



Report to Overview and Scrutiny Commissioning Committee

Date: 10 November 2009

Title: An investigation into alternative means of managing country parks and green spaces

Contact Officer: Group Manager, Countryside and Heritage

Background

The County Council owns and manages several country parks and green spaces geographically spread throughout the county albeit the country parks are mainly situated in the south of the county. Despite the clear social benefits of the Authority supporting these areas they do represent a liability that is precariously funded and lacking in necessary investment.

Financial constraints on the Authority into the foreseeable future mean it is highly unlikely that additional funding will be found to either support the increasing running cost of the Country Parks and Green Spaces or provide much needed re-investment to meet increasing public expectations and demographic changes.

Narrative

The Authority has a long history of excellence in the provision of Parks and Green Spaces. The existing in-house service, called Countryside and Heritage, manages a portfolio of four Country Parks, and approximately 40 green spaces (see annex 1 for a list of sites and annex 2 for a plan showing their location, please note Quarrendon Leas is not owned or managed by the Authority and Thrift farm is not managed by C+H) the Countryside Estate.

The Countryside Estate fulfils three crucial roles:

- Informal outdoor public recreation. On small and large sites with a geographic spread across the county, (albeit all Country Parks are within the south of the county).
- Protection of bio-diversity, some of European importance.
- Protection of archaeology and some built heritage.

A Project has been set up which aims to set out options for the Authority to retain the social benefits of the Country Parks and Green Spaces and other services for Buckinghamshire while divesting itself of the liabilities. A change

of management model would enable re-investment in these facilities and services.

A Programme Board (see annex 3) representing a range of stakeholders has been established to investigate alternative means of managing the Country Parks and Green Spaces and will report to the Authorities Cabinet Member and Cabinet at appropriate times.

There are a number of potential management models, which will be considered:

- i. In house (status quo) but with greater freedoms.
- ii. Transfer to or contract with a/or a number of public sector organisations
- iii. Transfer to a public sector shared management model.
- iv. Transfer to a not for profit Trust. (A Trust could be local or national in scale, already within Bucks or neighbouring area).
- v. Transfer to a not for profit Trust specially created for the purpose.
- vi. All options shown above or a combination will be considered.

Expenditure on liabilities over the next 20 years

Whilst only preliminary work has been carried out investigating assets and liabilities, at this stage, initial studies indicate that there are a number of assets that are being under-funded creating the necessity for the potential of large sums of money to be found over the next twenty years.

The Project will further research the finance required to maintain the various properties (liabilities and their costs) for example further time will be spent refining costs, deciding whether savings can be made by transferring to another organisation but offsetting this with the likely and expected growth in the business prompted by additional development, particularly in the North of the County.

The current estimated Revenue budgets for 2009/10, including those managed by Property Services and including management overheads are summarised in the table below.

	Gross Expenditure £000	Income £000	Net Budget £000
Country Parks and Green Spaces	872	427	445

The Project is engaging with other organisations through a process known as Market Sounding to ascertain how they currently manage similar facilities. These organisations will need to demonstrate that they have the skills and experience in the management and development of public open space, including: countryside recreation and visitor services, biodiversity management, estates management, environmental education and community engagement. These will need to be matched with business skills and commercial acumen.

Cabinet and the Programme Board

The Programme Board has met three times. On the second occasion it met it asked that a report be compiled for Cabinet, the decision is set out below;

Cabinet received the report of the Cabinet Member for Planning and Environment outlining proposals for the nominated Programme Board to investigate how the Country Parks and Green Spaces should be managed and financed and that the Programme Board will bring a further report to Cabinet recommending a new model for the future management of the Country Parks and Green Spaces.

Recommendations:

1. To agree for the nominated Programme Board to investigate how the Country Parks and Green Spaces should be managed and financed.
2. To provide advice to the Programme Board and devolve the signing off of the Project Initiation Document to the Board.
3. That the Programme Board will bring a further report to Cabinet recommending a new model for the future management of the Country Parks and Green Spaces.

RESOLVED

Cabinet agreed the recommendations of the Cabinet Member for Planning and Environment.

The Programme Board has subsequently met and agreed the Project Initiation Document (PID) and also signed off the project timetable and Communications Strategy (see annex 4).

Project Timetable

The project timetable extends to October 2010 when potentially the service could be handed over to a single organisation or several organisations. The decision whether to do this would be taken in March 2010, after consultation and due process, and there would follow a six month mobilisation period running up to October 2010. Dependant on which organisation/s are chosen it is possible that the timetable may need to be extended to March 2011.

Communications

The Communications Strategy will be both inwardly and outwardly facing and aims to provide clear, open, honest and timely communications in all phases of the Project and to particularly ensure that communities living near the Country Parks and Green Spaces have full opportunity to engage in the process.

The Cabinet Member and the Programme Board welcome the opportunity to communicate with the Overview and Scrutiny Commissioning Committee (OSCC) and with their approval would be prepared to return to provide further updates.

Further background information on Countryside and Heritage Services can be found at;

www.buckscc.gov.uk/leisure/parks

Recommendation

The OSC Committee is recommended to;

- 1. NOTE the report, Cabinet decision and stage to date of the Project.**
- 2. PROVIDE any views at this stage to the Programme Board.**
- 3. CONSIDER how the OSC Committee would like to be involved with or kept informed about the Project.**