

**HORTON COUNTRY PARK LOCAL NATURE RESERVE MANAGEMENT PLAN  
2017-2117**

<u>Report of the:</u>	Head of Place Development
<u>Contact:</u>	Stewart Cocker
Urgent Decision?(yes/no)	No
If yes, reason urgent decision required:	
<u>Annexes/Appendices</u> (attached):	<u>Annexe 1</u> – Executive Summary - Draft Horton Country Park Local Nature Reserve Management Plan 2017-2117 <u>Annexe 2</u> - Draft Horton Country Park Local Nature Reserve Management Plan 2017-2117
<u>Other available papers</u> (not attached):	Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme Agreement 2010 – 2020 Horton Country Park Local Nature Reserve Management Plan 2006 - 2016

**REPORT SUMMARY**

**This report asks the Community and Wellbeing Committee to approve and adopt as policy an updated management plan 2017-2117 for Horton Country Park Local Nature Reserve.**

**RECOMMENDATION (S)**

- (1) That the Committee adopts the updated 2017-2117 Horton Country Park Local Nature Reserve Management Plan as Council policy.**
- (2) That the Committee receives an Annual Review of costs and funding associated with the Plan.**

*Notes*

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

- 1.1 The adoption of an updated management plan for Horton Country Park Local Nature Reserve (LNR) will make a long term positive contribution to all four of the Council's four Key Priorities and the Community Strategy by guiding the management of one of the Borough's largest areas of countryside in line with this Council's objective of committing to the principles of sustainability.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 Horton Country Park LNR is along with nearby Epsom Common LNR one of the largest nature reserves in Surrey and is managed by Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) in partnership with the Friends of Horton Country Park and the Lower Mole Partnership. The proposed management plan covers approximately 100ha of Horton Country Park LNR. Excluded from the plan are areas of land within the Country Park managed by the Equus Equestrian Centre, the Horton Park Country Club (golf course) and Hobbledown (formerly Horton Park Farm). Throughout the plan, unless otherwise stated, reference to Horton Country Park relates only to the EEBC managed part of the Local Nature Reserve.
- 2.2 The 2017-2117 management plan is intended to succeed the 2006-2016 plan and aims to update and build on the progress made during the implementation of the previous plan which was the first to be agreed formerly and implemented by EEBC. The previous plan has significantly improved the management of woodland, grassland, scrub and ponds, improved biological monitoring, increased volunteer input, commenced a programme of veteran tree management and improved public access and interpretation. The previous plan also secured the substantial external funding required to achieve some of the above improvements.
- 2.3 The title of 'Country Park' is a national designation, originating from the 1968 Countryside Act, which enabled local authorities to create country parks specifically to allow people living in urban environments easy access to countryside. There is little doubt that Horton Country Park LNR successfully offers the residents of the Borough just such an opportunity. Its creation in 1973/4 was also seen as a way of managing the visitor pressure on the Epsom and Ashted Common's Site of Special Scientific Interest, helping to protect their less robust nationally and internationally important habitats, as well as a way of protecting the Green Belt when the health authorities decided to close the hospital farms. The achievement of Local Nature Reserve Status in 2004 has helped to consolidate past achievements and give direction to the Council's future plans.

- 2.4 Successfully managing the Country Park involves actively managing public access and nature conservation. With 10km of surfaced paths and tracks there is a constant need to manage inappropriate access, encroaching vegetation and to maintain the infrastructure of the tracks, accompanying signs, seats and gates. The nature conservation value of the Country Park's rural landscape, made up of woodlands, hedgerows, meadows and ponds, is very high. Of special note are the presence of six 'Ancient Woodlands', now rare traditional hay meadows and the provision of habitat for species, such as the extremely rare ladybird 'Clitosthetus arcuatus' and no less than 28 bird species on the RSPB 'Red List' and 21 on their 'Amber List'.
- 2.5 An agreed management plan is a requirement for the current Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme Agreement 2010-2020 between this council and Natural England, which has secured an annual contribution to the Council totalling approximately £90,000 for Horton Country Park LNR from 2010 to 2020, along with additional capital payments available, to assist with for example, the management of veteran trees.
- 2.6 The draft 2017-2117 plan has been produced following a number of additional site surveys carried out during the lifetime of the previous plan with consequent re-appraisal, a review of available historical data and liaison with a number of individuals and representatives of relevant organisations (e.g. EEBC and Natural England). This has resulted in the objectives and outline prescriptions set out in the plan.
- 2.7 The experience of implementing the 2006-2016 plan and the need to continually make management decisions with a very long term view, such as those affecting veteran trees, has resulted in a plan that aims to provide a consistent and stable approach to the management of Horton Country Park LNR over the next one hundred years. The plan will be reviewed every ten years during its lifetime.

### **3 Proposals**

- 3.1 The Community and Wellbeing Committee is asked to consider adopting as policy the 2017-2117 Horton Country Park Local Nature Reserve Management Plan. Subject to ten year reviews the plan sets out an agreed approach for the continued management of the site to benefit both the people and wildlife of Epsom & Ewell for the next one hundred years. Implementing the plan enables the Council to demonstrate that it is proactively fulfilling its 'Biodiversity Duty' (Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006) and actively encouraging access to and protecting, the Borough's natural heritage. An executive summary of the Plan is attached as Annexe 1 to this report. The full Plan is attached as Annexe 2.

- 3.2 Below is a summary of the key management proposals within the draft management plan that are thought unlikely to change in the next one hundred years:
- 3.2.1 Ensuring good public access via a network of well-maintained and signed paths and bridleways.
  - 3.2.2 Ensuring the protection, maintenance, monitoring and enhancement of biodiversity and cultural heritage of Horton Country Park LNR.
  - 3.2.3 Managing and maintaining the features of nature conservation interest in 'favourable' condition.
  - 3.2.4 Encouraging and supporting the work of volunteers and the 'Friends of Horton Country Park'.
  - 3.2.5 Interpreting Horton Country Park LNR to the public.
  - 3.2.6 Maintaining a close working relationship with the operators of the Equus Equestrian Centre, Horton Park Country Club (golf course) and Hobbledown (formerly Horton Park Children's Farm).

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

- 4.1 Successful management of a nature reserve and designated Site of Nature Conservation Importance requires the informed, consistent, systematic and long term approach to habitat management and public access that a management plan provides.
- 4.2 Stage three of the draft management plan provides a guide to delivering the plan up to the first ten year review in 2027. The plan is aspirational and for guidance purposes only, estimated costs are given and as in the case of the previous plan 2006-16, implementation of the new plan is not dependent upon increased spending by the Council. During the previous plan substantial external funding was successfully secured and remains in place until 2020 with the prospect of future scheme eligibility. It should be noted that, without a management plan there is very little chance of securing funds from other sources.
- 4.3 There is no significant impact on current or future staffing levels. However, Horton Country Park LNR is unusual in being a very large site of national/regional importance for nature conservation but without dedicated staff. Whilst no increase in staff is proposed by the adoption of the new management plan, it should be noted that the plan does include the aspiration if resources ever permit for dedicated staff which would improve both this Council's ability to manage habitats, public access and interpretation.

- 4.4 **Chief Finance Officer's comments:** The Plan assumes that existing revenue budgets for staffing, grounds and tree maintenance and small incidental expenses will be maintained in future years. Agreed financial implications arising from the annual review of the Plan will be reflected in annual service estimates.
- 4.5 No additional internal funding is available for any items included in the Management Plan. Significant external contributions have been secured until 2020, and it is anticipated that we will apply for further funding in subsequent years.

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

- 5.1 The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 impose a duty on "public bodies" including local authorities to have regard to biodiversity, conservation and to maintaining lists of species and habitats for which conservation steps should be taken or promoted.
- 5.2 **Monitoring Officer's comments:** The legal issues have been addressed in this report.

## 6 Sustainability Policy and Community Safety Implications

- 6.1 The adoption of an updated Horton Country Park LNR Management Plan will help ensure that a significant area of countryside with the Borough of Epsom and Ewell is protected and enhanced in terms of nature conservation and well managed in terms of public access for a period of one hundred years.
- 6.2 Access to countryside is recognised nationally as a key to social wellbeing, indeed countryside walks are the nation's most popular recreational pursuit. The adoption of the updated management plan will play a vital role in ensuring the proper management of Horton Country Park LNR with regard to public access.
- 6.3 The presence of accessible well-managed countryside can powerfully effect perceptions and can be a key factor with both individuals and businesses in their decision to locate and stay in an area
- 6.4 The updated plan does offer community safety benefits by interpreting the site to visitors and encouraging local residents to get more involved in helping to manage the site which by default helps increase an informed on site presence that can report issues to Council staff.

## **7 Partnerships**

7.1 The current management of Horton Country Park LNR relies heavily on a range of partnerships both internal and external. For example, the Countryside Team works closely with the Ranger Service to maximise the effectiveness of the available Council presence. The Friends of Horton Country Park formed in 1999 have helped with practical tasks, interpretation and biological monitoring and the Lower Mole Partnership have provided essential support for over thirty years, carrying out practical nature conservation and access improvement tasks. Continuing these partnerships and in particular with our volunteers is an aim of the management plan and will be crucial to its successful implementation.

## **8 Risk Assessment**

- 8.1 Financially it has become increasingly challenging for local authorities to manage large areas of countryside, both maintaining good public access and fulfilling duties regarding biodiversity. Continuing to secure external funding to help meet the financial challenge requires a Management Plan.
- 8.2 The national trend in recent decades has been towards the statutory implementation of measures to maintain and enhance biodiversity as has been seen with protected species legislation and the 'Biodiversity Duty' for all public bodies. This would imply that the greatest financial risk to the Council would be the failure to address the management of biodiversity on Horton Country Park LNR today leading to greater costs in the future, trying to regain what will have been lost.

## **9 Conclusion and Recommendations**

- 9.1 In conclusion, the adoption of the new management plan would significantly assist this Council in meeting its responsibilities and contributes to a broad range of Council strategies. The management plan highlights the special nature of Horton Country Park LNR, and demonstrates this Council's ability to manage its countryside to a high standard.
- 9.2 Much has been achieved by Council staff and volunteers in protecting valuable habitats, improving access and interpreting the Country Park under the guidance of the 2006-2016 Management Plan. The progress of recent years can be maintained and built upon by the adoption of a successor management plan 2017-2117 to guide this Council's role in managing the site for good public access and nature conservation over the next century.

**WARD(S) AFFECTED: Ruxley Ward; Stamford Ward;**