

Local Members' Interest

N/A

Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee – 3rd March 2017

Progress on the Countryside Estate

Recommendations

1. That the Committee notes the progress to date in identifying the most viable management arrangement for each site with the Countryside Estate Review.
2. That the Committee debates the proposed approaches for involving Scrutiny, local members and local member groups in the future management arrangements for both large and small sites.
3. That the Committee approves the steps the County Council is taking in the interim to offset operating costs.

Report of Cllr Mark Winnington, Cabinet Member for Economic Growth

Summary

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

4. The Select Committee has previously been involved in and influenced the Review into the future management of the countryside estate. This report is being submitted to update the Select Committee on the progress to date, including Cabinet's decision to adopt Select Committee's recommendation (paragraph 6).
5. The processes for Scrutiny and local member involvement are described within the report and it's asked that you comment / debate on the suggested approach.

Report

6. At the May 2016 meeting the Committee debated and agreed the proposed approach for developing the detailed management arrangements and for selecting the most appropriate partner or partners for each countryside site. Because of the diverse nature of the sites, it was never envisaged that a single option would be suitable for managing all the countryside sites. The approach to find the best solution for each site was described in two stages: firstly, to find the best management option for each site and secondly by selecting the most appropriate partner or partners to work with on the site.
7. At the May 2016 meeting the Committee also agreed to support the Scheme of Delegation for selecting the preferred partner and management arrangements for each countryside site set out in paragraph 9.

8. In summary, the county council will need to undertake financial checks on any interested partner organisations and this would form part of any appointment and due diligence process. The county council needs to be clear when setting out the limits of what can be achieved by any organisation i.e. catering provisions at Marquis Drive at Cannock Chase Country Park which is commissioned by the county council from Entrust Support Services Ltd. Another issue is the Higher Level Stewardship Agreements which affect Cannock Chase, Apedale and Norton Bog/Anglesey Basin. Natural England must be notified of any transfer of land which would include the lease of any land and consider that the continuity of management of the land is important. Natural England will therefore be a key stakeholder in the proposals relating to the Cannock Chase, Apedale and Norton Bog/Anglesey Basin.
9. In June 2016 Cabinet agreed the following;
 - a. The proposals to redefine and reshape the management of the Countryside Estate based on the outcome of the full public consultation exercise and full Community Impact Assessment.
 - b. The broad proposals/principles around how the authority will write the specific business cases for each site.
 - c. The final decision on each site is delegated to the Cabinet Member on a site-by-site basis without the need to go back to Cabinet each time. The only exception to this is Cannock Chase Country Park and Chasewater Country Park. It was agreed that any decisions relating to these two larger parks would require Cabinet approval.

Progress to Date

10. In October 2016 two information days were held. The purpose of these was to test:-
 - a. the appetite for a partnership arrangement on sites
 - b. the appetite for partner/s taking on the management of a/some/all sites
 - c. The appetite for delivering some on-site services or maintenance tasks e.g. general groundwork, mowing, fencing.
11. The information days also provided information about the next stages of the process for submitting an Expression of Interest (EOI) to take over a site/s.
12. All existing and potential partners were invited to the Information Days which provided an ideal opportunity to build relationships and give partners an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the management activities on each site.
13. There were forty attendees to the southern information day and thirty-five in the north. All feedback was positive and there appeared to be a lot of interest, particularly in the smaller sites.

14. All attendees were offered a one-to-one meeting on the day with Ian Wykes and Emma Beaman to discuss any management proposals further. Seven of these were held in total.
15. Following the information days presentations on the review have been conducted at various parish councils and community group meetings. In addition, there have been a large amount of meetings with individuals, groups and organisations.
16. On December 2nd 2016 the EOI forms were put onto an online portal, enabling organisations to register an interest. The deadline for EOI submission is March 17th 2017.
17. On the 18th January the Cabinet Member briefed Cllr Susan Woodward both as Leader of the Opposition and as local member, on the proposals so far, particularly in regard to parking at Chasewater.

Next Steps

18. After 17 March, a panel will assess EOIs, conduct detailed dialogue with interested organisations (if needed), carry out due diligence on the organisations and finally put together a business case for each site. This will then lead to a process of informing local councillors during May / June 2017.
19. The review is being aligned with the Rights of Way review. Both reviews will require a new staffing structure and working practises being in place by March 31st 2018.
20. Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee to be provided with the opportunity to advise on the business case supporting significant change to the six large country parks prior to consideration by Cabinet or delegated decision.

HR Implications

21. All staff involved, directly or indirectly, with the management of the countryside estate will be affected by 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 be consulted upon during the consultation phase of the process.

MTFS

22. The Review aims to deliver MTFS savings of £50,000 in 2017/18 rising to £250,000 by 2020/21 and an additional £100,000 in 2020/21. Future savings will be made once the new management arrangements plans are in place, but it is not known yet what these will be. The point of this next stage in the Review is to find the best management arrangement for each site which, in turn, will determine how much is saved.

Steps taken in the interim to offset operating costs

23. In the interim steps are being taken to ensure MTFs savings are made. These include freezing posts whilst the review is being carried out and ensuring value for money on all essential purchases
24. 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.
25. In relation to paragraph 20 car parking charges are currently being investigated and a business case being produced at Chasewater and Marquis Drive. It is envisaged that Chasewater would be installed before Marquis Drive. Due to the proximity of the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) to Marquis Drive a Habitat Regulation's assessment is required to ensure the car parking will not have a negative impact on the SAC. Aligned with this is the production of a carpark strategy with all land owners in and around Cannock Chase. This will allow us to determine the best possible outcome for car parking going forward with minimal impact on the SAC. It is envisaged that the Car Parking Strategy work will commence by a consultant in April 2017.

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

Community Impact – A full CIA has been produced and is included in the background papers.

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Appendices

Community Impact Assessment

Appendix A – Timeline

Background papers:

- Car Parking Strategy – Cabinet Report – 17th June 2015:
<http://moderngov.staffordshire.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=123&MId=5528&Ver=4>
- Countryside Estate Review Part Two – Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Report – 24th May 2016:
<http://moderngov.staffordshire.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=868&MId=6583&Ver=4>