

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

COUNCIL MEETING – 7 DECEMBER 2006

RECONFIGURATION OF THE COUNTRY PARK AND COUNTRYSIDE SERVICES SECTION OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES DEPARTMENT

Report by Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval for a reconfiguration of the Country Park and Countryside Services Section within the Department of Neighbourhood Services.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Over the last 3 years, the service has had considerable success through the implementation of the Coalfield Access Project, which included the River Ayr Way, attracting funding of over £2.5 million. The funding package for this project tapers down from December 2006 to its finish in June 2007. The current structure is not able to maintain and develop this service further.
- 2.2 In February 2005 the Land Reform Scotland Act (2003) was enacted, giving several powers and duties to the Council to enable them to maintain and promote responsible use of the countryside. These include the duty to produce a Core Path Plan that will meet the needs of the community, to establish an Outdoor Access Forum and to promote the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. An audit is currently being carried out to inform the Core Path Plan. However, the Section does not currently have the resources to produce the Core Path Plan, and the related Strategic Environmental Assessment or carry out other duties under the Act.
- 2.3 The Service has a number of important tourism products that as well as providing a service for the local community should provide a significant draw for visitors to the area. The Dean Castle Country Park has achieved 4 stars through the VisitScotland visitor attraction scheme and is locally known and remains popular. It currently has high visitor numbers, but these are made up primarily through repeat visits from local people.
- 2.4 The River Ayr Way, is Scotland's first 'source to sea' path network and as such has attracted much attention. In 2005, a year before the route was officially opened it was shortlisted for the most prestigious Scottish Tourism award, the Scottish Thistle Awards. Current visitor figures are already forecast to exceed expected figures. If the benefits that could be derived from these assets are to be realised and if East Ayrshire is to capitalise on the niche markets of rural tourism such as walking and wildlife, then there needs to be a greater focus on tourism, marketing and promotion.
- 2.5 In 2006, the Scottish Executive introduced new Rural Development regulations to ensure greater co-ordination of woodlands, greenspaces and outdoor access. A new approach to the way that Countryside Services is delivered will

allow East Ayrshire Council to become an integral partner in taking these regulations forward.

- 2.6 The staff of the Country Park and Countryside Services team have also supported several community based initiatives including the Irvine Valley Regeneration Partnership (Walking Festival); Kilmarnock History Society (Kilmarnock Town Trail); Drongan Health Initiative (Hannahston Community Woodland) and Stewarton Woodlands Action Trust (Strategy for Stewarton area). Local projects often require professional support to achieve their goals and the reconfiguration proposals will ensure that continued support is available across East Ayrshire.

3. PROPOSALS

- 3.1 The reconfiguration proposals seek to address several key issues. These issues were highlighted during the Leisure Services Best Value Review.

3.1.1 Dean Castle Country Park

In order to develop the Dean Castle Country Park and to widen its visitor appeal, attracting more visitors from out with East Ayrshire, it is essential that there is a greater focus on marketing and promotion. A greater emphasis also needs to be put into attracting external funds to implement a development plan for the Country Park.

3.1.2 Countryside Development

The current structure within the Countryside Services section has a distinct division between the Outdoor Access Unit and the Countryside Ranger Service. After March 2007, the Outdoor Access Unit will no longer exist, under current arrangements, due to the completion of externally funded projects.

The proposed new structure will provide a more integrated approach to key aspects of countryside services, allow staff to develop community environmental projects and work with communities across the whole of the local authority area.

3.1.3 Realising the Area's Tourism Potential

The restructure proposes to put a greater emphasis on developing tourism through a high profile marketing campaign for the Country Park and the wider countryside development initiatives, including the River Ayr Way, and by developing projects that will fit with VisitScotland priorities for niche marketing.

3.1.4 External Funding Opportunities

Countryside Services has a proven record of attracting external funds, particularly for outdoor access. The reconfiguration of the service will ensure that these skills are maintained and developed and that increasingly available external funds associated with the development of parks, greenspaces and the outdoors are tapped into.

- 3.2 The reconfiguration requires amendments to the staffing structure and these were agreed by the Corporate Governance Committee on 23rd November 2006. These proposals will be funded from existing budgets or from external funding as appropriate. The basis of the reconfiguration is the integration of elements of the externally funded Outdoor Access Project with the Country Park structure. The new structure will allow the service to develop in a sustainable manner. New posts of Countryside Development Manager; Countryside Marketing Officer and Outdoor Access Officer will be created as permanent posts, a River Ayr Way Project Officer; a Greenspace, Wildlife and Habitats Officer and two Community Greenspace Officers will be created on a temporary basis if external funding bids are successful. If funding is secured the Community Greenspace Officers will work closely with community groups to create new areas of greenspace, improve existing parks and open spaces and ensure accessible links between greenspaces.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The total additional costs associated with the proposals amount to £151,517 including employers' costs. A total of £106,470 (including employer's costs) will be met through external funding applications to Scottish Natural Heritage for a four year period. The remaining £45,047 will be found from mainstream outdoor access funds.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The reconfiguration proposals will allow the Council to respond effectively to the requirements of the Land Reform Scotland Act (2003)

6. COMMUNITY PLAN / POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The above proposals are in line with the East Ayrshire Outdoor Access Strategy, the Community Plan and local/national strategies relating to tourism and economic development, biodiversity, health promotion, health inequalities and social inclusion.

The proposals for the restructure of Countryside Services will contribute to the implementation of a number of the Community Plan objectives. Although the work of countryside services will have a particular impact on improving the environment through the further development of paths which will link in and around settlements and with the implementation of high quality green spaces and green corridors, it will also contribute to improving opportunities, improving health and promoting community safety. The proposals will also maximise the opportunities to engage communities in their local environment, as well as develop successful partnerships.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 The Council is asked to: -

- (i) approve the service reconfiguration proposals contained within the report;

- (ii) otherwise note the contents of this report.

William Stafford
Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services

WS/JG

27 November 2006

BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. Report to Corporate Service Committee of 22nd November 2006 by the Depute Chief Executive/Executive Director of Corporate Support and Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services on the restructure / reconfiguration of the Country Park and Countryside Services Section.

Anyone wishing further information should contact John A Griffiths, Head of Leisure Services (tel 01563 578179).