CABINET

COUNCILLOR MARTIN TENNANT
MAJOR PROJECTS AND PROPERTY
PORTFOLIO HOLDER

5 MARCH 2019

REPORT NO. EPSH1914

KEY DECISION: NO

SOUTHWOOD SANG

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

This paper seeks approval to enter into a collaborative agreement with the Environment Agency to carry out a feasibility study and as necessary, implement associated works to create a natural wetland habitat at Southwood Suitable Alternative Green Space (SANG).

The Cabinet is recommended to:

- agree that the Council should work with the Environment Agency to carry out a feasibility study with a view to creating a natural wetland habitat on part of Southwood SANG
- authorise the Corporate Manager - Legal Services to negotiate and enter into an agreement with the Environment Agency
- authorise the Head of Economy, Planning and Strategic Housing to agree the brief for the project, in consultation with the Major Projects and Property Portfolio Holder
- agree a £40,000 capital budget in 2019/20 for the feasibility study, to be funded by a contribution of £90,000 from Environment Agency towards the costs of the project and future developers' contributions.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. This paper provides details of a proposal from the Environment Agency to provide a funding contribution towards the creation of a natural wetland habitat at Southwood Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG). A feasibility study will be undertaken to assess what habitat creation and enhancement can be undertaken, This report will include consideration of the requirement to provide a 2.4km route that is dry all year and other requirements of the SANG.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. In December 2017, Cabinet resolved to close Southwood Golf Course, at the end of the currently contracted period, to provide SANG to mitigate the potential recreational impact of net new residential development on the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area.

2.2. However, in October 2018, the operators of the golf course, Mack Trading, went into voluntary liquidation, and ceased trading prior to the end of their contract. The golf course closed and the site has since transferred back to the Council.

2.3. Since then, officers have been working with Natural England to bring forward plans to convert the site to parkland and identify complementary additional uses for the site.

2.4. Plans to open the first phase of the site later in 2019 are underway, and proposals are now being developed for the longer term enhancement of the site.

3. DETAIL

3.1. Southwood Golf Course and Southwood woodlands are at the top of Cove Brook and contain the headwaters of the brook. The headwaters and associated streams have an extremely important role to play in the health of the river system throughout its length. Headwaters and their associated streams:-

- Make up 70% of the river systems in Britain;
- Provide important nursery sites for fish and invertebrates;
- Feed organic material into the river system including wood and invertebrates, which in turn provide food and habitats to support higher fauna reliant on the river;
- Retains water within the head of the stream to avoid flooding; the water is then slowly released as the river system requires it;
- Filters ground and surface water and improves water quality within the river system. Originally, the headwaters would have been wooded with similar habitats to those present within Southwood Woodland, however over time the trees have been felled. This would have depleted the ability of the headwaters to retain and cleanse water, limited the organic matter entering the system and the opportunities for nursery sites.

3.2 The construction of the golf course is likely to have affected the headwaters further. To create the fairways, the topography of the site appears to have been altered leading to pooling of water within the site. The changes in topography and hydrology, along with the canalising of Cove Brook, have resulted in water not being retained within the head but flowing quickly into the river system. It is understood that this may have contributed to flooding further downstream in periods of heavy rain.

3.2. The works undertaken on Cove brook and the surrounding golf course have also impacted on the headwater's ability to filter contaminants from the soil before release into the river system. This has led to the Water Framework Directive (WFD) status for the brook being of very poor quality with low invertebrate numbers, and therefore the lowest quality status under the WFD.

3.3. The Environment Agency is keen to work with the Council to restore the headwaters to their original state and establish floodplain habitat and backwaters to provide better flood protection and filtration and create a wetland habitat on the site by:

- naturalising Cove brook and increasing light levels within the channel to encourage marginal and bankside vegetation;
- Creating backwaters to provide refuges for wildlife;
- Naturalising the ditch network to provide streams and backwaters across the site;
- Restoring floodplain habitat;
- Providing scrapes and ponds to increase the variety and populations for wildlife present

3.4. A wetland habitat would improve water quality and provide flood alleviation while still maintaining dry useable areas and "circular" walks at all times of the year. This still provides the opportunity to increase the extent of tree coverage across the site.

3.5. Whilst the first phase of this work is to carry out a feasibility study on the site, the Environment Agency's preference is that the Council would go on to create a wetland habitat, should it prove feasible. However, should the Council decide not to proceed, the Environment Agency have indicated that the Council could withdraw from the project upon full repayment of the grant. Cabinet are therefore asked to agree that the Council enters into an agreement for the delivery of the whole project, should it prove feasible, and subject to it not resulting in a significant reduction in the amount of SANG available on the site.

3.6. Working with the Environment Agency presents a unique opportunity to consider the Southwood area holistically, and to restore the habitats and physical processes associated with the Cove Brook corridor to create a more resilient ecosystem for the benefit of people and wildlife. The Environment Agency also feels that the project may also contribute to improving flood risk along the Cove Brook corridor through Natural Flood Management.

3.7. The agreement with the Environment Agency will include a requirement for public consultation and engagement as part of developing the proposals for the site.

4. IMPLICATIONS

Risks

4.1. While the creation of a wetland has the potential to bring with it significant ecological benefits, Natural England has advised that were there to be permanent areas of significant standing water on the SANG, this would result in a reduction in the amount of land classed as SANG on the site. This risk can be mitigated by specifying that any proposals developed should not fetter

the Council's SANG capacity, and in any event, restoring the hydrology of the area is likely to reduce the extent of standing water. Moreover, the installation of boardwalks across the wetter areas of the site can ensure accessibility at all times, ensuring that they would not be discounted from the overall SANG capacity. During a meeting on the 19.2.2019 the EA advised that the work was likely to lead to less standing water rather than more.

4.2. The creation of a wetland is likely to involve substantial works on the site. It is possible that whilst the works are carried out, part of the site may be unavailable for SANG allocation. Whilst in principle, this has the potential to affect the ability to consent planning applications for delivery of net new residential development within the 5km catchment of the site, it is not considered that this is a high risk given the size of the SANG, the potential to plan the phasing of works, and the short term nature of the works, which will ensure the full capacity of the SANG is protected and realised.

Legal Implications

4.3. To deliver this project, the Council will enter into a collaborative agreement with the Environment Agency. The agreement identifies the Council as the Lead Partner and as such, the Council will be responsible for the management and delivery of the project. The agreement will ensure that adequate safeguards are included for the Council to ensure that the project does not affect SANG capacity.

Financial and Resource Implications

4.4. The financial implications are outlined in the table below:

	19/20 £	**20/21 £**
Delivery of feasibility and options appraisal report	25,000	
Reporting on outcome of consultation (both with Contributing Partner and Stakeholders)	5,000	
Production of detailed designs	10,000	
Construction		140,000
Project closure		500
TOTAL	**40,000**	**140,500**

The Environment Agency has indicated that it will contribute £90,000, which is 50% of the cost of the project, whilst the Council will be responsible for the other 50%, (£90,000). There could be risks that this project could lead to additional costs beyond the amount anticipated, however this will become clearer after the feasibility and design stage, providing opportunities to reduce the scope of the project if required. In addition, if the project proved feasible but the Council decide not to proceed, the grant of £90,000 from the Environment Agency would be repayable.

4.5. £20,000 of the Feasibility and Design cost will be met from the Environment Agency contribution. The remaining £20,000 will be recouped from future Developers contributions, however, until those funds are received the cost would initially be funded by borrowing which has an estimated revenue cost of

£1,000 per annum for Minimum Revenue Provision and Borrowing costs. The £1,000 per annum will also be funded from future Developers contributions.

4.6. The feasibility report and designs for the project, together with estimated costs, will be brought back to Cabinet for further consideration and approval of a capital budget. Costs of carrying out these works will be recoupable from Developers' Contributions.

4.7. On-going management, monitoring, financial and associated costs will also be met from Developers' Contributions.

4.8. As the lead partner for the project, the Council will be required to allocate internal resources to the management and delivery of the project. It is felt that these can be met from within the existing project team established to deliver the Southwood project.

Equalities Impact Implications

4.9. There are no additional equalities impact implications arising from this report.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. This proposal presents a unique opportunity to work with the expertise of the Environment Agency to restore the habitats and physical processes associated with the Cove Brook corridor, creating a more resilient ecosystem for the benefit of people and wildlife.

5.2. By partnering with the Environment Agency, there is an opportunity to consider the enhancement of the Southwood area holistically by bringing the Cove Brook and associated wetland/floodplain features in to the project. Working in this way will not only ensure that the water quality is improved, but will help to secure multifaceted benefits including natural flood management and nature based recreation, all of which will add to the quality and diversity of the SANG offer in Rushmoor Borough.

Background documents:
Cabinet report – Southwood Golf Course 12 December 2017

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