



Environment and Transport Select Committee

15th September 2011**Review of Countryside Management Contract 2011/12**

Purpose of the report: Scrutiny of Services and Budgets/Performance Management

Members are asked to consider whether any follow up action is required in response to the attached Internal Audit report on the Countryside Management Contract 2011/12.

Introduction:

1. The attached report details an investigation into the Countryside Management Contract 2011/12, which was completed by the Internal Audit Team in July 2011. This was in response to a number of allegations regarding Surrey Wildlife Trust, which were raised by several members of the public.

Background:

2. In May 2002, Surrey County Council (the council) entered into a legal agreement with the Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) for the management of the countryside estate. Under this agreement land owned by the council is leased to the Trust for 50 years and SWT manages the land and property. SWT also manages access agreements with private landowners on behalf of the council.
3. In March 2011, a number of allegations were raised by members of the public relating to Surrey Wildlife Trust. Allegations relating to Swanworth Farm and the Norbury Park Saw Mill were subject to a special review. This review was completed in May 2011.
4. The remaining allegations concerning finances, governance and service delivery were considered as part of an internal audit already planned for 2011/12. This report was completed in July 2011 and is attached as

Appendix A. The terms of reference of the Audit Investigation are listed below:

“To ascertain whether systems are in place to ensure the following:

- The contract’s governance arrangements are appropriate and robust;*
- SWT delivers the service in accordance with the Service Delivery Specifications and to the agreed standard; and*
- The contract ensures value for money.”*

Context

5. In addition to the two Internal Audit investigations, there has been local press coverage and activity relating to concerns over the allegations, and a summary is provided below:
 - i. Press Coverage
6. Several of the allegations made against SWT in relation to the closure of the Norbury Park Sawmill, and the renewal of the lease of Swanworth Farm have received some local press coverage [several examples are listed in ‘Sources/Background Papers’ at the end of this report].
 - ii. Petition
7. A petition challenging the decision by SWT to not renew the lease of Swanworth Farm was received by the Cabinet Member for Environment, Dr Lynne Hack, at the Cabinet Member Decision Making meeting held on the 15th June 2011.
 - iii. Involvement of Mole Valley MP
8. The Mole Valley MP, Sir Paul Beresford has written to the Council and suggested that the issues surrounding SWT receive further Scrutiny.
 - iv. Campaign Group
9. Campaign Group SWT Action has set up a website <http://www.swtaction.org.uk> which outlines a range of concerns regarding the Trust.

Financial and value for money implications

10. Financial and value for money implications are explored within the attached Audit Report.

Equalities Implications

11. It is not considered that there are any discernible equalities implications arising from this report.

Risk Management Implications

12. Risk Management implications are explored within the attached Audit Report.

Implications for the Council's Priorities or Community Strategy

13. None.

Recommendations:

14. Members are asked to scrutinise the attached Audit report and consider whether any recommendations for follow up action are required.
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Report contacts:

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Sources/background papers:

- Surrey County Council, Internal Audit Report – *“Review of Countryside Management Contract 2011/12”* [Attached as Appendix A]
- Petition to Cabinet Member for Environment, Dr Lynne Hack, and Cabinet Member response (15/06/2011)
- This is Surrey Today (24/06/2011) *“Charity has offered to extend agreement for a year”*
<http://www.thisissurreytoday.co.uk/Charity-offered-extend-agreement-year/story-12826711-detail/story.html>
- This is Surrey Today (11/03/2011) *“Concern at running of Wildlife Trust”*
<http://www.thisissurreytoday.co.uk/Concern-running-wildlife-trust/story-12670634-detail/story.html>
- SWT Action Website – *“Campaigning for Reform of the Surrey Wildlife Trust”*
<http://www.swtaction.org.uk/>