

COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS

Summary

Access to nature and the countryside contributes greatly to our health and well-being. Woking Borough Council is one of a number of organisations responsible for managing greenspaces for local residents, workers and visitors to enjoy in this area. It fulfils this role directly and indirectly, working with relevant partners. This report provides brief background information as context for the presentations to be given at the meeting.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE That the report be noted.

Background Papers:

Sustainability Impact Assessment
Equalities Impact Assessment

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Access to nature and the countryside has been proven to benefit human health and well-being, both mental and physical. The responsible conservation and sensitive improvement of the natural environment for local residents, workers and visitors to the Borough to enjoy also safeguards these for wildlife, benefitting a wide range of biodiversity.

2.0 Strategy

- 2.1 As Committee members heard at its January meeting, Woking 2050, the Council's latest Climate Change Strategy, provides an overarching vision to coordinate our efforts to create a sustainable Borough by reducing our impact on the environment. It looks at the type of place and community we hope Woking Borough will be and how we can all help shape and achieve it. Its vision includes that Woking will be a borough that 'protects and enhances its high quality natural environment' and 'recognises, prepares and adapts to the socio-economic, environmental and demographic changes that the future will bring'.
- 2.2 The strategic local plan for development, the Core Strategy, seeks a 'green Borough where people will have easy access to good quality open spaces and infrastructure for recreation and leisure'. Steps towards this include ensuring green infrastructure provision keeps pace with growth and preserving, enhancing and making accessible local biodiversity features.
- 2.3 The Natural Woking strategy takes forward these ambitions for biodiversity and accessible high quality green Infrastructure. 'Green infrastructure' is defined as: 'A network of multi-functional green space, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities' (National Planning Policy Framework). It's an umbrella term used to describe a wide variety of natural and managed land uses, including open spaces, parks and recreation grounds, sports grounds, allotments, watercourses and ponds, natural and semi-natural greenspaces including sensitive habitats such as the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Areas (SPA), and open countryside.
- 2.4 Natural Woking sets out the Council's strategic approach to green infrastructure in the Borough by identifying the existing network of spaces and routes and identifying gaps for potential new provision. It also looks to connect the individual elements to make strong recreational, ecological and environmental networks in Woking Borough.

3.0 Countryside management

- 3.1 Open spaces and habitats in the Borough, as elsewhere; reflect a mosaic of differing land ownerships and management. Key land managers include the Borough Council, Surrey County Council, Surrey Wildlife Trust and Horsell Common Preservation Society.
- 3.2 Surrey County Council also has responsibility for the management and maintenance of the County's network of public footpaths, bridleways and byways. It also maintains the Definitive Map that is a legal record of the position and status of Rights of Way.
- 3.3 The Surrey Countryside Access Forum is an independent body that advises the County Council and others on improving access to the countryside and its membership represents a broad range of interests including farmers, landowners and those who earn their living in the countryside; users who enjoy the countryside in many different ways; and other relevant interests, such as nature conservation.

- 3.4 The Countryside Code sets out the responsibilities for visitors to the countryside and those who manage the land. For more information see www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code
- 3.5 Woking Borough Council itself is responsible for an extensive and expanding range of green infrastructure assets, which it manages both directly and indirectly, working with relevant partners. A map of greenspaces in the Borough is provided at Appendix 1.
- 3.6 The Council's Green Spaces Development Officer and Support Assistant manage these sites, working in conjunction with relevant colleagues elsewhere within the Borough Council including those in the Asset Management, Neighbourhood and Engineering Teams.
- 3.7 Management works to maintain high standards of safety and quality of greenspaces are typically procured directly through the Council's environmental grounds maintenance contractor, Serco, or other supplier relevant to the task.
- 3.8 For some sites medium to long-term land management arrangements are put in place. For example, the Borough Council has a contract with Surrey Wildlife Trust to manage Westfield Common for accessibility (including volunteering opportunities) and biodiversity.
- 3.9 The Surrey Heathland Partnership (SHP) is a further example. SHP provides a heathland management service by working to restore, enhance and manage heathlands across three boroughs, funded by Surrey County Council, together with Woking, Waverley and Guildford Borough Councils.
- 3.10 There are four sites within Woking Borough that are managed by the SHP; these are Brookwood Heath, Prey Heath, Sheet's Heath and Smart's Heath.
- 3.11 The project involves organised grazing and clearance of invasive scrub and bracken, as well as promoting an understanding of heathland and encouraging good practice in its management. The work that the SHP carries out is essential in supporting our heathlands and the rare species that need heathland in order to survive.
- 3.12 A copy of the 'Summary Guide to Surrey Heathland: An introduction to the heathland habitat and its management' (SHP) is attached at Appendix 2.

4.0 Implications

Financial

- 4.1 No additional resource requirements arise from this report. Future contributions to the SHP are to be confirmed.

Human Resource/Training and Development

- 4.2 No implications.

Community Safety

- 4.3 No implications.

Risk Management

- 4.4 No implications.

Sustainability

- 4.5 No additional implications arising from this report. Management and improvement of greenspaces and countryside access contributes positively to sustainability, as detailed in the Sustainability Impact Assessment.

Equalities

- 4.6 No implications.

5.0 Conclusions

- 5.1 Woking Borough Council and delivery partners such as the Surrey Heathland Partnership manage a wide range of countryside greenspaces, for the benefit of people and wildlife. This remains an area to which the Council is strongly committed, to maintain and continually improve our green infrastructure network.
- 5.2 More information about countryside access and the work of the Surrey Heathland Partnership will be provided at the site visit (17 March 2018) and presentations to the meeting (26 March).

REPORT ENDS

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – greenspaces map from

<https://www.woking.gov.uk/leisure/greenspaces/explorewoking/greenspacesmap>

Appendix 2 - Add the 'Summary Guide to Surrey Heathland: An introduction to the heathland habitat and its management' (Surrey Heathland Partnership) from

https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/49421/Heathland-GuideR.pdf