

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

27 JANUARY 2005

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF COUNTRYSIDE SERVICES - IMPLEMENTATION OF THE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To report details of progress to date with implementation of the Best Value Review of Countryside Services Improvement Plan.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Committee considered and supported the Final Report and Improvement Plan for the Best Value Review of Countryside Services at its meeting on 4 February 2004. It was subsequently approved by Executive Members on 23 March 2004. The Committee considered a further report on the launch of the Countryside Service on 5 May 2004.

3.0 PROGRESS WITH IMPLEMENTATION

- 2.1 Since its formation in April 2004, the Countryside Service has now had ten months in which to begin implementation work on the first phase of the 5-year Improvement Plan. Although a relatively short period, substantial progress has been made with achieving year one targets and, with a few exceptions, the majority of the key building blocks for the new service are now in place.
- 2.2 An attempt has been made to document in detail the main improvements to date and these are set out in the Implementation Schedule, which is included as Appendix 3. This lists all the tasks identified in the Improvement Plan for implementation during the first year of the service. Against each task, an assessment has been made of achievements made to date, together with any constraints that have delayed progress. As this is inevitably a long and detailed account, a summary of some of the more significant improvements is included in Appendix 1.
- 2.3 During the first few months of the service, many of the key tasks were related to staff management and included: agreeing the new structure for the service; introducing improved team working arrangements; preparing staff job descriptions and grades; and advertising and recruiting to new posts. This was a complex and sensitive process involving consultation and 1-to-1 meetings with staff. The Improvement Plan identified the need for a number of new posts created to improve specific aspects of the service. Recruitment was undertaken in two phases between approximately July 2004 and January 2005 with priority being given to those posts judged to bring the most immediate front line benefits to the service. The lengthy lead in period meant that existing staff have had to endure an unsettling period of change, whilst simultaneously having to rise to the new expectations being placed upon the

service, but without the benefit of additional staff resources until a relatively late stage. It has therefore been a very challenging period for all staff within the service. Despite this, and to the credit of the staff concerned, the Service has already achieved some major milestones.

2.4 The Best Value Improvement Plan set detailed monthly targets for the first year of implementation. These were set in January/February 2004 when work on the Final Best Value Report was completed and represented a 'best guess' at the time of how the various initiatives were likely to be rolled out. Inevitably early implementation has not been exactly to plan and some work has slipped whilst other work has been completed ahead of schedule. Many of the Action Plan targets were based around an early assumption of the staffing structure that was likely to be developed and several changes were subsequently made which could not have been anticipated.

2.5 The Action Plan target dates have therefore been used as a guide only. In reality, a more pragmatic approach has had to be taken. A much stricter prioritisation has been adopted based upon a judgement of what could realistically be achieved within the resources available in each of the early months of implementation and what steps would be most effective in improving the service in the short term. Some of the key priorities that have been used to guide the early phasing of improvements have included:

- The restructuring of the service.
- Appointment of new staff, giving priority to public rights of way.
- Establishing effective team working arrangements.
- Delivering against external statutory deadlines eg open access management planning and rights of way improvement planning.
- Publicity, including particularly the launch of the service.
- Addressing 'log-jams' eg DMMO processing, bridge maintenance and management issues.

2.6 Appendix 1 summarises the key achievements made to date. The service has made substantial progress in virtually all areas:

- All but one of the first year staff are in post;
- A new countryside management service has been started in Ryedale;
- Excellent progress continues to be made with the public rights of way improvement plan;
- New policies, procedures and processes have transformed the speed at which changes to the Definitive Map are being made;
- Additional countryside volunteers have been recruited;
- Arrangements are in place to deal with the new open access provisions;
- Countryside apprentices and parish caretakers are in post and making good progress;
- Existing services have been strengthened in rural archaeology, ecology and landscape; and
- The profile of the service has been raised through new publicity and promotion.

2.7 Despite improvements made on the public rights of way network, the service has unfortunately not yet hit the authority's very challenging LPSA target. This is felt to be largely due to the fact that the new resources flowing into the service came too late to influence the key surveys that were used to assess performance against the 'ease of use' target. Nevertheless we have one last year in which to raise performance to the necessary level. Existing performance is discussed in more detail in Appendix 1 and various measures are listed in Appendix 2 which have either already been put in place or will be introduced to ensure that we meet our target.

4.0 AUDIT COMMISSION FINAL INSPECTION

4.1 The Audit Commission Final Inspection took place in September 2004 and their draft report was received in November. This rated the service as "fair" with "excellent prospects for improvement". Comments on behalf of the authority have been submitted to the Audit Commission. As well as a number of detailed comments, two key issues were raised. The first concerned the nature and scope of the report, which appeared to concentrate primarily on the final inspection, without giving sufficient emphasis to the work undertaken during the previous two stages of the Review. The second key issue raised related to the balance of the report, which appeared to concentrate primarily upon the public rights of way elements of the service at the expense of heritage and countryside management.

4.2 In conclusion it was stated that taking all the points made fully into account, it should logically affect the first judgement made on the service and it was suggested that this should 'tip the balance' from a 'fair' service to a 'good' service. The Audit Commission's final report is awaited.

5.0 FUTURE PROSPECTS

5.1 It is hoped Members will agree that the Implementation Schedule identifies clearly how much has already been achieved in the first ten months of the new Countryside Service. It is equally true that there is a long way to go to deliver all the improvements expected from the service, and to meet the raised expectations of customers and partners. However the basic building blocks are now in place. The service launch demonstrated widespread support from our partners for the direction the County Council is taking and resulted in very positive feedback. Despite a difficult few early months, staff are fully behind the new service and committed to delivery. Many key milestones have already been achieved.

5.2 The service is confident that it can continue to deliver within the agreed Action Plan, provided that it is given the necessary resources. During the first year of implementation in 2004/2005, an additional £130k was put into the service against the original Improvement Plan estimate of £145k. The original Improvement Plan estimate for year two was £142k but, taking into account the shortfall in year one, a figure of £160k was included in the estimates for 2005/2006. Although the budget position has yet to be resolved, it is currently proposed that this estimate be reduced by £90k to £70k. This will clearly have a major impact upon the level of improvements that can be delivered in year two of the plan. An additional allocation of £50k has however been made available to assist implementation of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act,

which will provide some further flexibility. When the budget position has finally been resolved, it will be necessary to prioritise carefully those improvements that will bring the most immediate benefits within the level of resources available.

6.0 RECOMMENDATION

6.1 It is recommended that the report be received for information.

M O MOORE
Corporate Director, Environmental Services

Background Reports:
Best Value Review of Countryside Services – Final Report and Improvement Plan–
April 2004.

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