

CABINET MEETING – 22 MARCH 2022 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SHEET – PART I	
Title of Report:	Link Together Project
Author(s):	Executive Director of City Development
Purpose of Report:	This report seeks approval for delivery, subject to a successful outcome to the external grant application, of the Link Together project (“the Project”) in partnership with Durham Wildlife Trust and the Wear Rivers Trust.
Description of Decision:	<p>Cabinet is recommended to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Subject to the award of the relevant external funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), authorise the Executive Director of City Development, in consultation with the Executive Director of Corporate Services and the Leader and Portfolio Holder for Dynamic City, to take all necessary steps to deliver the Project, including to agree and enter into Funding Agreements with the NLHF and a Partnership Agreement with Durham Wildlife Trust (DWT) and the Wear Rivers Trust (WRT) in respect of the Project; and (ii) Approve the proposed funding arrangements for the delivery of the Project as set out in this report (subject to the award of the relevant external funding) and approve the resultant variation to the Capital Programme.
Is the decision consistent with the Budget/Policy Framework?	Yes
If not, Council approval is required to change the Budget/Policy Framework	
Suggested reason(s) for Decision:	<p>Funding for delivery of the Link Together Project has been sought in partnership with DWT and the WRT from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) through a competitive bidding process. Subject to the award of the relevant external funding, the Project will deliver a range of significant greenspace improvements across communities in the Coalfield area of the city with associated engagement activity. Whilst some level of greenspace improvements would still be delivered in isolation through funding received via Section 106 Agreements, the scale and scope of the works would be significantly reduced without the external grant from the NLHF.</p>

Alternative options to be considered and recommended to be rejected:

The alternative option would be to not progress the Project. However, the opportunity to secure substantial external funding to deliver significant greenspace improvements in the Coalfield area (and the resulting benefits as set out in this report) would be lost.

Impacts analysed:

Equality Privacy Sustainability Crime and Disorder

Is the Decision consistent with the Council's co-operative values? Yes

Is this a "Key Decision" as defined in the Constitution? Yes

Is it included in the 28 day Notice of Decisions? Yes

LINK TOGETHER PROJECT

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CITY DEVELOPMENT

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report seeks approval for delivery, subject to a successful outcome to the external grant application, of the Link Together project ("the Project") in partnership with Durham Wildlife Trust and the Wear Rivers Trust.

2.0 Description of Decision

- 2.1 Cabinet is recommended to:

- i) Subject to the award of the relevant external funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (HF), authorise the Executive Director of City Development, in consultation with the Executive Director of Corporate Services and the Leader and Portfolio Holder for Dynamic City, to take all necessary steps to deliver the Project, including to agree and enter into Funding Agreements with the HF and a Partnership Agreement with the Durham Wildlife Trust (DWT) and the Wear Rivers Trust (WRT) in respect of the Project; and
- ii) Approve the proposed funding arrangements for delivery of the Project as set out in this report (subject to the award of the relevant external funding) and approve the resultant variation to the Capital Programme.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 The Council has been successful in recent years in securing significant levels of external funding to deliver priority activities and projects that support the objectives of the City Plan.
- 3.2 Access to good quality accessible greenspaces is important to local residents and their value and profile has been raised significantly during the Covid 19 pandemic. Whilst there is a good network of greenspaces within the city, it is recognised that the quality and accessibility of many of these greenspaces could be improved. In addition to the benefits such improvements can generate for local residents, improving greenspaces can also have the dual benefit of improving habitats for a range of species.
- 3.3 As part of the planning process, the Council has been successful in obtaining contributions from relevant developers under Section 106 Agreements towards greenspace and biodiversity enhancements in relation to a number of developments across the city, including development within the Coalfield area. The Council is required to identify opportunities on an ongoing basis to deliver the enhancements that Section 106 contributions are collected to facilitate.

- 3.4 The Heritage Fund is administered by the National Lottery and provides grant funding to conserve the UK's diverse heritage, to encourage people to be involved in heritage and to widen access and learning. Whilst traditionally the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) has focussed upon the built environment, there has now become an increasing focus on the natural environment for a variety of reasons.
- 3.5 In order for NLHF bids to be considered, the applicant needs to provide at least 10% match funding, however the greater contribution of match funding that can be provided is understood to increase the likelihood of a successful bid given it is a competitive process. Applications are progressed through an initial Expression of Interest followed, if successful, by a Stage 1 (Development) and then Stage 2 (Delivery) phase bids.
- 3.6 Over recent months DWT has been in discussion with the Council to consider development of a funding bid to the NLHF to facilitate improvements to the green infrastructure network throughout the Coalfield area. The proposals have been developed with the Coalfield Area Neighbourhood and Community Board, and the Coalfield Area Committee.

4.0 Current Position

- 4.0 An Expression of Interest application for the Link Together Project was submitted to the NLHF by DWT with the agreement of the Council in July 2021. Following notification of the successful outcome to the Expression of Interest, development work on the Project has progressed.
- 4.1 If successful, the Project will deliver green infrastructure and wildlife improvements to 13 Council-owned sites in the Coalfield area. The sites cover all wards within the Coalfield area ensuring that the project will be of benefit to all of the Coalfield communities. Improvements to green infrastructure provided as part of the proposals will include improvements to natural grassland, woodland, hedgerow and wetland areas, removal of invasive species, flood storage and stream naturalisation features as well as creation of wildlife stepping-stones and improved site access points and signposting.
- 4.2 DWT will coordinate the development and delivery phases of the project (Stages 1 and 2 respectively) and coordinate volunteering opportunities alongside the Council to ensure that the Coalfield communities including young people are fully engaged.
- 4.3 The Wear Rivers Trust will also be a key partner, providing expertise relating to riparian habitat. In addition, the GP Alliance will be a key partner, offering social prescribing opportunities that are linked to the 5 steps to Well Being Framework, which can be built into the delivery of the project. Additional support is also to be provided by partners including Northumbrian Water, the Environment Agency, Natural England and the Wear Catchment Partnership as well as local community groups working closely with colleagues across the Council as appropriate.

- 4.4 A Stage 1 bid for the Project was subsequently submitted to the NLHF in November 2021 to seek to secure the grant funding required for the development phase. It is anticipated that the bid will be considered at its next committee meeting on 17 March 2022 and a decision will be issued shortly afterwards. A further application will be made in due course for the delivery phase (Stage 2).
- 4.5 Existing Section 106 funding has been identified by the Council which could be spent through the Project, which would be in alignment with the purposes for which they have been collected. By utilising these funds as match funding as part of a wider NLHF bid as proposed, this increases the scope and scale of the benefits that can be delivered compared with spending the Section 106 funding in isolation.
- 4.6 Further, following discussion at the Community & Neighbourhood Board in July and Area Committee in September 2021, the Coalfield Area Committee has agreed to contribute £200,000 as match funding across the lifetime of the bid to be split across the development (Stage 1) and delivery phases (Stage 2).
- 4.7 In order to ensure that commencement of the development phase of the bid is not delayed, in the event that the NLHF grant is approved in March, Cabinet approval is being sought for the proposed funding and delivery arrangements, subject to the award of the relevant external funding from the NLHF.

5.0 Funding

- 5.1 The Project will be delivered over two phases. The total cost of the Project (across the initial development stage and subsequent delivery stage) is anticipated to be £1,961,125, with £1,005,382 being sought from the NLHF. The match funding is proposed to be from Section 106 funds (£605,742), the Coalfield Neighbourhood Fund (£200,000) and the North East Community Forest (£70,000). In addition, volunteer in-kind support across the two phases is estimated at £80,000.
- 5.2 The development phase (Stage 1) bid total is £174,303, of which £149,303 is being sought from the NLHF with a match funding contribution of £20,000 from the Coalfield Neighbourhood Fund (included within the overall £200,000 set out in para 5.1 above). The balance of £5,000 to deliver the development phase relates to in-kind volunteer support from partners.
- 5.3 The final figures to be included in the delivery phase (Stage 2) bid are expected to be £1,786,822 with £605,742 from Section 106 funds, £180,000 from Coalfield Neighbourhood Fund and £70,000 from the North East Community Fund together with £75,000 of volunteer in-kind support. The final figures will be confirmed during the development phase prior to the Stage 2 bid submission.
- 5.4 The Section 106 funding identified for the Project is subject to existing legal agreements and the Council is already in receipt of the majority of these Section 106 funds. Agreement has also been secured for the contributions from the Coalfield Area Committee (subject to the successful outcome of the NLHF grant funding application) and the North East Community Forest.

6.0 Reason for Decision

- 6.1 Funding for delivery of the Link Together Project has been sought in partnership with DWT and the WRT from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (HF) through a competitive bidding process. Subject to the award of the relevant external funding, the Project will deliver a range of significant greenspace improvements across communities in the Coalfield area of the city with associated engagement activity. Whilst some level of greenspace improvements would still be delivered in isolation through funding received via Section 106 Agreements, the scale and scope of the works would be significantly reduced without the external grant from the HF.

7.0 Alternative Options

- 7.1 The alternative option would be to not progress the Project. However, the opportunity to secure substantial external funding to deliver significant greenspace improvements in the Coalfield area (and the resulting benefits as set out in this report) would be lost.

8.0 Relevant Considerations

- 8.1 **Financial Implications** - The cost and funding implications are set out above. It is proposed the Council will provide match funding of £605,742 Section 106 contributions, £200,000 from the Coalfield Neighbourhood Fund and £70,000 from the North East Community Forest Fund should the bid be successful, primarily to support the Stage 2 Capital works.

In accordance with the Council's Financial Procedure Rules, the Cabinet may authorise variations to the Capital Programme provided such variations are within available resources and consistent with Council policy. It is proposed that Cabinet authorise the proposed variation.

- 8.2 **Legal Implications** - The proposals in this report are subject to the award of the necessary external funding from the HF. Subject to the approval of the current funding application, the Council would enter into a funding agreement with the HF and a partnership agreement (which will incorporate the relevant funding terms from the HF) with the DWT and WRT as the delivery partners. This will ensure that the delivery partners comply with all of the HF's funding conditions.
- 8.3 **Equalities Analysis** - An Equality Analysis has been undertaken in connection with the Project, within the context that the detail of the Delivery Phase (Stage Two) of the Project will be worked up during the initial Development Phase (Stage One). A copy is enclosed in Appendix A. In summary, the findings of the EIA are that there will be no known negative equalities impacts as a result of the Project and that there is the potential for positive impact in relation to age and disability in terms of increased access to opportunities. The EIA will be reviewed and updated as the detail of the Delivery Phase is developed and as engagement activity with partners is progressed.

8.4 Health Outcomes and Health Inequalities - Engagement with the GP Alliance is expected to identify social prescribing opportunities linked to the 5 steps to Well Being Framework that will be built into the Delivery Phase (Stage Two) of the Project. The extent of the positive impact which can be generated through the Project will be considered more fully during the Development Phase (Stage One) as engagement activity with partners is progressed, including identification of appropriate means to evaluate the impact of the Project on health and wellbeing on individual participants and more broadly within the coalfield communities where possible. It is however anticipated that insights from Project data and engagement activity, and associated improvements in access to greenspaces, should support improved health and reduced health inequalities

8.5 Policy Implications - The Project will make a strong contribution to delivery of improvements to the green infrastructure network which is in alignment with the Council's Green Infrastructure Strategy and Action Plan which forms part of the Core Strategy & Development Plan and supports delivery of the city's Low Carbon Framework.

9.0 Background Papers

None

