

# Not for Publication

The following information is 'Confidential' by virtue of the provisions of Section 100A(2) or 'Exempt' by virtue of the provisions of Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act, 1972

## Service Delivery Overview & Scrutiny Panel - 23 March 2022

### EXEMPT MATTERS

The following items are exempt under Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by virtue of the paragraphs indicated

- 38 **Proposal to transfer the Management of the SMDC Countryside Sites - Nicola Kemp, Head of Service Commissioning.**  
*(Paragraph 3 - Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) )*

Councillor Porter – Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Biodiversity, introduced a report to the Panel on the proposal to secure the future management arrangements of the Moorlands countryside sites via the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust (SWT).

This council currently had responsibility for the management of 12 countryside sites, two of which were designated as Country Parks, 6 as Local Nature Reserves (LNR), one as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and two Sites of Biological Interest (SBI).

The provision of country parks was a discretionary service provided by SMDC. The Council needed to consider alternative ways of delivering the same or better service due to resource limitations and to ensure that the sites were given full consideration in regards to habitat creation and biodiversity objectives that this Council had and which would add value.

As was reported to the Cabinet in August 2017, four options were previously considered in regards to the future management of the Council's countryside sites, these being:

1. Service to remain under Council management but with savings target achieved,
2. Transfer management of all sites to one specialist provider,
3. Transfer management of sites on a site by site basis to multiple providers,
4. Establish a private sector partnership.

Since the time of the last report in 2017, a review of operational efficiencies and different ways of working had been implemented, reducing spend on this service area. It was not believed that any further or significant operational savings would be achieved whilst the services remained in the control of this Authority without compromising the level of management undertaken at the sites.

It was believed that only option 2 would meet the needs of the Council in regards to reducing the financial burden associated with the Council's direct management of

## Service Delivery Overview & Scrutiny Panel - 23 March 2022

these sites, whilst ensuring nature and habitat conservation was of a paramount consideration.

As a result, officers initiated discussions with the SWT as a result of previous successful partnership projects with the Council.

Discussions with the SWT commenced following the realisation that all other options were not practical for SMDC. Officers from SoTCC were engaged in this process due to their involvement with Wetley Moor. Officer level conversations with SoTCC confirmed that they would be willing to support this Council in achieving a more sustainable management option for the site, via a third party.

Initial discussions with SWT focussed on them taking on the management of the eleven countryside sites (excluding the Leekbrook line as detailed at 7.9 of the report), based on a long term lease approach with the share of title held by SoTCC being transferred to SMDC to facilitate Wetley Moor to be leased to SWT.

Full details of the contractual arrangements were contained within the report.

A total of £65,000 p/a would be made available to SWT to support their various obligations in respect of the Sites – (£15,000 p/a for the services in connection with Wetley Moor and a contribution of £50,000 p/a in connection with the other sites). Based on the 2021-22 budget this project would deliver savings of c. £50,000 per annum, although this would be lower in year 1 due to the costs the Council would incur as detailed at 11.8 of the report.

To avoid any uncertainty in the future, a member of the Panel requested for reference to be made to the café at Biddulph Grange County Park being managed by Biddulph Town Council (BTC), the use of the piece of land (between the café and entrance) and the necessity for SWT to work in partnership with BTC in the agreement. Nicola Kemp – Head of Service Commissioning, confirmed the Council had no objections to the inclusion of the need for SWT to work with BTC in regards to this site.

It was noted that BTC wished to see improvements to the ancient orchard, a dog free child play/sensory area, woodland art and exploration area. Ideally, the piece of land could be controlled by or leased to BTC.

In response to a query in relation to Wetley Moor Common, members were advised that delays in the transfer were due to the complexities around the Moor and that the £15,000 p/a for services were solely for the costs the Council incurred directly for this site.

### **DECIDED:**

- 1) For a meeting to be facilitated between SMDC, Biddulph Town Council and SWT, prior to the transfer of Biddulph Grange Country Park;
- 2) For a review of the transfer of the management of the countryside sites to be conducted in 1/2 years;
- 3) The Panel **RECOMMENDED** that Cabinet **APPROVE** in principle the proposed future management of the countryside sites via an arrangement with SWT as is detailed within the report, which would generate approximately £50,000 savings per annum. Further detail of the arrangements would be developed and provided by way of a Portfolio Holder Delegated Decision in due course;

**Service Delivery Overview & Scrutiny Panel - 23 March 2022**

- 4) The Panel **RECOMMENDED** that Cabinet **APPROVE** further work to be undertaken with officers at Stoke on Trent City Council (SoTCC) which could result from SMDC taking on full title for Wetley Moor and that information was obtained to provide due diligence to this Council of the liabilities regarding such. The aim being that in time Wetley Moor common could also be leased to SWT to enable improvements in regards to its management to be achieved.

The meeting closed at 6.57 pm

\_\_\_\_\_ Chairman \_\_\_\_\_ Date

CONFIDENTIAL