



OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD

6TH MARCH 2007

SUMMARY OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL'S FINAL REPORT: BECKS AND BECK VALLEYS

Aims of the Scrutiny Review:

The aims of the scrutiny review were to investigate issues around Middlesbrough's becks and beck valleys, given their importance in drainage and flood prevention. This included examination of existing Council responsibilities and policy and hearing information from other bodies and agencies which have an involvement in this issue.

Terms of Reference:

The terms of reference of the scrutiny review were as follows:

- To investigate current management arrangements and responsibilities for Middlesbrough's becks and beck valleys.
- To examine drainage issues and responsibilities and the role of the becks in preventing flooding.
- To consider any existing policies/strategies in this area.
- To examine existing budget arrangements and consider whether there are any future funding opportunities.
- To examine the role of becks and beck valleys as a leisure and wildlife resource.
- To speak to relevant external bodies and organisations on this topic and examine any current and future joint working arrangements.

Findings:

Evidence was gathered via discussions with officers from Environment and from representatives of external agencies and bodies.

A number of key issues were identified in relation to each of the terms of reference above and these form the basis of the scrutiny panel's conclusions and recommendations.

Conclusions:

Based on the evidence considered during the investigation, the Panel concluded that:

1. While Middlesbrough's becks are an important leisure and wildlife resource, their key role is drainage and flood prevention.
2. Leisure and wildlife issues can impinge on drainage issues - although good management and liaison arrangements ensure that this is seldom the case.
3. Existing Council drainage and flood prevention service standards in relation to Middlesbrough becks are excellent.
4. The Council's direct role in becks management is to change following the Government's decision to transfer responsibility for those becks defined as "critical ordinary watercourses" to the Environment Agency - the Council will lose overall control of this important service area.
5. It will be important to ensure that following the transfer of responsibilities at 4. above, existing service standards of drainage and flood prevention are at least maintained.
6. The Environment Agency's maintenance responsibilities will extend only to critical ordinary watercourses under their control - and not to works such as the de-silting of Gunnergate Lake, which impacts on overall becks drainage and has been identified as an urgent issue with budgetary consequences.
7. The Council will continue to be responsible for the main area of flood risk associated with Middlesbrough's becks - namely highway culverts.
8. Despite the Council's expertise and high standard of service provision, there is a possibility, in the longer term, of the Environment Agency using a contractor other than the local authority to undertake some becks maintenance.
9. The transfer of responsibilities to the Environment Agency presents an opportunity to enhance some aspects of beck valleys service provision (eg public access and wildlife schemes) through improvement projects funded by the agency.
10. Existing becks management arrangements allow a co-ordinated approach that involves all interested parties. It is essential that this is maintained following the transfer of responsibilities.

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11. The implications of the Environment Agency's decision to not fund Middlesbrough's flood prevention schemes will need to be carefully considered by the Council.
12. The prevalence of using hard surfacing materials on developments in Middlesbrough - particularly in the south of the Borough - impacts adversely on drainage and is of concern.

Recommendations:

As a result of the submitted evidence, and based on the conclusions above, the scrutiny panel's recommendations for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny board and the Executive are as follows:

1. That the Environment Agency be advised of the scrutiny panel's findings that the existing standard of becks service provision is excellent and should be maintained at that standard as an absolute minimum for all becks, irrespective of which organisation is responsible for them.
2. That every effort be made to ensure that the Council continues to provide the maintenance and emergency response service for all Middlesbrough becks.
3. That, representations be made to the appropriate Government department that in the event that if, at any time in the future, the Environment Agency employs a contractor to maintain Middlesbrough's Becks, the contract should be awarded on a service standard - and not cost - basis.
4. That, following 4. above, and subject to compliance with Government procurement rules, representations be also made that local authorities such as Middlesbrough which have shown that they can provide a high standard of becks maintenance service, be allowed to undertake emergency works in the case of contractor default. Such works should be done on the basis of recharge to the contractor.
5. That the issue of de-silting Gunnergate Lake, and the associated expenditure, be explored in consultation with the Environment Agency as this issue impacts on overall becks drainage.
6. That the Environment Agency's commitment to enhancing environmental aspects of becks and beck valleys be welcomed and liaison arrangements be continued to ensure that the Council and local communities are actively involved in the process.
7. That arrangements are put in place to strengthen links between all bodies and parties with an interest in Middlesbrough's becks and to ensure that a co-ordinated approach is developed in relation to all becks issues.
8. That representations be made at a national level concerning the reduction in the funding of flood prevention schemes across the country and the possible implications for areas of flood risk, including Middlesbrough.

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9. That the implications of Middlesbrough's failed funding bid for flood relief schemes be considered and reported to the Executive.
10. That the increased flood risk caused by the prevalence of using hard surfacing materials be publicised to increase public awareness of this issue.

**COUNCILLOR JOHN COLE
CHAIR OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL**