

APPLICATION C

Proposal	Darent Valley Path Enhancements
Applicant	Kent Downs AONB Unit
Ward(s)	Brasted, Chevening & Sundridge Dunton Green & Riverhead Eynsford Farningham, Horton Kirby & South Darenth Otford & Shoreham Sevenoaks Northern Westerham & Crockham Hill

RECOMMENDATION: That the £255,230.00 funding applied for, as set out in the report, for scheme “Darent Valley Path Enhancements” be approved on the following grounds:

- Strong economic, social and environmental benefits to the community;
- Partnership working with other organisations;
- Majority of project cost secured through different match-funding sources.

Introduction

- 1 The Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Unit is employed by Kent County Council. Working on behalf of the Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory Committee, the Unit is a strategic body that works with partners to achieve the conservation and enhancement of the Kent Downs AONB. The main body of work conducted by the Kent Downs AONB Unit is the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan, as well as being a consultee for planning applications and for the Local Plan.
- 2 The application for CIL funding was received by Officers on 01.12.2017.

Description of Proposal

- 3 The proposed scheme looks to improve the standard of the Darent Valley Path (DVP) by creating an integrated sustainable transport corridor through the Darent Valley. This would provide a viable alternative to car journeys for both visitors and residents. The project will make further provision for cyclists to use the path or an alternative parallel route, as well as enhancing routes to local train stations to encourage sustainable travel. Improvements to wayfinding and signage are also proposed.

- 4 Further work will be considered to improve and update interpretation along the route by providing better understanding of the heritage features of the Valley. The proposals will be extended to Westerham and Chipstead to enhance the DVP. Additional work for enhancement, signing and interpretation for circular routes will also be undertaken under the scheme.
- 5 The proposal, which runs along the entire area of the Darent Valley, covers a substantial area of the District which involves 7 Wards.
- 6 It is anticipated that the project would be completed by July 2022. The project has identified as part of a number of strategies, including:
 - Sevenoaks District Council Local Plan;
 - Kent Downs AONB Management Plan 2014-2019;
 - Local Transport Plan 4: Delivering Growth within Gridlock 2016-2031;
 - Sevenoaks District Strategy for Transport 2010-2026;
 - Sevenoaks District Community Plan;
 - Kent Active Travel Strategy;
 - Kent Countryside Access Improvement Plan; and
 - Kent Downs AONB Unit (Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme) Landscape Conservation Action Plan

Funding

- 7 The Kent Downs AONB Unit estimates that the total cost of the DVP Enhancement project is £405,460.00.
- 8 The Unit has identified a number of additional funding sources and grants to support their application to the Board:
 - Heritage Lottery Fund: £112,130.00
 - Kent Wildlife Trust (Member donations): £38,100.00
- 9 To support the Heritage Lottery Fund bid, a number of town and parish councils committed to the DVP. The total amount of funding committed at the time was £19,000.00 from four parish/town councils. In the application to the CIL Board, it is unclear whether this funding is still committed.
- 10 To meet the funding gap for the full cost of the project, the Kent Downs AONB Unit has applied to the Board for £255,230.00 of CIL funding.

Representations and Support

11 The application states a number of organisations that the AONB Unit are working in partnership to deliver the scheme:

- Heritage Lottery Fund
- Ashmolean Museum
- Connect Plus / Highways England
- Darent Valley Parish Councils
- Environment Agency
- Kent County Council - County Parks & Countryside
- Kent County Council - Heritage
- Explore Kent
- Kent Wildlife Trust
- National Farmers Union
- Southeastern Trains
- Sevenoaks District Council
- Wide Horizons; and
- Dartford Borough Council

12 The application is supported by the following local representatives and organisations:

- Cllr. Philip McGarvey (SDC Member for Farningham, Horton Kirby & South Darent)
- Cllr. Ingrid Tennessee (SDC Member for Farningham, Horton Kirby & South Darent)
- Cllr. Diana Esler (SDC Member for Westerham & Crockham Hill)
- Cllr. Michelle Lowe (SDC Member for Otford & Shoreham)
- Horton Kirby & South Darent Parish Council
- Westerham Town Council
- Eynsford Parish Council
- Farningham Parish Council

Lead Officers Appraisal of Bid

Principal Criteria met

- Strong economic, social and environmental benefits to the community;
- Partnership working with other organisations;
- Majority of project cost secured through different match-funding sources.
- Local support from the community

Strong economic, social and environmental benefits to the community

- 13 One of the key criteria for the assessment of bids is that proposals should demonstrate the economic, social and environmental benefits of the scheme. This includes whether there are significant benefits for the economy, community and social impacts and how the proposal benefits the environment and mitigates any impacts.
- 14 The Darent Valley is one of the District's main tourist attractions in itself as well as containing a number of other visitor destinations (i.e. Eynsford Castle, Lullingstone Villa). The area is heavily dependent on rural tourism, as a number of visitors come from London, Dartford, Gravesham and other surrounding area. The application looks at the economic case for the DVP enhancements, by providing better access and enhancing better transport improvements to tourism and business. It could increase the value of the rural economy as well as providing further opportunities for employment.
- 15 One of the main potential benefits is the creation of better linkages between the villages and towns along the DVP, to provide more opportunities for sustainable transport modes. Congestion and increases in traffic flows create concerns that the increasing number of journeys made by private vehicles will impact and degrade the quality of the Kent Downs. By providing better opportunities for sustainable transport (i.e. walking and cycling) the DVP enhancements could reduce the number of vehicles travelling along the Darent Valley, provide better benefits for health and wellbeing for residents and visitor through walking and cycling, and provide better linkages to other tourist attractions along the Darent Valley.
- 16 The culmination of these economic and social benefits could provide significant environmental impacts. The opportunities for active travel (i.e. cycling and walking) created with the potential of reducing car journeys would improve air quality along the Darent Valley corridor. With improved air quality, other improved environmental enhancements can be considered such as increased awareness/education of the landscape and its character, the conservation of important biodiversity and significant historical characteristics/features of the Valley.
- 17 The need for the scheme is clearly demonstrated and it is clear that there are significant economic, social and environmental benefits which not only

benefit local communities along the Darent Valley, but provides clear District-wide benefits as a result.

Partnership working with other organisations

- 18 Another key criterion for assessing the application is determining how the project will be delivered and whether any additional partners are included in the project delivery.
- 19 It has been clearly demonstrated that the application made by the Kent Downs AONB Unit has a number of partners which are involved in the delivery of the scheme, with the AONB Unit taking the lead in delivery and management of the scheme. Organisations that are included in the delivery of the scheme include environmental and heritage groups, transport providers, the County Council and local government authorities.

Majority of project cost secured through match-funding

- 20 The Council has determined that the purpose of CIL funding is to be a “top-up”, to be used in meeting any funding deficiencies or gaps in order to deliver the project. This funding should only be used for “capital” investment, as opposed to being used for “revenue” spend.
- 21 The application made clearly demonstrates that additional funding sources have been sought and secured for the project. This includes a secured grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, as well as contributions from scheme partners, member donations from member organisations, as well as commitments from town and parish councils.
- 22 It should be noted that the applicant has not sought any additional CIL funding from the appropriate town/parish councils (i.e. Westerham, Brasted, Chevening, Sundridge, Sevenoaks Town, Riverhead, Dunton Green, Otford, Shoreham, Eynsford, Farningham, Horton Kirby & South Darent) to help fund the scheme.

Local support from the community

- 23 The purpose of CIL is to support the delivery of local or strategic infrastructure to meet the pressures of development. An additional criterion that the applications were assessed against is to whether there is local support.
- 24 It is evidenced through the application that a number of local town and parish councils have offered their support to the project through the Heritage Lottery Fund bid, including some financial contributions to aid the delivery of the proposal. In addition, it is documented that a number of local Members across the Darent Valley have also voiced their support.
- 25 Finally, the scheme has been identified in a number of established plans and strategies at local and regional levels (outlined in paragraph 6).

Other considerations

Planning Permission

- 26 The assessment criteria states that preference of CIL funding will be given to those which have permissions or consents in place before funding is given. The Kent Downs AONB Unit has confirmed that while planning permission would be required for some aspects of the scheme, no planning permission has been sought yet. Due to the recent approval of the Heritage Lottery Fund bid, it hasn't been possible for the Kent Downs AONB Unit to apply for the necessary permissions. The applicant has stated that any final designs and plans are currently being worked up and these will inform whether any necessary planning permissions are required.
- 27 The proposal is a significant strategic scheme which covers a wide area of the District. It is also noted that the project will be completed within the next five years (July 2022). It is recognised that, depending on the final design enhancements, there may be some works which require permission or could be carried out under permissive powers. This is dependent on the type of work that is required and the organisation which carries out the works.
- 28 On weighing the evidence submitted in the application, I consider that this is a strategic project which offers a number of benefits for the District and local communities along the Darent Valley. If CIL funding was to be withheld before the project before planning permissions are in place, there is a potential risk that any secured funding could be lost.

Management of the Proposal

- 29 The Kent Downs AONB Unit is employed by Kent County Council, who work on behalf of the Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory Committee. As such, the ongoing maintenance of the DVP will continue to be provided by Kent County Council. The Unit has also confirmed that there will be ongoing funding from Kent County Council for the maintenance of the DVP but the value of this has not been confirmed.

Conclusion

- 30 The DVP enhancement along the Darent Valley is considered as a strategic project, as it covers a number of parishes. The economic, social and environmental benefits add weight to the needs of the project. The proposal has some match funding and has significant support of locally elected Members and a number of parish councils.
- 31 Therefore, the recommendation made is that the Board consider fully funding the request made by the applicant for £255,230.00.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Applicant's original pro-forma

Background Papers

The Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme

