

CABINET

Tuesday 23 June 2015

RESPONSE TO PETITION

The Petition

To ensure the independence of Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) and its ability to protect the County's Wildlife and its habitats by continuing to provide adequate funding for SWT's activities in managing social assets on behalf of the Community such as Special Protection Areas.

Details of petition:

The Surrey Advertiser has reported that the County Council has plans to withdraw all County funding from Surrey Wildlife Trust over the period to 2021. This may require SWT to work with commercial sponsors and supporters to find new sources of funding which has the potential to compromise its independence and conflict with its role as manager of Special Protection Areas within the Thames Basin Heaths. Surrey Wildlife Trust's website states, 'SWT is the only organisation concerned solely with the conservation of all forms of wildlife in Surrey.' The Wildlife Trusts website states, 'The Wildlife Trusts want to help nature to recover from the decline that for decades has been the staple diet of scientific studies and news stories. We believe passionately that wildlife and natural processes need to have space to thrive, beyond designated nature reserves and other protected sites.' Wildlife habitats across the County face the constant threat of encroachment by new development. Surrey needs an organisation which can champion the interests of Nature. Withdrawal of funding from SWT is inconsistent with SCC's pledge to protect the Green Belt.

Submitted by Mr Ben Paton

Signatures: 420

Response

I understand the well intended motivation of Mr Paton and those who subscribed to the petition. However, I do not agree that the county council's proposals are in any way inconsistent with our enduring pledge to protect the Green Belt; on the contrary they are aimed at enhancing the contribution that our countryside makes to this valuable asset.

The County Council is well aware of the value of the Countryside Estate as it relates to the immediate benefits of wildlife and habitat protection, and the wider benefits to public health and Surrey's unique and vital economy and enshrined this in the Agreement with SWT.

The proposed changes to the long term Agreement with Surrey Wildlife Trust have been jointly developed based on sound principles which recognise the wider aims and objectives of both organisations.

Our work with the Wildlife Trust has shown the Agreement can work effectively, with reducing levels of financial support from the County Council, provided that we work collaboratively, have strong governance arrangements in place and develop clear plans.

SCC has statutory responsibilities towards the Countryside Estate including rights of way and nature conservation. (The Estate is protected by a range of designations including SPA

(Special Protection Area), SAC (Special Area for Conservation), SSSI (Sites of Special Scientific Interest) and the AONB (Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty). These designations attract a modest amount of grant but in order to conserve them at the level these designations require, further sources of funding need to be attracted, including working with other organisations to bid for funding.

SWT as a charity is protected under the agreement if it is not able to generate the income needed to manage the Estate.

I will present detailed plans describing how the Agreement will be revised to achieve these objectives to the Cabinet later in the meeting, similarly the Wildlife Trust will present the changes to their Council in July.

I trust that the signatories to the petition are reassured by this response.

Mr Mike Goodman
Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning
23 June 2015