

Report to: Executive

Date: 8 April 2008

Report of: Executive Member for Liveability.

Subject: Proposal to declare three Local Nature Reserves.

Wards: Thornley and Wheatley Hill, Blackhalls & Seaham Harbour.

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 Local Nature Reserves (LNR), are places of local wildlife interest declared by Local Authorities to enable people to enjoy and interact with the natural environment.

1.2 The purpose of this report is to formally declare three District Council owned sites as Local Nature Reserves at:

- Gore Burn, Wheatley Hill
- Crimdon Dene
- Rockhouse Dene, Seaham

2. Consultation

2.1 Consultation has been undertaken with the Natural England's Conservation Officer for East Durham who has confirmed that the sites are suitable for Local Nature Reserve declaration. Elected members representing the wards have been informally consulted.

2.2 Management summary plans have been produced for the proposed reserves in consultation with Natural England and are attached as an appendix.

3. Background

3.1 Local authorities have power to declare Local Nature Reserves (LNR) on land in their ownership under sections 19 & 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. LNR's are managed with nature conservation as a primary aim but also to provide opportunities for study, research or the enjoyment of nature.

3.2 The District Council does not have any land that has been declared as a Local Nature Reserve however there are six within the District owned by the County Council.

3.3 The District Council owns three sites that are ideal for declaration and management as Local Nature Reserves. Declaration will enable the Council to draw attention to the nature conservation interest of the sites and will help to deliver the Council's own Local Agenda 21 Strategy. It will make a contribution to regional targets contained within the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan and will maximise opportunities to attract investment to further improve public access and nature conservation. All three sites provide

extensive opportunities for community volunteering and school educational events. Habitat management activities will contribute to the Councils performance against the new National Indicators for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships (NI 197:Improved local biodiversity).

4. Gore Burn, Wheatley Hill

4.1 The District Council owns a large area of land at Wheatley Hill centred on Gore Burn. The site contains a mosaic of woodlands, grazing fields and approximately one mile of watercourse. Visitor access is currently limited to a single public footpath and a section of reclaimed mineral line known as the Miners Heritage Trail.

4.2 Funding of £48000 has previously been secured from the Heritage Lottery Fund to undertake the Gore Burn Wetland Restoration Project and this project has enabled a series of improvements to be made to enhance the nature conservation interest, public access and volunteering opportunities on the site. This project is due to be completed by January 2009.

5. Crimdon Dene

5.1 This is a large site containing ancient semi-natural woodlands, recreational grasslands and part of the Crimdon Burn stream. There is good public access and the site provides an interesting addition to any visit to the Durham Heritage Coast.

6. Rockhouse Dene, Seaham

6.1 This steep sided dene offers an interesting mosaic of woodland, grassland and streamside habitats. The site is in the centre of Seaham and has reasonable public access with educational and recreational potential within easy reach of the nearby residential areas.

7. Local Nature Reserve Declaration

7.1 Formal declaration of these sites as Local Nature Reserves would commit the Council to manage the land as a nature reserve and to protect it from inappropriate use or development. Formal declaration provides a level of protection within the Planning system and enables the Council to highlight the sites both for nature conservation and public recreation.

7.2 The Council could choose not to formally declare the sites as Local Nature Reserves, but to elect to manage the sites for nature conservation purposes however, formal declaration enhances site marketability (in the promotional sense) and is likely to provide numerous opportunities for positive promotion through the Communications and Marketing unit.

8. Implications

8.1 Financial implications

Declaring the three sites as Local Nature Reserves will commit the Council to managing the sites to benefit the nature conservation interest and allow a

level of public access. All three sites have existing public access and it is not anticipated that significant additional infrastructure works will be required.

Where habitat management work is required finance will be sourced from existing budgets within the Engineers and Countryside Services Unit.

Promotion of the new Local Nature Reserves is likely to result in an increase of visitors to the sites therefore signage will be required at site entrances. Provision for this has been made as a revenue one off within the budget estimates for 2008/09.

8.2. Legal implications

Although not a statutory requirement, best practice dictates that a document of declaration is required and that this is available for free public inspection.

Gore Burn, Wheatley Hill: The majority of the site is in the freehold ownership of the District Council however the Asset and Property Management Unit are currently finalising a land exchange for a small parcel of land which is expected to be complete in the near future.

Crimdon Dene and Rockhouse Dene are in the freehold ownership of the District Council and there are no legal implications arising from this report.

8.3 Policy implications

Declaration of the sites as Local Nature Reserves would commit the Council to managing the sites for nature conservation and provide a degree of public access. Declaration is in accordance with the objectives of the Corporate Plan.

8.4 Risk implications

A risk assessment has been completed for this report.

8.5 Communications

Once agreement to declare the Local Nature Reserves is reached a public notice is required and the agreement documents placed available for public inspection.

Declaration will enhance volunteering and educational opportunities for local residents and engender closer linkages with Parish Councils and Community Groups. Declaration will also allow for positive promotion at organised environmental events and through the INFOPOINT newsletter.

Practical volunteering events organised through the Council's Coast and Countryside Rangers will provide numerous opportunities for promotion through the Communications and Marketing Unit.

8.6 Corporate Plan and Policies

The proposal is in accordance with the Corporate Plan Priorities:

- CTC2 – To improve, protect and sustain the natural environment: by reducing waste, increasing recycling, protecting wildlife and conserving resources.
- BHC 3 – To improve, promote and encourage the use of locally accessible, high quality open space.

8.7 Sustainability

The declaration of the three Local Nature Reserves is in accordance with the Councils Local Agenda 21 Strategy targets

- 21: Protection and enhancement of the environment
- 23: Habitat creation
- 24: Habitat protection
- 25: Species protection
- 26: Improved access and information

8.8 Local Government Review

There are no implications for the Local Government Review arising from this report. It is expected that the LNR's will be managed within existing budgets by the new Council.

9. Conclusion

Declaring the three sites as Local Nature Reserves will provide locally accessible areas of nature conservation interest and will ensure site protection through the planning system. Declaration will re-affirm the Council's commitment to objectives in the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan.

10. Recommendation

To formally declare Gore Burn at Wheatley Hill, Crimdon Dene and Rockhouse Dene in Seaham as Local Nature Reserves under sections 19 and 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.

Background Papers

District of Easington (2001) *Our future in our hands* Local Agenda 21 Strategy. District of Easington.

District of Easington (2005) *Corporate & Performance Plan 2005-2006*, District of Easington

Barker G., (1999) *Local Nature Reserves: A guide to their selection and declaration*. English Nature, Peterborough, England.

Pratt, Dr. K., (1999) *Action for Wildlife: The Durham Biodiversity Plan* Durham Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership, Durham, U.K.