

REPORT TO: Executive Board Sub-Committee

DATE: 9th September 2010

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Environment and Economy

SUBJECT: Potential project for European LIFE funding

WARDS: Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 A call for funding applications by the European Union was announced during May 2010 under the LIFE+ Nature and Biodiversity heading. Some initial preparatory work through a partnership approach identified a potential project addressing the long term management of the Upper Mersey Estuary using an ecosystem services approach. This has resonance with the Mersey Gateway environmental mitigation scheme and with other environmental initiatives connected to the estuary. As the submission date for the application occurred between Executive Board Sub-committee meetings, a briefing note was circulated to the chair and vice-chair of the Sub-committee in early August. This report details the progress that has been made to date since then and seeks approval to proceed with developing the application.

2.0 RECOMMENDED: That

- (1) Members approve the partnership approach taken to progress a LIFE funding application for the long term management of the Upper Mersey Estuary.**
- (2) Officer time within Environment & Economy continues to develop the concept and to secure external funding sources to potentially draw down 500,000 €.**
- (3) The Strategic Director, Environment and Economy, be authorised to take all the necessary actions to progress the preparatory work into a successful application.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 LIFE+ Nature and Biodiversity is a European funding programme aimed at delivering the requirements of the Habitats Directive designed to halt the loss of biodiversity in the member states. As such, it is quite a specific source of funding with very specific guidelines. However, previous work on the Mersey Estuary for the Mersey Gateway public inquiry and the Biodiversity seminar in December 2009; the current Artery of Life project; ongoing research work with the University of

Salford and Wild About Halton projects has given a head start in drawing up a proposal.

- 3.2 The proposal is for a demonstration project to develop an ecosystem services approach to the long term management of the Upper Mersey Estuary (UME), with a number of conservation actions on the ground, including an improvement to 171 hectares of saltmarsh and reedbed. The chosen location is highly suited to the LIFE criteria, as it is adjacent to the already European-designated Mersey Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA) and links the urban centres of Warrington, Widnes and Runcorn. There are significant pressures on the UME including climate change, flooding and population growth, and the need for conservation as part of the North West Inland Fisheries Conservation Authority (NW IFCA) which comes into being from April 2011. As such, the area could be managed to provide significant ecosystem services and benefits in terms of biodiversity, carbon storage, sea defence, flood protection, leisure, recreation and tourism. These issues bring in other interested parties and an initial partnership has emerged including the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Warrington Borough Council and Cheshire Wildlife Trust. There is also scope to bring in private landowners who own large areas of land in the project area, such as Fiddlers Ferry, INEOS and Peel Holdings.
- 3.3 The vision is to facilitate the creation of a biodiverse rich area and demonstrate how such management delivers enhanced ecosystem services above the current baseline. A map of the proposed area is in Appendix 1.
- 3.4 The proposal offers a number of advantages:
 - a. If the LIFE+ bid is successful, up to 50% of funding will come from Europe and will bring in at least 500,000 €.
 - b. It is attractive to a number of strategic policy areas for Halton and for Warrington, at national, regional and local level
 - c. It can be an aid to the developing Mersey Gateway environmental mitigation work and its links to wider environmental regeneration initiatives in the estuary
 - d. Supports the objectives of the NW IFCA as referred to above. It is important to be aware that the area could change radically in the future as a result of trends of climate change and increased flooding leaving a gap in fisheries and environmental management in this area
- 3.5 It is proposed to submit an application by 1st September in order to get feedback on the work carried out so far, and to help address the issue of providing a suitable level of match funding. To date, the match funding elements come from partner contributions in kind, such as officer time from the Mersey Gateway team to deliver the saltmarsh environmental mitigation scheme. Any shortfall in this approach will be sought from

external sources: it is likely an application will be made to the Heritage Lottery Fund as the concept of ecosystem services fits in well with the criteria for their biodiversity grant stream and with the promotion of 2010 as International Year of Biodiversity.

Development of the Project

- 3.6 The ecosystem services approach to management is being championed by DEFRA and Natural England, and contact has been made with these agencies. Halton also has an established academic base to the concept through our current work with the University of Salford, and through the PhD saltmarsh management research project for the Mersey Gateway on Widnes Warth.
- 3.7 The partnership to develop this LIFE bid includes the University of Salford, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, The Mersey Forest, Cheshire Wildlife Trust and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH). Warrington Borough Council are also a partner but were unable to be present at the first two meetings. The Environment Agency, North Western Sea Fisheries Committee and Mersey Forest are not to be beneficiary partners but are interested in the project and have offered to provide a letters of support.
- 3.8 The concept fits in well with the approach taken to the Mersey Gateway mitigation scheme, by providing a defining framework for the specific Biodiversity Management Plan which the Concessionaire has to deliver. The Mersey Gateway Environmental Trust, currently in the process of registration with Companies House, could also have a part to play as a key long term delivery mechanism to initiate, develop, and monitor science based research projects in conjunction with academic institutions over a 25 – 30 year period.
- 3.9 To date, the officer time within the Mersey Gateway team spent on developing the concept has been complementary to the Mersey Gateway environmental mitigation package.

Financial Implications/ Submission deadline

- 3.10 The technical side of the application has been prepared in conjunction with External Funding, European and Regional Affairs who have used their expertise to develop the financial package of capital and in-kind contributions. National support in submitting the application is provided to all applicants by a consultancy, Beta Technology.
- 3.11 A pragmatic view has been taken on the funding package required for the tight September 1st submission deadline. Two partner meetings took place in July, followed by one in August and it was agreed to proceed to the submission stage while acknowledging there is still work to be done on finding match funding contributions. If the application is

not successful, it will still automatically generate feedback for use in any future submissions or in the event that alternative sources of funding may be more fruitful.

- 3.12 It is known that some potential applications from elsewhere are unlikely to be submitted in September due to the loss of match funding commitments from bodies such as Regional Development Agencies. It is thought that any application that can put together a secure financial package is likely to have less than normal competition.
- 3.13 An update on the 1st September submission or otherwise will be verbally reported at the Sub-Committee meeting.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Mersey Gateway project is a key priority for the Council, which will deliver benefits locally and across the wider region.
- 4.2 The demonstration project will also progress Halton's commitment to landscape-scale improvements to the Mersey Estuary, using ecological rather than administrative boundaries, as in the case of the Mersey Gateway Environmental Trust.
- 4.3 The Artery of Life project, which began in 2009 is scheduled to be completed in 2013. This proposed LIFE project will provide a continuation of this important work to reconnect people back to nature using the estuary as our greatest natural asset.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act places greater responsibility upon public sector bodies to consider biodiversity in the work they do.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

- 6.1 **Children and Young People in Halton.** There will be opportunities under the cultural ecosystem service to contribute to Key Objective E: To ensure that all children and young people in Halton have positive futures after school by embracing life-long learning, employment opportunities and enjoying a positive standard of living.
- 6.2 **Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton.** There will be an indirect contribution through training and vocational opportunities through Key Objective B: To develop a culture where learning is valued and to raise skill levels throughout the adult population and in the local workforce.

- 6.3 **A Healthy Halton.** There will be opportunities for biodiversity activities to contribute to Key Objective C: To promote a healthy living environment and lifestyles to protect the health of the public, sustain individual good health and well-being, and help prevent and efficiently manage illness.
- 6.4 **A Safer Halton.** There will be opportunities to contribute to Key Objective C: To create and sustain better neighbourhoods that are well designed, well built, well maintained, safe and valued by the people who live in them, reflecting the priorities of residents.
- 6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal.** There will be opportunities to contribute to Key Objective E To enhance, promote and celebrate the quality of the built and natural environment in Halton. The long term management of the estuary can further improve the Borough's image. In particular, in Area of Focus 12, examples of future planned activity include "Creating local nature reserves and wild spaces that support the Council's efforts to deliver urban renewal and a better quality of life in Halton." The Mersey Gateway nature reserve will be a main delivery mechanism for this Area of Focus.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

- 7.1 If all the match funding elements cannot be secured, the application will be rejected. A follow-up call for a further round of LIFE applications is expected in May 2011 and a re-submission would give more time to both develop the concept and to put together a sound financial package, by which the decision on the Mersey Gateway by the Secretary of State will be announced.
- 7.2 There is no immediate effect on the delivery of front line services: this is a demonstration project with long term benefits.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

- 8.1 Biodiversity initiatives provide an opportunity to improve accessibility to services, education and employment for all.

9.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

None under the meaning of the Act.

APPENDIX 1

LOCATION OF PROJECT AREA

