

Individual Executive Decision Notice

Report title	Heritage Lottery Fund Development Phase Approvals 2024-2026	
Decision designation	GREEN	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Craig Collingwood Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change Councillor Louise Miles Cabinet Member for Resources	
Wards affected	All Wards	
Accountable Director	John Roseblade, Director of Residents Services James Howse, Director of Finance David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer	
Originating service	External Funding and Digital Projects	
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Report to be/has been considered by	Residents Services Leadership Team	19 February 2024

Summary

To provide an overview of the successful Heritage Lottery Fund funded project Explore, Enhance, Protect and Promote Smestow Valley Nature Reserve project and approve entering into the grant funding agreement for the development phase between 2024-2026 and to establish supplementary revenue budgets.

Recommendation(s) for decision:

That the Cabinet Member for Resources and the Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change, in consultation with the Director of Finance and the Director of Residents Services and the Chief Operating Officer approve:

1. The acceptance of the grant allocation of £184,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the development phase of the project Explore, Enhance, Protect and Promote Smestow Valley Nature Reserve.

2. To enter into an 18-month grant funding agreement with The Heritage Lottery Fund as the funding body for the development phase.
3. The establishment and spend of supplementary revenue in line with the funding agreement.
4. Payment of grants and fees as required for delivery of activity.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The National Lottery Grants for Heritage offers grants between £250,000 to £5million for projects that connect people and communities to the national, regional and local heritage of the UK. Priorities are to fund heritage projects that: promote inclusion and involve a wider range of people, boost the local economy, encourage skills development and job creation, support wellbeing, create better places to live, work and visit and improve the resilience of organisations working in heritage.
- 1.2 An Expression of Interest was submitted for Explore, Enhance, Protect and Promote Smestow Valley Nature Reserve in February 2023. City of Wolverhampton Council were then invited to submit a full bid which was submitted in August 2023. In December 2023 we were advised that the bid for the development phase had been successful.
- 1.3 The constitution allows the Cabinet Member for Resources and relevant Cabinet Member in consultation with Director of Finance and Monitoring Officer to approve where new or additional external income identified not included in the approved budgets, where income has conditions constraining its possible range of uses and with agreement from the Section 151 officer.
- 1.4 Applications to the Heritage Lottery Fund go through two phases: a development phase of up to two years, enabling applicants to work on their project proposal, and a delivery phase of no more than five years. We are seeking approval to enter into an 18-month funding agreement with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for the development phase and set up supplementary revenue budgets. During that time, an application will be made to The Heritage Lottery Fund for the delivery phase which we plan to last for 2 years.

2.0 Explore, Enhance, Protect and Promote Smestow Valley Nature Reserve

- 2.1 Smestow Valley Local Nature Reserve (SVLNR) is a unique natural and historical site in the West side of Wolverhampton which forms part of the UNESCO Black Country Geopark. It follows the natural valley of Smestow Brook which it shares with the Staffordshire and Worcester Canal forming a wildlife corridor nearly 4.5km long connecting the National Cycle Route 81 which runs to Aberystwyth to the canal network providing a high-quality environment for pedestrians, cyclists and offering excellent opportunities for leisure, wellbeing and tourism.
- 2.2 With over 51 hectares of woodland, scrubland and meadows, the reserve is rich in wildlife. SVLNR has a unique place in the city and the regions industrial heritage. It links the canal network and railway line which both marked a new era of inland transport systems. Remnants of the railway can be found throughout SVLNR, and the old railway

station is now a vintage tearoom ‘Cupcake Lane’ and popular meeting place. The historic local landmark Meccano bridge once carried the railway line across the canal and now carries the main path. The canal towpath and former railway line create two circular walks in a figure of 8 loop across SVLNR with Meccano Bridge sitting at the apex linking Castlecroft and Compton Park in the South with Aldersley and Newbridge in the North.

2.3 Despite the wealth of natural and built heritage, SVLNR is not well known locally or regionally as a site of significant heritage. It is well used but many more people living in the vicinity could be encouraged to explore the site and learn more about its treasures. This project will Enhance and Protect the industrial and natural heritage of SVLNR and Explore and Promote SVLNR to a wider audience. We will:

- 1) Increase accessibility onto and throughout SVLNR including paths and access points making them inviting and welcoming.
- 2) Restore, highlight and promote the built heritage including the landmark Meccano bridge and the platform at cupcake lane.
- 3) Improve the natural heritage of SVLNR enhancing the canal corridor to protect and expand resilient habitats increasing biodiversity and climate resilience.
- 4) Create signage / wayfinding to promote routes and highlight heritage features improving the visitor experience. Increase engagement through heritage focussed community events and volunteering.
- 5) Provide opportunities to train staff and volunteers.

2.4 The table below sets out the budget for the development phase of Explore, Enhance, Protect and Promote Smestow Valley Nature Reserve.

Table 1: HLF Delivery Phase 2024-2026	2024-2026 £000s
Staffing Costs, Project Manager (G7), Conservation Officer (G5)	104
Professional Fees, Surveys, Opening Up Costs, Subscriptions	80
Total Costs	184
Match – staff match, volunteering	33
TOTAL	217

2.5 As part of the development stage, a bid worth £1.94 million will be submitted for the costs of the Delivery Phase which will take place throughout 2025-2027. The estimated capital and revenue breakdown is outlined below:

Delivery Phase	2026-2028 £000s
Revenue / Activity Costs	307
Capital Costs	1,495
Revenue Other costs	147
TOTAL	1,949

- 2.6 £200,000 UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UK SPF) was allocated as match for the Heritage Lottery Fund but did not fit the timescales for the delivery phase. The projects will be delivered alongside the development phase of the bid to Explore, Enhance, Protect and Promote Smestow Valley Nature Reserve to test approaches to engagement and volunteering. This has previously been approved and includes:
- A. A grant to Canal and River Trust of £160,000 for tow path improvements to improve accessibility and coir roll to improve biodiversity, on the basis that the Canal and River Trust own and control the canal.
 - B. A grant of £12,500 to Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust to deliver three elements reinstating ponds, meadow creation and hedgerow restoration and creation.
 - C. A grant to Wildside Activity Centre who will work with the Friends of Smestow Valley to deliver a community orchard and woodland management and planting.
- 2.7 The majority of the grant will be spent on materials with recipients providing technical expertise and overseeing volunteer participation.
- 2.8 The Council will seek to identify approximately £161,000 match funding for the delivery phase if successful. Land fill tax operator have been identified as potential source of match funding to increase improvements in biodiversity within SVLNR.

3.0 Evaluation of alternative options

- 3.1 Option One - Do nothing: by not entering into a grant funding agreement for the development phase of the Heritage Lottery Bid, £218,000 will be lost to the city, negatively impacting on our ability to draw down a further £1.9 million funding for the delivery phase of the project. It will impact on our ability to address key local priorities to achieve a vibrant, green city that we can all be proud of as described in Our City: Our Plan. It will impact on our ability to ensure SVLNR is accessible for residents and caters for the needs of our diverse communities enabling residents to live longer, healthier and more active lives.
- 3.2 Without the funding outlined in the delivery phase of the bid, City of Wolverhampton Council will have to find alternative funding to pay for the refurbishment of the heritage features including Meccano Bridge which is estimated to be in the region of £896,000. The city will also miss the opportunity to draw down £524,000 for improvements to accessibility to the nature reserve and the opportunity to work in partnership with the Canal and River Trust, Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust and local groups such as Wildside Activity Centre, Friend of Smestow and Gatis Street Community Centre to engage with and promote the Nature Reserve to our residents.
- 3.3 Option Two - Explore, Enhance, Protect and Promote Smestow Valley Nature Reserve: enter into year 18-month funding agreement with HLF to provide funding to engage with a wider range of people and work up submission for the delivery phase of the Heritage

Lottery Bid and achieve local priorities and delivery priorities set out in the SVLNR Management Plan.

4.0 Reasons for decision

4.1 Option Two is recommended in order to use funding from HLF to support local priorities and ensure there is an opportunity to secure funding for the delivery phase of the HLF fund and maximise other funding opportunities.

5.0 Financial implications

5.1 This report seeks approval for a supplementary revenue budget for the development phase subject to a signed grant agreement. Heritage Lottery Funding will fund the project manager and conservation officer, professional fees and surveys. The council is providing match funding through existing staff time within existing budgets, volunteer time and section 106 funding. The revenue costs associated with this development phase are set out in the table below:

Development Phase	2024/2025 £000s	2025/2026 £000s	TOTAL £000s
Staffing Costs, Project Manager (G7) Conservation Officer (G5)	69	35	104
Professional Fees, Surveys, Opening Up Costs, Subscriptions	53	27	80
Total Costs	122	62	184
Match – staff match, volunteering	22	11	33
TOTAL	144	73	217

5.2 To minimise the risk of any underspend, we will employ a dedicated Project manager with experience of delivering external funded projects and maximising spend.

5.3 Upon completion of this phase further approvals will be sought to advance the scheme to the next stage. [SB/21022023/D]

6.0 Legal implications

6.1 The Council will enter into a Grant Funding Agreement with the Heritage Lottery Fund which outlines the project, profile of spend, outputs and outcomes and also sets out rules and regulations that must be complied with.

[SZ/29022024/P]

7.0 Equalities implications

7.1 Explore, Enhance, Protect and Promote Smestow Valley Local Nature Reserve (SVLNR) has positive equalities implications since its primary outcome is to promote inclusion and involve a wider range of people in SVLNR and its heritage.

8.0 Environmental implications

8.1 There are no direct environmental implications arising from this report. In the development phase experts will carry out surveys to ascertain the potential impact of works planned for the delivery phase as the focus of Explore, Enhance, Protect and Promote Smestow Valley Local Nature Reserve is about improving the environment of Smestow Valley Local Nature Reserve.

9.0 Human resources implications

9.1 There are two posts that would be employed by City of Wolverhampton Council for the duration of the development and delivery phase; 0.6FTE project manager grade 7 and a 1.0FTE SVLNR Conservation Officer grade 5. These posts will be managed by the External Funding Team Manager and the SRO, the Parks, Landscape and Countryside Manager.

10.0 Corporate landlord implications

10.1 There are no direct Corporate Landlord implications arising from this report.

11.0 Schedule of background papers