

Local Members' Interest
N/A

## **Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee – 18 December 2014**

### **Countryside Estate Management Review**

#### **Recommendation/s**

1. That the Committee debates the proposed approach for reviewing the management arrangements for the countryside estate.
2. That the Committee agrees the adoption of the proposed critical success factors.

#### **Report of Mark Winnington Cabinet Member for Economy, Environment and Transport**

#### **Summary**

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

3. The county council is reviewing its existing arrangements for managing the countryside estate. The Review is part of the wider vision to create a connected Staffordshire where everyone has the opportunity to prosper, be healthy and happy. The Project is still at an early stage of development and this is an opportunity for Members to discuss the proposals and to influence and shape the Project.
4. The Select Committee's comments will be reported to Cabinet so that they can be taken into account in their consideration of any proposed new delivery options for managing the countryside estate.

#### **Background**

##### **Overview**

5. The county council owns a large diverse countryside estate. This helps to make a significant contribution to many of its priorities, including enabling people to lead a healthy lifestyle benefitting both their physical and mental well-being and providing opportunities to enhance their skills, and in some cases employment potential, through volunteering opportunities. Alongside the main country parks, the estate also comprises a number of smaller sites. While the main country parks are very popular and make a significant contribution to the county council's wider priorities, the smaller sites tend to be more of a local recreational asset. As such, these smaller sites have more limited potential to support the county council's wider priorities but they still have to be managed to meet legal liabilities and obligations.

6. The Project aims to identify and establish a range of alternative delivery models for managing the estate, ensuring its long-term sustainability and ensuring that it delivers a range of important health, social and economic outcomes for Staffordshire's residents.

### **The Existing Management Arrangements**

7. The county council owns and manages a large countryside estate totalling about 6000 acres. This estate comprises six large country parks, nine picnic areas, a number of smaller sites and 3 disused railway lines. All of the country parks have protected habitats and sites. Cannock Chase Country Park is the largest country park and is designated a Special Area of Conservation, lying within the Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Please see the attached map showing the principal sites (Appendix A).

8. Most of the sites are located on the fringe of urban development and provide a significant resource for outdoor recreation. Also many sites have had a previous industrial use and considerable investment has been made to transform them and return them to the community as the valued assets that they are today.

9. Owning and managing countryside sites are discretionary. However, having assumed ownership of the sites, the county council is responsible for a wide range of statutory duties and obligations. In many cases the county council was bequeathed sites on the basis that they are held in trust on behalf of and for the use of the people of Staffordshire.

10. The management of the countryside estate is mostly delivered in-house by the Ranger Service and the Countryside Works Unit. Most of the maintenance work on the estate is carried out by the in-house Works Unit with a significant contribution from local communities and volunteers. External contractors are only employed for large-scale woodland management and engineering works.

11. The Ranger Service and Works Unit are supported by the Environmental Advice team as and when required. Their support is crucial to the successful management of some sites particularly those with protected habitats and features. Their active management of these protected sites generates about £185,000 per annum of external funding through Higher Level Stewardship schemes, helping to offset some of the estate's operating costs.

12. In light of the close working relationship between the Countryside Estate team and the Environmental Advice team any impact of any changes to the delivery of country parks on the environmental specialists will also need to be carefully considered.

13. Both activities are within the scope of the Infrastructure+ project. It is essential therefore that any decisions about the future delivery of these activities are not made in isolation and are also considered in conjunction with this Review.

### **Why not continue with our existing management arrangements?**

14. The business drivers for reviewing our existing management arrangements are detailed below.

15. **Financial:** The funding available for managing the countryside estate has been reduced over the last few years but further savings still need to be achieved. Although every effort is made to offset some of the operating costs by income generation, the net

cost is still estimated to be in the region of £1.2m per annum. So far, the financial savings targets have been met through a range of approaches, such as re-structures, a streamlining of processes and procedures and an increasing use of volunteers. However, the ability to meet future financial pressures through equivalent changes is limited. Without a fundamental reshape of the management of the estate, future savings can only be achieved by a reduction in service quality.

**16. Changing Demands and Needs:** Changing visitor demands and expectations are also adding to financial pressures. Over the last few years, there has been a sustained rise in the number, and also profile, of visitors, particularly to the six main country parks. Visits are no longer seasonal. This increased all-year round use is increasing site maintenance and cleaning costs. Also because of demographic changes like the increase in the number of people aged 65 and over, more elderly and retired people are visiting country parks with different needs. This and other similar demographic changes have led to changing demands, for example more easily accessible routes, which also have budgetary implications.

**17. Outcome-based Commissioning:** Aside from the financial imperative, the introduction of the Commissioning Framework in early 2013 changed the county council's approach to the delivery of services, including developing new ways of providing what people want and need which may not be directly through the County Council.

**18. Partnership Working & Better Outcomes:** Soft market testing has indicated that there is an appetite amongst landowners such as some District Councils, the RSPB and the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust to collaboratively manage some sites. It is felt that better outcomes for Staffordshire's residents and nature conservation, and also savings, could be made through developing partnership management arrangements with other landowners, local communities and volunteers. Developing the green space provision across the whole of Staffordshire, particularly that close to the urban areas could make a significant contribution to the county council's priorities of better health and "well-being" and also help with prosperity.

19. Local communities and volunteers have been closely involved with the management and maintenance of the countryside estate for many years and their input is the lynchpin to the successful management of the countryside estate, particularly the smaller sites.

**20. Market Changes:** Market changes have seen a growth within the private sector in the delivery of public services. The County Council is currently working towards establishing a strategic partnership with AMEY for the delivery of some of its services, including the maintenance of its country parks. The management of the country parks could also be included within the scope of this project.

### **Existing Insight**

21. The Project is still at the Initiation/ Feasibility Stage but it will be structured around the county council's commissioning principles. A proposed timeline for the Project is attached at Appendix B.

22. Some scoping work has already been carried out which will underpin the Project and in some cases, help to identify alternative delivery models for managing the countryside estate.

- A report which looked into the feasibility of transferring the ownership of countryside sites to the “Big Society” for example to charitable organisations was prepared by the county council’s Policy and Performance team in 2011. One of the key findings of the report and of particular relevance to this Review is that transferring ownership of all of the countryside estate would have significant cost implications. Most of the sites have a negative land value. Transferring ownership to a single or multiple providers would not result in any capital gain but would require the county council to provide a dowry as a necessary incentive. For those sites with liabilities such as reservoirs and dams the dowry could be significant.
- A desk top assessment of the countryside estate was carried out in 2011 (recently updated) which included a cost-benefit analysis of each site. The assessment categorised the sites into 3 main groups: those which meet the county council’s wider aims, those which provide valuable access to local green space, but are incapable of supporting other core ambitions and those which have little or no public benefit in terms of outdoor recreation and could be disposed of. Two of the sites identified within this category have been sold.
- Some insight about the countryside estate has also been gathered as part of the processes linked to the Infrastructure+ and Chasewater Country Park Projects which will also provide relevant insight for this Project. It is anticipated that further insight and consultation with stakeholders will be a major component of the overall project.

## **Potential Options**

23. We know from recent discussions and past experience that there is an appetite amongst the private, public and third sector to collaboratively manage the green space provision county wide. This desire in some cases stems not only from a need to realise savings but also, to improve the “public offer” and capitalise on the social return on investment.

24. Alternative arrangements are likely to include collaborative management with other landowners or local community groups, a strategic partnership with a private sector company such as AMEY, transferring one or more of the sites to a third sector organisation or employment of a Community Interest Company. It is not envisaged that the delivery models will be mutually exclusive. For example, on some sites, particularly the main country parks, a combination of models could be used.

## **Next Steps**

25. While we know from recent discussions and past experience that there is an appetite amongst partners, local communities and volunteers to become involved in the management of the countryside estate, the extent or willingness of that involvement has not yet been tested and further discussions are required. The next step is to engage with all internal and external stakeholders to obtain a more definitive response to establishing joint management arrangements and also, to develop a range of alternative delivery models for managing the countryside estate, and possibly other green space sites within the county. This formal engagement will be supported by the Customer insight team.

26. We need to ensure that any new management arrangements focus on the delivery of outcomes rather than outputs. Given that the Service area is in scope for the

Infrastructure+ Project which is outcome-focussed, it is proposed at this stage to use similar core objectives and Critical Success Factors (CSFs) as agreed for that Project, and the Connected Libraries Project. The core objectives are therefore likely to be:

- To maintain and improve the condition and usability of the country parks;
- To reduce the cost of delivering the Service;
- To involve communities in decisions and delivery of the country parks;
- To improve customer satisfaction in Staffordshire County Council and to enhance its reputation.

27. The Critical Success Factors to be used as the basis for evaluating any alternative delivery models identified for managing the countryside estate are likely to be:

- Increased value and prosperity for Staffordshire through a positive impact to SCC outcomes.
- A customer focussed service which enhances customer satisfaction and the reputation of the Council
- Financially sustainable and resilient services
- The flexibility to meet changing future demands through innovation and development

These Critical Success Factors will need to be developed in more detail at a later stage to ensure that any new management arrangements deliver the required outcomes.

28. The Select Committee's comments on this approach are sought.

29. It is anticipated that public consultation on any new delivery models for managing the countryside estate will commence at beginning of April 2015. The purpose of this exercise is to gain additional information and insight to inform the next stages and again, will be supported by the Customer Insight Team.

30. Any proposed changes to the existing management arrangements of the Countryside Estate may impact on employment. All staff affected by the Review and their Trade Union representatives have been briefed; engagement and full consultation, where required, will continue to take place on an ongoing basis as proposals are developed.

**Link to Strategic Plan** – The successful management of the countryside estate contributes to the county council's wider vision to create a connected Staffordshire where everyone has the opportunity to prosper, be healthy and happy. As part of the achievement of that vision, there is a need for continual review to develop new and different ways of working to achieve outcomes with fewer resources.

**Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity** – The Select Committee has played a key role in both the Infrastructure+ and Chasewater projects.

**Community Impact** - A full community impact assessment will be completed as part of the Project.

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**Appendices/Background papers****Appendix A – Map of Principal Sites****Appendix B – Project Timeline**