

DERBYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

PLACES IMPROVEMENT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR – ECONOMY,
TRANSPORT AND ENVIRONMENT**

18 JULY 2018

1.0 Introduction

This report is an introduction to the work of Derbyshire County Council's Countryside Service.

The report will explain the role and work undertaken by the Countryside Service and showcase recent successes, current challenges/opportunities and the future direction of the Service.

2.0 Background and Information

Derbyshire County Council's Countryside Service is responsible for providing access to Derbyshire's beautiful, varied countryside through the management of the public rights of way and the provision of greenways, countryside sites and facilities outside the National Park.

The Service is a part of the Economy, Transport and Environment (ETE) Department, and following a recent senior management change in April 2018 it is now part of the new Environment Division.

This new Division carries out work associated with the Council's statutory responsibilities, including Waste management, Flooding, Public Rights of Way, Tree Preservation Orders, and works with other divisions including strategic planning, development control in respect of minerals, and County Council development applications. The Countryside Service has a strong working relationship with the Emergency Planning Service and is called upon in extreme weather events and incidents. The Service provides staff, logistical, extraction and specialist transportation resources to assist vulnerable people, communities and the Emergency Services in times of need.

Countryside Service Estate

The table below provides a summary of the Countryside Service Estate.

Sites	Number/Distance
3 Destination Sites	Shipley Country Park , Elvaston Castle Country Park Middleton Top
Prospective Destination site	1 Tapton Lock
Country Parks	4
Visitor Centres	4

Greenways/Key Cycle Network	288.95 miles 465.02Km
Cycle Hire Centres	1
Woodlands	1,000ha
Water Bodies	105ha
Canals	16km
Reservoirs	4
SSSI's	8
Local Nature reserves	13
Picnic Sites	30
Total Countryside Sites	104
Public Rights of Way Network	3,336 miles/5,179 Km
Bridleways	451km
Roads Used as Public Paths	50km
Byways	3km
Highway Tree Safety responsibility	3,000 miles/4828 km
Total Rights of Way	4,974km

A review of the Countryside Service was carried out in 2016 which delivered a £1 million reduction in its revenue budget. The Service is currently working towards an additional funding cut of £0.5 million. This will ultimately equate to 36% reduction of the Service's budget between 2016 and 2019/20.

As a result of this rationalisation, the Countryside Service is now organised into three customer facing work areas:

1. Destination Sites & Commercial Operations Team - This team manages destination sites (these are the sites which attract the majority of visitors) and focuses on developing the commercial aspects of the Service in order to ensure its future sustainability.

The team includes countryside rangers, countryside wardens, sales/information staff, a project officer, the Elvaston Garden Team and volunteers who manage the destination sites at Shipley Country Park, Elvaston Castle Country Park, Middleton Top, High Peak Junction and the Cromford Canal.

2. Wider Countryside Operations Team - This team manages 104 countryside sites and 33 trails, including the Derbyshire sections of the Trans Pennine Trail and a woodland portfolio of 1,000 hectares (2471 acres) This team also manages the 175 County Tree Preservation Orders, comprising of 2,908 individually scheduled "Trees" "Groups" "Areas" and "Woodlands"

The team carries out the inspection of highway trees across the 5,631km/3498 miles of the road network on a cyclical basis. Staff also provide general tree advice to other departments and the public as required. The team also manage the broad portfolio of water assets including:

- Chesterfield and Cromford Canals

- 12 significant areas of water including reservoirs at Mapperley, Stockley, Manners, Watford Lodge
- Lakes at Pleasley Country Park, Peter Fidler Reserve, Williamthorpe Local Nature Reserve and Elvaston Castle Country Park.

These are mainly historic structures built over the last 200 years and challenge the authorities' resources and expertise to manage them in regard to condition and safety.

The reservoirs have to adhere to the Reservoirs Act 1975 and any water bodies which fall within the The Water Abstraction and Impounding Regulations 2017.

This recent act is creating a new area of work for the Service to deal with to ensure that the water bodies within the portfolio adhere to the conditions and appropriate licensing.

The team also manages Tapton Lock Visitor Centre. The Senior Project Officer (Asset Development) manages the Wider Countryside Team which includes Project Officers, countryside rangers, countryside wardens, sales/information staff, Tree Preservation Officer, two Tree Inspectors. The Team also works with volunteers and community groups to manage sites and deliver services across their area of responsibility.

As a county-wide Service, having officers covering specific parts of the County is very important. This brings both officers, local people and communities closer together and enables the Service to be responsive to local needs. Officers become familiar with their "patch", what goes on within it and through feedback and reports what needs doing.

The Service's uniformed rangers, wardens and project officers are the Service's visible presence on the ground. Their role is to manage and maintain sites, improve and create new facilities for countryside recreation. This is done to achieve a balance between the use of the countryside by people and at the same time provide a rich habitat for wildlife.

Countryside Service staff also have the knowledge and ability to deal with visitor safety and onsite problems. A great deal of the ranger's role is project management whilst the wardens are very much a hands on role with regard to estate maintenance.

The Service works closely with volunteers and community groups to achieve additional input to and management of sites and public rights of way although following the Service review there is no longer a dedicated officer specifically focused on volunteer engagement.

3. Public Rights of Way, Access and Greenways Team - A dedicated team within the Countryside Service deals exclusively with the statutory duties concerning Public Rights of Way, managed by the Rights of Way Officer. The Countryside Service manages 3218 miles/ 5,179Kms of public rights of way.

Public Rights Of Way Inspectors (6.5 FTE) cover the whole of the County including within the Peak District National Park The team works with land

owners and their tenants, local communities, Parish Councils, members of the public, users groups and access pressure groups.

Their work involves keeping the Definitive Rights of Way Map up to date, dealing with disputed routes, obstructions to paths, signing paths from roads, path maintenance, the structures (gates and stiles) and promoting the use of the network. Bridges and other structures are managed/replaced by the Highways Division.

The County Council is legally obliged to protect and assert for the Public their rights to use the network and to keep the Definitive Map and Statement (The legal record of Rights of Way for the County) under continuous review.

The Access and Greenways Team is managed by the Countryside Access and Improvement Officer. The team is responsible for the development and management of the Pennine Bridleway National Trail, the strategic development of the Greenways network and countryside access development.

The overall responsibility for the Countryside Service lies with the Head of Countryside based at Shand House Darley Dale Matlock.

3.0 Celebrating Success

The work of the Countryside Service is varied providing both communities and visitors accessible links to their green spaces and countryside. Successes of the Service are detailed below:

- **Managing destination sites to a national standard**

The Green Flag Award Scheme recognises and rewards well managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world.

The sites at Shipley Country Park, Elvaston Castle Country Park and Tapton Lock Visitor Centre have achieved and retained their Green Flag status in the last year.

This success has been achieved through a great deal of hard work, enthusiasm and pride not just from the Countryside Staff but with the support of the Council's Property Services Division and countryside service volunteers.

- **From Rail to Trail Arts Project**

The Countryside Service work with others to engage people in their local environment. Art is a great medium for this approach. Working in partnership can achieve some wonderful outcomes. This year saw the culmination of a great deal of community engagement deliver two pieces of art designed by the Hayfield Primary School pupils Project eARTh, High Peak Arts with artist Tracey Cartledge. The project was funded by Tesco Bags of Help, the Big Lottery and Groundwork. Two steel structures/ pieces of art now stand within the bus transport hub at the start of the Sett Valley Trail, they depict a railway and natural history theme.

- **Friends of Groups, working with volunteers.**

Derbyshire's countryside inspires many people and visitors to the County. There is much support for the facilities the County Council provides through the work of the Countryside Service. This is reflected in the volunteer input from community groups, specialist interest groups, individuals and friends of groups. The Countryside Service is supported through many hours of hard work and support. Many of the countryside site portfolio include post-industrial land reclamation sites which as they mature have created wildlife rich countryside sites which are valued by local communities and visitors.

Successful examples of this approach include the following:

- **Friends of Aston Brick Yard (FAB)** - This reclaimed site plantation is an area of secondary woodland and a wildflower meadow on the site of a former clay pit and brick works. It was a major gypsum provider in the 18th century, a brick works until mid-1960s, and then a landfill site until the late 1970s when villagers began to plant trees with the County Council.

The site was left to establish until 2012 when FAB was formed under the guidance of the County Council. This group through many volunteer hours have created both a pocket park for the community and a wildlife haven. This is an excellent example of community involvement overseen and encouraged by the Wider Countryside Service Team.

- **The Leawood Pump House & Middleton Top Engine House Volunteers**, a specialist interest group, who for over 45 years has cared for this industrial heritage. The Leawood Pump house operates a huge steam engine that pumps 4 tons of water with every stroke from the River Derwent to Cromford Canal.

Steam days are very popular with visitors to the Cromford Canal. The Unique 1849 Graham & Co. beam engine pumps water from the River Derwent into the Cromford Canal. Steam is supplied by two locomotive style boilers built by the Midland Railway around 1900. This is an excellent example of volunteers keeping heritage alive to share with visitors.

- **The Chesterfield Canal Trust** has volunteered with the Countryside Service since the mid 1980's on the five mile stretch of canal within the Council's ownership.

Through a huge amount of volunteer time, Council engineering expertise, a dedicated Council Waterways' Project officer, and the care of Countryside Service rangers and wardens, a once filled in damp ditch has been transformed back into a navigable canal corridor. This corridor is rich in wildlife with opportunities to boat, canoe and fish again on this thriving waterway. The canal corridor now provides both a utility route for work and shopping and also a place to enjoy a restful welcoming countryside site linking Staveley with the heart of Chesterfield.

- **Events on Countryside Sites**

Although countryside work is for the long-term, the world does not stand still. The Countryside Service in 52 years has seen how people's expectations of entertainment and activities in the countryside has changed.

To cater for this evolution, the Countryside Service provides a varied county-wide events programme throughout the year.

The programme is not provided by the Service alone but with a mix of providers using the sites as an attraction. This allows staff to focus on other elements of work and the Service still benefits from increased car park and shop income on event days.

These varied events provide opportunities for lifelong learning, hands on skills, children's' activities, food and drink, steam and boat rallies, animal wildlife, park runs and cycle events such as L'Eroica Britannia.

The Service has seen the benefit of putting its resources into the provision of larger events working with demonstrators, product providers and countryside groups to attract a wider audience to develop public awareness of the environment and of the Council's Countryside Sites.

- **Derbyshire Woodland Festival**

The Derbyshire Woodland Festival is the Service's flagship event, taking place in September each year. This provides a wide range of entertainment, brings in income to the service and showcases Elvaston Castle and the work of the Service.

The Festival was established 18 years ago by the County Council to celebrate both traditional and contemporary woodland crafts.

Although the event first started at Linacre Reservoirs on a small scale as a one day event for the last 8 years its home has been at Elvaston Castle Country Park as a weekend event.

It has become a very popular location because the country park is such a fantastic setting, with the festival taking place in the semi-natural woodlands which surround the more formal gardens of the estate.

The event helps preserve woodland crafts and traditions for future generations by introducing them to a wider audience and the Council lends its support to talented people still making a living from the crafts or businesses wishing to diversify or make a new start.

The Festival attracts a great mix of talent ranging from the traditional such as oak swill baskets made from thinly cleaved strips of oak, to clogs made to measure from blocks of alder and coloured leather to the more modern chainsaw carving, sawmilling and forwarding which largely replaced snigging in current forestry practice. This year's Festival will take place on the 22nd and 23rd September.

- **Industrial Heritage**

The Countryside Service has an interesting portfolio of rich industrial heritage on sites within its care. From a castle, canals, reservoirs to the High Peak Trail on the former Cromford and High Peak Railway. This was one of the first long distance railways which was built on canal principles. This site has the world's oldest railway engine house workshop.

These structures need constant care and attention and are a great responsibility.

This year the Service, through a grant from Natural England Capital fund, was able to carry out a scheme to restore the Wheel Pit at High Peak Junction. This was an important part of the mechanism for hauling engines and wagons up and down the Sheep Pasture incline.

- **Adventurous Bike Trails**

The Countryside Service has been at the forefront of providing opportunities for visitors to explore the countryside by bicycle. From the early days of cycle hire to developing the Greenways multi-user network. With more cyclists wishing to experience the thrill of humps and bumps the Service looked at providing an opportunity with the prospect of further development on suitable Countryside Sites.

The Wider Sites Team working with volunteers built an adventurous one way one mile cycle route at Temple Normanton alongside the Five Pits Trail. The team worked with volunteers and Bolsover District Council Leisure Team to provide a second mountain bike route on the County Council's Glapwell Countryside Site. Both these new facilities are proving to be very popular and creating positive feedback.

The examples of Service success outlined above reflect the enthusiasm and knowledge of staff, volunteers and local communities in being involved in their local countryside and countryside facilities

4.0 Current Opportunities, Challenges and Future Direction

As a front facing public service, the Countryside Service has always evolved, either responding to changes in the Council Plan, government policy, efficiencies required of it, customer expectations and site development.

It is now facing a new environment with less resources both in staff and core budget. It is developing options to generate income to offset the reduction in budget and seek new funding streams from its visitors and operations with an enterprising approach.

Maximising opportunities for broadening the portfolio of sales outlets and leases will assist in increasing income.

Over the last two years the visitor centres have revised their offer refreshing the shop operations to stock a more attractive range of gifts and stationary to cater

for a modern audience. Hot drink machines and cakes have been installed to create a grab and go opportunity and the ice cream offer is as popular as ever.

The Service has also explored offering catering business the opportunity to use the Council's sites. This has not been as attractive proposition as might be expected and is an area of further development.

The service will continue to explore new markets and audiences to create additional income streams to offset the revenue costs of providing service through existing or new methods. Although it is in the early stages of creating new options of this work area there is still much to be done and ways of working to explore.

The Service in line with the County Council's enterprising approach, is currently developing a holiday let portfolio commencing with the Bungalow at Shipley Country Park which is targeted to be available during 2019 and exploring the potential of existing buildings, Wooden Lodges and caravan sites for touring caravans/motorhomes, building on the experience of the Grin Low Caravan site.

The potential to expand the catering offer is also being considered with new locations already being let this summer. The Chesterfield Canal has suitable locations for moorings which would be another new income stream and become part of the site attraction to visitors.

The Service also wants to build on its success in accessing external income streams to manage sites for biodiversity, land management and heritage conservation. However, along with other land managers it will face a change in funding opportunities as DEFRA configures the post-Brexit funding landscape for such works. This will be seen to be both a challenge and opportunity to maximise support for the work of the service for the future.

Officer Recommendations

That the Committee:

- notes the breadth of work of the Countryside Service
- welcomes the successes of the Service outlined in the report
- recognises the current challenges facing the Service
- endorses the work the Service is undertaking to ensure its sustainability in the future

Richard Taylor
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