



CABINET – 23RD NOVEMBER 2018

**IMPROVING CONNECTIVITY WITHIN WATERMEAD COUNTRY
PARKS – NEW FOOTBRIDGE AND CYCLEWAY**

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES

PART A

Purpose of the Report

1. This report sets out a proposal for a new footbridge and cycleway across the River Soar near Thurmaston to improve connections within Watermead Country Parks, and seeks approval to progress the project and for the County Council to contribute funding towards the footbridge and associated paths which would be built in partnership with Leicester City Council. It should be noted that there are two Watermead Country Parks, the northern park is in the ownership of the County Council and the southern is owned by the City Council.
2. The report also highlights the ongoing partnership work between Leicester City and Leicestershire County Councils to maintain and develop Watermead Country Parks as a safe and welcome visitor attraction.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended:-
 - a) That £750,000 is allocated for the construction of the footbridge and associated footpaths and cycleway at Watermead Parks identified on the plan appended to this report subject to the City Council agreeing to contribute the equivalent amount;
 - b) That the Director of Corporate Resources in consultation with the Director of Law and Governance is authorised to take all necessary steps to progress the project including leading on the procurement for the scheme and establishing joint programme arrangements with Leicester City Council;
 - c) That the continued partnership working between both Councils be welcomed and supported.

Reason for Recommendations

4. To improve connectivity within Watermead Country Parks and to promote, maintain and enhance the Parks as a visitor attraction.

Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)

5. It is expected that the Leicester City Mayor will also make a decision with respect to funding of the scheme and joint working on 23rd November.
6. Subject to approval by the Cabinet and the City Mayor and the necessary agreements being reached with other parties, it is intended that work on the new footbridge would commence in the spring of 2019 at the earliest. It is expected that it would take around 12 months to complete the work; the nature of the terrain means that it is unlikely that much work will advance during the winter months.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

7. The proposed improvements align with the ambitions in the County Council's Strategic Plan to enhance the quality of life throughout Leicestershire, working in partnership with others.
8. The enhancement to the cycling and footpath provision along the river and canal corridor between the city centre and Birstall, Thurmaston, and Syston will encourage more environmentally sustainable transport, as set out in the Council's Environment Strategy.

Resource Implications

9. Considerable exploratory work has already been undertaken by both councils and a feasibility study was commissioned by the City Council to explore the practicality of constructing the footbridge. The work undertaken indicates that construction of the bridge and associated footpaths will cost around £2m, including the relevant licences and agreements.
10. The City Mayor has agreed that a budget of £500,000 could be made available from the approved Local Growth Fund programme from the River Soar Grand Union Canal Access project. This has already been the subject of a key decision by the City Mayor on 13th July 2018 and is approved funding as part of a wider programme of work which the City Council is delivering with partners from the Environment Agency and the Canal and River Trust.
11. There is therefore a remaining balance of the £1.5m, which will be split equally between the County and City Councils. A decision by the City Mayor will be required for approval of the remaining £750,000 and this decision will also be made by 23rd November. Funding for the County Council element of the project has already been earmarked within the Authority's "Future Developments Fund" and can be drawn upon when required.
12. As the bridge would be adopted by the County Council once built, a provision will be made within the overall budget towards the future maintenance arrangements and this would be agreed by the City and County Councils towards the end of the programme.

Circulation under Local Issues Alert Procedure

13. A copy of this report has been circulated to Mr. I. Bentley CC (Birstall), Mr. T. Barkley CC (Syston Ridgeway) and Mrs B. Seaton CC (Thurmaston Ridgemere).

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PART B

Background

14. Watermead Parks are two attractive open spaces that contain a network of lakes, woodlands and nature reserves between the valley of the River Soar and the Old Grand Union Canal. The parks and facilities link the Leicester city centre to the north of the city and to Birstall, Thurmaston, Syston, and Cossington. The parks are popular and valued by local residents and visitors to the area.
15. Leicester City and Leicestershire County Councils have been working collaboratively since 2016, with officers meeting regularly to discuss the parks' management. In recent months new joint branding and signage bearing the logos of both councils has been erected.
16. Due to the financial difficulties experienced by local authorities in recent years, the quality and provision of parks facilities has declined in many areas across the country. Whilst there are well established existing systems in place to manage Watermead Parks, the City Mayor and Leader of the County Council are keen to see greater benefits achieved through co-production.
17. The vision over the next five years is for the two Councils to work together to attract more visitors and maintain, enhance and develop the parks as a high quality, accessible space for residents and visitors now and for the future. There is also an opportunity to improve the cycling and footpath provision along the river and canal corridor between the city centre and communities to the north, which was originally established with the help of "Big Lottery" funding received in 2008 and used over the subsequent years.

Proposal

18. A key challenge for connectivity between the North and South Parks is the lack of a central crossing, hence the proposal for a new bridge across the River Soar. This would both improve access to the parks for pedestrians and cyclists and provide a more direct link route into central Leicester for communities to the north.
19. The development of a bridge and improvements to the pathways will enable greater connectivity, enhance walking and cycling travel options, and will improve access to open spaces.
20. Increasing the levels of physical activity for all is a public health priority for both County and City Councils. Promoting and facilitating physical activity through active travel can make a significant positive contribution to both people's physical and mental health, and steps to reduce reliance on vehicle transport (e.g. to schools and workplaces) can help to improve air quality.

Exploratory Work

21. Officers began exploratory work in the autumn of 2017 (as a joint City-County project). It was decided that, given the various constraints of the site, the location shown on the appended plan, to the north of the Bridge Business Park, represented the most feasible option.
22. The land to the south of site of the proposed bridge is privately owned, and initial dialogue has taken place with the landowner regarding the principle of a new footpath route and bridge across their land. The landowner has indicated that they would agree to the work being progressed subject to satisfactory terms being agreed.
23. Any associated costs that the landowner incurs will be paid for from the programme budget, and the landowner has indicated that there may also be a cost for surrender of a portion of their land to support the project and help develop the area. Any further costs associated with the dedication of third party land are yet to be confirmed.
24. In the meantime, an officer working group has been exploring the concept and practical issues relating to buildability and construction access have also been considered, to provide a high-level cost estimate and understanding of risks, particularly around the ground conditions and flooding.
25. Additional ground investigation works have been undertaken (in August 2018) on either side of the river at the proposed bridge location. The detailed report is expected shortly, but initial findings indicate that suitable ground is available at reasonable depth, thus enabling the bridge to be founded on piles. This removes a significant element of building risk.

Proposed Next Steps

26. Once funding is secured from both councils the next steps would be to commence a procurement exercise for a contractor and also to appoint a project manager. A planning application will also be required from the County Council.
27. Initial conversations have taken place with the Environment Agency and the Canal and River Trust, which also own land which may be affected by the construction of the bridge, and further discussions are planned. County Council and City Council officers will also commence dialogue with the appointed solicitors of the landowner.
28. Subject to the necessary agreements being obtained, it is intended that the County Council would initiate a procurement exercise and establish joint programme arrangements with the City Council to progress the project and manage risks and resources.

Equality and Human Rights Implications

29. An Equalities and Human Resources Impact assessment will be carried out. However an initial pre-assessment is that the bridge and improved paths will have a positive impact in improving accessibility.

Environmental Implications

30. The construction of the bridge is expected to have minor negative environmental implications and should ultimately result in positive environmental implications for the parks. However, there is a plan to carry out a series of ecological studies prior to and during construction.

Risk Assessments

31. The main risk to this programme is that both councils will require the consent of the landowners to construct the bridge on their land. As indicated above, positive dialogue is taking place.

Background Papers

None.

Appendix

Plan showing proposed new bridge and footpath links, Watermead Country Parks