT was not achievable.

6. 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).
7. 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 green spaces. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. 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.

15. 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
16. The Committee asked the representatives from the four sites for views on Green Flag status. Responses included:
- The maintenance of Green Flag status could create too much pressure on the countryside site
 - Green Flag status was perhaps less relevant in relation to wildlife and work within the voluntary sector
 - Many people were not aware of what Green Flag status meant
 - Green Flag status was a useful educational tool when making people aware of the environment and could also be used for benchmarking

Possible Recommendations (from officers)

- Integrated plans for the future development and management of countryside sites should be prepared. These should reflect the Council's broad strategic objectives, helping to protect and enhance the environmental value of these sites and maximise the benefits delivered to local communities. They should aim to target capital and revenue resources effectively, given the overall reduction in available funding.
- External funding for physical improvements to countryside sites should be sought where these are in line with the Council's strategic objectives. Implications for future revenue funding must be given careful consideration.
- The Council should continue to explore alternative management models for countryside sites and introduce new management arrangements where these are likely to reduce long-term revenue costs of the council, deliver greater public benefits from these assets, and maintain environmental quality. Opportunities to generate income and deliver services and activities through third parties should be pursued.
- Wherever possible the Council and its partners should continue to encourage community and volunteer involvement in countryside sites, where this supports the positive management and development of these assets and brings benefits to the individuals involved.
- All the council's main countryside sites should be promoted and, where possible, used to host a range of recreational, cultural and educational activities, maximising economic, social, health and environmental benefits.

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