



## Environment Select Committee

Friday 22 February 2019

### **A Joint 25 year Strategy for Surrey's Countryside Estate**

#### **Purpose of the report:**

- To update the Members of the Committee on the development of a joint 25 year strategy with the Surrey Wildlife Trust for Surrey's Countryside Estate
- Share outputs from engagement with the public and other key stakeholders
- Set out the framework for the strategy and invite comments to help develop the final strategy

#### **Introduction**

1. Surrey County Council owns 6,500 acres of countryside estate, and a further 3,500 is managed under access agreements. All of the Countryside Estate (the Estate) is open for the public to visit. It is our responsibility to ensure the countryside is cared for and managed so Surrey residents and visitors can access and enjoy it, as we know it is highly valued by our residents.
2. The Partnership between Surrey County Council (SCC) and the Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) was formally established in 2002 when 10,000 acres of countryside owned, or managed under access agreement by SCC, was leased to the SWT for 50 years.
3. The Estate ranges from the heathland of Ockham and Wisley Commons to the downland and woodland of Norbury Park. SWT makes sure that paths can be safely used, dangerous trees and branches are made safe, sensitive habitats and species are protected and fly-tipping is removed and that access to the countryside is maintained.
4. The current annual cost of managing the Estate is £2.1million of which the County Council contributes £425,000 (2018/19). With ever increasing pressure on local government finances, particularly as a result of the demand for social care services, we have been working on ways that our countryside estate can be self-funding so it is more resilient to changes

in public sector finance. This will ensure that the care and management that the countryside needs can be guaranteed for the future.

5. To ensure that we are able to achieve this in perpetuity we need a clear vision and a long term strategy.
6. During the summer of 2018 SCC and the SWT began engaging with key partners, other landowners, user groups and residents to get their views on the future of the Estate.
7. To enable us to gather this information a wide range of tools were used including face to face meetings, targeted workshops, focus groups, online surveys, site surveys and a public engagement exercise.
8. The aim of the engagement was to understand priorities for the next 25 years to enable the development of a strategy that would set out how we will work with our partners to improve outcomes for the Estate and reflects national policy, such as 'A Green Future' The Government's 25 year Environmental Plan and reflect research for example, the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment Report (MENE Report undertaken for Natural England)

#### **Outputs from Engagement**

9. In the summer of 2018 results from the development of a 2030 Vision for Surrey were published. One of the most important aspects of the Surrey that residents care about is the quality of Surrey's natural environment. They value the green and open spaces of Surrey and many people commented that having access to this green space and nature was a key part of the attraction of living in Surrey. There was a strong desire to see this preserved. In particular residents were keen to see continued conservation and protection of green spaces and seen as being essential to health and wellbeing of people in Surrey, and offered families the opportunities to relax, explore and appreciate the natural environment.
10. Over the summer SCC and SWT engaged with key partners and other landowners, including National Trust, Forestry Commission and Natural England, Surrey Hills AONB, RSPB and the Woodland Trust this involved face to face meetings and workshop some common areas were identified:
  - The Estate is important for other landowners and managers from the perspective of showing leadership in how things may be done differently.
  - It provides vital services. In order to continue to provide them active management is required and therefore investment.
  - All land managers, be they local government or private are facing challenges regarding future funding of that management. Leadership and demonstrations of how to tackle those challenges would be welcomed.

- All land managers are having to find ways to optimise their land management to provide multiple services - balancing recreation/food, conservation and flooding.
11. The Caring for our Countryside survey was launched on the 8 October 2018 and open for six weeks. The aim of the survey was to understand how the Estate is currently used and residents' priorities for its future. The survey had 1367 respondents. (the Summary Report of the Survey is in Annex 1 to this report)
- Of those that responded 95% said that the Countryside sites were very important or important to them. The most popular reasons given were:
    - Value open greenspace, wildlife and habitats
    - Countryside sites improve health and wellbeing
    - Importance that countryside sites are protected
  - The most popular sites visited were Newlands Corner, Chobham Common and Wisley & Ockham Commons. With walking, dog walking, nature watching and visiting with children being the main reasons for visiting. 74% of respondents travel to the sites by car.
  - When asked what would make the sites better now the top responses were:
    - Access to the countryside should be free.
    - The countryside should be protected and remain the same
    - Countryside sites should be well maintained.
  - When asked how they saw the sites in the future the top responses were:
    - The countryside should be protected and remain the same
    - Concern for the future of sites
    - Access to the sites should be free
12. Independent market research has shown us that there is a general lack of understanding of who owns and manages the Estate and the costs associated with its management. It was generally assumed that the 'Countryside' 'looks after itself' with relatively low costs for managing the Estate. There was a strong feeling that the costs for managing the countryside were included in existing taxation.
13. Residents or visitors may be aware of a site local to them but there was little awareness of the sites as part of a wider Countryside Estate. More needs to be done to promote the work and value of the Estate and that education is required to ensure awareness of what it takes to maintain and improve an accessible, safe and healthy Estate.
14. The focus groups indicated that residents are looking for the following benefits from a visit to the countryside:

- Mental health – escapism, relaxation, time to think, visual enjoyment.
- Physical health benefits – walking, running and cycling.
- New experiences – learning and education
- Social interaction – with partner, family and other users (including activities such as picnics and events)

## Strategy Themes

15. Three themes have emerged from the public and key stakeholder engagement:

### **Education and Engagement**

As is often said, you can't expect people to love and respect something they don't understand, they can't understand something they don't interact with and they won't protect something they don't love. The population has become more and more urban and their link to the countryside more and more tenuous. Most of the population live in urban areas with only about 20% living in rural areas and often even that population commutes to work and has little link to the countryside.

The surveys showed that there are only a relatively small percentage of visitors that come with children and there are very few educational visits or children's activities based on the Estate.

Improving how we engage and connect with future and current users of the Estate is key to ensuring sustainability and health and wellbeing benefits are achieved.

### **Access for Health and Wellbeing**

As a nation a large percentage of the population do very little exercise and consequently, we have an increase in the incidents of diseases associated with obesity and mental health issues associated with the way we live. Walking and other activities in the outdoors can help to address these problems.

There have been many short-term pilot activities that have shown the benefit of getting outside with other people generally funded as pilots by the NHS. This type of activity needs to be more accessible with opportunities for people to self-guide themselves around sites and to use the resources of other organisations to introduce people to the sites through activities.

### **Natural Capital and Landscape**

Parts of Estate are located in the Surrey Hills AONB and all of the Estate has a particular role in the landscape of the area and as stated above 70% is also designated for its wildlife conservation significance.

In conversations with other landowners across the County opportunities have become apparent to work in collaboration to achieve greater continuity of landscape and habitats, linking similar habitats to achieve a more sustainable area for the future. Along with this work is the significant opportunity to demonstrate how Surrey can improve its natural capital and show the benefit to the county as a whole. This can include how the Estate can act as a natural

drainage area protecting adjoining areas from flooding, how trees in the landscape can filter water to improve its purity and a role in improving air quality through vegetation that can clean the air.

The landscape has for centuries attracted people to come and live in Surrey and to visit at weekends. Particularly famous for this are the Surrey Hills which have been home to many artists, business people as well as farmers and foresters and pioneers in the benefit of open space and activities in the countryside.

16. These themes will be developed to form the Countryside Strategy. Annex 2 is a draft outline of the Strategy.

### **Recommendations:**

The Environment Select Committee to:

- Review the outputs of the engagement with key stakeholders and residents.
- Comment on the emerging themes and outline of Strategy.

### **Next steps:**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Timescale</b>
Draft Strategy	February – April 2019
Further engagement with key stakeholders to validate Strategy outputs	February – March 2019
Environment Select Committee	24 April 2019
Cabinet	30 April 2019
Launch Strategy	May 2019

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### **Annexes**

#### **Annex 1**

Caring for our Countryside - Analysis Summary Report

#### **Annex 2**

Countryside Estate Outline Strategy

### **Sources/background papers:**

[A Green Future – 25 Year Environmental Plan](#)

[Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment \(MENE\) The National Survey on People and the Natural Environment](#)

[Natural Capital Investment Plan for Surrey](#)

[2030 Vision for Surrey County Council](#)

Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan