

# MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

## AGENDA ITEM 9

### OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

20 AUGUST 2013

<p><b>FINAL REPORT OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL- BORO BECKS PROJECT</b></p>
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#### PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present the Environment Scrutiny Panel's findings, conclusions and recommendations following its investigation of the topic of the Council's Boro Becks Project.

#### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

2. Following the receipt of <sup>1</sup>Big Lottery funding in 2010, Middlesbrough Council, the Environment Agency and Tees Valley Wildlife Trust joined together to launch the three-year Boro Becks Project. The project's aim was to engage local people in making a positive contribution to the management of four of Middlesbrough's becks and promote their enjoyment as valuable green spaces and wildlife hotspots
3. As funding for the project will end towards the end of 2013, the scrutiny panel sought to investigate work undertaken to date and whether there is any possibility of continuing the work of the project once funding ceases.
4. The panel's investigation was undertaken as a short topic over the course of one meeting held on 1 July 2013. A second meeting was held on 5 August 2013 to consider a draft final report. A Scrutiny Support Officer from Legal and Democratic Services co-ordinated and arranged the submission of written and oral evidence and arranged witnesses for the review. Meetings administration, including preparation of agenda and minutes, was undertaken by a Governance Officer from Legal and Democratic Services.

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<sup>1</sup> Big Lottery funding was awarded as part of the Access to Nature grants programme administered by Natural England.

5. The membership of the scrutiny panel was as follows: Councillors Kerr (Chair); Clark (Vice-Chair), Brady, Cole, Davison, C Hobson, Rehman, Saunders and P Sharrocks.
6. A record of discussions at panel meetings, including agenda, minutes and reports, is available from the Council's Egenda system, which can be accessed via the Council's website at [www.middlesbrough.gov.uk](http://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk).
7. This report has been compiled on the basis of information submitted by Officers from the Council's Neighbourhoods and Communities Department to the scrutiny panel.

## **THE SCRUTINY PANEL'S FINDINGS**

8. The scrutiny panel's findings are set out below and relate to:

- Background to the Boro Becks Project.
- Service operation and work undertaken.
- The current/future funding position.

### **Background to the project**

9. Following changes in legislation in 2006, the Environment Agency assumed responsibility for four of Middlesbrough's becks that are deemed Critical Ordinary Watercourses - namely Marton West Beck, Middle Beck, Ormesby Beck and Spencer Beck. The Environment Agency was keen to improve the environment of the becks and engage local people in their work and initiated clean up campaigns and surveys of residents, who were invited to suggest possible improvements.
10. As indicated earlier, the Boro Becks Project was launched by the Environment Agency, Middlesbrough Council and the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust in 2010 following the receipt of Big Lottery funding. The three-year funding was made available as part of the Access to Nature grants programme administered by Natural England. As that programme was specifically targeted at areas of deprivation, the Boro Becks Project could not be rolled out on a Middlesbrough-wide basis but covers the four becks listed above.
11. Historically, Middlesbrough's becks have been identified in various strategic documents as important open spaces. The main aim of the Boro Becks Project was to build on this position by actively engaging with the local community to encourage a positive contribution to the management of the becks. This was to enable the becks to be enjoyed as valuable green spaces and wildlife hotspots. As a first step in this process, the Environment Agency commissioned surveys of residents living near to the becks, asking how they would like the becks to be improved. The results highlighted three main themes as important to the community:
  - Community access
  - Projects
  - Countryside management and biodiversity

12. Over the course of its operation, the project has aimed to build on these findings and actively involve the community in these areas. Work that has been carried out to date and work which is ongoing is highlighted in the remainder of this report.

### **Service operation and work undertaken**

13. The Boro Becks Team is based at Stewart Park and comprises three staff employed by the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, namely a Community Outreach Officer, Becks Ranger and Project Co-ordinator. It was highlighted that match funding, by way of contributions in kind, is currently provided by the Council in the form of staff support.
14. A Middlesbrough Becks Steering Group was established in 2007 to promote the local becks and co-ordinate work. The successful operation of the group was a key factor in securing the grant funding for the Boro Becks project in 2010. The steering group continues to meet on a quarterly basis and comprises key stakeholders, such as the Council, Environment Agency, Northumbrian Water and community representatives. Unlike the Boro Becks Project, the steering group covers all of Middlesbrough's becks and:
  - Works in partnership to ensure that projects are delivered.
  - Supports community engagement and participation.
  - Co-ordinates existing strategies.
  - Ensures communication between partners and the sharing of information.
  - Promotes the use and awareness of the becks.
  - Develop further opportunities across all of Middlesbrough's becks.
15. Following analysis of the results of the Environment Agency residents' survey, and two Countryside Summits involving local people, it was decided to use some project funding to involve residents on each side of the becks as volunteer rangers. The Panel was advised that a total of 27 volunteers are currently registered with Boro Becks. A further ten volunteers are in the process of being recruited and trained. All volunteers have been recruited in accordance with Middlesbrough Council procedures.
16. The volunteers have participated in a wide range of areas of work and training, including:
  - First aid.
  - Strimming.
  - Litter picking.
  - Pond creation.
  - Plant identification.
  - Tree, woodland, wildflower and wildlife management.
  - Footpath work.
17. Volunteers are given uniforms, meet on a regular basis, with guidance from the Becks Ranger, and are also encouraged to work independently.

18. Capital investment has been made in a number of areas and details are shown in the *funding* section of the report below.
19. In terms of working with communities, schools and local groups the Boro Becks programme has made progress in a number of areas:
- Educational programmes have been undertaken in conjunction with nine primary schools and one secondary school. This has included art workshops to design gateway sculptures for the becks.
  - Newham Bridge Primary School has been involved/supported in its bid for Eco School status.
  - The Team has worked with a range of groups including police and army cadets, Groundwork, brownie and guide groups and other youth groups.
  - Various events have been organised to encourage community participation.
  - Work has been undertaken in conjunction with Surestart Children's centres and libraries to engage children and young people in exploring the becks. This has included developing information packs for younger children in the form of animal-shaped mini rucksacks, such as bees, spiders and ladybirds.
  - Various information leaflets have been produced to publicise walks, nature trails and events and social media have also been used for publicity purposes.
20. The panel also heard that, under the slogan *Inspiring People to Love Their Wild Spaces*, the Boro Becks Team produces quarterly, seasonal newsletters. These have been used to:
- Highlight the work of the project.
  - Publicise its work and encourage public participation through volunteering.
  - Highlight things to see and do around the becks.
  - Educate about flora, fauna and habitats.
21. In addition, the Team organises free events along the becks to encourage family involvement and participation. These have included a Big Butterfly Count, a Big Bug Hunt/Craft Day, a Teddy Bears' Picnic, with face painting and crafts and a Big Bug Hunt. Guided walks have also formed an important part of the events programme and have enabled people to explore routes along the becks, as well as further afield, and enjoy the natural history and heritage of the area. Twenty four community events were held over the last year.

### **Current/future funding position**

22. The Borough Becks project's funding, in the form of grants, will end in December 2013. Breakdowns of the capital and revenue budgets were provided to the scrutiny panel.
23. To date, capital funding of £90,000 has been invested in the Boro Becks project. This comprises £60,000 Partnership Funding and £30,000 from the Big Lottery's Access to Nature grant. This sum has been spent on the following projects:

		£
Berwick hills and Ormesby Beck	Pond creation, tree planting, habitat creation and entrance feature.	15,000
Marton West Beck	Bridge Improvements	1,500
Ormesby Beck	Realignment/landscaping.	10,000
Spencer Beck	Entrance features, footpaths and trees.	20,000
Bridge and Barrier Improvements	Installation/repainting	16,500
Habitat Creation and Landscaping	Meadow management, tree planting and footpath creation.	13,500

24. Revenue costs have been as follows:

		£
Staffing (Staff employed by Cleveland Wildlife Trust)	Team of three staff, travel, PPE, organisation costs, project management	281,242
Community Events		40,000
Volunteering	Volunteer costs/tools and equipment	21,294
Promotion and Leaflets		15,000
Evaluation		15,000
Match Funding (Council Contributions in Kind)		36,000
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>372, 536</b>

25. The panel heard that, given the Council's current difficult financial position, mainstream budget funding will not be provided for continuation of the Boro Becks project. Although Area Care will take on responsibility for maintenance etc, it will be necessary to explore alternative funding sources and/or or service provision, to further develop/continue the project's work.

26. The scrutiny panel was advised that possible future funding sources are currently also being explored, including approaches to key partners. In respect of possible Environment Agency Funding, the scrutiny panel heard that a one-off funding amount was provided by the Environment Agency (due to an under-spend on the Agency's part) which was specifically for flood prevention works along the becks.
27. As has been outlined, the involvement of the local community has been a key element of the success of the Boro Becks project. In considering how the momentum created by the project can be carried forward given current resource constraints, Officers indicated that it is hoped that 'Friends Groups' can be established to continue community involvement. The Friends of Hemlington Lake have offered to mentor other friends groups and these are in the process of being set up. To date, a Friends of Marton West Beck group has been established. It is recognised that such groups, and other volunteers, will require support and the Boro Becks team has worked with Area Care to assist the volunteer network.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

28. Having considered the submitted information, the Environment Scrutiny Panel reached the following conclusions:
  1. Middlesbrough's Becks are a valuable green space and resource in a predominantly urban environment. They provide important habitats for flora and fauna as well opportunities for people to enjoy their facilities and observe nature in their area. The Boro Becks Project has been very successful in improving and promoting the becks that it covers and in engaging with local people on initiatives such as guided walks and educational programmes for schools and groups,
  2. Grant funding for the Boro Becks project will cease in December 2013. Middlesbrough Council's ongoing budgetary pressures mean that it will not be possible to continue the current level of financial support provided to the project. Consideration will need to be given to whether - and if so how and to what level - support for Middlesbrough's becks can be continued. Educational programmes in particular are recognised by the scrutiny panel as an important aspect of the work that has been undertaken to date. It is also recognised that any future Council support would have to be at a much reduced level, unless other funding sources could be identified. The scrutiny panel's view is that every effort should be made to build on the valuable work of the Boro Becks Project.
  3. The engagement of local people as Volunteer Becks Rangers has been very successful, with 27 people recruited to date. In addition, the establishment of Friends Groups, involving local residents, is now underway. A continuation of these initiatives could provide opportunities to build on their success, although it is recognised that support and training for the volunteers and friends groups would be essential.

4. Should alternative funding sources be identified/forthcoming, there would be a need to ensure that any Council involvement - whether through direct involvement or provision of assistance in kind - is sustainable in the longer term.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

29. Following 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 relevant external grant funding sources are explored with a view to continuing the Boro Becks Project, albeit on a smaller scale if necessary. Should funding be forthcoming, an assessment will need to be made as to how the project can be supported by the Council - for example by ensuring that any associated future maintenance requirements are sustainable, or continuing to provide assistance in kind.
  2. That the process of recruiting Volunteer Becks Rangers and establishing Friends Groups is continued and taken forward as a sustainable approach to continuing the work of the Boro Becks Project. Consideration should also be given to how best the use of volunteers and friends groups can be supported and promoted within existing resource levels - such as by promoting the sharing of information, expertise and resources between all friends groups and ensuring that any necessary training is provided. In order to ensure a sustainable way forward, any additional funding that is secured should not be directed towards revenue costs/staffing but should be used to promote the increased use of volunteers.
  3. That relevant schools are contacted and:
    - a) Informed of the educational value of becks in their area, including education programmes undertaken by the Boro Becks Project to date.
    - b) Invited to assist, on an educational basis, with the maintenance of areas around becks.
    - c) Invited to make a financial contribution to future educational programmes in relation to Middlesbrough's becks.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

30. The Panel is grateful to the following officers, who presented evidence during the course of this investigation:
  - C Corbett - Boro Becks Team
  - A Gladwin - Middlesbrough Council
  - A Mace - Middlesbrough Council
  - G Robinson - Middlesbrough Council
  - E Small - Middlesbrough Council.

## **BACKGROUND AND REFERENCE MATERIAL**

31. The following sources were consulted or referred to in preparing this report:

- Report to and minutes of the Environment Scrutiny Panel Meeting held on 1 July 2013.
- Information and publicity materials produced by the Boro Becks Team.

**COUNCILLOR BOB KERR**

**CHAIR OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL**

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