



OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

13 JANUARY 2009

**SUMMARY OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY
PANEL'S FINAL REPORT ON
COUNTRYSIDE MATTERS**

Purpose of the scrutiny investigation:

The scrutiny panel sought to investigate this topic by investigating countryside matters as they affect Middlesbrough, in particular those areas within the control of the local authority. This included existing countryside provision and associated facilities, existing proposals for improvement and possible future improvements.

The countryside in general - whether it be swathes of open space and fields in a rural setting, or pockets of green space in a more urban setting - provides invaluable opportunities for people. This can be through fostering happier, healthier lifestyles by providing leisure opportunities, or by promoting a greater appreciation and understanding of the countryside and local heritage.

Terms of reference:

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

To investigate the Council's general involvement in countryside matters, including:

- *Existing provision at Newham Grange Leisure Farm and Lingfield Countryside Centre and also plans relating to these.*
- *Tree management arrangements - to include legal responsibilities and policies relating to highway trees and open spaces.*
- *The Council's involvement in bio-diversity issues - including legal duties and work being undertaken in respect of beck valleys.*
- *Community and partner involvement - to include external funding opportunities and the role of community development initiatives such as Friends Groups.*
- *To update the position on allotments following earlier scrutiny panel recommendations on the subject and to examine the Council's legal responsibilities and schemes to encourage allotment usage.*

Findings:

The scrutiny panel found that although Middlesbrough is predominantly urban in character, with limited countryside within its boundary, it has good quality green space areas, ranging from beck valleys and parks through to allotments and nature reserves. The Council is actively involved, both directly and indirectly, in ensuring that these areas are utilised and enhanced to provide wildlife habitats, opportunities for play and leisure activity, environmental education and social interaction.

The panel found this topic to be very broad and diverse. As such, the review covered a very broad range of "countryside" issues. The panel's findings are reflected in its conclusions and recommendations, which are summarised below.

Conclusions:

Based on the evidence considered during its investigation, the panel made seven conclusions. These are shown in full in the final report and relate to:

- 1) The Council's key role in this issue - both through the Council's own work and work undertaken in partnership with others.
- 2) The need to update the visitor experience at Newham Grange Leisure and determine how, or whether, the master plan which has been drawn up can be implemented.
- 3) The opportunity to develop the leisure farm as a tourist attraction outside the immediate area.
- 4) The future use of the Lingfield Countryside Centre, which is a valuable educational and community resource.
- 5) The current position on allotments following earlier approval of the Council's Allotments Strategy.
- 6) Work undertaken in conjunction with external agencies and partners to maximise resources and assist in enhancing and managing the countryside.
- 7) Plans to introduce policies in respect of tree management issues and to map the Borough's tree cover.

Recommendations:

The scrutiny panel's final report contains five recommendations. These are shown in full in the report and relate to the following:

- 1) Revisiting and re-drafting the allotments strategy.
- 2) Deciding on the long term term feasibility of implementing the master plan to develop Newham Grange Leisure Farm.
- 3) Transferring activities from Lingfield Countryside Centre to Newham Grange Leisure Farm and developing the Countryside Centre as a community facility.
- 4) Ensuring that Council's biodiversity duties are publicised and that all Council departments and services are working towards achieving these.
- 5) Ensuring that the results of the tree mapping survey are submitted to the scrutiny panel; consulting the panel on possible tree-related policies relating to high hedges, right to light and right to TV/radio/satellite signal and high hedges; and ensuring that the programme of tree inspections takes into account the suitability of tree types for housing estates and open spaces.

- 6) Continuing partnership working with relevant organisations and groups, including helping such groups to access funding and exploring the possibility of developing links between various countryside-related attractions.

The Environment Scrutiny Panel's full report on this topic is attached for the Overview and Scrutiny Board's consideration.

COUNCILLOR JEANETTE WALKER

CHAIR OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL