

## **LOWER MOLE PARTNERSHIP: SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT**

<b>Head of Service/Contact:</b>	Ian Dyer, Head of Operational Services
<b>Urgent Decision?(yes/no)</b>	No
<b>If yes, reason urgent decision required:</b>	
<b>Annexes/Appendices (attached):</b>	<b>Annex 1</b> – Lower Mole Partnership Service Level Agreement 2019-2024 <b>Annex 2</b> - Countryside Partnerships Team Business Plan (April 2014 to April 2019)
<b>Other available papers (not attached):</b>	Committee Report to meeting of Leisure Committee, 21 October 2014 :Lower Mole Countryside Management Service: Service Level Agreement

### **Report summary**

This report proposes that the Committee approves a five year service level agreement with the Lower Mole Partnership, and recommends to Council the appointment of representatives to the Surrey Countryside Partnerships Board and Liaison Group for the Lower Mole Partnership.

### **Recommendation (s)**

**That the Committee:**

- (1) Agrees to approve a further period of funding for the Lower Mole Partnership for five years via a Service Level Agreement.**
- (2) Notes the Service Level Agreement requirement to provide one year's notice in writing to withdraw from the agreement.**
- (3) Recommends to Council the appointment of the Chairman of the Community and Wellbeing Committee to the Surrey Countryside Partnerships Board and the appointment of the Vice-Chairman of the Community and Wellbeing Committee as a substitute member.**
- (4) Recommends to Council that the Vice-Chairman of the Community and Wellbeing Committee and one other Member are appointed to the Liaison group for the Lower Mole Partnership.**

# Community and Wellbeing Committee

## 22 January 2019

### **1 Implications for the Council's Key Priorities, Service Plans and Sustainable Community Strategy**

- 1.1 The Lower Mole Partnership aims to provide a high quality and cost efficient volunteer based service for local communities and public and private landowners across its area, which includes the Borough of Epsom and Ewell. By doing so it will help Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) deliver its four priorities of Keeping the Borough Clean and Green, Supporting our Community, Managing our Resources and Supporting Businesses and our Local Economy.

### **2 Background**

- 2.1 The Lower Mole Countryside Management Project was set up in 1983 as a partnership-funded, volunteer-based countryside management service focused on protecting and enhancing countryside in the urban fringe of North East Surrey. The funding partners are Surrey County Council, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, Elmbridge Borough Council, Mole Valley District Council, Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames and the City of London (Ashted Common).
- 2.2 In 2014/15 following a review, restructure and rebranding of all the former Surrey Countryside Projects the Lower Mole Partnership funding partners agreed to adopt the Countryside Partnerships Team Business Plan (April 2014 to April 2019) and to sign a Service level Agreement (SLA) agreeing to fund the Partnership for a period of up to three years. The Partnership has continued to operate successfully under the new arrangements.
- 2.3 The Countryside Partnerships Board is currently proposing a ten year plan to follow on from the current Countryside Partnerships Team Business Plan (April 2014 to April 2019).
- 2.4 Copies of the 2019-2024 SLA and current business plan are attached at Annex 1 and Annex 2 respectively. It should be noted that the business plan (Annex 2) contains appendices that contain a copy of the 2012 Business Process Review brief (Appendix B) and the output from the BPR (Appendix C). It should be stressed that not all of the iESE conclusions applied equally to all of the former Countryside Management Projects.

### **3 Proposals**

- 3.1 The key proposals for EEBC as a funding partner, are to agree a further period of funding via a new Service Level Agreement (five years is recommended), recommend to Council the appointment of the Chairman of the Community and Wellbeing Committee to the Surrey Countryside Partnerships Board with the Vice Chairman of the Community and Wellbeing Committee acting as a substitute for the Board and for the Vice-Chairman to also be appointed to the Liaison Group along with one other member.

# Community and Wellbeing Committee

## 22 January 2019

- 3.2 The Service Level Agreement involves Epsom and Ewell Borough Council agreeing to contribute the current level of annual funding (£22,000) for five years from 1st April 2019 to the 31st March 2024, agreeing an annual work programme and continuing to accommodate the Project at Horton Country Park under the terms as described in pgh 4.1 of this report. It should be noted that in the interest of the wider funding partnership the Service Level Agreement requires the provision of one year's notice in writing to withdraw from the agreement.
- 3.3 The Countryside Partnership's Board comprises one member representative from each core funding partner. Partners are entitled to nominate a substitute representative in case their main member representative is unable to attend. It is expected that the substitute will normally be a member of the Liaison Group.

### **4 Financial and Manpower Implications**

- 4.1 The current arrangements for EEBC's annual financial contribution to the Lower Mole Partnership (LMP) are as follows. As of 2018/19 Epsom and Ewell Borough Council provides an annual contribution of £22,000 to the LMP. Responsibility for overseeing and coordinating the work of the LMP within Epsom & Ewell lies with the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Countryside Manager. The funding supports the core cost of running the partnership (i.e. employee's salaries, vehicle running costs, accommodation and office administration costs). Additional charges agreed prior to a practical task in Epsom & Ewell are made to cover the volunteer charge (£6 per day) and cost of materials, equipment, tools, PPE and machinery hire.
- 4.2 Epsom and Ewell Borough Council continues to provide office and workshop accommodation at Horton Country Park via an arrangement (separate lease) where an agreed annual total of volunteer days valued at £55 per day (Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) value for unskilled volunteer work) is accepted in lieu of the lease valued at £11,000 annually. This equates to 200 volunteer days. Additional volunteer days beyond 200 are paid by EEBC at the standard task based daily volunteer charge of £6 per day. In 2017/18 the total number of volunteer days worked in Epsom & Ewell was 415, equating to a value of £22,825. The figures do not include an estimate for the substantial amount of skilled work carried out by some volunteers who are trained to use excavators, dumpers, chainsaws and brush cutters, which HLF estimate is valued at £150 per day, therefore the true annual value is significantly higher.
- 4.3 As well as the practical conservation work of the volunteers, the LMP supplies other valuable services to the Borough:- Qualified and experienced advice and information on biodiversity, public access and landscape issues. Such advice might otherwise have to be bought in from consultants at a typical rate of £30 to £40 per hour.

# Community and Wellbeing Committee

## 22 January 2019

- 4.4 The LMP facilitates cross-boundary and cross-ownership co-operation and communication. This has been an important factor on Epsom Common with the City of London and along the Hogsmill/Bonesgate corridor with the Royal Borough of Kingston. The LMP staff have long-standing and detailed local knowledge and direct contacts in the community. Their knowledge and contacts are regularly made available to Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Officers. The LMP contributes further by attending meetings and sitting on committees such as the Epsom and Walton Downs Consultative Committee, the Epsom Common Association and the Epsom/Ashted Common SSSI Forum.
- 4.5 The LMP provides other services such as the loan of hand tools and equipment. Occasional use of workshop facilities, practical support for "Friends of" groups, space in the Tree Nursery, use of timber stocks and an additional professional presence on Horton Country Park are other examples. The latter means that LMP staff field queries from members of the public when EEBC staff are not available. In addition the LMP hosts the Lower Mole Trust which contributes funds raised to conservation projects within Epsom & Ewell and the wider Partnership. For example, Round Pond at Nonsuch Park and Field Pond in Horton Country Park, each receiving substantial grants of several thousand pounds. None of these other services are charged for.
- 4.6 A key question for Epsom and Ewell Borough Council as a funding partner is whether or not we will retain value for money if we maintain our current level of funding? In 2017/18 EEBC contributed £20,002 to core funding exclusive of the office and workshop provision at Horton Country Park (See paragraph 4.1 above). We paid a further £1,204 for task based equipment/materials costs and the daily volunteer charge, giving a total cost in 2017/18 of £21,204. The minimum value for volunteer work in 2017/18 was £22,825 (415 volunteer days at £55 per day and not including skilled volunteer days). Subtracting the value of the lease at £11,000 the volunteer activity contributed a minimum value of £11,825 or 56% towards the total Epsom and Ewell Borough Council costs of £21,204. Taking in to account the other services described in 4.2 which are not charged for, the extra value of skilled volunteer work not accounted for and the unknown financial value of the health and wellbeing benefits both directly to the volunteers and to the public from the volunteers countryside management work, it can be argued that the current arrangements remain beneficial and cost effective to the Council.
- 4.7 The retention of one appointed Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Officer to the Lower Mole Partnership Officers Working Group means there is no change to current or future Epsom and Ewell Borough Council staffing levels.

# Community and Wellbeing Committee

## 22 January 2019

- 4.8 **Chief Finance Officer's comments:** The base budget for 2019/20 includes £22k to make the proposed contribution. Any additional expenditure is currently charged against the Basic Payment Scheme or the Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme. Both of these are currently funded through EU grants. If political changes result in the closure of these schemes expenditure would need to be funded from the residual balances on these grants already held by the Council, or from existing revenue budgets.

### 5 Legal Implications (including implications for matters relating to equality)

- 5.1 Continued financial support for the LMP gives residents both young and old the opportunity to contribute directly to the protection and enhancement of their local environment and to gain the social and health benefits that result from conservation volunteering.
- 5.2 Under section 74 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 local authorities owning a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) have a statutory duty to further the conservation and enhancement of SSSIs both in carrying out their operations, and in exercising their decision making functions. The LMP has made a vital contribution to the protection and enhancement of the Borough's two SSSI (Epsom Common Local Nature Reserve and Stones Road Pond)
- 5.3 The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act, Section 40 places a duty on public authorities to conserve biodiversity. Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity. Conserving biodiversity includes, in relation to a living organism or type of habitat, restoring or enhancing a population or habitat. The work of the LMP contributes directly to the duty, protecting and enhancing biodiversity on our open spaces and assisting us to implement our site management plans and Local Biodiversity Action Plan.
- 5.4 **Monitoring Officer's comments:** The SLA as drafted is not a formal legal document but an understanding between the council and the Lower Mole Partnership. As an informal arrangement between the parties, the provisions are not enforceable by either party. The current arrangements have worked well previously but, if funding from other partners is not made to the partnership, there is a risk that the project will fail and it is unlikely that the council will be able to recover the money it has given to the partnership for the year.

### 6 Sustainability Policy and Community Safety Implications

- 6.1 The work of the LMP provides clear sustainability and community benefits by using volunteers to protect and enhance the Borough's open spaces and assisting in implementing our site management plans and Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

# Community and Wellbeing Committee

## 22 January 2019

- 6.2 The work of the LMP which involves active community involvement in environmental improvements helps create more cohesive communities and can help reduce anti-social behaviour.

### 7 Partnerships

- 7.1 The LMP is an existing partnership of 35 years between Surrey County Council, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, Elmbridge Borough Council, Mole Valley District Council, Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames and the City of London (Ashted Common). There are clear benefits to working in partnership with regard to countryside management where many cross border issues/opportunities can and have been addressed.

### 8 Risk Assessment

- 8.1 Continued support of the LMP will help ensure that the Borough's countryside and biodiversity continue to be protected and enhanced in a financially efficient way. Our continued financial support of the wider partnership enables the service to operate across North East Surrey providing economies of scale and cross border benefits as described.

### 9 Conclusion and Recommendations

- 9.1 As described above, the LMP has continued to operate successfully following the review of 2014/15. It is recommended that the Committee approves a new five year Service Level Agreement and appoints the Chairman of the Community and Wellbeing Committee to the Surrey Countryside Partnerships Board with the Vice Chairman of the Community and Wellbeing Committee acting as a substitute for the Board.
- 9.2 It is also recommended that the Committee appoints the Vice Chairman and one other member to the Liaison Group for the Lower Mole Partnership. It is also recommended that the committee notes that in the interest of the wider funding partnership, the Service Level Agreement requires the provision of one year's notice in writing to withdraw from the agreement.

**Ward(s) Affected:** (All Wards);