
**THE UPDATE AND AMENDMENT OF DARLINGTON'S COUNTRYSIDE
STRATEGY - 'PEOPLE AND NATURE IN DARLINGTON'**

**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor David Lyonette,
Regeneration and Planning Portfolio**

Responsible Director - John Buxton, Director of Development and Environment

Purpose of Report

1. To seek Members' approval to begin a process of reviewing the Council's existing Countryside Strategy 'People and Nature in Darlington' with the purpose of bringing this strategy up to date and so making it more relevant for current needs.

Information and Analysis

2. The need for a review follows significant related changes in corporate priorities since the publication of the last Countryside Strategy, written over ten years ago, as well as new, closely connected initiatives held within the Community Strategy. This will include learning from our main achievements over the ten year period that the strategy has been in place, establishing a baseline that describes the state of Darlington's green environment at present, and assessing the effectiveness of existing policies as well as how these have been adapted in line with changes in national and regional agendas. The review process will involve extensive consultation and will form a key element of the Council's strategic documents for Darlington's outdoor environment.

Aim

3. The main aim of a Countryside Strategy should be to identify the importance that the delivery of a 'quality' countryside has for a town like Darlington and to provide a strategy for maximising the potential of this facility. When we talk about a 'quality' countryside we mean one that is rich in wildlife, free of litter, easy to access, always changing and improving, is interesting and relaxing, feels safe and comfortable for those who visit it and live in it and is fully sustainable in its physical and economic aspects. At the same time it is able to provide a sense of adventure and discovery and above all it is integrated with the urban environment avoiding any sense of exclusivity.
4. Whilst there are parallels with the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, the Countryside Strategy will look at making the most of the whole of the Borough's countryside (with four-fifths of the Borough's area being rural); the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy is focused on spaces within the urban area and villages.

The Update and Amendment of Darlington's Countryside Strategy – 'People and Nature in Darlington'; why now?

The National and International Context

5. It is ten years since the publication of Darlington's previous Countryside Strategy. In this time some major changes have occurred at all levels, from the local to the international. These changes increase the pressure for change in the way that local authorities deliver services affecting the green infrastructure of the towns and the countryside that lies beyond. These drivers for change can be split into four main categories. These are:

(a) National policy including issues affecting climate change and sustainability

The issues that derive from the production of Darlington's Community Strategy are closely connected to the thinking behind Local Agenda 21 (LA21) as they are intended to encourage a higher degree of local distinctiveness on how areas develop and adjust to a more sustainable future. The plan states, 'for a healthy future, we need to celebrate, care and protect (and enhance) the variety of life, otherwise known as biodiversity, and take responsibility and live within the limits of our earth'. The Countryside Strategy needs to identify how this is to be achieved. Further to this, the Community Strategy emphasises a range of issues that affect the countryside and green environment. These are:

- (i) Quality of life, attracting people to the area and encouraging them to stay.
- (ii) Economic development, where the improvement of the natural world provides a more attractive setting for property and business.
- (iii) Healthy lifestyles, with well over 50% of the population using walking as their main means of exercise, far exceeding any other activity.
- (iv) Educational achievement - The Countryside Strategy will highlight the important role having a 'quality' countryside on your doorstep plays in encouraging schools/children/people generally in exploring their own area and finding out about their own history, both natural and social.
- (v) Inclusive communities – Again the Countryside Strategy will look at how extremely effective wild green spaces are for bringing together local communities and making them feel involved in where they live.

(b) Related issues that derive from Darlington's Community Strategy

The issues relating to changes in policy at the local, national and international levels are:

- (i) Local Biodiversity Action Plans (the aim of which is to coordinate action for wildlife across the region) have been produced since the publication of the last Countryside Strategy based on the UK's Biodiversity Action Plan. These provide a framework for the coordination of action for wildlife across all geographical

areas.

- (ii) Local Agenda 21 (the purpose of which is to establish the principles of sustainability throughout all the Council's services) was established in 1992 following the Rio Summit. It set an agenda looking at how to engage local people in the process of achieving sustainability in the way we live. Since the last strategy, this process has come of age and now sees the concept of sustainability written into the majority of policy documents. The Countryside Strategy needs to identify ways of ensuring that there is sufficient baseline information available to measure the existing health of the natural environment and that the strategy identifies the likely outcomes and outputs in terms of environmental sustainability that the policies and associated projects will deliver.
 - (iii) The third major strand of the Earth Summit was the Forest Principles agreement highlighting the importance of trees and woodland. The Countryside Strategy needs to look at how we can strengthen Darlington's role in the Community Forest programme and the part we play in helping deliver the region's Trees and Woodland Strategy.
 - (iv) Changes in planning legislation is another major driver for change as regards Darlington's strategy for the countryside. The publication of the new Planning Policy Statement 9 has greatly increased the emphasis on the role local authorities should have on improving the natural environment.
 - (v) The production of the new strategy coincides with a period of national change in the countryside, accelerated by the concerns for the common agricultural policy and the move towards more environmental products in exchange for grant aid to farmers. This change adds impetus to the need for a new strategy as it opens the door to a range of possibilities, many of which will be investigated by the Countryside Strategy.
 - (vi) In the North East, new regional structures have been formed since the original Strategy was written and there has been a move towards a more regional and sub regional focus. One of the contentions of One North East, the Regional Development Agency, is that a beautiful natural environment is a key element in the area's success. The strategy needs to investigate how Darlington can contribute to this vision.
- (c) **Legal changes including legislation on protected species and countryside access**

The Countryside Strategy also needs to identify how the Council is to adapt in order to meet its legal requirements towards the countryside and wildlife:

- (i) Following recent legislation, there has been an increase in the degree of legal protection certain species and habitats receive. Through the Wildlife and Countryside Act and European legislation on protected species, habitats and species under threat of extinction are now much better provided for. The Countryside Strategy needs to set out how best the Council can work with all parties in ensuring that this legislation is acted on positively, so helping the process of development proceeding in a manner that acts within the spirit of the law as well as providing environmental gains that can be of benefit to the wider

public.

- (ii) Revisiting the Countryside Strategy also coincides with the statutory requirement to produce a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) by 2007. This drive to improve countryside access using the existing rights of way legislation revealed a number of problems associated with both the provision and the delivery process. The Countryside Strategy needs to demonstrate how the Council's part in this process is helping improve this aspect of the countryside.

(d) The public's own changes in lifestyles, their expectations and desires

Finally, changes need to be made to the Countryside Strategy as a result of changes in public opinion:

- (i) As a result of a wide variety of activities in the media and in scientific circles, the public's expectations of what can be achieved is increasing. Because people are more aware of the importance of the natural world and the need to facilitate its recovery from the years of industrialisation and exploitation, there is a greater need for local authorities to demonstrate that they are making an effective contribution to this programme.
- (ii) Demographic shifts and changes in employment patterns also have led to people seeking different kinds of leisure pursuits and transport options. These have led to significant changes in use as well as aspirations towards the countryside including increases in mountain biking, equestrian demand, walking, running and numerous related activities.

The Process of Producing the New Strategy

- 6. In order to produce the new Countryside Strategy, extensive consultation exercises with all the key stakeholders are proposed. There will be a Steering Group created to oversee the process made up of representatives from Darlington's Wildlife Groups, from walking organisations and from general users of Darlington's 'Wild Spaces', especially members of the many 'friends' groups for the seven 'Local Nature Reserves'. There will be a series of questions sent out to both random and selected parties, as well as interviews conducted with key representatives. The progress of putting together the findings of the consultation process, as well as producing the Council's new Countryside Strategy, will be reported to Environment Scrutiny Committee and Darlington Environmental Forum. The new strategy will be ready for full Council approval in the autumn of 2007.
- 7. Joint working will take place with the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy on policy issues which impact both on spaces with the urban area and villages and on the wider countryside, to ensure consistency of approach.

Responsibilities and Priorities

- 8. The strategy will identify areas where the Council could take responsibility. The changes in Planning Policy Guidance, changes in wildlife law and changes in policies towards the rural fringe all act to put greater emphasis on the role of local authorities to play an active part in improving the three main themes of the strategy; biodiversity, access to quality countryside and the interdependence of the rural and urban economies. The strategy will help guide

priorities for actions.

Conclusion

9. The above provides some of the reasons why it is timely to produce a new Countryside Strategy at the present time. It highlights why in the last ten year period there has been the need for positive action on biodiversity and access to quality countryside has accelerated and that we now find ourselves in a period where this action needs to be consolidated and supported by all sectors. With the development of a new strategy.

Financial Implications

10. The new strategy will be delivered through a combination of core and externally funded personnel delivering a comprehensive set of policies, activities and projects. Inevitably, in any programme of works where a step change is envisaged some financial implications are likely. By working hard to ensure that opportunities are identified for forging partnerships and accessing new funding streams, any additional funding requirements that impact on the Council should be managed within existing resources.

Outcome of Consultation

11. A number of consultations have taken place recently in areas closely associated with the issues covered by the Countryside Strategy such as consultations on the use of the Borough's rights of way network and consultation on the use of Darlington's open spaces. In addition to these, ongoing consultations take place on a regular basis with Local Nature Reserve steering groups, groups involved in project development work and information gleaned from the day to day compliments and complaints the countryside service receive.

Legal Implications

12. This report has been considered by the Legal Services Manager for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Legal Services Manager considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

13. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. Work on revising the Countryside Strategy will pay particular attention to measures which can help minimise crime and disorder.

Council Policy Framework

14. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework.

Decision Deadline

15. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter. It is proposed that Environment Scrutiny Committee is involved in the preparation of the strategy.

Recommendation

16. It is recommended that Cabinet agrees to a review of the Council's Countryside Strategy taking place.

Reasons

17. The recommendation is supported by the need to ensure that the Council:
 - (a) Has a strategy towards the countryside and the green environment that is able to address the new agenda driving developments in these areas.
 - (b) Can demonstrate that it is able to prioritise resources in a way that ensures Darlington is performing at an excellent level in delivering its services to the countryside and green infrastructure.
 - (c) Through extensive consultation has a Countryside Strategy that truly reflects the wishes of the Darlington public.

John Buxton
Director of Development & Environment

Background Papers

- (i) Local Biodiversity Action Plan
- (ii) People and Nature in Darlington
- (iii) Darlington's Community Strategy
- (iv) DEFRA Guidance on producing a Rights of Way Improvement Plan
- (v) Planning Policy Statement 9
- (vi) The Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000

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