

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Executive
Date: 29th April 2013
Report for: Decision
Report of: Executive Member for Highways and Environment

Report Title

Trafford Countryside Management Partnership

Summary

The purpose of this report is to inform Members of the proposal to develop a Countryside Management Partnership for Trafford to facilitate the management of both the Mersey Valley and Bollin Valley. A new model is necessary for the management of both these areas to ensure a sustainable approach to the long term management and maintenance of these valuable resources.

Recommendation(s)

- 1. That the Executive support the proposal in principle and provide delegated authority to the Executive Member for Environment and Transport to set up the arrangements for the Partnership.**
- 2. Support the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Community Forest Trust (charitable arm of Red Rose Forest) and Trafford Council.**
- 3. Endorse the proposed partnership management structure (appendix 1) and provide Member support to the partnership steering group.**

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

Name: Petula Neilson
Extension: 2047

Background Papers: None

Implications:

Relationship to Policy Framework/Corporate Priorities	The decision supports the corporate priority of a cleaner greener borough as well as improving health and wellbeing for local residents. It also supports the priority outcome for well maintained green spaces within the Community Strategy and will contribute to the delivery of both the Health and Wellbeing strategy and the Trafford Forest Plan.
Financial	An estimated £45k/annum contribution from ETO will be required for 3 years, generating £70-100k of potential activity and options for securing match funding. This can be funded from resulting efficiencies in the Groundforce service budget and is in addition to delivering the 2014/15 (MTFP) budget savings of £117k contribution to Manchester City Council for the Mersey Valley Warden Service and £58k to Cheshire East for the Bollin Valley.
Legal Implications:	<p>Formal notice has been given by Trafford Council to Manchester City Council to dissolve the Mersey Valley Joint Committee. Also notice has been given to withdraw funding in line with the constitution. Notice has also been given to Cheshire East in respect of the Bollin Valley.</p> <p>Appropriate governance arrangements need to be made to take forward the proposals in this report. It is intended that a memorandum of understanding between the council and the Community Forest Trust will provide the mechanism for the day to day operation of the proposed partnership.</p>
Equality/Diversity Implications	None
Sustainability Implications	Improved partnership for long term sustainable management of a valuable Green Infrastructure resource that will contribute to delivering objectives within the climate change strategy.
Staffing/E-Government/Asset Management Implications	None – this proposal does not include any of the buildings at Sale Water Park including the Visitor Centre.
Risk Management Implications	The risk management implications will be considered fully in the preparation of the business plan. The major risk is a do nothing approach that could result in reputational risks as well as potential risks on the sites through on going dilapidation.
Public Health Implications	The sites are currently well used in key locations. However this partnership would seek to encourage greater use across all areas, leading to increased physical activity and improved mental health. Also there should be opportunities for more active involvement in conservation volunteering and green gyms.
Health and Safety Implications	Better managed, more actively used sites will reduce health and safety risks.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Mersey Valley Warden Service was set up by Greater Manchester Council in the late 1970s. One of several River Valley schemes, it covered land in Stockport, Manchester and Trafford, and was overseen by a Joint Committee of GMC and North West Water (now Environment Agency function). After the abolition of the GMC, the Joint Committee and warden service continued operate, however Stockport withdrew from joint management in the late 1990s but Trafford and Manchester continued.
- 1.2 Physical land management in Trafford was removed from the remit of the Warden Service in 2007, since which time, land management in the Valley has been carried out in house by a team of two allocated staff from the Groundforce team. The Warden service has however, as part of the withdrawal agreement with Manchester, continued to be funded to manage the Visitor's Centre at Sale Waterpark, undertake visitor management activities including limited patrolling, events and education work across Trafford sites. In May 2011, as a result of budgetary pressures across Manchester City Council, the two information wardens who managed the Visitor Centre took voluntary severance, along with the education ranger. Since this time there has been a decline in the service that the Mersey Valley Warden Service has been able to deliver for Trafford and the situation has become untenable going forward.
- 1.3 The Bollin Valley Warden service was set up in 1972 on a similar basis, with Trafford, Manchester, Macclesfield Borough Council, Cheshire County Council, Environment Agency, Countryside Commission(now Natural England) and Manchester Airport as partners. Since then both Manchester City and more significantly Manchester Airport have withdrawn from the partnership as well as local government reorganisation resulting in East Cheshire now being the overall administrative authority. This has resulted in a significant reduction in funding contributions and again together with financial pressures on both local authority partners, has created an untenable situation going forward.

2.0 Trafford Council Countryside

- 2.1 Trafford Borough Council is responsible for the management of over 20 countryside sites, totalling over 250ha, of which 220ha are in the Mersey Valley, including 63ha at Sale Water Park. The main site within the Bollin Valley owned by Trafford is Ross Mill, a 5.4ha Site of Biological Importance. Most of these sites have little or no development potential as they lie in the flood plain or are designated Green Belt, though some have potential for specific forms of development, including Sale Water Park and the former Lesley Road Tip.
- 2.2 These sites have established public use and interest, and this demand is growing, with the increasing popularity of cycling and walking, rising fuel costs making trips to the Lakes/Peaks/etc less attractive, and Trafford's increasing population of children creating a demand for low cost and healthy activities for families.
- 2.3 Many of these sites, particularly in the Mersey Valley have not had a significant level of management for many years, and infrastructure created in the past (eg paths, fencing, signage) is at or near the end of its life. Failure to manage these sites will increase Trafford's liabilities and ultimately costs. Degrading paths/fencing and unthinned woodlands lead to safety issues. Neglect encourages higher levels of litter

and fly tipping, and declining public confidence and use lead to personal safety issues.

3.0 Proposed Countryside Management Partnership

3.1 The proposal is that a new partnership to manage Trafford's countryside will be created between Trafford Council and Red Rose Forest's charitable arm, Community Forest Trust (CFT). CFT would adopt the lead role, working collaboratively with Trafford Council (Greenspace Strategy and Groundforce Teams), co-ordinating delivery and fundraising. CFT is uniquely placed to deliver this service and as a charity, it can raise funds not accessible to the Council. It also has staff who have substantial experience of managing urban countryside in the Mersey Valley and beyond. A wider partnership would be developed, including the Environment Agency, Groundwork Trust and other stakeholders. The partnership would also work with the Conservation Volunteers, the Probation Trust and the Ramblers to develop and deliver projects as well as developing friend's groups for key areas.

3.2 It is estimated that Trafford Council will need to provide an initial contribution of around £45k per annum for a three year period as a contribution towards CFT's work. This can be found from resulting efficiencies in the existing Groundforce budget and is in addition to delivering the 2014/15 (Medium Term Financial Plan) budget savings of £117k contribution to Manchester City Council for the Mersey Valley Warden Service and £58k to Cheshire East for the Bollin Valley. The estimated £45k/annum will be funded from within Groundforce by helping to explore/provide lower overall cost operating models. This model includes strategic stewardship and co-ordination of traditional and voluntary resources that has not been currently utilised. This will be the catalyst for a new operating entity borough wide for countryside space.

3.3 This partnership would deliver four main kinds of activity:

- **Access management** – ensuring the path network is open, accessible and safe, and that fences, gates and stiles are in good order preventing illegal access.
- **Habitat management** – woodlands need periodic thinning to ensure trees grow well and public safety is maintained; meadows require cutting and the removal of hay; and wetlands need clearing work to prevent them silting up and drying out
- **Community engagement** – people enjoy learning about nature and a programme of walks, events and school visits encourages usage; the presence of staff on site (paid or volunteer) gives visitors confidence in using sites and nips problems in the bud; and providing information, printed, digital or face-to-face, enriches people's experience of the sites
- **Project management**– underpinning the other activities, there needs to be a strategic approach to managing and prioritising sites, building and supporting the stakeholder partnership, and pursuing and administering grants and other funding.

3.4 Through appropriately targeted active management, Trafford's countryside will deliver multiple benefits including;

- **Environmental:** 'Well-managed countryside and greenspaces' is one of Trafford Environment Partnership's Priority Outcomes, and local countryside can reduce carbon emissions by encouraging local tourism and active travel.
- **Health:** Countryside sites encourage increased physical activity, especially among children, and are known to help reduce common mental health problems
- **Economic:** Access to countryside sites can increase the desirability of nearby residential property. A wide range of small enterprises can be involved in countryside management, and they can provide opportunities for green investment and offsetting
- **Social:** Countryside sites can bring together communities to use and manage them, and are the focus for wide range of volunteering opportunities

3.5 Because of these benefits, it should be possible to secure significant new resources, including Forestry Commission grants, Landfill Tax funding, Health and Wellbeing commissioning, developer contributions and private sector support. The target will be to secure £100-200k per annum of cash or in-kind support.

3.6 If approved, the partnership will be formally established through a memorandum of understanding that will include governance and reporting arrangements as shown in Appendix 1. A business plan will be developed to guide the project and identify sources of appropriate funding and support that can be secured. This will include looking at mechanisms for how the public can contribute to the management of countryside sites, for example, through bequests and membership contributions, as well as ensuring that local businesses that use the sites to run their business, make an appropriate contribution to the management and maintenance of those sites.

4.0 Other Options:

4.1 Do Nothing:

As described previously the Council have agreed to give notice to the Mersey Valley Warden Service and the Bollin Valley Partnership. A do nothing approach would therefore rely on two operational officer from Groundforce being responsible for the maintenance of the Council's countryside assets. This would result in the deterioration of Trafford Countryside sites and growing public dissatisfaction as well as adverse biodiversity implications. The overall result would be future significant increased costs to restore the sites to acceptable standards.

4.2 Disposal of Assets:

Countryside sites are predominantly located within green belt and flood plain and many have other planning restrictions identified within the Council's Core Strategy. Aside from agricultural tenancy, the majority of the sites have no value from land sales or development. The sites are designated open space and any disposal would be subject to the process for disposing of Public Open Space under the Local Government Act 1972. They also provide necessary green space often close to more densely populated areas of the borough and are therefore essential in meeting standards for open space provision.

4.3 Other Management Organisations:

Alternative partners have been considered. However land management trusts often require large endowments to take on the management and maintenance of this sort of site in perpetuity and this usually happens with post-industrial sites when they are

initially restored. Red Rose Forest and their charitable organisation are uniquely placed to take on this role and have got a wealth of experience, particularly within the Mersey Valley that would be difficult to match from another source.

5.0 Consultation

- 5.1 No direct consultation has been undertaken yet although we have spoken to both Manchester City Council and Cheshire East Council about these proposals. Consultation has been carried out on the removal of funding to both the Mersey Valley and Bollin Valley as part of the budget consultation.
- 5.2 Should approval be given for the partnership to go ahead then there would be public and stakeholder consultation to inform the development of both the management plans for the sites, as well as the business plan.

6.0 Reasons for Recommendation:

- 6.1 To ensure that the Council will have a Countryside Management Partnership to support the management of its Countryside Sites and ensure that funding can be raised and that on-going improvements can be delivered with the coordinated involvement of stakeholders.

Finance Officer Clearance (type in initials).....PC.....
Legal Officer Clearance (type in initials).....MJ.....

[CORPORATE] DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE (electronic).....



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To confirm that the Financial and Legal Implications have been considered and the Executive Member has cleared the report.

Appendix 1 – Countryside Management Partnership Structure

