

Cabinet

16 September 2015



**Environment and Sustainable
Communities Overview and
Scrutiny Review Group -
Management of the Woodland
Estate owned by Durham County
Council**

Report of Lorraine O'Donnell, Assistant Chief Executive

Purpose

1. The attached report presents the findings and recommendations of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Review Group report on the management of the woodland estate owned by Durham County Council.

Background

2. At a meeting of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 11 November 2015 members agreed the terms of reference for the review with the aim of the review to investigate how Durham County Council strategically manages its woodland estate and identify any areas for improvement. It was agreed that the review would focus on:
 - Are DCCs current policies, strategies and plans effective in managing the woodland estate?
 - Is partnership working within the County in relation to management of the woodland estate robust?
 - How will DCC fund woodland management in the future including opportunities for income generation?
 - Should DCC be seeking to create new woodland that meets multiple objectives on DCC estate where appropriate?
 - How DCC and partners encourage, engage with and support communities within County Durham to participate in woodland projects and initiatives?
 - DCC's current and future arrangements for the diversification of the woodland estate?
 - How DCC and partners promote biodiversity within the woodland estate?
3. A review group of ten members was established from the membership of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Evidence was gathered over a period of six meetings and two site visits with information from Durham County Council officers from Regeneration and Economic Development (RED) and Neighbourhoods

Service Groupings; Forestry Commission; Durham Wildlife Trust (DWT) and Northwoods.

4. The review group's findings are attached at appendix 2 and have resulted in the formulation of the following recommendations:
 - a) That Durham County Council as part of the audit of the woodland estate considers:
 - The future strategic management of the woodland estate.
 - The partnership management approaches adopted by key partners within County Durham such as Durham Wildlife Trust.
 - The development and implementation of a streamlined corporate strategy/policy framework for the management and protection of woodland owned by Durham County Council.
 - b) That Durham County Council maximise the income generation and employment opportunities from timber extraction on existing and potential new sites including consideration of new management models such as those produced by the SIMWOOD project for the marketing and extraction of timber.
 - c) That Durham County Council's procurement process for the letting of timber extraction contracts ensure that:
 - Contracts are advertised to target and maximise interest from the private sector.
 - That in conjunction with the Corporate Procurement Manager the required documentation and process is simplified to make contracts more attractive to private sector companies.
 - d) That Durham County Council maximises the funding opportunities available via the Common Agricultural Policy (Countryside Stewardship Scheme for England) and the European Structural and Investment Fund (Low Carbon Economy Strand) if and when such funding becomes available for the benefit of the Durham County Council woodland estate.
 - e) That Durham County Council continues to actively encourage and promote the volunteering opportunities available within the woodland estate via the Durham Community Action's Do-it website, AAPs, Durham County News, Durham County Council Staff (current and former), Resident Organisations, Community Centres and County Council Members.
 - f) That Durham County Council ensures that the contact details of the Countryside Service are clearly displayed on community woodland sites for use by the general public and that Durham County Council publicise via factsheets information in relation to the benefits of biodiversity; woodland management and the illegal status of fallen timber taken from the woodland estate.

- g) That a review of this report and progress made against the recommendations will be undertaken six months after the report is considered by Cabinet including as part of this process an update on the progress of the audit of the woodland estate.

Service Response

5. The report was shared with Regeneration and Economic Development Departmental Management Team and Neighbourhoods Departmental Management Team and was well received. Both Management Teams commented that the report was “very positive in terms of managing the Council’s assets”.

Recommendations

6. Cabinet is asked to note the recommendations in the report attached (appendix 2, pages 4-6) and to formulate a response within the six month period identified in the report for systematic review of the recommendations.
7. That the report is shared with the County Durham Environment Partnership Board.

Contact: Tom Gorman
tom.gorman@durham.gov.uk
Author: Diane Close
diane.close@durham.gov.uk

Tel: 03000 268027

Tel: 03000 268141

Appendix 1: Implications

Finance – The report highlights the need for DCC to maximise the funding opportunities for woodlands available via the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and the European Structural and Investment Fund via the Low Carbon Economy Strand when funding becomes available. In addition, woodlands present an opportunity to generate income for the Authority which needs to be maximised via timber extraction from the forest estate on appropriately identified sites.

Staffing – None

Risk – None

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty – The necessary Equality Impact Assessment has been prepared concerning the review report.

Accommodation – None

Crime and Disorder – None

Human Rights – None

Consultation – None

Procurement – In relation to timber extraction contracts for DCC woodland estate the report identifies the need to ensure that contracts are advertised appropriately to maximise interest and target the private sector. The report also identifies the need for the required documentation and procurement process to be simplified to make the contracts more favourable to the private sector.

Disability Issues – DCC tries to ensure that community woodlands sites can be accessed by people with disabilities including by the use of mobility scooters. However, some sites have limited access and advice can be given by the Countryside Service as to the accessibility of individual sites.

Legal Implications - None