

OUTDOOR PARTNERSHIPS UPDATE

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1. Summary

This report provides an update on the review of the Outdoor Partnerships team and the work carried out in the development of a future Sustainable Business Model for the Service

2. Decision

Members of Environment and Services Scrutiny Committee are asked to:

- A. Note the recent changes within the Team and to scrutinise the work being undertaken to develop a Sustainable Business Model for the Service

REPORT

3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

Parks, Countryside Heritage Sites and the RoW network are very important to quality of life, the local economy and for wildlife and heritage. They provide a wide range of benefits for people and the environment. Aside from the wildlife and historical value, they are important local and regional recreation facilities. These assets also provide a boost to the local economy.

4. Financial Implications

Shropshire Council announced its 3 year Funding Strategy covering the period 2016/17 through to 2018/19 on 27th January 2016. The budget years for 2017/18 and 2018/19 were at the time for noting, however in order to achieve a balanced budget, should alternative funding streams not be found, then the worst case scenario was highlighted – this included a range of service areas including Country Parks, Countryside Heritage Sites and urban greenspaces having their budgets reduced to nil.

Rights of Way was identified as a mandatory service.

An alternative approach has now been agreed that retains the Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites within the Council, safeguarding the sites for the future by generating more income and working towards a cost neutral position. The target is to raise £115,000 in 2017/18 increasing to £173,000 by 2019/20. If this target is not met, the Parks & Countryside Sites will continue to be at risk. The implications of this approach are shown below.

5. Background

The Team has recently restructured following voluntary redundancy of the Outdoor Partnerships Manager. As of 1st July, Clare Fildes has been appointed as the new service lead in the role of Outdoor Partnerships Enterprise Manager. The new service structure is attached at Appendix 1

A key responsibility for the Team Managers over the next 3 – 4 years will be to continue to embed commercial thinking within the team and to substantially grow income generation within their respective areas as a response to proposed budget reductions. This includes commercial income generation from groundworks, but also for the Parks and Sites Team, implementation of the Enterprise Plan to counter significant budget reductions for this Team.

6. The future of our Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites – Enterprise Plan

The Outdoor Partnership Service is currently responsible for the management, maintenance and community engagement of 120 parks and greenspaces (Originally 145 sites, however, 25 local greenspaces are now transferred to Shrewsbury and Bridgnorth Town Councils and are no longer part of the Ringway grounds maintenance contract). These sites can be categorised as urban greenspaces, country parks and countryside heritage sites.

Urban Greenspace.

The urban greenspaces are the recreational open spaces used by the local community and include 55 play areas and 5 recreation grounds with football and cricket pitches and 37 other urban greenspaces. The maintenance of all these sites form part of the Ringway grounds maintenance contract.

The management of urban greenspaces is being transferred to the Highways Street Scene Team, who already maintain amenity greenspaces and highway verges through a contract with Ringway. The Play and Maintenance Officers and the budget for this will be transferred by 1st July 2016. The ownership and management of urban greenspaces will then form part of the wider discussions with Town and Parish Councils that includes libraries, museums and leisure centres. This has been necessary to focus Outdoor Partnerships staff on generating income for the Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites.

Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites

Having submitted a new Enterprise Plan for the Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites, it has been agreed that these will remain with Shropshire Council, with an ambitious plan to raise income to manage these sites, reducing the contribution from the Council over the next few years. These sites are being considered as a complete portfolio, thus retaining staff expertise and safeguarding them for future generations.

The Country Parks and Heritage Sites are those sites with specific natural and cultural heritage features, including designations such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Scheduled Ancient Monuments and Local Nature Reserves. These sites are major assets to the local community, with local people taking great pride in their parks, many of whom join our 'Friends of Park Groups' to volunteer their time to help look after the site and help raise funds and apply for small grants to develop projects. The sites are also used by a wider audience, however, attracting visitors from across the county and beyond. A map showing these sites is attached in Appendix 2.

The sites require specialist management, which is provided by our Country Park and Heritage Site Officers, whose role is to:

- Develop and implement site management plans
- Undertake/oversee repairs and maintenance
- Oversee external contractors

- Undertake regular site checks to comply with H&S legislation
- Develop projects
- Provide planning advice
- Apply for grant aid to support park development
- Provide habitat advice and guidance
- To work with local communities and support volunteering activities

The plan has modelled income generation based on the following:

- Introducing car parking charges
- Town and Parish Council contributions
- New membership scheme
- Development of the Shropshire's Great Outdoors Foundation to encourage charitable giving
- More externally funded projects
- Shropshire Outdoors Contracting and Consultancy
- Expansion and upgrade of facilities at Severn Valley Country Park and The Mere
- Development of a wood fuel business

There may well be alternative sources of income and the Outdoor Partnership Team will be consulting with Shropshire Councillors, Town and Parish Councils, volunteer and 'Friends of' groups and local people to agree plans for raising the required income from individual sites.

Shropshire Outdoor Contracting and Consulting - Rights of Way

In addition to the Enterprise Plan the work also carries on to gain additional income for the maintenance of the Rights of Way network.

A business case was agreed in November 2014 recommending that the Rights of Way (ROW) Maintenance team develop their current activity in generating income to assist in closing the funding gap created by the withdrawal of ROW capital budgets and the ongoing impact of reduced ROW revenue budgets. It was agreed that earned income should be placed within a service reserve account to build up funds over a period of time could then be reinvested into work on major capital schemes outside of the existing revenue budgets. Over the last 12 months this new approach has been successful, with £74,000 transferred into the new reserve account to put back into ROW maintenance. However the ability to achieve more income by using the existing team was not sustainable. As envisaged in the original business case, to achieve more, we needed to invest in this approach for the future.

In addition, the results of the final 25 bridge inspections have now been received to update the list of known capital problems (50 bridges now surveyed). The current estimate of the value of outstanding works is £650,000 (with £280,000 being high priority). Further re-inspections are programmed for the 50 bridges which will alter the value of the estimate, in addition further issues are being identified which will be added to this list.

It was therefore vital that the new way of working was fully implemented, in a way that ensures that the risks are properly managed, and that the council's statutory duties and the volunteer input that supports this work are not neglected. A further Business case was made and agreed and as such we have now a team in place that can further grow income generation as well as cover the costs of the revised investment. In addition, the service can now support maintenance on the Parks and Countryside sites that is currently undertaken by higher cost external contractors.

Shropshire Outdoor Contracting and Consulting will ensure that at least £40,000 income is secured each year for the ROW maintenance programme on an ongoing basis. The income will be used to support higher cost 'capital' type works within the existing programme. Any additional income will supplement reduced budgets across the Service.

Shropshire Hill AONB Partnership

Following a period of consultation, Shropshire Council and the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership will be working together to develop a new independent organisation for the Shropshire Hills AONB. In developing new approaches both organisations will continue to work closely with local stakeholders, Telford & Wrekin Council, Defra, Natural England and the National Association for AONBs.

7 Alternative Options and Appraisal

A number of options for the management of Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites have been considered including:

1. Cease management of Council owned Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites, making staff redundant
2. All Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites to be sold to another Public or Third Sector provider.
3. All Country Parks & Countryside Heritage Sites to be maintained by another provider
4. Council to retain parks and sites management to provide minimum mandatory service (without Visitor Centres, education, events or volunteer support).
5. Greenspace transferred to Environmental Maintenance and Council to retain parks and sites management, including visitor centres to provide a minimum appropriate service, but with a new charitable arm, more income generation and development funding sourced from elsewhere.
6. Development of new charitable organisation outside the Council for Parks and Sites, RoW, and health initiatives

Option 5 was agreed as the preferred option for a number of reasons:

- Ability to access alternative sources of funding; donations, legacies, income, sponsorship and grants, with minimum set up costs for the charitable organisation.
- The parks and sites have been reducing the Council contribution over the past few years and this will continue, working towards a cost-neutral position.
- Council contributions will need to continue, tapering to £45,000 in 2019/20.
- Site ownership is secure for the future.
- Keeps good quality, well maintained sites open to the public.
- Staff and expertise retained.
- No time consuming transfers or associated costs.
- No endowment funding needed
- Focus on health and wellbeing to help reduce Adult Social Care funding.

8. Conclusions

Development of the service in house, working towards a cost-neutral position regarding controllable costs, is the preferred option. It is the most cost effective option for the Council as there is no large dowry or ongoing contribution for a long term lease required. Option 5 reduces costs over time and the Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites Enterprise Plan shows how this option would be delivered to ensure that income across the service increases by £173K in four years, reducing the Council contribution to £49K.

The Outdoor Partnerships team would work together to develop income earning and external funding synergistically across Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites, Rights of Way management, Mapping and Enforcement, Shropshire Outdoor Contracting and Healthy Outdoors. Across the service, this will build on community engagement, volunteering and outdoor activities to ensure access to and enjoyment of the great outdoors in Shropshire is safeguarded for the future.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Cllr Stuart West Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Culture

Local Member

County wide – all members

Conflicts of interest declared by members

Appendices

Appendix 1 - New service structure Appendix 2 - A map of Country Parks & Countryside Heritage sites