

Local Members' Interest

N/A

Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee – 14th November 2017

Progress on the Countryside Estate

Recommendation

1. That the Committee scrutinise the contents of this report and considers the outcomes from the first phase of the Countryside Estate Review.

Report of Cllr Gill Heath Cabinet Member for Communities

Summary

What is the Select Committee being asked to do and why?

2. The Committee has previously provided input to the review into the future management of the countryside estate. This report is being submitted to update the Committee on the outcomes from the first phase of the Countryside Estate Review.
3. The Committee is being asked to note that a further paper will be submitted to this committee prior to Cabinet in March 2018, which identifies and recommends a management and delivery solution for the Countryside Estate

Context & Background

4. Staffordshire County Council (SCC) owns a large diverse countryside estate, providing opportunities to enhance people's skills, and in some cases, employment potential, through volunteering. Alongside the main country parks, the estate also comprises a number of smaller sites (e.g. picnic areas). Whilst the main country parks are very popular and make a significant contribution to SCC's wider priorities, the smaller sites tend to be more of a local recreational asset. However, these smaller sites still have to be managed to meet SCC's legal liabilities and obligations.
5. SCC has powers under Section 4 of the Countryside Act 1968 to establish country parks but it does not have a statutory duty to do so. However, by virtue of having country parks and other countryside sites, there is a range of legislation that SCC has to comply with, including:
 - a. SCC owns water bodies that come under the jurisdiction of the Reservoirs Act 1975. This defines SCC as a statutory undertaker.
 - b. Under the Occupier Liability Act 1984, SCC has a duty of care to site visitors.
 - c. There are a range of statutory duties relating to environmental legislation and rights of way that cross SCC's countryside sites (e.g. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and The Rights of Way Act 1990).

6. Other legislation that SCC has to comply with includes: The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949; The Forestry Act 1967 as amended; The Countryside Act 1968; The Highways Act 1980; The Town and Country Planning Act 1990; The Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994; The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (England and Wales) Regulations 1999; The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010, and The Access to Environmental Information Regulations 2004 among others.
7. The management of countryside sites is primarily delivered by the Ranger Service and the Countryside Works Unit with input from the Environmental Advice Team. They are supported by approximately 25,000 volunteer hours and private sector contractors (as required).
8. To effectively and sustainably manage the countryside sites going forward, SCC decided that alternative delivery models needed to be explored. In early 2015, ten alternative delivery models were consulted upon and these were refined down to four preferred options. The four options, which were agreed by Cabinet in June 2016, were:
 - A: Maintain council ownership and seek opportunities to increase income from existing sites by working with volunteers, communities, third sector organisations and private parties.
 - B: Transfer management on a site-by-site basis to local community or voluntary sector groups such as parish councils.
 - C: Establish a partnership to manage countryside sites in a particular area.
 - D: Establish a not-for-profit trading company or trust to run and develop parts of the estate.

Progress to Date

9. The first phase of the Countryside Estate Review covered the management and maintenance of the 18 countryside sites that comprise SCC's countryside estate. It did not include any other council-owned land (e.g. County Farms) or the management of public rights of way (PRoW).
10. A separate PRoW Review is being conducted and is running parallel to the Countryside Estate Review. The PRoW Review is assessing the entire PRoW function (i.e. management and maintenance) in order to identify a sustainable business model and working arrangements for managing and maintaining PRoW in Staffordshire. However, it is important to recognise that the Ranger Service and the Countryside Works Unit deliver the maintenance of PRoW and therefore a number of staffing options will be jointly investigated going forward.

11. Timeline to date

- a. September 2015 – Public consultation identifying the preferred options.
- b. June 2016 – Four preferred options were presented and approved by Cabinet.
- c. October 2016 – Information days with potential interested parties.
- d. December 2016 - Expression of Interest (EOI) forms went live.
- e. March 2017 – Expression of interest close.
- f. April 2017 – Panel meeting to access EOI's.
- g. April/May 2017 – Clarification meetings with EOI applicants.
- h. June 2017 – Decision letters to applicants.
- i. June 2017 – Delegated Decision papers agreed for Consall Nature Park and Wimblebury Picnic Area.

Outcome of Expression of Interest Process

12. Between December 2016 and March 2017, organisations interested in managing and delivering all or some of SCC's countryside sites were encouraged to submit an Expression of Interest (Eoi). In total, fourteen EOI's were received.
13. The results of the EOI evaluation process are:
 - a. The RSPB will take over the management and maintenance of Consall Nature Park.
 - b. Heath Hayes and Wimblebury Parish Council will take over the management and maintenance of Wimblebury Mound Picnic Area.
14. The EOI evaluation process also revealed a number of issues that have subsequently impacted on the Review's direction of travel, including:
 - a. Many organisations expressing an interest in one or more sites also requested payment for taking on the site/s. Payment in exchange for taking on a site/s was not stated in the EOI tender.
 - b. Some local community groups expressing an interest in taking on a site also required significant levels of support from SCC in the short to medium term.
 - c. Some organisations expressed a desire to take on sites on a phased approach or in clusters, thereby making the evaluation process difficult.
 - d. Almost all organisations requested more detailed information about the costs and the management requirements of each site.

Phase Two – Proposed Next Steps

15. A process will commence enabling the transfer of Consall Nature Park and Wimblebury Mound Picnic Area to the RSPB and Heath Hayes and Wimblebury Parish Council respectively.
16. A review of the current operating model and a range of efficiencies and income generating measures will be introduced in the short to medium term to ensure that the MTFs saving of £0.6m is met by 2018/19. These include:

- a. A car parking strategy for all appropriate countryside sites will be developed and implemented to ensure that income generating opportunities are maximized.
 - b. Explore the 'offers' at Marquis Drive Visitor Centre and at Chasewater Innovation Centre to improve the current offer and maximise income generating opportunities.
 - c. Evaluate existing contracts to identify savings (e.g. deer management, property care, vehicle management, etc.).
 - d. Review operation of new Countryside Stewardship Schemes going forward.
 - e. Develop and implement a new operating model for the management and maintenance activity on country parks and PRow.
17. The review of the current operating model will require an appropriate consultation with staff and Trade Unions in accordance with SCC processes once the impact for staff is understood and an indicative timeline (that may be subject to change) is included in Appendix A to demonstrate how this might be managed.
18. To enable a recommendation for the sustainable future of the countryside estate to be made by the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee in March 2018, the following work needs to be completed:
- a. Identify minimum management requirements for each site to meet legal and basic operational needs.
 - b. Develop basic management plans and calculate future costs for each site based on the minimal management requirements.
 - c. Assess all capital assets on each site in order to adopt an asset based management approach.

Steps taken in the interim to offset operating costs

19. In the interim steps are being taken to ensure that our MTFs savings are delivered. These include holding vacancies whilst the Review is being completed and ensuring value for money on all essential purchases.
20. Additional sources of income are also being explored. For example, introducing car parking charges on the larger sites and increasing the current event charges across all the Country Parks. In the Cabinet meeting 17 June 2015 it was agreed that:
- a. Current charges are maintained at the existing levels. Existing experience would suggest that a reasonable level of compliance would be achieved at these rates and it is unlikely to encourage displacement parking or deter those on lower incomes
 - b. An annual season ticket was in place at £22 pa (equivalent of 6p a day) not to penalise regular users such as dog walkers. Holders of blue badges would be exempt. Most local authorities charge for car parking on their countryside estate and generally current rates are on a par or lower than rates charged elsewhere.

- c. The charging policy would be reviewed periodically and, if required, amended subject to approval from the Cabinet Member. Fees and charges are reviewed annually as part of the budget setting process.

Third phase of the Countryside Estate Review

21. A further paper will be brought to the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee that will make recommendations for the final phase of the Countryside Estate Review. This may include the procurement of a management solution.

HR Implications

22. All staff involved, directly or indirectly, with the management of the countryside estate will be affected by all phases of the Review. This includes members of the Ranger Service, the in-house Works Unit, Visitor Centre Staff and the Environmental Specialist team. All staff are continually informed of progress and will have the opportunity to input through a formal consultation process.

MTFS

23. The total budget (capital and revenue) for managing the countryside sites and rights of way maintenance is £1,601,420 per annum. The wider Rural County team has to deliver a saving of £0.6m by 2020/21 in order to meet its MTFS commitments.

Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity – Previous consideration by Select Committee on May 2016

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Appendices

Appendix A – Flowchart of Development of Detailed Approach