

Executive Report

Ward(s) affected: n/a

Report of Director of Environment

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A VISION FOR GUILDFORD BOROUGH'S COUNTRYSIDE SITES

Executive Summary

Officers recommend adopting the proposed Countryside Vision document as Strategy to deliver a landscape scale approach and partnership working in Countryside management.

Guildford Borough Council (GBC) owns and manages 52 sites as countryside sites covering an area of 800ha, 2.5% of the Borough's land area. Guildford Borough Council also manages approximately 32km of rural road verges on behalf of Surrey County Council.

Within the GBC's countryside estate, two heathland sites (Bullswater Common and Pirbright Heath) are afforded strong protection through inclusion in the Thames Basin Heath SPA (Special Protection Area) and the Ash to Brookwood Heaths SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest). Shalford Water Meadows is included in the Wey Valley Meadows SSSI. The Borough's countryside estate also includes five Local Nature Reserves, the highest protection Local Authorities can designate.

The Countryside Vision states the Council's ambition to deliver a long-term sustainable network of Countryside sites that provides safe access for recreation as well as a network of wildlife habitat that future generations can access and enjoy.

Guildford's Countryside Vision will:

- provide a framework to guide our long term site management and communicate our ambitions to Guildford's residents,
- guide allocation of current resources to prioritise strategic aims and legal obligations across the Countryside Estate, including provision of recreational

- access,
- provide a landscape scale direction for habitat management that guides funding strategies,
- support the delivery of the Local Plan through the development of Suitable Alternative Natural Green spaces,
- communicate Guildford Borough's ambitions to partners and stakeholders, provide assurance that external investments are in line with long term sustainable goals and
- align Guildford Council's countryside management with national and regional policy.

The alternative option would be not to adopt a strategic document and develop management plans for individual sites only.

Recommendation to Executive

That the Executive reviews and approves the strategic policies in managing our countryside sites to inform detailed sites management plans and operations.

Reason(s) for Recommendation:

Adoption of the Strategy will provide a tool to

- inform and support landscape scale habitat and access management,
- support targeting of resources,
- enable partnership work and external funding

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 It is recommended that the Executive reviews and approves the strategic policies in managing our countryside sites to inform detailed sites management plans and management operations.
- 1.2 The Countryside Vision statement will provide a framework to enable proactive management of Guildford's Countryside and development of appropriate action plans for site management. The Countryside Vision aims to link into the delivery of wider strategies and partnerships to ensure a landscape scale approach to countryside management. This landscape scale approach supports the government's Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services.

2. Strategic Priorities

2.1 The adoption of a strategic document to guide the long-term direction of Countryside Management will support the following strategic priorities:

- Our Borough – The Countryside Vision will support sustainable provision of accessible greenspace and recreational activities including SANG sites.
- Our Infrastructure - The delivery of SANGs and other Greenspaces will support sustainable delivery of local amenities.
- Our Environment - The Countryside Vision will guide the sustainable management and protection our countryside, specifically the corporate plan priorities of:

‘Work with partners to provide a high quality, diverse environment by ensuring sufficient and appropriate green, blue and open space and a resilient ecological network is maintained

and

‘Support the River Wey Catchment Partnership to improve the water quality of the river and the management of its catchment

- Our Society - The Countryside Vision will support sustainable provision of accessible greenspace to improve Health and Wellbeing.

3. Background

Guildford’s Countryside sites

3.1 This Countryside Vision statement will provide a framework to enable proactive management of Guildford’s Countryside and development of appropriate action plans for site management.

3.2 Guildford Borough Council (GBC) owns and manages 52 sites as countryside sites covering an area of 800ha, 2.5% of the Borough’s land area. Guildford Borough Council also manages approximately 32km of rural road verges on behalf of Surrey County Council.

3.3 Within the GBC’s countryside estate, two heathland sites (Bullswater Common and Pirbright Heath) are afforded strong protection through inclusion in the Thames Basin Heath SPA (Special Protection Area) and the Ash to Brookwood Heaths SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest). Shalford Water Meadows is included in the Wey Valley Meadows SSSI. The Borough’s countryside estate

also includes five Local Nature Reserves, the highest protection Local Authorities can designate.

- 3.4 Guildford Borough's Countryside sites provide a range of eco system services. The benefits people obtain from functioning eco systems include provisioning services (wood fuel, grazing pasture, pollination of crops), regulating services (flood alleviation, water purification, carbon sequestration) and cultural services (recreation).
- 3.5 The sites contribute to a network of publicly accessible countryside as well as wildlife habitat managed by other landowners, such as Surrey County Council, National Trust and Surrey Wildlife Trust. In order to recognise the importance of working across landownership boundaries, GBC is represented in a number of landscape partnerships, including Surrey Nature Partnership, Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership and the Surrey Heathland Project.
- 3.6 The proposed Vision document covers the countryside sites that Guildford Borough Council owns and manages. It details how the Council aims to work in partnership with other organisations in order to achieve landscape scale management of green spaces within the Borough and Surrey.
- 3.7 GBC's Countryside Team recognises that large areas of countryside in Guildford (60% of the Borough) are located within the Surrey Hills AONB. Other organisations such as the Surrey Wildlife Trust and National Trust manage similar habitats on designated sites including SSSI, and partnership working is a key action in site management.

Aims of the Countryside Vision Document

- 3.8 The aim of the Countryside Vision document is to provide a strategic direction for the management of the Council's Countryside Estate.
- 3.9 The documents links into the delivery of wider strategies and partnerships to ensure a landscape scale approach to countryside management that supports the objectives that are set out in the government's document "Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services".
- 3.10 Guildford's Countryside Vision is not intended to be a Planning Policy that covers the countryside in Guildford Borough's administrative area that is not managed by Parks and Leisure.
- 3.11 Guildford's Countryside Vision will:
 - set out a framework that guides our long term site management and communicate our ambitions to Guildford's residents,
 - guide allocation of current resources to prioritise strategic aims and legal obligations across the Countryside Estate, including provision of recreational access.
 - provide a landscape scale direction for habitat management that guides funding strategies,

- support the delivery of the Local Plan and the development of Suitable Alternative Natural Green Spaces (SANG),
- communicate Guildford Borough's ambitions to partners and stakeholders and provide re-assurance that external investments are in line with long term sustainable goals and
- align Guildford Council's countryside management with national and regional policy.

3.12 The Countryside Vision Document includes the following Vision Statement.

- Guildford Borough Council aims to manage its Countryside estate to maintain and enhance its landscape, natural capital and ecological value to continue providing benefits for future generations.
- We will work in Partnership with residents and organisations to improve sustainability and to protect our countryside, whilst balancing this with the needs of the rural and wider economy.
- Guildford's natural environment and landscapes will form part of the overall provision of Surrey's ecosystem services, creating a coherent network, for people, recreation and wildlife, through supporting the implementation of traditional management.

3.13 The Countryside Vision document collates current legislation, national and regional and regional policies and regional partnership initiatives that guide the landscape scale approach in managing our Countryside.

3.14 The Countryside Vision document will also allow the development of a strategic network for the provision of recreational activities and access within the Council's own Countryside Estate.

3.15 It will also allow identifying links to the rural economy to maximise opportunities for cost efficient site management. This includes existing partnerships in conservation grazing, opportunities within the developing wood fuel and biomass markets, but also training and apprenticeships.

3.16 Within the document, officers have grouped the Council's sites are into seven habitat types that each face similar issues and have developed management objectives that will inform the site management plans for each habitat type.

3.17 The Countryside Vision is supported by an action plan (2017 -2022) that outlines the overall direction of countryside management in the Borough and the Strategic Priorities for the Countryside sites owned by Guildford Borough Council.

3.18 The Vision and Objectives for Guildford's Countryside sites are linked to the Rural Economic Strategy that covers further areas beyond land management. The Rural Economic Strategy for Guildford lists actions for Strategic Priorities that support the delivery of Guildford's Countryside, including carrying out a

survey of rural stakeholders and identifying opportunities for a wood fuel economy. These actions in the Countryside Vision and Rural Economic Strategy complement each other.

4. Consultations

- 4.1 No formal external consultations have been carried out on the document.

5. Executive Advisory Board comment

- 5.1 Members of the Board welcomed the document, and its attempt to understand the nature and range of the Council's potential obligations to its own countryside estate, but, whilst it provided an analysis of likely demands for work, it was felt that the document would not lend itself to being used as a strategy for delivery in its current form. The Board therefore recommended that priority areas should be identified, and that they should reflect the areas where the greatest impact could be made. It was noted that the report did not fully reflect the extent of work in AONBs, and it was suggested that Paragraph 2 of the document be amended to reference AONBs as comprising 60% of the Council's land area.

Councillors suggested a number of amendments to the main report, including:

- a change to the title, to clarify that the vision related only to the Council's countryside estate.
 - additional reference to the Surrey Hills AONB.
 - On page 7, it was suggested that the strategic priorities should list the environment first, rather than third.
 - the reference to the River Wey Catchment Partnership could be extended to include the work of Surrey Wildlife Trust on the AONB.
 - the Background section (page 14) could be strengthened to integrate and correlate with the work of other bodies.
 - It was noted that there was limited reference to SNCIs or SSSIs, and it was suggested that a map of the SSSIs could be included to highlight areas of responsibility.
 - the work of bodies such as the Surrey Wildlife Trust, and volunteer groups, should be reflected in the document.
 - it was suggested that references to SANGs should be removed, as they were more pertinent to a development strategy than to an environmental strategy.
- 5.2 In response, the Lead Councillor and Officers explained that the document had been drafted with an holistic, high level approach. The headings lined up with those in the corporate plan, and references to SSSIs, SNCIs and SANGs were included. Furthermore, the Parks and Countryside Section was the delivering body for SANGs, and did not designate them.

The Countryside Manager agreed that it would be made clearer to the Executive that the vision was around the Council's own countryside estate.

- 5.4 The Board agreed that its comments, as summarised above, be submitted to the Executive when it considers the Document in April.
- 5.5 A number of above amendments have been included into this report and the Countryside Vision document.

6. Equality and Diversity Implications

- 6.1 The proposed strategy has been subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment screening. The assessment concludes that the proposed strategy does not have implications for equality and diversity.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1 The Countryside Vision document provides a framework for the delivery of the management of Guildford's Countryside Estate within the existing resources.
- 7.2 Partnership work will allow identifying and using opportunities within the rural economy for financially sustainable management practices, including use of biomass, recreation and apprenticeships.
- 7.3 Specific projects and infrastructure repairs may require additional funding, for example through the Community Infrastructure Levy and the funding mechanisms set out in the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area Avoidance Strategy.
- 7.4 The Countryside Vision document provides a framework that allows external funders to assess the Council's ambitions and long-term strategies and thus provide assurance that external grants represent value for money. Funding examples include New Environmental Land Management Scheme (NELMs), Biodiversity offsetting, landfill tax funds and CIL.

8. Legal Implications

- 8.1 The document provides strategic guidance to enable the Council to fulfil its legal obligations in Countryside Management.
- 8.2 The impact of Brexit on environmental legislation may be significant. Almost all environmental legislation in the UK, derives from the EU, although there are notable exceptions (for example, the Climate Change Act 2008, which sets legally-binding targets for the UK to reduce its carbon emissions).
- 8.3 It seems likely that the UK will keep the substance of these regimes. There will be no change until legislation is made.

- 8.4 The Council as part of its Countryside Management has a duty to protect and safeguard Special Protection Areas, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Registered Commons, (EC Birds Directive 2009 and EC Habitats Directive 1992).
- 8.5 The relevant legislation affecting Countryside Management is likely to require updating following the UK leaving the EU.

9. Human Resource Implications

- 9.1 The adoption of the Countryside Vision will provide strategic guidance for the Countryside Team's workload. There are no additional resource implications.

10. Summary of Options

- 10.1 Officers recommend that the Executive agree to adopt the Countryside Vision document as strategic document to guide the Council's approach to management of the public Countryside sites and SANG.
- 10.2 Adoption of the Strategy provides a tool that informs landscape scale habitat and access management, and will support targeting resources, external funding and partnership work.
- 10.3 The alternative option would be not to adopt a strategic document and develop management plans for individual sites only.

11. Conclusion

- 11.1 Officers recommend adopting the proposed Countryside Vision document as Strategy to deliver a landscape scale approach and partnership working in Countryside management.
- 11.2 The Countryside Vision clearly states the Council's ambition to deliver a long-term sustainable network of Countryside sites that provides safe access for recreation as well as a network of wildlife habitat that future generations can access and enjoy. This document will support the Countryside Section to strategically prioritise resources and identify funding gaps.
- 11.3 The Document also provides clearly defined aims for the Guildford's Countryside estate and provides a statement to public, partner organisations and external funders the Countryside Services ambition to deliver value for money.

12. Background Papers

- 12.1 Guildford's Countryside Vision Document.

13. Appendices

None.

Please ensure the following service areas have signed off your report. Please complete this box and do not delete

Service	Sign off date
<i>Finance / 151 Officer</i>	
<i>Legal / Governance</i>	
<i>HR</i>	
<i>Equalities</i>	
<i>Lead Councillor</i>	
<i>CMT</i>	
<i>Committee Services</i>	