

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
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Select Committee – Membership

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Councillor Rigg
Councillor Walmsley
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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.