

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: Renewal of Great Fen Project Collaboration Agreement

Meeting/Date: Overview & Scrutiny (Env Well Being) – 14th January 2014
Cabinet – 23rd January 2014

Executive Portfolio: Strategic Planning & Housing

Report by: Assistant Director Environment, Growth and Planning

Ward(s) affected: Ramsey, Sawtry, Stilton, Yaxley and Farcet, Upwood & The Raveleys

Executive Summary:

The Great Fen Project is a strategic landscape scale restoration project of national and international importance.

The Project is rapidly becoming much more of a reality 'on the ground' as positive changes are now happening - and it is considered that the next stages in its delivery will be fundamental in terms of maximising its local economic development potential.

The current Project Collaboration Agreement, which dates from 2009, is time limited and it is due for renewal before March 2014.

The Council is one of the five core Project Partners (in association with the Environment Agency, the Middle Level Commissioners, Natural England and the Wildlife Trust).

Whilst we have the ability to consider all our options at this point in time it is generally recognised that the Great Fen Project is now positively moving forward and delivering benefits for the people of Huntingdonshire. Whilst we could consider reducing our support it is considered important that the Council continues to be an active Project partner in order that we can sustain our essential inputs into the formulation and on-going delivery of the project. In that way we can continue to ensure that an appropriate emphasis is placed upon the delivery of tangible economic, social and environmental benefits.

The Project Partners all financially support the delivery of the project (HDC via both a contribution of £20k pa and by utilising appropriate Officer time) and the approved Council budget and MTP already includes provision for this to continue.

Recommendation(s):

That the Cabinet approves the renewal of the Great Fen Project Collaboration Agreement for a further 5 year period.

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1. WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT/PURPOSE?

- 1.1 The current Great Fen Project Collaboration Agreement, which dates from 2009, is time limited - and therefore it now needs to be renewed before the current agreement expires in March 2014.

2. WHY IS THIS REPORT NECESSARY/BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Great Fen Project is a landscape scale restoration project of growing national and international repute. The Council is one of the five core Project Partners (in association with the Environment Agency, the Middle Level Commissioners, Natural England and the Wildlife Trust).
- 2.2 The positive impacts of the Project are now becoming much more of a reality 'on the ground' and its economic benefits are starting to be realised. It is considered that the next key stages in its planned delivery, which will include the main visitor facilities, will be fundamental in terms of maximising its local economic development potential.
- 2.3 However this requirement to renew the collaboration agreement gives the Council the opportunity to appropriately consider its ongoing role and whether it wants to continue to be an active Project partner.

3. OPTIONS CONSIDERED/ANALYSIS

- 3.1 The Council now has the opportunity to consider the basis of its on-going support for the Great Fen Project. We could consider reducing our commitment to, and level of participation in, the Project but it is considered that undertaking such a course of action would have clear negative consequences for the future wellbeing of the District.
- 3.2 The Council's active involvement and its positive and pro-active contributions to the on-going delivery of the Great Fen Project allow us to appropriately influence the form of, and shape the delivery of, the project. This allows the Council to look to effectively utilise the projects assets and direct its proposals in order to help us deliver our defined corporate economic, social and environmental aims. It is considered that currently we are deriving good value from our contributions.

4. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

- 4.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) discussed the benefits the Great Fen Project delivers for the District. The District Council's interest principally is in the economic benefits it will bring to the area whilst the other Partners focus on other factors. It was concluded that these benefits considerably exceed the Council's contribution. The District Council's funding is matched by the four other founding partners and is used to develop the project. This includes funding the Great Fen Project Manager's post and staging ad hoc promotional/educational events. It is hoped that other "observing partners" will become funders of the project.
- 4.2 Members were also satisfied with the role of the Steering Group in governing the work of the Project and, in particular, the budget monitoring it undertakes on a quarterly basis.
- 4.3 It is likely that the main visitor centre will be developed during the life of the new Agreement. This will require the technical expertise of planning and other

officers. It is proposed that the centre will be owned by the Wildlife Trust, so there will be no financial risk to the Council in respect of that development.

4.4 As the next five years are going to be critical to the further development of the project, the Panel has unanimously supported the renewal of the Great Fen Project Collaboration Agreement. Given that the visitor centre and the Council's economic ambitions will become more established in this period, it will be appropriate for the Council to review its commitment to the project when the new Agreement expires.

4.5 The Panel will continue to have a role in monitoring how the Project develops in the future.

5. KEY IMPACTS/RISKS? HOW WILL THEY BE ADDRESSED?

5.1 It is considered that the Great Fen Project will continue to become much more of a reality over the next 5 years – with it being anticipated that the Project's main visitor centre and other key facilities will be delivered within that projected time period.

5.2 If the Council was not to be as actively involved in shaping the development of the project then our ability to positively direct and appropriately influence that delivery would be diminished. The Project would continue to be delivered but there would be obvious risks in relation to its future community focus.

6. WHAT ACTIONS WILL BE TAKEN/TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

6.1 The Assistant Director Environment, Growth and Planning will be liaising with the Head of Legal and Democratic Services in order to finalise the renewal of the collaboration agreement within the applicable timescale.

7. LINK TO THE LEADERSHIP DIRECTION

7.1 The continued successful delivery of the Great Fen Project is a key element of our committed growth strategy. The on-going successful delivery of the project will significantly contribute to sustainable local economic growth within the wider Ramsey area, support continued farm diversification and the development of new business opportunities; it will continue to support local community and educational initiatives; and it will also help us meet our environmental objectives. Fundamentally the Great Fen Project will increasingly become one of the strategic 'green lungs' that help us meet the needs of our growing population.

8. CONSULTATION

8.1 All of the Project Partners are currently undertaking similar collaboration agreement renewal processes.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

(Comments from the Head of Legal & Democratic Services)

9.1 The Council has the necessary legal authority to enter in to the proposed agreement renewal process.

10. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

(Comments from the Assistant Director, Finance & Resources)

10.1 The Project Partners financially support the delivery of the project (HDC via both a contribution of £20k pa and appropriate Officer time) and the approved Council budget and MTP include provision for this to continue.

11. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS

11.1 It is considered that this upcoming time period will be crucial for the successful delivery of the Great Fen Project.

11.2 It is considered imperative that HDC maintains its role as an active partner in order that we can ensure that the Project continues to help us positively deliver our corporate aims.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Report to Cabinet – Great Fen Project Governance July 2009
Existing Great Fen Project Collaboration Agreement 2009

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