

## **Cabinet Meeting on Wednesday 14 December 2022**

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



**Cllr Victoria Wilson, Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture said,**

“There has been a notable increase in the appreciation of, and interest in, our countryside in recent years.

“Our aim is to manage increased accessibility to our countryside estate while protecting the very things that make the country parks, spaces and greenways so attractive.

“And with a growing emphasis on stopping climate change and supporting nature recovery, our new vision for the countryside estate reflects the important role it can have for

local communities, the local economy and for the environment.”

#### **Report Summary:**

Staffordshire County Council owns a large countryside estate including six main country parks, a suite of local sites and three greenways, covering an area of 2,280 hectares. This report sets out a new vision for the estate and proposals for an in-house management model that will focus on maximising the benefits of the estate to our communities and environment.

The proposals include a delivery plan showing how actions will support the Council’s strategic objectives. Early priorities include nature recovery work and woodland creation to support net carbon zero; greening the service – electric / HVO vehicles, charging points and promoting wider behaviour change; a Healthy Parks Programme and improved accessibility; developing the volunteering offer; an enhanced business and catering offer at main country parks; extension of pay and display to the north of the county and a Parks Promotion Plan, with improved online presence and on-site visitor welcome and orientation.

#### **Recommendation**

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Considers and supports the proposed approach for management of the countryside estate and associated delivery plan.

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

#### **Recommendation of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture**

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Considers and supports the proposed approach for management of the countryside estate and associated delivery plan.

**Local Member Interest:** N/A

#### **Report of the Director for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills**

##### **Reasons for Recommendations:**

##### **Background**

1. Staffordshire County Council owns a large countryside estate of around 2,280 hectares, including six country parks, nine picnic sites and three greenways.
2. In March 2019, Cabinet agreed to a range of financial sustainability measures for the estate and to explore the potential for longer-term alternative management options, such as transferring management to external bodies or a charitable trust. However, following the pandemic and with a growing emphasis on tackling climate change and nature recovery, a new vision for the countryside estate has been developed which reflects the important role it can play for local communities, the local economy and for the environment.
3. The new vision is based on an in-house management model, which enables a more rapid focus on delivery of outcomes. The new vision is presented below for Cabinet's consideration, along with a summary of how it will support the Council's strategic objectives. A delivery plan is included in Appendix 1 which runs from 2022-2026.

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

4. Our new vision for the countryside estate is to provide accessible and inclusive natural greenspace for communities and visitors, actively supporting health and wellbeing. The estate will showcase the Council's work to tackle climate change, support nature recovery and celebrate our heritage, with the needs of conservation and recreation carefully

balanced. Managed by the County Council and supported by community volunteers, the estate will provide opportunities for learning and enjoyment, and provide business opportunities that enhance the visitor experience and contribute to sustainable site management.

5. This new vision for the countryside estate will support the County Council's overall vision for an innovative, ambitious and sustainable county, where everyone has the opportunity to prosper, be healthy and happy.

### **Supporting our Strategic Objectives**

6. The detailed delivery plan to achieve the vision set out above is presented against the Council's strategic aims and can be found in Appendix 1. The plan includes the following elements:

### **Supporting Staffordshire's Economy**

7. Staffordshire's rural environment and green spaces underpin the county's offer as a great place to live, work and visit. The Council's significant countryside estate is an important part of this offer and, with improvement and investment, could make a greater contribution to the local economy.
8. The country parks, which include Cannock Chase, Chasewater and Apedale, have great potential to offer an enhanced visitor experience in high quality natural landscapes. These larger sites also have the potential to offer opportunities for businesses which complement the park offer, such as catering, outdoor activities and events. In all cases, due to the sensitivity of the environmental assets on the sites, the aim is to improve the visitor experience and contribute to site management while protecting nature. The estate can also offer opportunities for learning and skills, which can contribute to addressing the current skills shortage in the environment sector.
9. In some cases, enhancing the visitor experience may be through enhanced catering, events and activities. At Chasewater and Cannock Chase there is scope for more significant improvement. A feasibility study is currently exploring developing the visitor offer at Chasewater, focused on the visitor centre and south shore. There is also significant scope to develop the facilities at Cannock Chase Country Park to provide a fit-for-purpose visitor facility for the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. These developments will require external investment and will be developed over future years.

10. The key priorities for the estate in relation to the economy are:
- a. Enhance catering offers at country parks.
  - b. Increase provision of business units.
  - c. Parks promotion plan to raise awareness and help people plan their visit.
  - d. Placements and traineeships.
  - e. Expansion and development of facilities at Chasewater Country Park.
  - f. Longer term development of fit for purpose facilities at Cannock Chase Country Park to increase understanding of the AONB.

### **Climate Change, Environment and Sustainability**

11. The countryside estate makes a major contribution to the Council's environmental ambitions. Habitats on the sites are sequestering carbon and supporting climate adaptation through natural flood management. There is some scope to enhance habitats to increase carbon sequestration, for example through tree planting at appropriate locations and peatland restoration. A key priority will be greening the service, moving to electric or HVO vehicles, plant and equipment. There is also scope to further explore renewable energy generation at some locations, e.g. solar panels on depot roofs and small scale wind generation. The sites also provide an opportunity to promote action for climate change and provide public charging points.
12. Management of the sites to enhance habitats plus targeted conservation work will ensure that the sites play an important role in the local nature recovery strategy for Staffordshire. Nearly 60% of the estate is designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and much of Cannock Chase Country Park is designated as a Special Area of Conservation, of European significance. The sites support many rare and important species.
13. With support from a range of funding schemes such as Countryside Stewardship, the service manages habitats and species to secure their future. Work beyond the sites is also taken forward in partnership with other organisations to support landscape-scale management and habitat connectivity, incorporating new approaches such as 'rewilding' where appropriate.
14. The key priorities for the estate in relation to the environment are:
- a. Increase carbon sequestration to support net zero delivery.
  - b. Greening the service through electric vehicles and equipment and renewable energy generation where possible.

- c. Targeted management to enhance habitats and species as part of the nature recovery strategy.
- d. Promotion and awareness raising on environmental issues with Climate Change team.

## **Health, Wellbeing and Community Involvement**

15. Numerous studies evidence the benefits of spending time in natural greenspace to people's health and wellbeing, and this became particularly evident during the pandemic. Staffordshire's countryside estate already plays an important role in providing accessible greenspace and a range of healthy activities such as health walks, park runs, etc. As part of the new vision, there is real scope to increase health, wellbeing, community and cultural outcomes.
16. The delivery plan includes actions linked directly to health, such as exploring green / social prescribing, health walks, activity promotion etc. However, it also includes our volunteering offer and how this can be expanded to benefit participants through both physical activity but also social inclusion and reducing isolation. Linking activities to interests such as wildlife, heritage and the arts can help us reach audiences for whom physical activity may not be the main attraction. This section also includes action to reduce barriers to access, both physically and also other barriers such as safety or cultural aspects that may prevent some people gaining the benefits their local greenspace can provide.
17. Community involvement is critical to the success of the countryside estate. Volunteers already play a key role in supporting management and conservation, but there is scope to expand the volunteer offer to provide a range of experiences. A supporter scheme is also proposed for those wishing to find out more about the sites and support their management.
18. The key priorities for the estate in relation to health, wellbeing and community involvement are:
  - a. Healthy Parks Programme of activities.
  - b. Accessibility audits and work to reduce barriers and ensure inclusivity.
  - c. Enhanced cultural / arts / heritage offer.
  - d. Volunteer Strategy and expansion of volunteer programme including volunteer wardens.
  - e. Support Friends groups and develop supporter scheme.

## **Transport and Digital Connectivity**

19. The Countryside Service currently uses its expertise to reduce the dangers of deer crossing highways. The Deer Safety Project has been

running for several years, working with leading experts to test deterrent devices to reduce vehicle collisions. Countryside Officers also deal with dead and injured deer on the highway to ensure safety of road users. This work will continue as the deer population expands in the county.

20. The delivery plan also includes management of the three greenways which provide multi-user routes, and connections to the wider highway and rights of way network from the parks. There is potential to provide EV charging points at busier country parks to support greening.
21. Digital infrastructure is a major constraint at some sites, impacting on both SCC operations but also on the ability to provide up to date services to visitors who now expect good connectivity at key sites. Cannock Chase is a priority due to the number of staff and visitors affected by the currently extremely poor connectivity.
22. The key priorities for the estate in relation to transport and digital are:
  - a. Deer safety project and emergency response.
  - b. EV charge points.
  - c. Greenway management.
  - d. Digital connectivity at key sites.

### **Best Start**

23. Access and proximity to greenspace has been shown to have positive benefits for pregnancy outcomes and early years development, establishing positive behaviours that are likely to continue throughout life. Some links have already been made using country parks as locations for activities linked to early years and working with vulnerable families. There is great scope to expand this role further.
24. Some sites currently support outdoor learning centres, forest schools and other learning activities for children. There is scope to further develop this, expanding to other sites and also working with schools and providers to develop holiday activities, junior ranger events etc.
25. The key priorities for the estate in relation to early years are:
  - a. Programme of activities developed with family support teams.
  - b. Support and expand outdoor learning and forest schools.
  - c. Support wider family activities.
26. The above priorities are set out in more detail in the delivery plan in appendix 1. Key priorities for the next 12 months include:

- a. Enhanced catering offers at main country parks
  - b. Complete feasibility study for Chasewater Country Park
  - c. Extension of pay and display to the north of the county
  - d. Parks Promotion Plan – online presence and welcome signs / orientation
  - e. Nature recovery work for designated sites and target species, and planning work for woodland creation for net zero
  - f. Greening the service – electric / HVO vehicles, charging points etc.
  - g. Sustainability promotion and behaviour change
  - h. Commence development of Healthy Parks Programme and deliver Wayfinding Project at Cannock Chase (partnership scheme funded by Sport England)
  - i. Access audits and work to enhance access where funds currently available – bid for further funding
  - j. Develop volunteer strategy and recruit additional volunteers
  - k. Deliver fibre broadband to Cannock Chase CP
  - l. Deer safety project and callout
27. The proposals have been considered by Prosperous Staffordshire Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meetings in February and October 2022. The Committee supported the proposals and requested that greater consideration be given to nature recovery including the potential for rewilding, and to explore opportunities for renewable energy generation on the estate where appropriate. These issues have been addressed in the proposals now presented.

### **Legal Implications**

28. There are no significant legal implications to the proposals. The retention of an in-house model significantly reduces pressure on limited capacity in legal services which would be required for other management options.

### **Resource and Value for Money Implications**

29. There are no MTFS commitments linked to these proposals. The MTFS commitment of £496,000 has been met through the restructure of the Environment and Countryside Service, completed in 2022.
30. Given the pressures on Council budgets, no additional funding from internal budgets is being requested at this stage. Instead, it is proposed that the new vision for the countryside estate will be resourced by:
- a. Securing grants and external funding. – Existing grants are already received via Countryside Stewardship for habitat management, and targeted grants for species recovery work. There are further opportunities through lottery, AONB, rural development, levelling up

- and other sources. Availability of funds may impact on delivery of some actions, but some are scalable to resources available meaning that progress can be made in many areas.
- b. Developer contributions – funds have been secured for several sites where nearby developments will significantly increase footfall on country parks and where this may have an impact on the site’s environmental quality or infrastructure, including at Chasewater and Apedale Country Parks. For Cannock Chase, Cabinet has previously agreed a significant programme of protection measures funded by developer contributions which will help manage increasing visitor pressure on protected habitats resulting from an increased population.
  - c. Income from leases, licences and concessions which complement the park offer – e.g. cafes and catering, use of buildings and facilities. It is essential that income generated on the sites is retained by the service and reinvested in site management and operation.
  - d. Costs recovered through pay & display car parking – the Countryside Act enables local authorities to charge for car parking at country parks. It requires that any surplus funds be ring fenced to be reinvested in the management of the park. Pay & display already operates successfully at Chasewater Country Park and at two locations on Cannock Chase. It is proposed that the existing and established pay and display approach be extended to five sites in the north of the county over the next two years, and at further locations on Cannock Chase in line with the previously agreed Cannock Chase protection programme.
  - e. Donations, supporter scheme, crowd funding and sponsorship – there may be opportunities through the supporter scheme and by linking with local communities and businesses to raise funds to support particular park improvements.
31. Should additional SCC funding be required for specific larger-scale projects, a business case proposal will be developed and considered through the appropriate processes under the scheme of delegation. This is likely to be required for improvements at Cannock Chase and Chasewater Country Parks.

### **Climate Change Implications**

32. Generally, the proposals will have a positive impact by supporting climate mitigation and net zero and also contributing to climate adaptation. Greening the service by using moving to low carbon vehicles, plant and equipment will reduce its carbon footprint, and opportunities for renewable energy generation at the sites would also reduce dependency on fossil fuels and contribute to net zero. Greater focus on sustainability in procurement contracts for catering can also reduce both carbon footprint and wider use of resources. Habitat management at countryside

sites will support increased carbon sequestration and natural flood management by intercepting rainfall and increasing infiltration. Forming part of the nature recovery network, the habitats will also support wildlife in adapting to the impacts of climate change through increased habitat connectivity, enabling species to move and find suitable conditions. The sites also provide opportunities to promote community awareness and action for climate change and sustainability, including both climate mitigation and also adaptation.

33. Increases in use of the sites may mean more car use which could have a negative impact. However, provision of electric charging points at larger sites could support uptake of electric vehicles. Much of the promotion will also be targeted to local communities to help them connect to local sites, which may be in walking distance. The promotion of trails and greenways which enable people to access the countryside without a car will also be a focus.
34. It is important to note that climate change will impact on the sites and service. The increase in wildfires is already evident, as is the impact of increased storms on infrastructure and trees. Extreme heat places huge pressure on habitats and also increases risks of safety issues for the public such as water safety. Increased shading at visitor hot spots is being looked at. The impacts on wildlife are also likely to increase, with increasing risks of plant and animal diseases and pressures on some species which may not be able to adapt to changing conditions.

### **Community Impact Assessment**

35. The Community Impact Assessment for the new vision for the countryside estate is presented in appendix 2. The proposals represent a generally positive impact since they seek to enhance the ability for all members of the community to gain the benefits of access to natural greenspace and to protect and enhance the environment.
36. To implement these improvements however, there is a need to recover costs through extending pay and display parking to additional sites. Recognising current cost of living pressures for many service users, a range of measures have been identified to reduce impacts, including:
  - a. Meters will not be installed at new sites until after the current winter period when people's household costs may be high.
  - b. Charges at new sites will be phased in, with an initial voluntary period for a few months.
  - c. Charges at existing sites will remain at the current rate until April 2024. These charges (£1 for up to 2 hours; £3 per day and £36 for an

annual permit) compare favourably with other countryside locations in the area which can charge £3 up to an hour and £8 per day.

d. An annual permit will be available for use at all SCC countryside sites which significantly reduces the cost (to less than 10 pence per day) for people using the sites regularly.

37. Annual permits for those who regularly volunteer at the sites and members of the supporter scheme are also being explored.

38. It is important to note that the costs recovered through parking charges will enable better management of the car park facilities and investment in the management of the sites, including making them more accessible for all abilities, caring for wildlife and heritage and improving the visitor experience.

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

Appendix 1 – Countryside Estate Delivery Plan 2022-6

Appendix 2 - Community Impact Assessment

### **Contact Details**

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