

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-nnn-2009/10
Date of meeting: 13 September 2010



Portfolio: Penny Smith
Subject: Proposed Countrycare re-structure
Responsible Officer: Kassandra Polyzoides (01992 564119).
Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

1. To agree that the job description and grading of the Countryside Manager post be reviewed and
2. To agree one of the two proposed structures for Countrycare:
 - Option 1
 - Retain the existing structure
 - Option 2
 - Delete one Assistant Countryside Manager post and create an additional Countryside Assistant post, fortifying the project implementation tier of the team and allowing for the further extension of the volunteer programme.
3. To note Countrycare's intention to extend it's volunteering and public engagement programme

Executive Summary:

The current grading of the Countryside Manager is lower than that of other team leaders across the Council and it has for some time been thought that a formal review of the roles' job description and grade is appropriate. There is an opportunity to review Countrycare's structure given the current vacancies, the coalition Government's localism agenda and in view of the need to improve work efficiency and consider changing service delivery requirements.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To ensure that the Council and District continues to benefit from a well structured Countryside Management team, that delivers high quality countryside management projects and public information and advice services, in a cost efficient manner.

Other Options for Action:

Not agree that the Countrycare Manager post Job Description and grading be reviewed at this time. Not agree any of the proposed structures for Countrycare.

Report:

- 1) Countrycare is Epping Forest District Council's Countryside Management Service. Based within the Policy and Environment section of the Directorate of Planning and Economic Development, Countrycare is the key resource for advice, information and practical assistance on countryside and nature conservation issues. Countrycare has just entered its 25th year and since its establishment in 1986, it has developed a credible and proven track record for delivering quality projects and attracting external grant funding. This in turn has developed strong community support and trust, which staff have been able to harness to good effect. The obvious public enthusiasm and desire of people to make a difference is reflected in Countrycare's ability to recruit and keep a wide volunteer base and gain public support for community based project works. Operating across the entire Epping Forest District, Countrycare undertakes a wide variety of community-based activities and coordinates a regular programme of practical conservation work. The ability of Countrycare to engage and involve the local community in "hands on" practical conservation work remains its key strength. As one of the Council's primary "enablers" Countrycare involves people of all ages and abilities in every aspect of its work. Countrycare is also the Council's key resource for advice on biodiversity, nature conservation law and protected species, green infrastructure and legislation such as the Hedgerow Regulations. Countrycare undertakes a statutory role within the Planning process by giving advice to Development Control Officers on biodiversity implications within planning applications. Countrycare also provides staff time and volunteer assistance to other Directorates offering cost effective management of the Districts 9 Local Nature Reserves including coordination of the Roding Valley Meadows LNR.

Existing Countrycare structure:

Countryside Manager £30,011 **Vacant as of June 2010**
Assistant Countryside Manager £26,276 **Vacant as of June 2010**
Assistant Countryside Manager £26,276 **Vacant as of Sep 2010**
Countryside Assistant £16,440

2 x Future Jobs Fund posts

Assistant Countryside Manager (Trainee) (PCC 05x) – Corporately funded to November 2011 (£22,221 - £25,472)

- 2) The key objectives of the service:

- To conserve and promote the biodiversity of the district and implement the goals of the Epping Forest Biodiversity Action Plan.
- To provide a quality in house Ecology Unit offering specialist statutory planning application advice and promoting a greater understanding and respect for the countryside for the constituents of the District
- To promote public access to the countryside and provide for informal recreation.
- To involve local communities in all aspects of the Service's work and extend an already popular volunteering programme.

- 3) Review of Countryside Manager job description and grading

The Countryside Manager post is currently vacant (August 2010). Prior to pursuing a process

to re-fill the post, it has been acknowledged that the job description and grading require a review, partly in order to ensure that we engage candidates of the highest calibre. In addition the previous post holder was found to be working outside of the outdated job description partly as the role under his guidance grew in merit and scope. As a result it was concluded that the review panel could conduct a job evaluation to look at the job description and post grade.

The decision to evaluate the post would acknowledge the important day to day tasks that this role encompasses and ensure consistency across the Council. It is vital at this point to ensure that there is a strong strategic direction driving Countrycare forward as an innovative service. Given that more emphasis will be placed on community involvement and engagement, volunteering and the notion of localism, Countrycare will be required to extend the work they deliver in this area. The existing volunteering programme is strong, it does have the potential however to be promoted further and serve as an exemplar to other Councils of how a bottom up approach to countryside management can work at a local level. A strong strategic direction for the service will allow it to continue to maximise the implementation of practical conservation work, including contributing vital officer time to other Directorates for the continuation of an array of schemes, in a cost effective manner. Considerable Countrycare officer time is contributed in kind to other Directorates for the delivery of countryside management projects. Not having this contribution would require budgets to be dedicated to consultants fees or for the Council to cease for instance to manage the Districts LNR's, which we would have to make a strong case for. An experienced manager would also ensure continued efforts to maximise funding contributions for the Council from external funding sources for the delivery of key projects, especially during the period of economic recovery.

4) Countrycare structure

Option 1

Leave as is:

Countryside Manager £30,011 **Vacant as of June 2010**
Assistant Countryside Manager £26,276 **Vacant as of June 2010**
Assistant Countryside Manager £26,276 **Vacant as of Sep 2010**
Countryside Assistant £16,440

Annual cost: £99,003

Assistant Countryside Manager (trainee)-Corporately funded to 11/2011 £22,221. Plus two Future Jobs Fund employees until August November 2010

Option 2

Delete one Assistant Countryside Manager and create an additional Countryside Assistant
Countryside Manager £30,011
Assistant Countryside Manager £26,276
Countryside Assistant £16,440
Countryside Assistant £16,440

Annual cost £89,167= annual saving £9,836

Assistant Countryside Manager (trainee)-Corporately funded to 11/2011 £22,221. Plus two Future Jobs Fund employees until August 2010

Making the team smaller than what has been recommended above would impact the volunteer and customer advice service and the officer time contribution to other Directorates to the Local Nature Reserve (LNR) sites in District Council ownership.

The Countryside Assistants need to be accompanied on site by the ACM, partly as they are not fully qualified in operating machinery and need to be supervised with the volunteers

In the event that the Countryside Manager job description was reviewed and the post re-graded from Grade 8 to Grade 9 the additional annual cost would be £4,538.

| | | Re-grading | |
|-----------------|---------|-------------------|----------|
| Option 1 | £99,003 | £4,538 | £103,541 |
| Option 2 | £89,167 | £4538 | £93,705 |

Including the re-grading of the Countryside Manager post Option 2 would save £5,298 per annum. In addition the total running costs for the service are being reviewed in order to ensure other operational cost saving over the short and medium term.

There have been discussions regarding operating Countrycare as a volunteer service. Given how other similar organisations work it is felt that at this stage this would not be feasible for the following reasons;

1. The work the team does is specialist, in ecology, conservation management and planning. Apart from contributing time, volunteers would need to have very specific skill sets to deliver the high quality of service currently provided. In addition an extensive and costly programme of health and safety procedures would have to be in place to include adequate task and site risk assessments, upkeep and maintenance of PPE (personal Protective Equipment), tools and records and checking of suitable qualifications are held by volunteers i.e first aid certification and chainsaw qualifications.
2. The service would require in excess of 140 hours of volunteer time throughout the week to deliver a consistent service. Experience in this sector has shown that volunteer time is most effectively gained at the project development/ implementation stage. A key aspiration for the service over the next couple of years will be to extend the volunteering service at the project that level, aiming to gain more volunteers at a 2-5 hour per week contribution for the implementation of projects.
3. The district already has the Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers, which relies on much of the existing volunteer resource, and existing volunteer time is already stretched. The emphasis for the future would be to broaden the exiting volunteer base, as discussed above engaging constituents to average two and above hours of volunteer work.

Extending the volunteer programme

The current Countrycare Volunteer programme:

- 1) For 2009/10 the team organised 99 practical project days involving 1,044 volunteer days (6,264) hours. This equates to £ 45,750 of volunteer assistance. In addition Countrycare have raised over £200k worth of grant funding for the development and delivery of projects over the last 10 years. Countrycare staff and volunteers undertake a vital role in the upkeep of the district's 9 LNRs and the establishment of new sites such as Bobbingworth Former Landfill Site. In 2009/10 over 500 staff hours and 2000 volunteer hours were given working, promoting and maintaining EFDC land. This equates to over £30,000 worth of labour. Many of the tasks were highly skilled and would have been too expensive to undertake with contractors for example Hedgelaying on the flood reservoir LNRs.

Localism: Our vision for Countrycare-Placing emphasis on volunteering

The aspiration is for the service to promote EFDC to becoming a beacon Council when it comes to promoting and protecting the green and unique character of the district using local volunteers and providing excellent educational services to the people of the District.

- 2) Focusing on health and equality issues-engaging harder to reach groups and ages and promoting a healthy lifestyle through the volunteer programme, especially targeting areas most in need. There has been evidence, through their own account, that volunteer health has benefitted as a result of the volunteering programme.
- 3) Targeting youth and the older age groups in devising projects as well as implementing on the ground.
- 4) Providing mentoring programmes for the 14-21 age group and improving attainment education in ecology and countryside management
- 5) Extending the involvement/education of schools and children in the district via the Green team environmental programme. This has been organised in the past with the Community development team and has the ability to grow further.
- 6) Extending the work being delivered with the successful tree warden scheme.

Resource Implications:

Option 1: £99,003 per annum

Option 2: £89,197 per annum or 93,705 including re-grading of post

Additional amount related to potential Countryside Manager post re-grading: £ 4,538

Legal and Governance Implications:

Under Section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, County Councils, Borough and District Council's have the powers to establish Local Nature Reserves. EFDC has used this power to establish 9 LNRs across the district.

Through the LNR designation the Council has committed to safeguarding and maintaining the sites for their nature conservation interest and managing them accordingly.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

Currently Countrycare offer a regular presence on EFDC's LNR's. This is in the form of a education days, a regular volunteer programme and patrolling. Staff and volunteers maintain the special habitats of the sites, keep pathways clear, litter pick and repair vandalism of countryside furniture. All this largely unnoticed work ensures the LNRs are a pleasant and safe place to visit and use for leisure. The works have also had a dramatic impact on biodiversity increasing the opportunity for people to access nature right on their doorsteps. Currently additional budgets do not exist for this work to be undertaken and without Countrycare staff and volunteers much of it would not get done.

Consultation Undertaken:

Discussions held with other departments

Background Papers:

Countrycare Annual Reports

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management

Not undertaken

Equality and Diversity:

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications? No

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken? No

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?
All work conducted by Countrycare aims to be inclusive and ensure that the Equalities agenda's are taken into account