

Proposal: Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve redevelopment project

Applicant(s): Kent Wildlife Trust

Ward(s): Sevenoaks Northern

RECOMMENDATION: That the **£250,000** applied for, as set out in the report, for the scheme “Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve redevelopment project” be approved on the following grounds:

Principal criteria met:

- Strong social, economic and environmental benefits to the community;
- Strong link between new development and the scheme;
- Good partnership working;
- Significant public benefit;
- Clear evidence to show that the scheme will be delivered;
- Strong local support;
- The scheme contributes towards the Council’s commitment to tackling climate change.

Introduction

- 1 CIL funding is sought to improve the visitor facilities and safeguard biodiversity at Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve.
- 2 The application was received before the application deadline closed on 15 September 2023. This proposal has not been previously considered by the CIL Spending Board.

Description of Proposal

- 3 The proposal sets out a number of improvements to be made at Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve, including refurbishing the visitor centre to provide a new café, retail and event spaces, improved toilets, an outdoor seating area, play area, resurfaced car park with increased capacity and upgraded interpretation. It is also proposed to safeguard biodiversity through installing a new security fence and zoning, to minimise wildlife disturbance and balance visitor presence.
- 4 Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve is a nationally important nature reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), with over 2,000 species recorded and attracting

around 50,000 visitors per year. The current facilities are approximately 35 years old, tired and in need of updating. Improved visitor facilities will increase visitor numbers whilst protecting the wildlife that inhabits the site, and re-establish the site as a quality destination for the local community and wider public.

Funding

- 5 The applicant, Kent Wildlife Trust, estimates that the total cost of the project is £1,500,000.
- 6 To date, no other funding sources have been secured to fund the proposed improvements, however a large range of funding opportunities are being explored, including:
 - £50,000 – Bernard Sunley Charitable Foundation
 - £20,000 – Tarmac Landfill Communities Fund
 - Banister Charitable Trust
 - Individual donors / high net worth individuals
 - Corporate, public, community and digital fundraising
- 7 Therefore, to meet the funding gap for the full cost of the project, the applicants have applied to the Board for £250,000 of CIL funding. This equates to 17% of the total project cost.

Representations and Support

- 8 The application submitted indicates that the applicants are working in partnership with Sevenoaks District Council to deliver the scheme, as the proposed improved visitor facilities at Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve will also benefit visitors to Bradbourne Lakes.
- 9 It is indicated that during earlier consultation on the project in 2021, support was given by Cllr McArthur and former Cllr Fleming, and by Sevenoaks Town Council. However the application itself is not supported by any letters of support.

Officer's Appraisal of Bid

- 10 Assessment criteria met:
 - Strong social, economic and environmental benefits to the community;
 - Strong link between new development and the scheme;
 - Good partnership working;
 - The scheme is identified in an adopted strategy or plan;
 - Significant public benefit;
 - Clear evidence to show that the scheme will be delivered;
 - Strong local support;

- The scheme contributes towards the Council's commitment to tackling climate change.

11 Assessment criteria not met:

- Funding not maximised from other sources.

Appraisal of strongly performing criteria

Strong social, economic and environmental benefits to the community

- 12 When considering an application for CIL funding it must be demonstrated that the project would deliver clear social, economic and environmental benefits. This is crucial to the sustainability of the scheme and a key consideration in determining whether the project should be awarded CIL funding overall.
- 13 The project would see major upgrade works to the visitor facilities available at Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve. It is understood that the current facilities are 35 years old and of sub-standard condition, with limited toilet facilities, poor lighting, unsuitable heating and limited catering. Further, the current walking trails around the site are not accessible to all and access to the site is poor particularly for groups arriving by coach. The project would see a significant improvement in the quantity and quality of the visitor facilities, as well as measures to safeguard wildlife for future generations. It is considered that the improvements will benefit the local community and wider public.
- 14 The applicants have set out that the visitor infrastructure at Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve is in need of improving so that current and future visitors can be adequately catered for. The reserve is a much-loved local green space for nature lovers, walkers, birdwatchers, families and school groups, and the improvements will help revitalise the biodiversity, cultural and community offering. It is considered that the social benefits are significant, through providing better physical access to the site and the delivery of education programmes and community engagement activities in the proposed event spaces. The health and social benefits of providing high quality publicly available open space are well documented and can have a positive impact on people's lives. Further to this, it is noted that the northern Sevenoaks area is densely populated with some pockets of deprivation and potential for regeneration, which has been identified in the Sevenoaks Town Neighbourhood Plan. It is considered that the proposed improvements to Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve, particularly in respect of the improved access and visitor facilities, will positively contribute towards the health and wellbeing of the local community and wider public.
- 15 Turning to the economic benefits, it is clear that the project will support local tourism. Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve is identified in the District Council's Economic Needs Study (2022) as a wildlife and environment tourism resource, recognising that such a destination is a key driver for visitors, with outdoor activities being highly rated as visitors seek immersive experiences. The

applicant indicates that the café and retail space will focus on local suppliers and produce through the creation of a local and sustainably produced procurement policy and will therefore support the local economy and local enterprise.

- 16 As set out in paragraph 4 above, Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve is a nationally important nature reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It is clear that the project has been carefully planned and developed to ensure that the impact of visitors is mitigated and reduced where possible, through the biodiversity enhancements proposed, to help nature flourish in the longer term. It is understood that this will be done through installing security fencing to prevent unofficial access, which will reduce the disturbance to breeding birds and other sensitive wildlife and habitats. Zoning of the reserve, including the creation of accessible trails and signage, will help to manage and direct footfall relieving pressure in sensitive habitat areas. It is considered that these environmental benefits are significant.

Strong link between new development and the scheme

- 17 Northern Sevenoaks is a focus for development in the Sevenoaks Town Neighbourhood Plan and in the emerging Local Plan, including the large scale redevelopment of the Sevenoaks Quarry. The project provides for both existing and future residents therefore future proofing the reserve for years to come.

Good partnership working

- 18 The applicant is working in partnership with Sevenoaks District Council to deliver the project, showing a good example of partnership working.

The scheme is identified in an adopted strategy or plan

- 19 The project is not identified in either the Council's Infrastructure Delivery Plan or Infrastructure Funding Statement. However it is noted that CIL may be spent on projects outside of these plans.
- 20 The Core Strategy (2011), the District Council's adopted Local Plan, recognises the importance of enhancing biodiversity. Policy SP11 sets out that 'opportunities will be sought for the enhancement of biodiversity through the creation, protection, enhancement, extension and management of sites and through the maintenance and, where possible, enhancement of a green infrastructure network to improve connectivity between habitats'.
- 21 The Sevenoaks Town Neighbourhood Plan 2020-38 sets out an objective to 'protect, improve and enhance access to existing publicly accessible open spaces and create new publicly accessible open spaces and green infrastructure', and specifically identifies an aim to 'work with and support Kent Wildlife Trust to enhance access to the Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve and improve on-site facilities'. It is considered that the application therefore meets this requirement.

Significant public benefit

- 22 As set out in paragraphs 13-16 above, the proposed improvements to the visitor facilities and enhancements to biodiversity at Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve would provide significantly improved facilities to those that currently exist, and help to re-establish the site as a quality destination for the local community and wider public. It is considered that the improved visitor facilities will increase local tourism, giving people the opportunity to engage with nature, inspire and promote learning, and bring enjoyment and significant health and wellbeing benefits. There is no doubt that the site, once improved, will have a significantly positive impact within the local community, and is highly likely to attract visitors in groups and from further afield. As such, it is considered that the public benefit of this project is significant.

Clear evidence to show that the scheme will be delivered

- 23 The land is owned by Tarmac Aggregates Ltd and managed by Kent Wildlife Trust, the applicant, on a 99 year lease which runs to 2113. The applicant states that the landowner is supportive of the proposed improvements. The applicant is therefore in a good position to see the project delivered and has the legal right to do so.
- 24 The applicant has committed to keeping the District Council updated with progress on a quarterly basis and has set out clear timescales for the delivery of the project. Planning permission for the project was granted in July 2022. Additional consents are required including a bat licence and roman snail licence, both of which have been applied for through Natural England. The project is estimated to take 12 months and is planned for early 2024, subject to achieving funding. It is therefore considered that clear evidence has been submitted to show that the scheme will be delivered.

Strong local support

- 25 It is understood from the application form that the project has been in development since 2012 and the local community were consulted in 2016 via a survey, which identified that visitors felt that the café and toilet facilities should be improved. A public consultation was undertaken in 2021 which engaged with specific stakeholders including local MPs, Sevenoaks District Council, Sevenoaks Town Council and local parish councils, Natural England, the Environment Agency, local residents and site users.
- 26 It is therefore considered that the project has strong local support.

The scheme contributes towards the Council's commitment to tackling climate change

- 27 As set out in paragraph 16 above, the project proposes a number of biodiversity enhancements, to safeguard the wildlife and habitats that currently exist on the site and to protect them from the human impacts of tourism. The project also seeks to be environmentally friendly through the introduction of green energy, through the use of solar panels and EV charging points in the visitor car park. The District Council is committed to tackling the challenge of climate change,

particularly in relation to the emissions of the District, and it is considered that this is an important consideration in determining whether the project should be awarded CIL funding.

Other considerations

CIL exemptions

- 28 The applicant has confirmed that they have not previously benefitted from a CIL exemption for the project. In accordance with the CIL Charging Schedule, CIL is chargeable on the following developments: residential, supermarkets and superstores and retail warehousing. The proposed works would not fall within these remits and as such would not be subject to a CIL charge.
- 29 It is therefore considered that there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the applicant has not previously, and would not, benefit from a CIL exemption for the project.

Appraisal of weakly performing criteria

Funding not maximised from other sources

- 30 It is considered that the proposal does not perform as strongly against this criteria. The applicant estimates that the total cost of the project is £1,500,000, and has applied to the Board for £250,000 of CIL funding. This equates to 17% of the total project cost.
- 31 The applicant has indicated that they are exploring a large range of funding opportunities to contribute towards the cost of the project, including from charitable trusts and foundations, the Tarmac Landfill Communities Fund, individual donors and high net worth individuals and fundraising. It is however noted that none of these funding opportunities are secure.
- 32 In these circumstances members of the Board may wish to consider adding a condition to ensure that funding to cover the full cost of the project is secured before any CIL funding is released.

Conclusion

- 33 Kent Wildlife Trust (the applicant) has submitted an application for CIL funding to improve the visitor facilities and safeguard biodiversity at Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve.
- 34 The need for the project has been clearly demonstrated as the existing facilities are in poor condition and the site is unable to adequately accommodate future visitors without negatively impacting on biodiversity. The project will bring significant social, economic and environmental benefits to the local area with wide public benefit, re-establishing itself as a quality destination for the local community and wider public. The project has been identified in the Sevenoaks

Town Neighbourhood Plan 2020-38 and benefits from local support. It is noted that the applicant is asking for 17% of the total project cost, and has not benefited from CIL funding previously.

- 35 After reviewing the application and supporting evidence, it is recommended by Officers that £250,000 of CIL funding be awarded to support the delivery of the project, subject to a condition that ensures that funding for the full cost of the project is secured before the CIL funding is released. It is considered that the scheme provides significant public benefit and represents good value for money, therefore demonstrating appropriate use of CIL funds.

Appendices

Applicant's original bid pro-forma and supporting information

Background Papers

None

Contact Officer(s): Emma Henshall Ext. 7358; Carlyn Kan Ext. 7246

Richard Morris

Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer for Planning & Regulatory Services