

Committee	Cabinet
Date	1 May 2007
Report By	Director of Transport and Environment
Title of Report	Scrutiny Review of Countryside Management
Purpose of Report	To advise Cabinet on an appropriate response to the report of the Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Cabinet is recommended to:

- 1. note and welcome the report of the Scrutiny Committee; and**
 - 2. advise the County Council that in considering the report of the Scrutiny Committee, the Council be recommended to welcome the recommendations as set out in the report and to endorse the response of the Director of Transport and Environment as set out in the appendix to this report.**
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1. Financial Implications

- 1.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the report

2 Background

2.1 Many local authorities at county, district or unitary level support countryside management services which provide support and assistance to the public seeking recreation in the countryside, while working closely with landowners and helping to conserve and enhance the wildlife, archaeological and cultural resources of the countryside. These services operate within specific designated sites as well as across the broader countryside.

2.2 The County Council has operated a Countryside Management Service (CMS) for some thirty years. In 1992 its biggest site (Seven Sisters Country Park) and a range of other countryside management functions within the Downs were delegated to the newly established Sussex Downs Conservation Board for management purposes. The CMS now manages 15 sites outside the Downs – a mix of country parks, local nature reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (some have several such designations). Some are owned by the County Council, others are managed by the authority on behalf of other landowners.

2.3 There is no statutory responsibility on the local authority specifically to provide a CMS but the service does assist the authority in discharging a range of statutory functions, including the conservation of biodiversity. Also, where sites are owned or managed by the authority, that in itself brings liabilities and a duty of care. The CMS comprises a small, highly professional and dedicated group of staff but the financial and other resources available to them have been extremely limited. There is no doubt that the service contributes to the achievement of a wide range of County Council objectives: promoting healthier living (for example, through leading and organising guided walks and cycle rides) and targeting younger people, older people and black and minority ethnic groups in many of its activities. However, the pattern of sites owned or managed by the County Council does not give the appearance of a coherent master plan for achieving these objectives: while some of our sites undoubtedly provide an important local service it is not always clear how they meet any strategic need.

2.4 It is for this reason that the Scrutiny Committee was invited to consider the current approach to countryside management with a view to providing a steer on the overall strategy for taking on, managing and disposing of sites.

3. Conclusions

3.1 The department has very much welcomed the Scrutiny Review and the vigour and enthusiasm which the Board has displayed in pursuing its investigations.

3.2 I also very much welcome the overall conclusion that the CMS provides an important range of services and clearly merits the County Council's support. There are a number of recommendations from the review, aimed at bringing a greater strategic vision and coherence to the service, as well as achieving improvement to service delivery and improved financial sustainability. My detailed responses to each recommendation are set out in the appendix.

BOB WILKINS

Director of Transport and Environment

27 MARCH 2007

CABINET 1 MAY 2007 – SCRUTINY REVIEW OF COUNTRYSIDE MANAGEMENT

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Scrutiny Review of Countryside Management – March 2007

Appendix 1

	Recommendations from Scrutiny Review	Response of Director
1	If a countryside site is acquired by the County Council in mitigation for any development or highway then provision for both the immediate and ongoing environmental management must be identified at the outset (paragraphs 3.1, 3.4).	Agreed. This has been the principle on which sites have come into the CMS portfolio but, with the passage of time and ongoing budget reductions between an initial development decision and the handover of a site to the CMS, it may be difficult to identify additional resources.
2	The Environment Division and Countryside Management Service should fully explore the scope to expand income generation activity at countryside sites including: introducing or increasing car parking charges, promoting commercial enterprises at sites such as cafés and shops, and reviewing leases of properties to maximise income (paragraph 3.3).	Agreed. This will need to have regard to environmental and other constraints on individual sites.
3	The Countryside Management Service should aim to ensure that sites it manages on behalf of external landowners are at worst 'cost neutral' to the County Council (paragraph 3.4).	Generally agreed. However there are some sites of countywide significance in terms of wildlife where, in previous years, a County Council contribution has been felt to be appropriate alongside other partnership contributions. With ever increasing pressures on the County Council's environmental budgets, it may be appropriate to reduce the County Council's contributions and seek improved gearing.
4	The County Council should not designate any further local nature reserves unless the full resource and other implications for the Council are identified in advance (paragraph 3.7).	Agreed. Very few have been designated in recent years and this is the approach that has been adopted
5	The Environment Division and Countryside Management Service should include effective marketing and publicity as an integral part of its work to ensure that the public are aware of the County Council's involvement in countryside management and to promote active use of the sites to those who would benefit (paragraph 3.10).	Agreed. However, with increasing pressures on environmental budgets in recent years, it has frequently been the resources available in marketing and publicity that have been reduced in order to protect basic maintenance. Through improved internal co-ordination and external partnerships, we are seeking to improve our delivery in this area. Increased County Council "branding" of sites will need to be balanced

		against the need to encourage partnership contributions and community involvement.
6	Countryside site management functions should be consolidated within the Countryside Management Service rather than lying under different management heads within the Environment Division (paragraph 3.15).	There is one significant site managed within a different Group within the Environment Division. This is the Rye Harbour Local Nature Reserve, the most important wildlife site in the county and line-managed by the County Ecologist. There may or may not be advantages in transferring line-management responsibilities for this site to the CMS though this was not explored in detail during the Scrutiny Review. The issue is under active consideration and the views of the Rye Harbour Local Nature Reserve Committee and very supportive Friends group will be consulted before any changes are implemented.
7	Where a local site demonstrates exceptional success in generating local volunteer support and funding, the Council should consider negotiating a reduction in its direct support and redirect resources elsewhere; care must be exercised so as not to threaten the sustainability of the site nor to give the impression that the status of the site is being downgraded (paragraphs 3.4, 3.19).	Agreed, though the provisos contained within the recommendation are important. In each case we will need to assess the resources required to manage the site.
8	Wherever possible, an appropriate County Council member or officer representative should be appointed to external bodies managing countryside sites; and the list of delegates to outside bodies should be made fully accessible to members and the public (paragraph 3.22).	Agreed
9	The national 'Green Flag' criteria should be used informally to help assess progress and identify action needed on all sites managed by the Countryside Management Service; formal 'Green Flag' status should be sought for the most appropriate sites (paragraph 3.26).	Agreed. This could be a useful mechanism for assessing and upgrading our sites

10	Site management should actively try to be representative of as many open space user groups as possible. In line with the 'Green Flag' criteria, management should pursue an understanding of users and levels and patterns of use; active community involvement in site management and the right level of facilities to suit all sectors of the community (paragraphs 3.4, 3.27).	Agreed
11	A sharply focussed audit of countryside sites should be undertaken by the Environment Division to result in: clear standards for countryside management regardless of who provides the service; a clear idea of activities that should be specifically undertaken by the Countryside Management Service to ensure its future sustainability and an indication of where site ownership or management should be transferred to other bodies (paragraphs 3.16, 3.29, 4.4).	Agreed. It is intended that this exercise should provide the rationale for a clearer strategy for the County Council, setting out which sites and activities have a county significance and which might best be handled at a local level. This will not automatically result in widespread changes of landownership as there are major constraints militating against this, but it should give an important steer with regard to future actions, such as new collaborate arrangements,. In all cases we will need to consider the best way of ensuring the contribution of a good service, whichever body were to own or manage the sites.
12	The mission for the Rights of Way and Countryside Management Service should be: <i>To enable the safe and informed enjoyment of the East Sussex landscape by residents and visitors, through ensuring that the land and rights of way for which East Sussex County Council is responsible are accessible, maintained, enhanced and promoted</i> (paragraph 4.3).	Agreed.