



Environment and Transport Select Committee  
19 July 2013

### **Countryside Management Task Group: Report on Progress**

**Purpose of the report:** Performance Management/Policy Development and Review

Following the Report by the Countryside Management Task Group, it was agreed that progress on the actions would be reported to the Select Committee in July and October 2013.

#### **Introduction:**

1. In July 2012, the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment asked the Environment & Transport Select Committee to convene a Task Group with the broad aim of considering how the management of Surrey's countryside could be conducted in a long term, effective and financially sustainable manner which promotes economic growth and conserves and enhances the environment.
2. The Task Group reported to the Select Committee on March 6<sup>th</sup> 2013 with a series of recommendations which were subsequently recommended to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013.
3. This report sets out the action plan that has been developed from those recommendations and outlines the progress to date. This is the first of a series of reports which will come to the Select Committee on the action from the Task Group Report.

#### **Background**

4. Surrey County Council has influence over a number of areas of rural management and the ability to make a significant impact on the future of the countryside in the County. It was acknowledged by the Task Group that the environment of Surrey is important to the residents of the County and therefore needs to be managed well.
5. The County Council owns over 2,600 hectares (6500 acres) of Countryside Estate and has Access Agreements over a further 1,400

hectares (3,500 acres) and manages 1,223 hectares (3,032 acres) of smallholdings with 100 tenants, that is without taking into account the open land managed as part of its other holdings, such as schools, offices and care homes. This gives the County Council an ideal opportunity to demonstrate good practice in the way it manages its land, giving greater access to the public for health and wellbeing, providing training in rural skills and raising awareness of the importance of countryside management and the natural environment.

6. In 2002 an agreement was concluded for Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) to manage the Countryside Estate and Access Agreement land for 50 years. The agreement allowed for periodic reviews to be undertaken. It is now over ten years into the agreement and following a number of audits and a report on built property by Chesterton Humberts, an in depth review is being undertaken to ensure that the parties are achieving best value for the countryside estate and the public.
7. The County Council facilitated the Surrey Rural Strategy which runs from 2010 to 2015. Due to considerable changes in the network of organisations that have an influence on rural issues, particularly at the national and regional level, it is time to review that Strategy and ensure it is still relevant and can be used effectively to bid for funds for projects in the county.
8. Countryside Management encompasses a range of activities from the land based economy such as agriculture and forestry, the rural economy, habitat management and access for visitors and residents as well as overall management of the landscape. There are many organisations across Surrey who have an influence on managing the countryside along with many individual farmers and landowners.
9. Key recommendations that came out of the Task Group review were the scope to develop iconic locations that could help promote Surrey's Countryside, the opportunity to develop stronger brands as part of our tourism strategy and the scope to work together with other landowners to manage the land better as a resource for recreation, to manage activities to become more self financing and to conserve and enhance the environment in the County.
10. The County Council has worked in collaboration with a number of parties to manage its Estate and to develop the Rural Strategy; however there are always opportunities to collaborate further. Examples of collaboration are leasing small areas to Parish Councils to manage, working with the Districts and Boroughs both in Surrey and adjoining local authorities to develop countryside management projects, working with private landowners to improve access for the public.
11. Woodlands are a key habitat and resource for Surrey in many aspects for landscape character, for recreation, biodiversity and as a source of sustainable local resources and employment by the re-introduction of traditional woodland management cycles. It is often cited that Surrey is the most densely wooded county in England with around 22% woodland cover, but it has a high level of small woodlands, and higher than

average levels of habitats with special designations. Therefore cost effective management is a key challenge. There are a number of examples of good practice in the county, but the Task Group supported the case for the Council to play a role in re-establishing traditional woodland management practices in a systematic way, both on the SWT managed estate and by other woodland owners and in its role as a wood fuel consumer.

12. An overall theme from the Task Group report was partnership working, with the County Council taking the role of facilitator to help start or support a partnership and provide representation on appropriate partnership bodies. The County Council currently hosts four partnerships. The Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty unit works at a strategic level drawing up the management plan for the Surrey Hills and developing innovative ways of delivering that plan through others. The Surrey Heathland Partnership works exclusively on heathland management in the west of the County and the Lower Mole and Downland Countryside Management Partnerships work with local communities to manage habitats, involve the community, raise awareness and increase access.
13. Following the publication of the Natural Environment White Paper, Defra sought bids for Local Nature Partnerships to take a lead as advocates for the environment in their area, promote better management and work with the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and local planning authorities to ensure that development went ahead in balance with the environment.
14. Surrey Nature Partnership (SNP) was confirmed by Defra in July last year and is now developing its terms of Reference ready to take on a role working in collaboration with the LEPs to support growth in the economy that is environmentally sustainable. SNP will develop a strategy and attract funding for projects.
15. The Action Plan in the appendix sets out the work currently being undertaken or proposed as a result of the report from the Task Group. The Committee are asked to provide comments to the Cabinet Member.

<b>Conclusions:</b>
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16. The County Council has an important role to play in the management of Surrey's Countryside, in collaboration with the many other organisations and individuals who also manage the countryside. It is in a position to demonstrate good countryside management on its own Countryside Estate, including giving better access to the countryside, providing training in rural skills leading to increased employment, raising awareness of how the countryside is managed and why, and encouraging more people to become physically active. In order to ensure that the management of the Countryside Estate achieves this, the review of the agreement with Surrey Wildlife Trust needs to put in place governance and terms that ensure this happens.

17. The County Council's precise role will vary depending on what is needed but it is in a unique position of being able to take an overview and highlight the gaps.
18. The Task Group report sets out a list of recommendations that would put the County Council in a stronger position to demonstrate good countryside management itself and through others and to support the rural economy and communities.

<b>Recommendations:</b>
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19. That the Select Committee
  - a) Comments on the actions outlined
  - b) Advises the Cabinet Member for Transport, Highways and Environment of any further areas which should be considered.

<b>Next steps:</b>
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A further progress report will be brought to the October 2013 Select Committee

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**Sources/background papers:**

- Task Group Report: Countryside Management to Environment and Transport Select Committee on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2013.
- Task Group Report to Cabinet on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013.