

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 17 November 2014 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Graham (Chairman)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors E Adam, D Bell, J Clare, J Clark, J Gray, D Hall, G Holland, K Hopper, I Jewell, O Milburn, S Morrison, P Stradling and L Taylor

Co-opted Members:

Mrs P Spurrell

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E Bell and P May.

2 Substitute Members

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

4 Any items from Co-opted Members or interested parties

There were no items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

5 Management of the Woodlands Estate Owned by DCC Review

The Chairman thanked the Council's Principal Landscape Officer, Regeneration and Economic Development (RED), Ged Lawson and Landscape Delivery Officer, RED, Susan Mullinger together with the Forestry Commission's Partnerships and Expertise Manager, Richard Pow who were in attendance to speak to Members regarding progress in relation to the Management of the Woodlands Estate owned by Durham County Council (DCC) (for copy see file of minutes).

Forestry Commission

The Partnerships and Expertise Manager reminded Members of public sentiment following proposals by Government to sell off large areas of publicly owned woodland and explained that consequently an independent report was commissioned, led by the Bishop of Liverpool. It was noted 6 months following this independent report, a response from the Forestry Commission and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) set out a way forward, with the main points including that woodland should be retained in the public's ownership and that a return to "a woodland culture" would help to make woodland areas more sustainable.

The Committee noted that resulting policy had the principles of: Protect; Improve; and Expand. It was explained that there were challenging targets of increasing woodland cover by 12% by 2060, a doubling of the current rate of creation, and to have 66% of woodland sustainably managed, the current level in County Durham being 47%. It was noted that the woodland cover in County Durham was more typical of the rest of England than the North East region, with the percentage conifer coverage being between the North East and national values of 52% and 24%. Members noted woodland ownership was approximately split 50/50 between the Forestry Commission and other landowners. It was highlighted County Durham enjoyed the benefits of a large adjoining woodland economy in Northumberland and South Scotland.

Members learned that in terms of incentives to manage woodland, the end of the current Rural Development Payments scheme was making way for a new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for 2015-2020, £14 Billion of funds in total. It was explained that there were two "pillars" to the CAP and that Pillar 1 would be in effect "production subsidy", comprising approximately 70% of the £14 Billion, with the remaining 30% being under Pillar 2 promoting rural development. Members noted that Pillar 2 was split into 4 sub-sections: Countryside Stewardship (formerly NELMS); Growth; Farming Competitiveness; and LEADER. Councillors learned that Country Stewardship comprised of £2.2 Billion in legacy schemes, as many were medium-term (5-10 years), and £900 million would be for new schemes. The Committee noted that the "Growth" section would be dealt with via the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs); "Competitiveness" was in effect farming subsidy; and "LEADER" being a system whereby Local Authorities and Community Groups could work on local rural schemes.

It was explained that the English Woodland Grant Scheme had closed and a new single integrated system, as part of the Countryside Stewardship would come into effect from July 2015. It was noted that the funding profile had been retained and that administration was via Natural England; funds dealt with by the Rural Payments Agency; and advice given by the Forestry Commission. The Committee noted that interim grants from the Forestry Commission would be available in respect of: Creation, to ensure a planting season is not missed in the move to the new system; Planning, as a requirement of the new system was to have a Woodland Management Plan (WMP) in place before funding could be accessed; and Plant Health, to restock where diseased trees have been removed. It was added that the interim grants would be by invitation only for high priority sites; where woodland management and creation would best deliver against the Countryside Stewardship scheme; and in areas such as increasing biodiversity and water management, both quality and quantity.

It was noted that through the Competitiveness fund or “Countryside Productivity” there was funding for: infrastructure, new roads, hard-standings, drying sheds; Kit, log splitters, tractors, grab-arms; and haulage, adaptations to work with timber. Members noted that the Forestry Commission would provide advice to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), allowing them to prepare and take advantage of opportunities and funding when they become available. It was added that some businesses from County Durham had already come forward to take advantage of advice from the Forestry Commission. Councillors also noted venison as a potential market, however, this was not a large market in County Durham in comparison to other areas.

The Partnerships and Expertise Manager explained that approximately 18 months ago the Forestry Commission and representatives from the forestry industry developed a blueprint for the growth of forestry sector in northern England, “Roots to Prosperity”. It was added that the Secretary of State (SoS) and North East Local Enterprise Partnership (NELEP) had supported the launch in August 2014, coinciding with the NELEP Investment Strategy. It was noted that the high level strategy had been identified and Forestry Commission funding would mean a Co-ordinator would be in place shortly, with the blueprint moving into the implementation phase.

The Committee learned that County Durham had been selected as a pilot area for Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) in respect of forestry management and it was explained that there was a need to ensure myths were dispelled regarding EIAs being simply an addition regulatory burden.

The Partnerships and Expertise Manager concluded by noting that in respect of the DCC woodland estate, an option could be to have a forest management company prepare and implement management plans to deliver the objectives DCC would wish for their woodland estate.

The Chairman thanked the Partnerships and Expertise Manager and asked Members for their questions on the presentation.

Councillors asked questions in relation to: the type of trees that would be used in expanding woodland cover; over how many years the £3.6 Billion of Pillar 2 was paid; whether that funds was for all of the UK; what the plan period was; who decided upon allocations; timing of funding via the Forestry Commission; and how allocations were spread out.

The Partnerships and Expertise Manager explained that the types of trees that would be selected for planting to expand woodlands and create new woodland cover would depend upon the sites identified. It was added that woodland expansion would only be where appropriate, so if an area was put forward and it is not deemed suitable or already has environmental value in its current state, then the area would not be planted. The Partnerships and Expertise Manager noted that the grants referred to were for England only for the period 2014-2020. It was noted that allocation was via DEFRA who had consulted last February, with input from organisations such as the National Farmers Union. It was added that in the past that Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were the means by which local input was given, however, with the RDAs being abolished in 2012 local input, albeit to a lesser degree, rested with the LEPs.

Members asked further questions in relation to: where in County Durham new woodlands could be created; whether there were preferred sites; whether the economy was the primary driver for woodland management; whether County Durham was getting a fair share of allocations; and what role DCC would play in the regional group, led by Northumberland.

The Partnerships and Expertise Manager explained that new woodlands would be in any suitable sites where a landowner came forward to the Forestry Commission with a suggestion. Members were reminded that the Forestry Commission had its regulatory role, carrying out EIAs and that sites were looked at in terms of where they would provide the greatest benefit socially, economically and environmentally. The Committee noted that there was an element of landowners being financially incentivised in order to protect woodland, however, it would be through a mix of arrangements to be able to deliver the improvements, benefits and woodland creation that was desired. Members were reminded that the CAP had originally been primarily a production subsidy, however there was increasing movement to providing environmental benefits. It was added that both the European Union and UK Government had confirmed that it was possible to modulate CAP funding from Pillar 1 to Pillar 2, with current “modulation” being 12.5%. In relation to County Durham getting a “fair share” and the role of DCC it was explained that appropriate woodland areas would be approached by the Forestry Commission regarding accessing funding, though there was an ability to “self-invite” and that DCC would be able to contribute as there were many attributes, such as having the third largest saw mill in the UK and an established base for solid fuel, that all counted in County Durham’s favour.

Durham County Council

The Principal Landscape Officer noted that DCC did not have a single corporate strategy for woodland management, however, there were elements of woodland management within existing plans: County Durham Landscape Strategy 2008; County Durham Green Infrastructure Strategy 2012; Corporate Tree Management Policy 2014; and within the emerging County Durham Plan. It was explained that the plans were generally “outward looking” and that guidelines had been adopted and set out within DCC documents in relation to the condition and protection of “ancient woodland”. Members were shown maps illustrating where ancient woodland sites were located within the County and noted that there were aims to: encourage the restoration of damaged or planted woodland; to promote a strategic landscape-scale approach to the creation of new native woods, and encourage planting which extends, or improve links between, isolated woods; and to encourage the positive management or restoration of other important habitats within the wider “forest habitat network”, particularly hedges and species-rich grasslands.

In terms of conserving and managing existing woodlands, Members understood that there were objectives linked to protecting and conserving woodland, and managing them to maximise their environmental value and ensure their long-term viability and productivity. Councillors learned that in terms of management, there was a need to understand what each type of woodland required and to promote the adoption of woodland management plans and greater participation in woodland grant aid schemes. The Principal Landscape Officer explained that the Forestry Stewardship Council standard for woodland management would be encouraged and also support would be offered to projects such as the “Northwoods” initiative.

Members noted that another aspect would be to encourage and promote greater involvement of local communities in the management, planting and care of woodlands and trees in their neighbourhoods.

Councillors learned that some of the woodland owned by DCC were looked after by the Countryside Team in areas such as Nature Reserves and former railway lines and some larger areas within parks and gardens were maintained by the Council's Neighbourhood Services. It was added that the largest woodland areas owned by DCC were managed by the DCC Forestry Team and these were mostly within rural areas, often with a high conifer content. Members also learned that there were some new "Jubilee Woods" that were planted on DCC land, subsequently leased to the Woodland Trust.

The Principal Landscape Officer explained that in terms of forest design, there were objectives linked to the restructuring of existing plantations, to be undertaken sensitively and encouraging and increase in the proportion of locally native broadleaved species. Members noted that where sites were of ecological or archaeological importance, and damaged by recent planting, those sites should have trees removed, or planting changed to a more appropriate type. It was added that when new plantations or shelterbelts were being restocked, this would provide an opportunity to improve their fit with the surrounding landscape, through design and appropriate planting.

The Committee learned that another aspect which would help to ensure the sustainability of woodlands was to encourage the development of new local markets for woodland produce including wood-fuels, woodland crafts and other niche markets. It was explained it would also be beneficial to encourage architects and specifiers to use a greater proportion of timber for construction and other purposes, sourcing timber from regional suppliers. Councillors noted there was an aim to increase use of wood fuels, such as short rotation coppice and forest residue as a contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Members were informed that benefits of woodland expansion included: expanding timber and other woodland resources; enhancing the beauty of the countryside and contributing to diversity; creating and improving habitats for wildlife; regulating the movement of water through river catchments, reducing soil erosion and leaching of pollutants into surface and ground water; helping to revitalise derelict and degraded land; creating jobs and opportunities for economic diversification in rural areas; improving quality of life by providing opportunities for recreation, education and local community involvement; and storing carbon.

Councillors noted that an objective of woodland expansion was to promote a substantial increase in the County's woodland cover while ensuring that plans for woodland expansion are integrated with wider environmental, economic and social objectives. It was added that the establishment of new woodlands was to be encouraged, including new native woodlands to help reverse woodland losses and habitat fragmentation, strengthen landscape character and enhance biodiversity. The Committee noted that new community woodlands in areas close to settlements could provide opportunities for public access and that new large multi-purpose woodland in landscapes should be encouraged, in particular areas affected in the past by land reclamation, opencast working or agricultural intensification.

Members were informed that the development of new urban fringe would help improve the appearance of settlements and provide setting for new development, and new woodland could be used in the restoration of mineral workings, waste disposal sites, or in the reclamation of derelict land.

The Committee noted that there were 4 “priority areas”, including: native woodland, to defragment by connection up ancient woodland; riparian, along rivers and other water courses; community woodlands, within walking distance of settlements; and landscape improvement areas, reclamation of former industrial or farming sites.

Councillors noted the statements and policies within the County Durham Green Infrastructure Strategy and how these sought to: protect existing trees from detrimental effect by development; requirements for new woodlands to be planted as part of restoration of schemes for opencast mineral or landfills sites; and institute new tree planting as part of new developments. It was added that the emerging County Durham Plan also looked to protect existing woodlands and the Corporate Tree Management Policy set out what customers could expect in terms of services offered by the Council’s Neighbourhood Services Department.

The Principal Landscape Officer concluded by reiterating that currently there was no overall woodland management in place, and that part of this ongoing process was to determine if there should be an internal management policy or whether the woodland estate could be managed differently.

The Chairman thanked the Principal Landscape Officer and asked Members for their questions on the presentations.

The Committee asked questions in relation to: what Officers saw as the main threat to meeting the aims and objectives as described; how a new overall woodland management strategy would differ from those policies already in place; and how to encourage use of locally sourced materials by architects.

The Principal Landscape Officer explained that there were several threats, including: disease, such as Ash Dieback; lack of active management of upland woodlands, and consequences in respect of flooding; and pressure from developers. It was added that the current policies and strategies were outward looking and any new approach would set out what DCC would do, or wish to do. Members noted that there was a role for the Council in looking to use sustainable, locally sourced material within its own contracts, however also to encourage use of such materials in the wider region. The Partnerships and Expertise Manager explained that there were several national schemes to promote using local materials, with moves to a “Grown in Britain” mark which would help consumers and specifiers to use local quality products.

Councillors asked further questions in respect of: the “existing market” for woodland products; meeting demands of new local markets; the demand for wood as a fuel; and the link to tourism.

The Principal Landscape Officer explained that County Durham was close to Northumberland and Southern Scotland, two large existing markets for woodland products and that meeting demands may require smaller plantations to develop products to be able to reach a “critical mass” in terms of a particular product. The Partnerships and Expertise Manager added that there was a strong firewood market, and that through active management of woodland, DCC could tap into this market, looking at what existing woodland could produce. The Principal Landscape Officer explained that with woodland management there was a degree of long term planning (around 20-30 years) however, there was a need to try and react to any market demands, such as increased demand for wood as fuel.

The Principal Landscape Officer noted that Hamsterley Forest was the second most popular attraction in the county, and issues of accessibility and facilities provided at woodland sites in general was not part of legacy strategies and therefore this may be an area for further development. Members noted new woodland being developed in the east of the County was along the A19 corridor just north of Murton and the quality of the tree cover would take time to build up.

Resolved:

That the presentation be noted.

6 Draft Terms of Reference

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Ann Whitton referred Members to an amended Terms of Reference document relating to the Review of the Management of the Woodland Estate owned by Durham County Council. It was noted that this contained additional comments from Mrs P Spurrell, Co-opted Member of the Committee, and these related to strengthening objectives (c) and (d) relating to equality issues, to include: “physical, sensory and learning disability groups and various age groups including young people” when referencing projects targeting specific groups.

Members were also asked to express their interest at being included within the Working Group that would look at the Management of the Woodland Estate, with a view to have a group of 10 Members and Co-opted Members. A note was made of those Councillors, including the Chairman and Vice-Chairman that would comprise the Working Group.

The following Members expressed an interest in taking part in the Working Group: Councillors: Graham (Chair), J. Armstrong, Clare, Clark, Hall (V. Chair), Holland, Jewell, I. Taylor, Stradling and Mrs P Spurrell. The Committee agreed that the above would form the membership of the Working Group.

Resolved:

That the amended Terms of Reference document for the the Review of the Management of the Woodland Estate owned by Durham County Council be agreed.

Signed.....
Date.....