

CORPORATE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 28 MARCH 2023

INCOME GENERATION AT THE COUNCIL'S COUNTRYSIDE SITES

Summary

1. The Panel has requested an update on Worcestershire County Council's income generation opportunities at countryside sites.
2. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities, the Assistant Director of Communities, and the Countryside Greenspace, Gypsy and Traveller Service and Road Safety Education Manager have been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on activity.

Background

3. The Countryside Service has a long history of generating income. However, over many years its sources of income generation have diversified significantly; it is nationally one of the leading Countryside Services in using its resources and assets to generate income so 100% of its delivery budget is funded through generated finance or grants.
4. Sources of income fall into the following categories:
 - Tenancies at different properties: e.g. country park cafes (Waseley Hills and Worcester Woods Country Parks), Ranger's House (Waseley Hills), office space (Waseley Hills), pub car park (Hartlebury Common).
 - Income from hiring space: e.g. meeting room hire (Waseley Hills and Worcester Woods Country Parks), outside space on sites e.g. use of BBQ and space for activities such as military fitness, dog training, charity stalls, garden and parking licences, grazing licences.
 - Car parking charges (Waseley Hills Country Park).
 - Agri-environment grants (Waseley Hills Country Park, Worcester Woods Country Park, Hartlebury Common, St Wulstan's Nature Reserve).
 - England Woodland Creation grants (New Farm).
 - Management fee for Worcester City owned area of Nunnery Wood.
 - Renewable energy: e.g. Renewable Heat Incentive from woodchip boiler (Worcester Woods Country Park).
 - Sale of wood products e.g. firewood, memorial benches, Forest School products.
 - Hosting fee for Malvern Hills AONB staff team.
 - Public Health Ring Fenced grant for managing countryside sites for health and wellbeing, volunteer opportunities and managing Worcestershire Health Walks programme.

- Contracted services: e.g. management of sites for others (Worcestershire Parkway, Hill and Moor landfill site), conservation contracts (woodland management work for Wychavon DC, biodiversity mitigation works for Highways capital schemes, Roadside Verge Nature Reserve scheme management).
 - Professional services: e.g. Natural Flood Management project funded by Environment Agency, HLF funded Three Counties Traditional Orchards Project.
5. Income streams within the service are kept under regular review and some potential income streams have been explored and subsequently not progressed, either because they have not been considered to be cost effective (e.g. car park charges at smaller, or more remote sites) take-up has been limited, or it would create other site management issues (e.g. mobile catering units at picnic places which create a litter and management burden).
 6. Many of the Council's countryside sites are not appropriate for hiring out to third parties for events or activities because they have sensitive habitats (such as meadows, woodland, heathland), are protected sites (e.g. a Site of Special Scientific Interest), have a lack of appropriate infrastructure or they are too small (the majority of picnic places).

Impact of Covid on Income Generation

7. Covid-19 had a significant impact on income generation for the Countryside Service particularly in the year 2020/21 where £98,500 income was lost across the service, mainly as a result of rent reduction, service charge reduction, reduced meeting room hire etc.

Income generation at Worcester Woods Country Park

8. Worcester Woods Country Park is a flagship site within the countryside sites portfolio in Worcestershire, with approximately 800,000 visits per year. It is not possible to accurately record the number of visits due to the permeability of the countryside sites with multiple accesses by foot.
9. The Country Park generates over £100,000 annually through meeting room hire, outside space hire, café rent and recharges, sale of wood products, renewable energy and income from managing other sites. This income is generated through the areas outlined below.
10. **Formal long-term hire of outside space:** An informal arrangement has been in place for a number of years with activities for young children (e.g. bouncy castle, crazy golf, miniature railway) being provided on the Events Field at the Country Park by an external provider who contributes a proportion of income to the Country Park. This arrangement is under review and the Countryside Service is currently advertising the opportunity for a new provider to create a new attraction in spring 2023.
11. **Regular and one-off hire of outside space:** Many different groups use the Country Park for a variety of reasons. Commercial enterprises such as dog training and fitness classes are charged a fee for their use of the site and individuals and

groups can hire the BBQ area. A craft and plant fair were trialled last summer on the events field and organisations such as Severn Arts and re-enactment groups have been keen to make use of the Country Park as a venue. Hire of outside space generates approximately £12,000 per annum.

12. **Meeting room hire:** The community meeting rooms at the Country Park have been very popular since they were developed 15 years ago and demand has always been high from community groups, private companies and the County Council, but this has been impacted by Covid due to many formal meetings and training now being delivered virtually. Increasing meeting room hire charges and developing another meeting room may well now not be cost effective, but the existing rooms have come back into regular use from businesses and charity organisations. Room hire will generate between £15-20,000 in 2022/23.
13. **Sale of wood products:** Managing woodlands in a sustainable way is important for wildlife, climate change and sustainability. The traditional coppicing at the Country Park and the thinning of the canopy trees creates wood products such as materials for Forest Schools, firewood and timber that the Team turns into memorial benches, bridges and other site furniture, allowing income to be generated from sales, or budget to be saved by not having to purchase these. This is worth approximately £6,000 per annum.
14. **Contracted Services:** The Team based at the Country Park also manages County Hall Lakes on behalf of the Council's, Property Services Dept and an area of Nunnery Wood that is owned by Worcester City Council. It also manages other areas of land on behalf of different organisations and carries out habitat creation and management works on a contracted basis, which in 2021/2 generated nearly £50,000 in income.
15. **Agri-environment Grant:** The Country Park receives a small grant from Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) for its sensitive management of the important habitats on site such as ancient woodland, hedgerows, traditional orchard and species rich meadows.
16. **Car Boot Sale:** For many years, until 2003, the County Council hosted a large car boot event at the Country Park. However, this was ceased due to concern from the police related to highway safety (inappropriate parking along the dual carriageway), concern from Trading Standards due to an inappropriate number of traders participating, and wear and tear on the site from large volumes of footfall and litter each week. Since that time, the team has diversified its income sources on site significantly, and a wider range of visitors and groups have been able to make use of the award-winning country park.

Future income opportunities

17. A future source of income for the Team could be available through new Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) that DEFRA will be rolling out in the next few years, which will replace the current agri-environment grants received.
18. In addition, the Environment Act brings in new Biodiversity Net Gain requirements for developers in the autumn of 2023, and the countryside sites have the potential to offer a 'habitat bank' to host biodiversity related projects that will require capital and

revenue funding from developers, providing an income to the team and the opportunity to enhance sites even further for biodiversity.

19. There may be further opportunities to build on the existing provision of contracted services, such as managing sites for external parties, delivering contracted services for others such as Highways and District Councils, and offering professional consultancy services if this does not impact on the core delivery of the team to manage its countryside sites to Green Flag standards.

Purpose of the Meeting

20. The Board is asked to:

- consider and comment on the Report about Income Generation at Councils Countryside sites; and
- determine whether any further information or scrutiny is required.

Specific Contact Points for this Report

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer, (in this case the Assistant Director for Legal and Governance) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

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