

SUBJECT:	Colne Valley Partnership and Groundwork Thames Valley funding
REPORT OF:	Officer Management Team - Director of Services Prepared by - Head of Environment

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To update Members about the Colne Valley Park and the Council's funding to the Colne Valley Park Partnership and Groundwork Thames Valley.

2. Links to Council Policy Objectives

- 2.1 The Partnership and Groundwork currently assist with the following Council Aims:
- ❖ Plan for a thriving and sustainable District, which protects the Green Belt and promotes appropriate development consistent with keeping the character and space for everyone to enjoy.
 - ❖ Endeavour to make our environment measurably cleaner, healthier and managed in a way to preserve it for future generations.
 - ❖ Work with partners to improve the provision of and access for all to the right services, suitable housing and other amenities.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Colne Valley Regional Park (CVRP) was established in 1965. It covers an area of 43 square miles covering parts of 10 local authorities. It provides the first significant area of countryside to the west of London and is regionally important for recreation and internationally important for wildlife. Large areas are open to the public and accessible through a network of paths. The Park provides an area of great natural beauty around the south western boundary of London.
- 3.2 South Bucks is one of the major beneficiaries of the Colne Valley Park (CVP) - 41% of the CVP is located within South Bucks (the largest part of the Colne Valley), the vast majority of CVP projects are undertaken in South Bucks District.
- 3.3 32% of South Bucks is within the CVP (the largest percentage of all the local authorities) - this is the part of the district closest to the urban edge and the greenbelt here is most under threat from dereliction, decline of agriculture and development.
- 3.4 The Key Aims of the CVP are:
1. To maintain and enhance the landscape, historic environment and waterscape of the Park in terms of their scenic and conservation value and their overall amenity.
 2. To resist urbanisation of the Colne Valley Park and to safeguard existing areas of countryside from inappropriate development.
 3. To conserve the biodiversity resources of the Park through the protection and management of its diverse plant and animal species, habitats and geological features.
 4. To provide opportunities for countryside recreation including appropriate accessible facilities.

5. To achieve a vibrant and sustainable rural economy, including farming and forestry, underpinning the value of the countryside.

- 3.5 South Bucks DC has been a member of the Colne Valley Partnership throughout its history. The Council contributes an annual Levy towards the Partnership which stands at £4,838 at 2011/12 figures. The total annual levy from all the partners is approximately £44,000.
- 3.6 Other partners to the Partnership are local authorities whose boundaries cross the Regional Park. The contributions are based on a formula which takes into account the area that each LA has in the CVP and the population within a certain distance of the Park which might be expected to visit it. The continuance of core funding through the Colne Valley Levy is important if opportunities to deliver projects in the Colne Valley Park are to be continually realised.
- 3.7 The Colne Valley Partnership levy contributes towards the running of the CVRP, marketing and publicity, and the Colne Valley Park Visitor Centre in Denham. The CVP has an agreement with GTV for it to undertake works on its behalf, including running the CVP centre.
- 3.8 Groundwork Thames Valley was founded in 1988. Groundwork is the main body for developing and implementing Colne Valley projects. Groundwork employs several staff to work on Colne Valley projects such as Landscape Architecture, Community Development, Education and Marketing.
- 3.9 South Bucks District Council has been providing core funding since 1988 which helps to meet the costs of the above. South Bucks DC has also been providing project funding for annual improvement projects within the Colne Valley Park since 1992. The South Bucks projects contribute to the Colne Valley Regional Park Action Plan (currently 2009 - 12) and Annual Review.
- 3.10 The amounts concerned (at 11/12 figures) are as set out below:
- | | |
|----------------------------|--------|
| Groundwork Core Funding | £7,470 |
| Groundwork Project funding | £8,450 |
- 3.11 The core funding is paid towards the general service that Groundwork provides. This contributes to running costs and enables project staff to develop new projects and investigate funding sources. This is then matched by government funding via Groundwork UK. Core funding from SBDC is also multiplied many times by the amount of project funding brought into the district by Groundwork. Without Core Funding Groundwork resources would be reduced and it would be unlikely to be able to develop projects for the District Council or seek other funding towards them.
- 3.12 The project funding is used to fund the implementation of environmental improvement projects themselves. As a charity, Groundwork also brings in match funding for projects which is not normally available to Local Authorities. In total Groundwork brings in external funding to deliver approx. £400,000 of projects/year, although not all of this is in South Bucks. Throughout the implementation of the last action plan from 2006 - 09, £1.25 million worth of projects were delivered within the Colne Valley Park, a ten-fold increase on the Levy from the Local Authority members of the Partnership.

- 3.13 At a meeting of the Environment PAG in October 2010, the Portfolio Holder agreed to continue funding for 2011/12 and to look further at the potential to use the Capital Community Development Grant for 2012/13 onwards for projects and also to discuss further with the Colne Valley Park (CVP) and Groundwork Thames Valley (GTV) the potential for future efficiencies and reduction in future contributions.

“After considering all the information available the PAG agreed to advise the Portfolio Holder to continue funding for 2011/12 and to look further at the potential to use the Capital Community Development Grant fund for 2012/13 onwards for projects and also to discuss further with CVP/GWT the potential for future efficiencies and reduction in future contributions.”

4. Proposal/Discussion

Colne Valley Park Partnership Core funding

- 4.1 Following discussions with the CVP it is clear that they are experiencing financial pressures, with some authorities ceasing to provide core funding. Accordingly, the CVP is exploring a wide ranging change in its modus operandi with the possibility of becoming either a Charity or a Community Interest Company; operating in a much more entrepreneurial way and opening itself up to encourage the private sector to play a role in it, particularly to offset the reducing income from Local Authorities. Accordingly it is looking at a number of matters as part of this, including a change to the Aims of the Partnership and measures to make it ‘fit for purpose’ and sustainable in the light of changing circumstances being faced by the Partners. These proposed changes will be discussed at a meeting of the Colne Valley Partnership in October 2011 and a provisional new structure agreed in December 2011.
- 4.2 Members have previously shown support for the CVP core funding. SBDC, with much of its district within the CVP, receives the most benefit from the CVP and stands to lose the most should funding be reduced. Currently, the CVP core funding for 2012/13 and beyond has been identified as a saving to the Council. (SBDC Cabinet on 8th February 2011.) Members are asked to reconsider this and advise whether the core funding should in fact be cut, or whether the contribution should be maintained at current levels, with a slight increase for inflation, for the next three years.

The current Colne Valley Park Core Funding is £4,838

- 4.3 Alternatively, Members may wish to re-phase the proposed cut to 2013/14 and thus allow the new charity/community interest company to be set up in the interim. Also, Members might like to consider pump priming any new charity with a one off capital payment in lieu of further revenue payments, say a one off payment of £40,000. This £40K one off sum should only be offered if and when the Charity/Community Interest Company is set up, rather than if the CV Partnership continued to operate in its current form. The reasoning for this is that if the CVP partnership continued in its current form, it is possible that other Local Authorities may withdraw funding to the extent that the CVP Partnership would have to be wound up, and in such circumstances the £40K would have no long term benefit.

- 4.4 In addition, the CVP has requested that its member authorities explore the following:

To establish whether there is any potential for increasing Park owned/controlled income-generating assets. At present, the only income that is derived in this way is the surplus generated by Groundwork (assisted by the Friends of the CVP) from the Colne Valley Park visitor centre - circa £8.5k anticipated in 2011/12. It has asked Local Authorities to undertake an assessment of the assets and/or income derived from them (in terms of land, property, facilities (including car parks and agricultural estate), which it would be prepared to either:-

- Gift sites to the new Park organization (potentially in lieu of future financial contributions - i.e. the Levy funding that the Council pays to the Partnership each year.)
- As above, giving the new organization 'first refusal' on the potential to purchase.
- It has identified the most obvious ones for LAs to look at as being:-
 - Car Park charges (at least share) - on the basis that without the park activities, the income wouldn't be generated (this refers mainly to income from BCC car parks at the Country Parks);
 - Via its own developments (e.g. green energy, profit share with farmers on re-use of redundant buildings for park-related uses, wind turbine, 'green' conferencing, woodland burials, wood fuel and other wood products?)
 - Via direct service provision for visitors (e.g. cycle hire, camping, catering, garden products).

Direct service provision. To consider what service provision that is or could be out-sourced from LAs which the Park organisation be at least able to tender for. It has identified matters such as landscape / green space management contracts, facilities management (including, potentially, country parks), Rights-of-Way.

- 4.5 These matters have been considered but the District Council cannot offer anything at this time.

Groundwork Thames Valley Core Funding

- 4.6 The Council has supported Groundwork Thames Valley in recent years with an annual grant to assist with its core funding requirements.

This grant was £7,470 at 2011/12 figures

- 4.7 As above, Members have previously shown support for the Groundwork core funding which helps support many of the activities within the Colne Valley Park. Currently, the GTV core funding for 2012/13 and beyond has been identified as a saving to the Council. (Cabinet on 8th February 2011.) Members are asked to consider this and advise whether the core funding should in fact be cut, or whether the contribution should be maintained at current levels, with a slight increase for inflation, for the next three years.

Groundwork Thames Valley Project Funding

- 4.8 The Council has supported Groundwork Thames Valley in recent years with an annual payment to facilitate capital improvements to sites within South Bucks.

This grant was £8,450 in 2011/12.

Members previously agreed to look further at the potential to use the Capital Community Development Grant fund for 2012/13 onwards for projects.

- 4.9 There will be a saving of £8,450 as the Groundwork Project funding will cease. Currently, the Capital Community Development Grant has £15k per annum from 2012/13, although this may change in future years. Following Members' previous discussions, GTV will apply to this fund for future capital works on a project basis, which will be considered on a case by case basis.
- 4.10 Members are also asked to consider the funding for these projects in future years, and at what level, should the Capital Community Development Grant cease to exist. Savings would have to be made elsewhere in the Capital Budgets should further funding be required.
- 4.11 Members are asked to reconsider the withdrawal from the Core Funding to both the CVP and GTV and to consider the funding of Colne Valley environmental improvement projects through the Capital Community Development Grant or alternatives.

5. Resources, Risk and Other Implications

- 5.1 The financial contributions to the Colne Valley Park Partnership and Groundwork Thames Valley for 2011/12 are provided for in current budgets. Members are asked to discuss these contributions for 2012/13 onwards.
- 5.2 **Risks.**

Should the funding be withdrawn, there are several risks. These are shown in Appendix A.

6. Summary

- 6.1 The Policy Advisory Group is asked to advise the Portfolio Holder with regard to:
- The continuing annual financial support to the Colne Valley Park Partnership and Groundwork Thames Valley, from 2012/13 for three years.
 - The use of future years' Capital Community Development Grant budget for future capital works, or alternative arrangements.

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Background Papers:	None

Appendix A. Risks associated with withdrawing funding from the Colne Valley Partnership.

- Central government funding is only available to match local contributions, therefore any cut by South Bucks District Council is multiplied by two as match funding may also be lost.
- There is the potential for a 'house of cards' effect, where reductions in funding by one local authority triggers reductions by the other local authorities.
- Many forms of grant funding will not cover the costs of preparing and submitting applications for project funding. Without core funding, the CVP and Groundwork's ability to secure additional project funding to spend in the District would be greatly reduced.
- Groundwork provides a number of support services for the Colne Valley Regional Park. The presence of the Colne Valley has provided extra protection for the most vulnerable part of the District and enabled funding to be secured. A cut in funding would greatly weaken Groundwork's ability to perform its roles and so weaken the Regional Park.
- Groundwork supports the activities of many local groups and organisations within South Bucks and the capacity to do this would be reduced. Initiatives such as the Friends of the Colne Valley, Rural Development Forum, Farming in the rural urban fringe, Local Food to Local Markets, Woodland management, links between local people and the countryside on their doorstep, Tourism & day visits might suffer. Local residents spent 1,337 volunteer days working in the Colne Valley Park during 2009/10 which shows that the Councils contribution generates a valuable return.
- A funding reduction will severely impact on Groundwork's ability to develop and deliver community projects within South Bucks. In addition to the Colne Valley Park team this will also affect Groundwork's other teams and subsidiary companies that operate within South Bucks - Blue Sky, Iver Nature Study Centre, Learning services, West London Floating Classroom.
- Many other sources of funding cannot be accessed without local match funding. Colne Valley project funds from SBDC are used as match to pull in additional funding from landfill tax, private companies and other grant sources. These sources of funding might dry up without SBDC funding. Nearly £275k worth of projects in the South Bucks/Colne Valley geographical crossover was undertaken in 2009/10 (a 13-fold return on the £20,663 total investment from SBDC). A reduction in any one of the three budgets will severely impact on the ability to generate this return in future.
- The Colne Valley Regional Park can play a significant role in helping SBDC implement many of the core policies contained in the Core Strategy, including the following:
 - Core policy 9 - Natural environment
 - Core policy 16 - South of Iver development site (opportunity area)
- Green Belt policy says 'no' to development and has been very successful in maintaining open land but green belt policies alone do not assist with finding positive uses for land or maintain landscape quality. The Colne Valley Park complements the successes of green belt policy by saying 'yes' to high quality landscapes, biodiversity, recreation and farming and forestry.
- The Colne Valley Park also ties together the urban fringe in South Bucks together with the urban fringe in neighbouring Hillingdon, Chiltern, Three Rivers and Slough. The green belt /urban fringe is now under significant development pressure from development (eg HS2 and associated infrastructure, Project Pinewood). Now is the worst time to withdraw funding and expect Groundwork to tackle these challenges (and opportunities) alone.
- The CVP encourages other partners to join the Partnership, to bring benefits to the South Bucks area. The Partnership has recently recruited the Chiltern Society to contribute to the Levy. On behalf of the partnership, Groundwork is discussing this with other potential partners including the GLA and BAA.

- Additional implications of a withdrawal by SBDC are likely to include the closure of the CVP Visitor Centre and toilets as it will be difficult to justify using funding from other local authorities to pay for a building in South Bucks if that local authority is no longer contributing. This would leave the Partnership without a central base to operate from and to recruit volunteers from.
- There is a risk that senior management of Groundwork will shift focus to other local authorities that are contributing to core funding. This will mean that large projects such as the £200k Rural Development Forum and the £1.7M Lottery Landscapes Partnership bid will be much less likely to be developed in future.