

**CABINET**

**GROWTH BID FOR REINSTATEMENT OF FUNDING LEVELS FOR ARNSIDE/SILVERDALE AND FOREST OF BOWLAND AONBs AND WARTON CRAG AND TROWBARROW LOCAL NATURE RESERVES**

**16<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY 2010**

**Report of Corporate Director (Regeneration)**

**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

The Cabinet Member has requested this report to seek agreement to reinstate the planned contributions to the running of the Arnside/Silverdale AONB, and Forest of Bowland AONB Units, and the Countryside Projects budget for wardening services at the Council's Local Nature Reserves.

<b>Key Decision</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Non-Key Decision</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Referral from Cabinet Member</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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<b>Date Included in Forward Plan</b>	
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<b>This report is public.</b>
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**RECOMMENDATIONS OF COUNCILLOR JON BARRY**

- (1) That the contribution to the operation of the Arnside/Silverdale AONB Unit be reinstated to £14,300 in 2010/11 with normal increases for inflation in subsequent financial years, and the resulting growth be included in Cabinet's budget proposals.
- (2) That the contribution to the operation of the Forest of Bowland AONB Unit be reinstated to £6,900 in 2010/11 with normal increases for inflation in subsequent financial years, and the resulting growth be included in Cabinet's budget proposals.
- (3) That the Countryside Projects budget for wardening at Warton Crag and Trowbarrow Local Nature Reserves be increased to £9,900 for 2010/11 with normal increases for inflation in subsequent financial years, and the resulting growth be included in Cabinet's budget proposals.

## **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 The Arnside/Silverdale AONB Unit comprises an arms length unit of four staff operating on behalf of a partnership between the City Council, Cumbria and Lancashire County Councils and South Lakeland District Council. The funding of the unit is made up of contributions from the four local authorities (25%) and match funding (75%) from Natural England. There is an incentive to ensure that AONB Partnerships secure the full 25% contribution from the local authorities, as the Natural England Contribution decreases by 5% as a penalty if the local authorities' contribution is less.
- 1.2 For 2009/10 the City Council decided to make a saving on its contributions to other bodies and reduced the contribution to Arnside/Silverdale from £13,700 to £11,400 and for Forest of Bowland from £6,900 to £6,000. In addition it reduced the budget for countryside projects from £9,500 to £6,600. These actions could have an adverse effect on the ability of the Unit to operate and meet the standards expected of the four partner authorities by Natural England.
- 1.3 The budget saving has not had an adverse effect on the Natural England contribution this year (£123,171 core funding) because they have been prepared to accept a further contribution from the Parish Councils' as cushioning the City Council's reduction for this year only. It has been made clear to the City Council, however, that a failure to return its contribution to the normal level will result in a reduction of 5% in core funding from Natural England. This reduction in funding, alongside the reduced contribution, would begin to have an adverse impact on operational matters.
- 1.4 Members should also be aware of the direct impact of the reduction in funds for countryside projects has been upon wardening and Health and Safety duties relating to the Council's Local Nature Reserves at Trowbarrow and Warton Crag. The management of the reserves is made up of stewardship funding from DEFRA for physical works such as plantation thinning and grassland maintenance. The Council's contribution under Countryside Projects funds a wardening contractor who's role is primarily to make regular visits to the sites, especially during school holidays, to ensure that safety warnings relating to the site's rock climbing facilities are properly in place and to ensure that young people using the site for mountain biking and other activities are doing so safely and without constructing jumps and other structures which could have legal implications for the City Council under Health and Safety legislation.
- 1.5 The reduction in funding for this wardening service has meant that visits to the site and overall supervision has reduced to a level where a higher risk to the City Council in terms of breaches of its Health and Safety responsibilities has occurred. Members will be only too aware of the need to maintain the highest standard of health and safety procedures for public access land in their ownership, and it is strongly recommended that the funding be returned to normal levels.
- 1.6 The operation of the AONB Units also fits closely with two of the key priorities in the Corporate Plan. By the cross boundary working with the Cumbria authorities and promoting social, economic and sustainable tourism initiatives, the statutory duties support the local economy within the district and around Morecambe Bay. By implementing management plans for protected landscapes covering almost two thirds of the district, the activities enhance the environment and the district's clean green spaces.

## **2.0 Details of consultation**

- 2.1 The Arnsdale/Silverdale AONB Executive Committee made representations to the then Cabinet Member about the serious implications of reducing funding to the AONB Operation. Similar representations have also been made by the Forest of Bowland Executive Committee. In both cases link contact officers from Natural England have confirmed that a failure to raise 25% of contributions from the respective local authorities would unfortunately result in a 5% budget cut from core funding.

## **3.0 Options analysis**

- 3.1 Option 1: Not to make any changes to the reduced budgets. This would result in a subsequent reduction in funding from Natural England for core activities and hence a need to reduce progress in implementing the two AONB Management Plans. This would conflict with the Councils vision and stated aims to manage the environment in the district to the highest standards. It would also create a considerable risk for the authority in corporate management terms by increasing the risk of an adverse Health and Safety incident on either of the Local Nature Reserves.
- 3.2 Option 2 : To reinstate the planned contributions to the AONB operations and the Countryside Projects budget, for consideration as growth as part of the 2010/11 budget. This would avoid a cut in future contributions from Natural England, and enable the AONB Units to continue implementing the local authorities management plans for the AONB's to current timescale. It would also reduce the risk of Health and Safety incidents at the Local Nature Reserves to a mitigated level.

## **4.0 Officer Preferred Option.**

- 4.1 The officer preferred option is Option 2.

### **CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

**(including Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)** The management of the two AONB's through the special arrangements described in this report enables large parts of the district to be managed in a manner appropriate for protected landscapes. It accords fully with the objectives of the Sustainable Community Strategy and the Local Development Framework and is a legislative requirement of duties given to the City Council under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

The operation of the AONB Units also fits closely with two of the key priorities in the Corporate Plan.

By the cross boundary working with the Cumbria authorities and promoting social, economic and sustainable tourism initiatives, the statutory duties support the local economy. By implementing management plans for protected landscapes covering almost two thirds of the district, the activities enhance the environment and the district's clean green spaces.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Option 1 will lead to a further reduction of core funding in this area from Natural England from 2010/11 onwards, currently estimated at £6,200 and is likely to have further negative impact on the current operation.

The preferred option 2 will increase the 2010/11 revenue budget by a total of £6,700 plus inflation for future years thereafter for contributions to the Arnside/Silverdale AONB Unit (£2,700), the Forest of Bowland AONB Unit (£800), and the Countryside Projects Budget (£3,200).

This should be balanced against the Council continuing to secure a 75% contribution to funding from Natural England for the operation of the AONB Units, and mitigating the risk of claims for breaches of Health and Safety responsibilities in relation to activities at the Local Nature Reserves.

Option 2 will either need to be treated as a growth item during the 2010/11 Process or as a reduction in another service provided elsewhere as no other budget has been identified.

## **SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS**

Any potential growth should be considered in context of the Council's financial prospects, Cabinet's proposed priorities/non-priorities and alongside other competing demands, as part of the 2010/11 budget.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

None arising from the report.

## **MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS**

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

The Forest of Bowland and Arnside/Silverdale AONB Management Plans.

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