

<b>Local Members Interest</b>
N/A

## **Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Monday 28 February 2022**

### **Future Vision for the Countryside Estate**

#### **Recommendation**

I recommend that the Committee:

- a. Considers and provides comments upon the draft revised vision for the countryside estate in advance of a recommendation to County Council Cabinet.

#### **Report of Cllr Victoria Wilson, Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture**

#### **Summary**

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

1. The Committee is asked to consider and comment upon the revised vision for the Council's countryside estate. Cabinet previously agreed a two-stage approach to the management of the Estate, firstly to deliver an MTFS commitment and secondly to deliver longer-term financial sustainability.
2. With the first stage complete, the Committee is asked to consider a revised approach to the estate's long term financial sustainability which reflects the changed situation and is more in line with the Council's strategic objectives.

#### **Report**

##### **Report Summary**

3. In March 2019, Cabinet agreed a two-stage approach for the Countryside Estate; firstly, a review of the countryside service operating model to achieve MTFS savings, and secondly a formal process to explore transferring management to external bodies or to a newly created charitable trust. Alongside this a range of further measures were proposed to improve financial sustainability including through cost recovery.

4. Key contextual changes since Cabinet agreed this approach have prompted a review of this decision. This includes the impacts of the pandemic and the urgent need to focus on environmental outcomes such as climate change and nature recovery. The paper sets out a revised vision for the countryside estate, placing it at the heart of our ambition for a greener and healthier future for Staffordshire.

## **Background**

5. Staffordshire County Council owns a large countryside estate, including six country parks, nine picnic / local sites and three greenways. The review of the management of this estate began in 2013 driven by a requirement to identify financial efficiencies. The estate was included within the scope of the 'Infrastructure+' contract, however it was concluded that this was not an appropriate model for this work area.
6. An Expression of Interest exercise took place in 2016/17 inviting external bodies to register interest in management of the sites. This resulted in only two sites being transferred to external bodies (RSPB and Wimblebury Parish Council) on a nil-cost basis. Research and a detailed options appraisal for the rest of the estate were subsequently completed, following which, management proposals were presented to Cabinet in March 2019.
7. As it was clear that management transfers were complex and would not achieve the scale of MTFS savings required within the necessary time frame, Cabinet agreed a two-stage approach. The first stage was a review of the operating model for the service to achieve the MTFS saving of £786,000. This commenced in January 2020 but was put on hold due to the pandemic and the subsequent increase in demand across the Estate. In 2021 the MTFS requirement was revised to £496,000 and the re-organisation recommenced; it is now approaching completion and the new staffing structure will be effective from May 2022.
8. The second stage was a procurement exercise with the intention of seeking alternative management options for the estate; this was planned to follow completion of the review of the operating model. It was anticipated this would most likely involve external environmental bodies and/or creating a charitable trust, with the management of any remaining countryside sites being retained in-house. Measures would also be introduced to improve the long-term financial sustainability of the estate.

## Changing context

9. Since the Cabinet decision of 2019 there have been several significant contextual changes. These include:
  - a. Significance of the estate to the community – the pandemic saw people connecting with green spaces and exploring their local countryside assets at a scale not previously experienced. Whilst this placed huge pressure upon the service, it has also been a great opportunity for communities to connect with nature, benefitting their physical and mental health. There was also an increase in people’s desire to get involved. Proposed changes to the management of sites have highlighted the high level of public interest in the estate and its future.
  - b. Significance to Staffordshire’s ‘offer’ – work on Staffordshire’s place brand highlighted the significance of the county’s green assets to our reputation and visitor economy, underpinning Staffordshire as a great place to live, work and visit.
  - c. Delivery of new environmental goals – Staffordshire County Council aims to achieve net zero carbon by 2050. The Council also has new duties under the Environment Act 2021, strengthening its obligations to biodiversity and nature recovery.
  - d. Nature Recovery Declaration – in February 2022 the Council made a declaration on nature recovery. This includes leading development of a nature recovery strategy and managing Council-owned land to support biodiversity.
10. With the review of the operational model approaching completion and delivering the revised MTFs commitment of £496,000, under the proposals agreed by Cabinet in 2019 the next step would be to begin the procurement process to explore alternative management arrangements for the sites.
11. Bearing in mind the changing context we are now operating within; it is proposed that the County Council reconsider this next step. An alternative is proposed which would maintain the Council’s role as managers of its estate. This would link with wider strategic goals and minimise the risks associated with a significant and complex procurement exercise with uncertain outcomes. This approach would also provide certainty for communities and staff and enable resources to be focused directly on improving outcomes.

## **Proposed way forward**

12. Informed by the above factors, it is suggested that the recommendations from 2019 should be reviewed and an updated proposal is drafted for consideration.
13. The revised vision for the countryside estate is:
  - a. Management of the estate is retained by Staffordshire County Council. Opportunities to build community capacity and involvement will be developed. Due to the recent increased significance of countryside sites to communities; should interest emerge from local community bodies in increasing their involvement in the management of local / picnic sites, this will be explored as opportunities arise on a local site basis.
  - b. Expansion of the volunteering offer, including creation of volunteer warden roles in addition to the volunteer task force. This would enable paid staff to focus on strategic duties and support greater involvement by the local community in the delivery of the parks.
  - c. Car park charges – installation of car parking charges at more car parks across the estate, with the option of an updated parking permit scheme covering multiple sites, providing a more affordable option for regular users. Under existing legislation, costs can be recovered to support provision of facilities and any surplus must be ring fenced for reinvestment in the countryside sites. This has been agreed as part of the Cannock Chase protection proposals and is already successfully operating at two locations on the Chase and at Chasewater Country Park. The approach would be extended to other sites in the county.
  - d. Cafes, business opportunities and leases – expansion of the current offer and improvement to café facilities, with retail opportunities, to offer improved services for visitors and generate income to support operating costs of the parks. NB these opportunities should be focused on complementing the overall site offer.
  - e. Rebranding of the service and a 'friends' scheme to facilitate public support for operating the sites with updates on activities and benefits to scheme participants such as the annual parking permit, discount vouchers etc.
  - f. Building on the success of the EU-funded RDPE Countryside Explorer project and existing Countryside Stewardship and S106 schemes, further investment through external funding bids for environmental management and infrastructure development.

- g. The countryside estate acts as a 'shop window' to raise awareness and directly contribute to the Council's environmental priorities – actively tackling climate change and nature recovery.
  - h. The service provides a route into environmental work for young people in Staffordshire, offering opportunities through seasonal roles and modern apprenticeships.
  - i. The estate directly supports physical health, active lifestyles and mental wellbeing through programmes of health walks, dementia trails, enabling more inclusive access and opportunities to increase wellbeing. Creating better links with GP surgeries and other health professionals to benefit the community more proactively.
14. The Countryside Act 1968 gives Staffordshire County Council powers to provide parking spaces, as well as allowing for charges to be made on countryside sites for the provision of facilities and services, including for vehicle parking places. On this basis, the County Council intends to introduce car park charges on further countryside sites where it is financially viable to do so (where the cost of introducing and operating car park charges on a particular site can be recovered by the parking fees it will generate). The legislation allows for any surplus generated to be reinvested back into the sites.
15. In designing new countryside estate parking schemes where charges are to be introduced, regulation and measures needed on the public highway adjacent to those schemes to mitigate the risks of dangerous parking from displaced vehicles avoiding payment will be considered as part of scheme development.

### **Financial Impact**

16. MTFS savings of nearly £500k associated with the service area have already been delivered through the revision of the operating model. There are no further MTFS commitments associated with the countryside estate.
17. The proposals seek to secure greater long-term financial sustainability through cost recovery, income generation and external funding. However, some investment funding may be required to pump-prime these opportunities. If the broad vision is supported, further work will be undertaken to provide greater detail on investment needs and opportunities as part of a Cabinet paper and this will be brought back to this Committee for its consideration and comment.

## **Community Impact Assessment**

18. The revised proposal addresses several impacts identified in the CIA of the 2019 decision, reducing change and uncertainty for both communities and staff and enabling a more rapid approach to improving the sites.
19. Car parking charges may impact; however, mitigation is proposed including keeping charges modest and offering more affordable annual passes for regular users. Funds would be used to cover costs of providing parking facilities, improving their maintenance, and any surplus would be reinvested in the sites, supporting improved facilities to support more inclusive access, wider site management and conservation.

## **Conclusion and recommendation**

20. The revised vision presented above would enable the Council to focus its resources on improving the countryside estate and maximising the benefits it provides to residents and visitors. It builds public confidence in the Council's commitment to the environment while also reducing uncertainty for both staff and communities.
21. It is recommended that the Committee considers and provides comments upon the draft revised proposals for the countryside estate in advance of a recommendation to County Council Cabinet.

## **Scheme of delegation**

22. Should the proposal be agreed by Cabinet, operational decisions on key investment projects and implementing car parking charges at specific sites would be made by the Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities in consultation with the lead Cabinet Member and local members as appropriate.

## **Next Steps**

23. Following consideration by the Committee, proposals will be presented to Cabinet noting any feedback through the scrutiny process.

## **List of Background Documents/Appendices:**

**Appendix 1** – Community Impact Assessment

## Contact Details

**Assistant Director:** Janene Cox OBE, Assistant Director for Culture, Rural and Safer Communities

**Report Author:** Sarah Bentley

**Job Title:** Head of Environment & Countryside

**Telephone No.:** 01785 276047

**E-Mail Address:** [sarah.bentley@staffordshire.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.bentley@staffordshire.gov.uk)

