

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-027-2010/11
Date of meeting: 13 September 2010



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Safer and Greener
Subject: Proposed Countrycare Re-structure
Responsible Officer: Kassandra Polyzoides (01992 564119).
Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1) To agree the proposed re-structure for Countrycare by deleting one Assistant Countryside Manager post and creating an additional Countryside Assistant post, thereby fortifying the project implementation tier of the team and allowing for the further extension of the volunteer programme; and

(2) To note Countrycare's intention to extend its 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 role's 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 continue to benefit from a well structured Countryside Management team, which delivers high quality countryside management projects and public information and advice services.

Other Options for Action:

Retain existing Countrycare structure

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 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 the services ability to recruit and keep a wide volunteer base and gain public support for community based project works.

2. 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 the service 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.

3. Countrycare is also the Council’s key resource for advice on biodiversity, nature conservation law, protected species, green infrastructure and legislation such as the Hedgerow Regulations.

4. Countrycare undertakes a statutory role within the Planning process by giving advice to Development Control Officers on biodiversity implications of planning applications. Countrycare also provides staff time and volunteer assistance to other Directorates offering cost effective management of the District’s nine Local Nature Reserves (LNR) including coordination of the Roding Valley Meadows LNR.

5. The Local Area Agreement (LAA2) agreement requires that the Council pursues Positive Countryside Management (PCM) for all its Local Wildlife Sites (LoWS). Via the LAA2 the Council has the statutory obligation to report and deliver progress on National Indicator NI 197 ‘Improved local biodiversity-proportion of local sites where positive conservation management has been or is being implemented’.

6. The Local Area Agreement Biodiversity Indicator (LAABI) Group has the aim of getting 34% of the LoWS within the Essex area into PCM by March 2011. We currently have 222 LoWS in the District. The Council via the efforts of Countrycare and the Essex Wildlife Trust is well on course in achieving the 34% target. Specifically we have achieved 66 PCM sites across the District out of 74, which is our target.

The Key Objectives of the Service

7. The key objectives of the Service are currently as follows:

(a) to conserve and promote the biodiversity of the district and implement the goals of the Epping Forest Biodiversity Action Plan;

(b) 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 residents of the District;

(c) to promote public access to the countryside and provide for informal recreation; and

(d) to involve local communities in all aspects of the Service’s work and extend an already popular volunteering programme.

Existing Countrycare Structure

8. The current structure of Countrycare is as follows:

(a) Countryside Manager £44,460 - **Vacant as of August 2010;**

- (b) Assistant Countryside Manager £36,720 - **Vacant as of June 2010**;
- (c) Assistant Countryside Manager £36,720 - **Vacant as of Sep 2010**;
- (d) Countryside Assistant £21,750;
- (e) Assistant Countryside Manager (trainee) £28,930 – Corporately funded to November 2011; and
- (f) two Future Jobs Fund employees until November 2010.

Review of Countryside Manager Job Description and Grading

9. 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, in order to ensure that candidates of the highest calibre are engaged. 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 would conduct a job evaluation to look at the job description and post grade.

Recommended Countrycare re-structure

10. It is recommended that one Assistant Countryside Manager post is deleted and an additional Countryside Assistant post created in its stead. This would give the following revised structure:

- (a) Countryside Manager £44,460;
- (b) Assistant Countryside Manager £36,720;
- (c) Countryside Assistant £21,750;
- (d) Countryside Assistant £21,750;
- (e) Assistant Countryside Manager (trainee) £28,930 - Corporately funded to November 2011; and
- (f) two Future Jobs Fund employees until November 2010.

Current salary budget	£139,650
Proposed re-structure	£124,680

11. The proposed re-structure would result in a Continuing Services Budget (CSB) saving of £14,970 per annum. The total per annum running costs for the service are being reviewed in order to ensure operational cost savings over the medium and long term. Initial examination into the option of combining Countrycare and Grounds Maintenance has shown this to not currently be an effective set-up for service delivery, but can be re-examined in the near future.

Countrycare as a Volunteer Service

12. 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:

(a) 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.

(b) The service would require in excess of 140 hours of volunteer time throughout the week to deliver a consistent service. At least 60 of these hours would be managing the service and addressing operational needs. To sustain the existing high quality service, volunteer input would need to remain consistent over time, which can not be guaranteed, 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 implementation level, aiming to gain more volunteers at a 2-5 hour per week contribution for the implementation of projects.

(c) 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 existing volunteer base for Countrycare projects, engaging more residents and ensuring a minimum of two volunteer hours per week.

Extending the volunteer programme

13. The current Countrycare Volunteer programme. In 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 £200,000 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 nine 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 land owed by the Council. This equates to over £30,000 worth of labour. Many of the tasks were highly skilled and would have been expensive to undertake with contractors, for example Hedge laying on the flood reservoir LNRs.

Localism: Our vision for Countrycare-placing emphasis on volunteering

14. 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. The vision includes:

(a) 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 staff accounts, that volunteer health has benefited as a result of the volunteering programme.

(b) Targeting youth and the older age groups in devising projects as well as implementing on the ground.

(c) Providing mentoring programmes for the 14-21 age group and improving education in ecology and countryside management.

(d) 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 potential to grow further.

(e) Extending the work being delivered with the successful tree warden scheme.

Resource Implications:

£124,680 including re-grading of the Countryside Manager post will offer a CSB saving of £14,970 per annum.

Legal and Governance Implications:

Under Section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, County Councils, Borough and District Councils have the powers to establish Local Nature Reserves. EFDC has used this power to establish nine 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 the Council's LNRs. 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. This work, including work on the LoWS, has 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.

Consultation Undertaken:

Discussions held with other Directorates.

Background Papers:

Countrycare Annual Reports.

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management

The proposed re-structure of Countrycare would allow for ongoing service delivery at the same level as existing and enable the team to extend its volunteer programme.

Equality and Diversity:

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

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

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 is taken into account