

From: Robert Thomas, Cabinet Member for Environment
Simon Jones, Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee – 14 January 2025

Subject: Kent Countryside Management Partnerships – Signing new Memorandum of Agreements and future funding

Key Decision: 24/00125

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of report: None

Future Pathway of report: Cabinet Member Decision

Electoral Division: All

Summary: Kent County Council relies on the skills, knowledge and volunteers that the Kent Countryside Management Partnerships (CMPs) provide in order to fully deliver our priorities under Framing Kent’s Future. The Memorandums of Agreement (MoA) are formal agreements for the partnerships that are required as part of their overall governance and are essential for them to be able to access external funding. They are time limited to allow for review and revision and now require resigning as they expire. The signing of the Memorandums of Agreement commits KCC to hosting arrangements and the provision of small revenue funding arrangements.

Recommendation(s): The Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse or make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Environment on the proposed decision to:

- Agree to the SIGNING of the two expired Kent Countryside Management Partnerships Memorandums of Agreement, and the signing of other Memorandums of Agreement when they expire;
- Agree continued HOSTING through the MoA for the four Countryside Management Partnerships;
- Agree to INCREASE annual contributions for the four hosted Countryside Management Partnerships in line with KCC's pay strategy annual pay award.
- Agree to INCREASE annual contributions for the Countryside Management Partnerships in line with inflation; and
- DELEGATE responsibility for the negotiation of any annual increase to contributions to the Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport as shown at Appendix A.

1. Introduction

1.1 Kent County Council depends on the skills, knowledge, and volunteers from the Kent Countryside Management Partnerships (CMPs) to achieve its goals under

Framing Kent's Future. The Memorandums of Agreement (MoA) are formal agreements that are necessary for the partnerships' governance and to secure external funding.

- 1.2 The Kent CMPs were established in the mid to late 1980s. Since then, there has always been an agreement between core partners. The current MoAs are the latest version of this ongoing agreement, which has been in place since the CMPs were formed. Previously, the Head of Service has signed these MoAs.

2. Key considerations

- 2.1 The key considerations are:
 - That the documents are current and appropriate for the nature of the Partnership and its resources.
 - That any financial risk is identified, and control mechanisms are in place to mitigate them.
 - That the documents allow for the County Council to exit their commitments without significant penalty.
 - That the financial contribution from KCC is agreed.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Countryside Management Partnerships (CMPs) were created through policies from the Countryside Commission/Agency between the 1970s and 1990s. While many CMPs across the country have been absorbed into local authority teams, Kent's seven CMPs have maintained their local identity while serving the entire county.
- 3.2 CMPs are dedicated to managing Kent's green and blue spaces. They have experienced staff, dedicated volunteer teams, tools and vehicles. They play a vital role in conserving the Kent countryside and coast and also provide valuable community services. They deliver community, education, health, habitat and biodiversity projects and collaborate with a wide range of public and private partners to achieve better outcomes, make best use of resources and access various funding sources.
- 3.3 CMPs also promote positive land management in line with the Kent Downs and High Weald National Landscape Management Plans, biodiversity net gain, Plan Bee, Plan Tree and KCC's Environment Plan.
- 3.4 Each CMP is hosted by a local authority; four are hosted by Kent County Council and, as such, are a valuable internal resource for the KCC Environment Group, wider KCC teams and KCC Partners. The four KCC hosted CMPs are:
 - Kent High Weald Countryside Partnership
 - Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership
 - Medway Valley Countryside Partnership
 - North West Kent Countryside Partnership.
- 3.5 Additionally, Dover District Council host two CMPS, Romney Marsh Countryside Partnership and White Cliffs Countryside Partnership. Medway Council hosts one CMP, the Medway Swale Estuary Partnership.

- 3.6 Each CMP operates as an independent non-profit organisation within their host authority's structure. Kent County Council provides a fixed amount of core funding to each CMP annually, which has not increased for several years despite inflation.
- 3.7 Each CMP's governance, partnership, and funding arrangements are detailed in their Memorandum of Agreement, which acts as their governing document. As partnership organisations, CMPs work towards their partners' strategic priorities and report to them according to individual agreements and Service Level Agreements. Kent County Council, as a host authority and core funder, significantly influences the work of CMPs, making them essential for achieving many of the council's environmental goals set out in **Framing Kent's Future**.

4. Options considered

1. **Do nothing:** Without the current Memorandums of Agreement (MoAs), CMPs will struggle to access some funding streams because grant-giving bodies require proof of governance arrangements. The MoA serves this purpose. Without it, their ability to generate income and fund staff and resources will be affected.
2. **Do not extend the agreements:** If the MoAs are not signed, an alternative method to continue the projects would be needed. This could involve Kent County Council (KCC) taking on the service, which would increase financial burden as a new team of KCC employees would need to be formed. This could impact the quality and quantity of work, cause delays, and potentially stop some projects altogether. It could also damage KCC's reputation.

5. Financial implications

- 5.1 The CMPs receive a small contribution from KCC but are required to generate sufficient income to cover all of their costs, capital and revenue as well as maintain adequate reserves. Income is generated from other partners, who may or may not be signatories to the MoA, grant giving bodies, donations and project delivery. CMPs also raise external funds as partner funding does not cover the full cost in contributions – see tables 1 and 2 below. The relationship between the CMPs and Medway Swale Estuary Partnership is project based

Table 1 – KCC annual financial contribution

CMP	KCC core contribution 24/25	% of turnover funded by KCC contribution in 23/24
Medway Valley	£9,300	3.6%
Kentish Stour	£12,000	1.4%
North West Kent	£11,400	2.7%
Kent High Weald	£11,900	3.6%
White Cliffs	£10,500	1.7%
Romney Marsh	£10,500	1.7%
Medway Swale Estuary	£0	0%

Table 2 – other organisations annual contributions

CMP	Other core partner annual contributions 23/24	23/24 turnover *inc reserves and rolled project funding
Medway Valley	Maidstone Borough Council and Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council - £12,000	£259,474
Kentish Stour	Canterbury City Council and Ashford Borough Council - £7,000	£850,417
North West Kent	Swale District Council and London Borough of Bexley - £29,850	£425,417
Kent High Weald	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council - £76,194	£329,101
White Cliffs & Romney Marsh	Dover District Council and Folkestone and Hythe District Council - £140,360	£631,575

- 5.2 In addition, the four KCC hosted CMPs receive KCC in kind contribution as staff are employed by KCC and they adhere to KCC financial regulations and policies.
- 5.3 For many years, the annual financial contribution has not kept up with inflation, causing the CMPs to receive less funding in real terms each year. For KCC-hosted CMPs, the staff are KCC employees and receive pay increases as determined by KCC. Each Partnership has had to cover these increased costs by reducing expenses or increasing income, which has put a significant strain on them. It is proposed that from 1st April 2025, the annual pay award increase be applied to the annual contribution, and the financial contribution in Table 1 be adjusted for inflation.
- 5.4 This decision supports **Securing Kent's Future** because the contribution is much less than it would be if KCC provided the service itself and had to fund the entire team. Having the MoA in place also opens up more funding opportunities for the CMPs, as formal governance is required for external funders. Securing external funding means KCC does not need to increase its contributions to the CMPs.
- 5.6 The MoA provides a governance structure with other core partners, enabling SLAs and securing external funding. This helps maintain the viability and sustainability of the Partnerships as a county-wide service that KCC can use to support key priorities.

6 Legal implications

- 6.1 KCC legal service has advised on the MoAs, ensuring they align with KCC's strategy, budget, insurance, and liabilities. The advice confirms that the documents are binding and enforceable where KCC is the host.
- 6.2 To manage risks in the MoA, the Head of Country Parks and Countryside Partnerships is part of the CMPs' Steering Groups, maintaining relationships with funders, managing resources, and ensuring the CMP's business plan aligns with KCC's objectives.

- 6.3 Financial risks are managed through KCC policies, maintaining reserves, appropriate staffing levels, and recruitment based on income and budget. The Head of Country Parks and Countryside Partnerships oversees funding agreements and external bids to ensure commitments are within the CMP's resources.
- 6.4 If KCC decides to withdraw from a CMP, there are several options:
- Maintain hosting but withdraw the annual financial contribution, with the option to give notice to withdraw funding.
 - Withdraw from hosting but maintain the financial contribution, seeking an alternative host body. If none is found, the CMP would cease, and staff would be at risk of redundancy, with normal KCC procedures applying and the CMP's reserve used to mitigate costs.
 - Withdraw both the financial contribution and hosting, with the same outcome if no alternative host body is identified.

7. Equalities implications

- 7.1 An EqIA has been undertaken. There are no negative implications in signing the MoAs and continuing the work of the Kent CMPs. There would be a negative impact if the MoAs were not maintained as this may cause the Partnerships not to be able to access funding to deliver projects to improve communities access to greenspaces, deliver inclusive events or wellbeing and educational projects.

8. Data protection implications

- 8.1 A DPIA screening was carried out. It concluded that a DPIA was not required.

9. Other corporate implications

- 9.1 The CMPs are a KCC delivery network that supports other areas of KCC, particularly within the Environment Group but also Public Health, Public Rights of Way and Education and Skills

10. Conclusions

- 10.1 The Kent CMPs offer a countywide service that runs various community, education, health, habitat, and biodiversity projects. They support KCC's goals and provide good value for money by getting a lot of their income from external sources and partners. The MoAs are crucial for their governance, showing the commitment of the organisations on the steering groups and securing core funding. These documents are also important for winning funding bids.
- 10.2 KCC is a key partner and leader in the CMP service. Keeping the MoAs in place helps gain support from local authorities and other key partners like the Environment Agency and the London Borough of Bexley.
- 10.3 KCC's financial support is essential for attracting additional funding to carry out projects and efficiently achieve KCC priorities like Plan Tree.

11. Recommendations

The Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse or make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Environment on the proposed decision to:

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12. Background documents

- *Equality Impact Assessment*
- *Data Protection Impact Assessment*

13. Appendices

- Appendix 1: Proposed Record of Decision
- Appendix 2: Equality Impact Assessment

14. Contact details

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