

## Agenda Item 9

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<b>Date</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> July 2014

<b>Ward(s) affected:</b>	Wards in Ashted, Leatherhead, Fetcham and Bookham	<b>Key Decision</b>	Yes
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<b>Subject</b>	Countryside Management Partnerships - Management Review
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### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To agree new governance arrangements for the countryside management partnerships (Lower Mole, Downlands and Heathland projects) in Surrey.
2. To agree a Service Level Agreement between the Lower Mole Project and the Council contained in Appendix 1.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- There are three countryside partnerships hosted by Surrey County Council, of which one, the Lower Mole Project, operates partly within Mole Valley and is part funded by MVDC.
- The Lower Mole Project offers a comprehensive countryside management service for the north of Mole Valley.
- An external review of three projects, undertaken in response to reducing local authority contributions, has highlighted changes that could provide the basis for longer term financial stability which is less reliant on public funding.
- A new management structure is proposed bringing the three projects closer together.
- New arrangements for Member representation are also proposed.
- As part of the business review, service level agreements have been produced for each of the partners to agree, highlighting the contributions they make towards corporate priorities.
- The formal agreement of the partner authorities, including MVDC, is required before the new arrangements can be implemented in July.

## **CORPORATE PRIORITIES**

### **Access to Services – Helping residents to access the services they need**

- 1. Improve the way we engage with our Customers and listen to our communities.** The Lower Mole Project works with community volunteers to resolve urban fringe issues and to facilitate and encourage access to the countryside on residents' doorsteps.
- 2. Working with our partners.** The project is a partnership of local authorities (Elmbridge, Epsom and Ewell, Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and City of London) with formal mechanisms to discuss at Member and officer levels issues relating to the care, enhancement of and access to the local countryside, and to take action on these matters.
- 3. Ensure that our residents are supported through Welfare Reform and the emerging Health and Wellbeing agenda.** By providing opportunities for people to volunteer for countryside management tasks and organising healthy walks and guided walks, residents can exercise and benefit their environment.

### **Environment - Maintaining the character and environment of Mole Valley**

- 6. Improve the quality of the built environment whilst preserving the character and integrity of our towns and villages, and protecting the rural landscape.** The emphasis within the work of the project is on improving the urban fringe landscape close to peoples' homes. It also undertakes tasks on public spaces within the built up area.

### **Value for Money - Delivering quality, value for money services**

- 11. Review the way in which we provide our services to ensure that they are focused on what matters, deliver against our priorities and thereby develop a culture of innovation across MVDC.** The partnership approach to delivering a countryside management service across local authority boundaries in Surrey is now 30 years old. It is still considered to be the best way forward, but the management arrangements have been reviewed in the light of changed circumstances and funding. It is intended that this will raise the profile of the Projects and result in greater financial stability in the longer term.

## **The Executive has the authority to determine the Recommendations**

### **1.0 BACKGROUND**

#### Countryside Management Within Surrey and Mole Valley

- 1.1 Within the Surrey there are several countryside management projects set up at various times in partnership with the County Council, relevant district councils and other organisations. Three of these are hosted by the County Council: the Lower Mole Countryside Management Project, the Heathlands Project and the Downlands Project. Of these, the Lower Mole Project, operates within Mole Valley.
- 1.2 Although the projects vary in the way they work and the scale of their operations, there are certain common characteristics:
  - They are a partnership of local authorities and other environmental organisations;
  - They work across local authority boundaries;

- They are responsible to a steering group of Member representatives nominated by the partner authorities;
  - They are hosted by the County Council who employ the staff and are responsible for services such as HR, finance and office accommodation;
  - They employ staff on local authority terms and conditions;
  - The core of what they do is based on providing opportunities for volunteers to work under supervised conditions on projects that conserve and enhance the countryside, particularly within the urban fringe.
- 1.3 Turning to the Lower Mole Project specifically, this is the oldest of the County countryside management projects having been established in 1984. It is about to celebrate its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Today it employs 3.7 full time equivalents. Other staff are employed from time to time funded externally to undertake a specific initiative for a short period. Volunteer office staff supplements the salaried staff.
- 1.4 The Lower Mole Project covers a considerable part of north Surrey including the northern portion of Mole Valley. They will tackle jobs within the North Downs area but focus principally on the urban fringe areas of Ashted, Leatherhead, Fetcham and Bookham. They also cover the whole of Epsom and Ewell, Elmbridge and parts of the London Borough of Kingston. Surrey is a funding partner as is the City of London which has the important open space of Ashted Common within the Project boundary.
- 1.5 Related to the Lower Mole Project is a separate, volunteer led Lower Mole Trust set up to raise funds for the work of the Project and other local enhancement initiatives.
- 1.6 The Project assists MVDC in meeting its biodiversity duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. In often subtle ways the Project acts as a conduit towards meeting many of our corporate priorities from engaging with our communities to improving the quality of people's lives. Mostly this is done in a quiet and small scale way. Many local initiatives to manage land in private ownership for public benefit, such as Teazle Wood and Rye Meadows, have been supported by the Lower Mole Project. The work of the Lower Mole Project is overseen by a Member Steering Group of Councillors from the representative local authorities. Councillors Ling and Potter represent MVDC.

#### Future for Countryside Partnerships

- 1.7 The countryside management service in Surrey is not intended to compete with land management and maintenance contractors. It undertakes work which would not otherwise be undertaken but which has a direct community benefit. Funding comes largely from the partner local authorities as part of their investment in the local environment and the well-being of local communities.
- 1.8 It was recognised, however, that at a time when local authority budgets are under pressure and the core contributions to the three projects are going down, there needed to be a reassessment of the resilience of the service. Following external review funding by one of the partners, it was considered that management changes were needed. Underlying these changes is the proposal that the three separate projects should work more closely together whilst retaining the separate identity and local associations. Equally, there is a need to build in greater financial resilience by broadening their funding base,

drawing in more external funding and making them less reliant on public sector funding.

1.9 As a result of the management review the following recommendations have been considered, accepted and recommended to the respective local authority partners by the each of the project Member Steering Groups of each of the three projects:

- The management of the three partnerships will be brought together under one Operations Manager;
- The Operations Manager will be responsible to a Board with each of the partner authorities providing one representative. The purpose of the Board is to make strategic decisions in respect of the three projects and to look to a more sustainable future for countryside management in the County. It is expected that the Member representative would have executive functions within their respective local authorities, ideally with relevant portfolio responsibilities;
- The Board will hold an annual partnership meeting to which will be invited a range of organisations and individuals with an interest in their work;
- The Lower Mole Trust, which is a volunteer group with charitable status that raises funds for countryside management work, will have a place on the Board; for the first time volunteers will be represented formally;
- Each project will retain its own liaison group to allow local members to retain contact with their local partnership; this will be informal in nature; this Council would nominate two Member representatives to the liaison group one of which would be the representative on the Board;
- A new post of Business Development Officer would be created with responsibility for attracting external funding;
- The staffing structure for the projects will change to accommodate the closer working of the countryside partnerships, the posts of Operations Manager and Business Development Officer. This is referred to below.

These changes represent a fundamental change to the way all three projects have operated up to this point. Therefore, the funding partners need to agree them formally. Each of the local authorities concerned is taking these changes through their decision making processes so that there is authority to put the new arrangements in place by the end of July. The agreement of all the partners is required in order to bring these changes about. If agreement cannot be reached, there is, at the moment, no alternative arrangement open to the partnerships. The status quo is not an option for financial reasons. The process of finding an alternative solution could be lengthy and interim arrangements for the projects and their staff could be very problematic.

#### Staff Implications

1.10 Of particular importance are the staffing changes. In respect of the Lower Mole Project, the current staffing resource is 3.7 full time equivalents (fte).

1.11 The result of the changes will be to reduce the number of site-based project staff and the introduction of a strategic manager covering all three projects. There will also be a business development officer whose task is to bring money in from other sources to fund further work. In the sort term this will impact on the number of tasks that the Lower Mole Project will be able to

organise. In the longer term, if the business development officer is successful, additional resources can be brought to bear on front line work. Overall, the immediate impact will be a small reduction in the number of full time, dedicated equivalent (fte) staff for the Lower Mole Project.

#### Service Level Agreement

- 1.12 One of the recommendations of the review was to develop a much more client focused approach backed up with an up-to-date Service Level Agreement. These agreements will vary to reflect the priorities of each of the partners. The Service Level Agreement drafted for this Council is attached at Appendix 1 for agreement. The content reflects the Council's own priorities and sets out the ways in which the Lower Mole Project can help achieve them. It is important to see the Lower Mole Project as an integral part of the Council's work and priorities even though it is managed as a partnership and hosted separately.

#### Members' Oversight

- 1.13 Under the proposed arrangements the three projects would be responsible to one Members' Steering Group charged with making strategic decisions on budgets and overall direction. Each of the partners would have one Councillor serving on the Steering Group. That Member would be expected to be an Executive member with a relevant portfolio. For each of the projects, underneath the Steering Group, there would be an informal grouping of members to meet with officers and project staff to discuss some of the detail of the projects' work and to feed back comments from their local communities. The informal groups would have no executive powers but could report to the Steering Group on matters of interest or concern. Each local group would have two Member nominations from each local authority

#### Recommendation of the Lower Mole Project Members' Steering Group

- 1.14 The outcome of the review and the recommendations on governance, staffing and finance have been discussed with the relevant Member Steering Groups, including the Lower Mole Project Steering Group. Members of that Steering Group were concerned that the partnerships should remain grounded in their local communities and that they should retain close links with local Members. For that reason, it is intended to include within the new arrangements a liaison group for each of the three projects.
- 1.15 Whilst the Steering Group for the Lower Mole Project is concerned about the changes and what they might mean for an organisation and service that has been very successful, they also recognise that if the partnerships are to remain sustainable, particularly in financial terms, these changes should be recommended for agreement by the partner authorities, including MVDC.

#### Summary

- 1.16 To summarise, the Lower Mole Project is a very well run and professional organisation with a long term commitment to the local communities it serves. It helps this Council to achieve both statutory and non-statutory responsibilities and is well-regarded by Members of the Council who have been involved with it down the years. However, the Lower Mole Project is 30 years old this year and a business review was long overdue particularly with the need to make all three County Council-hosted projects more financially sustainable. The new governance arrangement will draw the three partnerships closer together and create a post that will specifically target fund raising and business development. A strategic Partnership Board will provide

direction and oversee the move towards more financial independence. A revised Service Level Agreement. The Lower Mole Project Steering Group recommends that the Executive agree the new governance arrangements and the Service Level Agreement.

### **Financial Implications**

- 1.17 MVDC is providing a grant to the Lower Mole Project of £12,802 in 2014/15. The three year grant period ends this financial year and the Project will need to re-apply for the grant this year.
- 1.18 The decisions made about the project will not increase the Council's financial contribution and the aim in the medium to long term is to make the Lower Mole Project and the two sister projects more financially independent of the local authority funding partners.

### **Legal Implications**

- 1.19 The Service Level Agreement sets out the Council's commitment to provide grant support until the end of the current financial year. If the Council decides in the future not to renew the grant it will need to give a year's notice and provide funding during this period of notice, which currently would amount to £12,802.

## **2.0 OPTIONS**

Option 1: agree the new management arrangements as set out in the report and the Service level Agreement (appendix) as recommended by the Lower Mole Project Members' Steering Group. This is the recommended option.

Option 2 would be to ask the County Council and the other funding partners to renegotiate the governance, funding and Service Level Agreement. Members would need to indicate the areas with which they are unhappy. This would leave the Project in limbo for another period of time and would not solve the short term funding problems. There is a chance that the County Council in these circumstances would withdraw from its position of host to the countryside partnerships, in which case the partnerships could not continue.

## **3.0 CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS**

**Monitoring Officer commentary** - The Monitoring Officer confirms that all relevant legal implications have been taken into account

**S151 Officer commentary** – The s151 Officer confirms that all relevant financial risks and implications have been taken into account. Funding for the Lower Mole Project has been agreed for 2014/15. The new arrangements assume continued funding at this level and a year's notice of any intention to withdraw..

**Risk Implications** - The success of the new management structure depends on the ability of the business development officer to bring in new investment that will replace declining local authority income. Local authority funding is likely to remain important however as this provides longer term, stable income in order to ensure continuity of staff with experience and local knowledge. A further decline in this income could threaten the viability of the Projects.

**Equalities Implications** - The Lower Mole Project does occasionally work alongside people with learning difficulties. Their countryside access tasks provide opportunities to improve access for people with a disability, such as improvements of stiles and radar gates for wheelchair users. The proposed management changes will not change these arrangements.

**Employment Issues** – the issues for the Lower Mole Staff are set out in the report. There are no direct employment implications for MVDC as the County Council is the employing authority.

**Sustainability Issues** – the work that the Lower Mole Project does is part of the Council's sustainability agenda and it is important that their role remains viable and has the potential to expand in the future. This has been recognised by the partners and it is why the changes set out in the report have been recommended to MVDC.

**Consultation** – consultation has taken place with the staff and with the officers of the respective local authority partners. Members on the Steering Groups were involved in the review and in the debates on the form of the changes to be recommended to the local authority partners.

**Communications** – there are no communications planned.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Countryside Partnerships Team Business Plan April 2013-April 2018

**MOLE VALLEY DISTRICT COUNCIL****Service Level Agreement – Lower Mole Countryside Management Service****Appendix****Service Level Agreement between Mole Valley District Council and the Lower Mole Countryside Management Project****Purpose**

Mole Valley District Council will work in partnership with and provide a financial contribution to the Lower Mole Countryside Management Service enabling it to provide a volunteer based service as set out in this Service Level Agreement.

**Service to be provided**

The Lower Mole CMS is to provide a high quality and efficient volunteer based service for local communities and public and private landowners across its project area. By doing so it will help Mole Valley District Council's corporate priorities for the northern part of the District by applying the following aims:

**1. Environmental conservation**

The Countryside Management Service will seek to meet the Council's objective of helping to protect the environment and character of Mole Valley by:

- a) Working to conserve and enhance habitats and biodiversity
- b) Conserving the local distinctiveness of the countryside
- c) Working with landowners to promote best practice and sympathetic land management
- d) Working to improve public understanding of countryside issues: biodiversity, heritage, land management, landscape and sustainability

**2. Public access**

The Countryside Management Service will seek to meet the Council's objective of listening to the District's residents and communities by:

- a) Consulting on potential projects at an early stage and following up on ideas expressed in a variety of ways.
- b) Working with landowners and managers to improve public access to the countryside.
- c) Providing and promoting opportunities for access to the local countryside and green spaces, via the rights of way network and permissive routes.
- d) Developing, promoting and maintaining a range of recreation routes.
- e) Producing site information and other literature to promote the countryside and the work of the CMS.

**3. Community involvement**

The Countryside Management Service will seek to meet the Council's objectives of helping to access services and delivering value for money by:

- a) Encouraging local people to become involved in the CMS primarily by engaging directly in practical work on sites in need of enhancement or management.
- b) Increasing understanding and awareness of the countryside through guided walks, talks and events, and by developing interpretation materials.

**MOLE VALLEY DISTRICT COUNCIL****Service Level Agreement – Lower Mole Countryside Management Service**

- c) Enabling local groups to become self-sufficient in carrying out countryside improvements in their local area.
- d) Developing connections with the local business community.
- e) Providing opportunities for community involvement and healthy living through a programme of active volunteering, events and walks.
- f) Developing opportunities for those experiencing social exclusion e.g. through physical or mental health conditions, or those with learning difficulties.
- g) Maintaining an active dialogue with local people.
- h) Providing training opportunities associated with countryside knowledge and skills.

**4. Strategy & planning**

The Countryside Management Service will seek to meet the Council's objective of delivering value for money, listening to residents and communities, and protecting the environment and character of Mole Valley by:

- a) Planning and prioritising work with partners using strategic documents such as Biodiversity Action Plans, site management plans and Community Plans
- b) Inputting into the relevant groups of Local Strategic Partnerships
- c) Be involved with the development of the Green Arc strategy and 'Green Infrastructure' planning
- d) Strengthening links with residents associations, parish councils and assisting with Parish Plans, Neighbourhood Plans and other forms of community planning as requested.

**5. Sustainability**

The Countryside Management Service will seek to meet the Council's objectives of protecting the environment and character of Mole Valley and delivering value for money by:

- a) Providing opportunities for training for staff and volunteers in traditional skills and techniques.
- b) Demonstrating sustainable practice through its work and activities.
- c) Promoting the use of products arising from conservation work.
- d) Producing a Business Plan to provide more details about how the terms of this agreement will deliver the service to provide real improvements to urban fringe and other countryside both within the District and on land adjacent to the District boundary enjoyed and valued by people living within the Mole Valley District.
- e) Encouraging an emphasis in community engagement and volunteering so that people have a direct stake in their local environment.

**Other terms and conditions**

All work is to be carried out in a safe, secure and efficient manner, with significant hazards being identified, risks assessed and reasonable measures taken to put in place safe systems of work for employees, volunteers and contractors.

The Manager will develop an annual work programme with a representative from Mole Valley DC, to be agreed by Officer/Member Steering Group by March each year.

**MOLE VALLEY DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**Service Level Agreement – Lower Mole Countryside Management Service**

The Manager will review progress on the annual work programme with a representative from the Mole Valley DC and report annually to the Steering Group about achievement of the objectives, delivery of targets and outcomes of work.

**Financial arrangements**

Since April 2012 Mole Valley District Council's financial contribution to the Lower Mole CMS has come from the Council's grant budget. The contribution, which will be made annually, has been agreed for a three year period until 2014/15.

The Council will make a contribution of £12,802 in financial years 2013/14 and 2014/15 subject to compliance with the terms of this Service Level Agreement and the annual review of the Council's budget to confirm that the funds for the forthcoming financial year will be available.

The payment will be made in accordance with the Council's financial rules.

This funding will support the core cost of running the Service i.e. employee salaries, vehicle running costs, accommodation and office administration costs.

Additional charges will be made for each practical task carried out on land owned by Mole Valley District Council to cover the volunteer charge and cost of materials, equipment, tools, PPE and machinery hire at the schedule of rates shown in Appendix 3. Any additional charges will be agreed prior to the commencement of a task and will be commissioned through a purchase order issued.

This agreement will be reviewed in June 2014, ten months prior to the end of term in order to allow time to draw up a further three-year agreement and for both the Service and the Council to consider whether they wish to renew it and on what terms.

If either party wish to withdraw from this agreement they must give one year's notice in writing.

Signed on behalf of Mole Valley District Council:

Signed on behalf of Lower Mole Countryside Management Service:

Dated: