

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Decision Report

Decision Maker:	Executive Member Culture, Recreation and Countryside
Date:	7 December 2017
Title:	Future Management of the Countryside Estate
Report From:	Director of Culture, Communities and Business Services

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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to seek approval for the outline proposals for the future management of the Countryside Estate.
- 1.2. These proposals form part of the Countryside Operational Transformation referenced in the recent Transformation to 2019 - Revenue Savings Proposals report to the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside. In addition the main elements of this report were presented at a full Members Briefing on 27 September 2017.
- 1.3. This paper focusses on the operational transformation programme for the Countryside Estate. It does not include specific reference to countryside access or parks transformation other than reference to cross service opportunities.
- 1.4. Whilst the Basingstoke Canal forms part of the Countryside Estate this report does not have any bearing on the strategy for the management of the Canal which is subject to a separate report. In practice the proposals identified in this report have been shared with the Basingstoke Canal team and there will be continued information sharing to maximise the learning and capitalise on transformation opportunities.
- 1.5. The report sets out the main opportunities to achieve the 2019 savings target under three key themes of transformation namely: improving productivity, generating income and alternative delivery models.

2. Contextual information

- 2.1. Hampshire has one of the richest and most diverse wildlife of any county in the UK from the internationally designated Solent Maritime SAC (Special Area for Conservation) in the South to the Thames Basin Heaths SPA (Special Protection Area) in the North of the County. It also boasts two National Parks within the county boundary.

- 2.2. Hampshire County Council is a significant landowner in the county with approximately 3,000 hectares of land owned by Hampshire County Council and managed by the Countryside Service. In total there are 60 sites dispersed across Hampshire and located in all districts except Rushmoor. These countryside sites range from large National Nature Reserves such as Lymington Keyhaven National Nature Reserve, to smaller more local green spaces such as Strawberry Fields.
- 2.3. In addition to the land that HCC own there are eight sites that are leased and managed by the Countryside Service. Equally there are four sites that are leased from the Countryside Service and managed by local community groups and Parish Councils. We also have a number of agreements with partner organisations to manage land on their behalf or jointly.
- 2.4. Over sixty percent of sites are recognised as being nationally important for their biological or geographical interest and are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This affords them with a level of protection from damage and requires a certain management regime to keep them in favourable condition. Within this portfolio of sites we also manage 12 Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAMs) or registered heritage sites.
- 2.5. As well as providing valuable habitats for a wide range of wildlife almost all of the countryside sites are publicly accessible and enjoyed by millions of people every year. They make a valuable contribution to making Hampshire a special place that people wish to visit, stay, work and live in.
- 2.6. A number of changes have been made to combine teams, reduce some activity and maximise the income we currently receive to manage the Countryside Estate. We have also tested some different working arrangements to provide some confidence in the proposals. Over the past year we have carried out an internal review of all of our sites considering the current management practice, the resource requirements and the potential of each of the sites in our current ownership and management.
- 2.7. Currently it costs a total of £950,000 to manage the Countryside Estate, of which £350,000 is income (the vast majority of this income is through agri-environment grants).
- 2.8. As part of the Countryside Service Transformation to 2019 plans, a savings target of £80,000 has been set for the Countryside Estate management, as a contribution to the overall Service savings target of £640,000.
- 2.9. The approach to the future management of the Countryside Estate is seen as a long term model that will be able to contribute to future savings targets as well as respond to the impact of changes to agri-environment funding as a result of Brexit.

3. Transformation to 2019 and beyond

- 3.1. A combination of opportunities will be required to achieve the savings target and transform the way that we currently deliver services related to the management of countryside sites.
- 3.2. This report focusses on the main elements of transformation that fall into three key themes:-
 - a. Improving productivity
 - b. Generating income
 - c. Alternative delivery models

Improving productivity

- 3.3. Volunteers play a very important role in the management of the countryside sites. Currently the level of contribution volunteers make is approximately 2,000 days which is 15% of the total days across the Countryside Service. The use of volunteers varies across the teams with a clear opportunity for increasing the targeted use of volunteers and volunteer skills to assist with the management of the countryside across the county.
- 3.4. Improvements to operational bases are required to enable officers to work more flexibly. Many of the offices and depots have poor connection, limited access to devices (tablets, computers, laptops) resulting in low productivity. Whilst the Country Park Transformation Programme will tackle some of the offices shared with the sites management teams there are a number of other locations that will require investment.
- 3.5. The Countryside Service is one of the leading proponents of how being more digitally enabled will result in increased productivity, better customer service and cost savings. The Countryside Service is working with IT to implement a plan of improving connectivity and will be developing the right digital solutions working with the corporate Enabling Productivity Programme and Digital 2 programme.

Generating income

- 3.6. There has been a reliance on the funding received from agri-environment schemes for the management of the Countryside Estate. This has been based on twin pillars of farm based subsidies with requirements for good environment management and targeted actions for which there was a contribution. There is likely to be a transition from this approach to a single or alternative payment system based on a wider range of environmental improvements.
- 3.7. The Countryside Service is fortunate that the estate portfolio comprises a high proportion of quality sites and has clear access and recreation objectives which will mean we are likely to benefit from the new schemes.

- 3.8. However, we are preparing for a significant reduction in agri-environment funding so other forms of funding will be necessary to meet our site maintenance obligations.
- 3.9. A significant volume of new housing, with associated infrastructure, is planned for Hampshire over the next 15 years. The Countryside Service has the expertise and capacity to manage the green infrastructure specifically created to meet the growing needs of new communities. There are a few examples of where this is already working successfully and we are considering new agreements where the cost/benefit is favourable.
- 3.10. Due to the extent and scale of the estate there is also an opportunity to help meet the mitigation requirements arising from development. Examples of the type of mitigation include species translocation sites and the provision of green space and facilities to meet increasing demand for recreation. The Countryside Service has a number of these agreements in place but there is potential to increase this income stream by having a clearer strategy, in collaboration with departments across HCC, for a more joined up and effective offer.
- 3.11. The top three preferred options in a recent public consultation on the County Council budget included generating additional income (73%) and introducing and increasing charges (45%). Mindful of this we propose to investigate charging for car parking at carefully selected locations to develop a vital source of new income that will replace some of the grant income to enable continued site maintenance. Remoteness and car park capacity along with operational considerations will determine suitability of charging. A careful, considered approach will be required to ensure that local communities and users understand the need for introducing these charges. Through sensitive pricing policies we can minimise the impact on individuals whilst still generating unrestricted funding necessary to achieve the savings and meet the shortfall as a result of a reduction in grant aid.

Alternative delivery models

- 3.12. The majority of the land the Countryside Service manages is owned by Hampshire County Council. Much of this land is specially designated either internationally or nationally for its importance to nature conservation and almost all the sites are regularly visited and enjoyed by the public.
- 3.13. There are certain obligations that must be met and that govern the way that these sites are managed and maintained. A review of the way that we currently carry out this work has shown that there are some opportunities to reduce or change this level of delivery, in order to make some financial efficiencies, without any significant impact on either the biodiversity objectives or the visitor enjoyment of the sites.
- 3.14. A standard set of Care and Quality criteria has been developed that helps us to prioritise our work and to seek alternative methods of delivery where the opportunity arises.

- 3.15. We are exploring the potential for a range of partnership and collaborative working arrangements with other organisations that have similar objectives. This may result in new partnership agreements or the leasing of sites to community groups, trusts or other authorities and agencies.
- 3.16. The sites that will be suitable for an alternative management approach will be those with limited prospects to generate the income required to cover maintenance costs. Other organisations may have access to income streams beyond the reach of the County Council that could provide a contribution to the long term sustainable management of sites.
- 3.17. In addition there may be sites that do not meet the core objectives of the Countryside Service or the County Council and therefore might be suitable for disposal. Any release of land would reduce the County Council liability and have a positive impact on the financial obligations of the Countryside Service. The criteria by which any sites would be considered for disposal would necessarily ensure that the existing public benefit and conservation value would be assured. Any proposals of this nature, along with the relevant criteria, would be subject to support from the Executive Member for Culture Recreation and Countryside and approval by the Executive Member for Policy and Resources.
- 3.18. Currently the Countryside Service lease eight sites that are often subject to existing agreements. It is proposed that these are reviewed to ensure that they are achieving the best value for money and do not present a financial burden to Hampshire County Council. Similarly we propose to review existing partnership agreements along the same lines.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1. This combination of proposals will contribute to the Countryside Service savings target for 2019 and pave the way for further savings that may be necessary beyond 2019. The current savings target for the Countryside Service is £640k with the stretch target of a further £60k taking the total to £700k. The Countryside Operational Transformation Programme is expected to make a contribution of £160k which comprises £80k from the proposals affecting the management of the countryside Estate.
- 4.2. The successful implementation of these proposals will also be necessary to mitigate against the inevitable reduction in grant income from agri-environment schemes which currently account for 85% of the total income generated by land under the management of the Countryside Service.
- 4.3. The aim of these proposals to increase the proportion external funding makes to the Countryside Service cash limit. This presents a marked change to a more business focussed approach to site management. Over the past two years the teams have been focussing on work planning and better understanding the costs and benefits of their work. This has enabled the Service to fully appreciate the opportunities for improving the way we work, and how to exploit the assets we have, to realise the necessary costs savings and generate income.

5. Performance

- 5.1. Hampshire County Council Countryside Service has a long held reputation for good conservation management. This is supported by annual assessments carried out by Natural England that indicate we consistently perform better, with regards to the management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest, against the national average. 46% of sites are in favourable condition and the ambition of this transformation is to maintain that and reduce the costs through greater productivity and prioritised, effective delivery.

6. Workforce implications

- 6.1. There is currently 16.5 full time equivalent staff directly involved in land management in the Countryside Service.
- 6.2. It is anticipated that the successful implementation of this transformation will result in some capacity being released through improved productivity, greater use of digital tools and increased volunteering. This will result in existing staff being deployed in different ways e.g. delivering income generating or joint working arrangements rather than a reduction in staff numbers

7. Consultation

- 7.1. Specific consultation on these proposals have not be conducted however reference was made to the Countryside Operational Transformation in the open public consultation called Serving Hampshire - Balancing the Budget which ran for six weeks in the summer 2017.
- 7.2. The key findings from the consultation feedback indicated that of all the options presented, generating additional income was the most preferred option. In addition two thirds of the respondents agreed that the County Council should raise existing charges or introduce new charges to help cover the costs of running some local services.
- 7.3. The proposals set out in this report have been developed in line with this key findings by seeking to maximise income generation opportunities and minimise the impact of service delivery reduction through smarter working, volunteer use and effective partnerships. In some cases where there might be a discernible change to service delivery on a specific site or collection of sites, appropriate consultation, including with local members, will be undertaken.

8. Recommendation(s)

It is recommended that the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside:-

- 8.1. Approve the outline proposals for the future management of the countryside Estate in seeking an increase in income, operational efficiencies and alternative management options.

- 8.2. Agree to consider the relevant criteria for releasing sites from County Council management and/or ownership and those sites that meet the criteria at a future meeting.
- 8.3. Agree to consider a business case for introducing car park charging at specified sites at a future meeting.

CORPORATE OR LEGAL INFORMATION:**Links to the Strategic Plan**

Hampshire maintains strong and sustainable economic growth and prosperity:	Yes
People in Hampshire live safe, healthy and independent lives:	yes/no
People in Hampshire enjoy a rich and diverse environment:	Yes
People in Hampshire enjoy being part of strong, inclusive communities:	Yes

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents

The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)

Document

Location

None

IMPACT ASSESSMENTS:

1. Equality Duty

1.1 The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, gender and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

- a) The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant characteristic connected to that characteristic;
- b) Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- c) Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

1.2 Equalities Impact Assessment:

EIA completed EIA1162010 (currently with EIA co-ordinator)

[Link to EIA pages](#)

2. Impact on Crime and Disorder:

2.1. It is expected that these proposals will have a neutral impact on crime and disorder.

3. Climate Change:

3.1. It is expected that these proposals will have a net positive impact through sustainable management of the environment.