

CABINET

Morecambe Bay Nature Improvement Area

17 January 2012

Report of Head of Regeneration & Policy Service

PURPOSE OF REPORT			
To obtain the agreement of cabinet for the City Council as managing authority for the Arnside/Silverdale AONB to act as accountable body for the Morecambe Bay Nature Improvement Area (NIA) in the event of the funding bid being successful.			
Key Decision	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Non-Key Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Referral from Cabinet Member	<input type="checkbox"/>
Date Included in Forward Plan	December 2011.		
This report is public.			

RECOMMENDATIONS OF COUNCILLOR JANICE HANSON

- (1) That Cabinet agrees to Lancaster City Council acting as accountable body for the Morecambe Bay NIA and signs the required Memorandum of Agreement by 31st January 2012.
- (2) That the revenue budget and capital programme be updated accordingly in the event that the Stage 2 application is successful, subject to there being no impact on City Council resources and subject to detailed monitoring arrangements being agreed with the Head of Financial Services.

1.0 Introduction

What are Nature Improvement Areas?

The Natural Environment White Paper, published in June 2011 commits Government to assist partnerships of local authorities, local communities and landowners, the private sector and conservation organisations to establish new Nature Improvement Areas. Although the characteristics of Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) will vary across the country according to what is possible and what is needed, these will be places where:

- opportunities to deliver ecological networks, which can provide valuable benefits to wildlife and people, are particularly high;

- a shared vision exists among a wide partnership including statutory and voluntary sectors;
- people are inspired by their enhanced experience of the outside world;
- significant improvements to the ecological network can be achieved over large areas by enlarging and enhancing existing wildlife sites, improving ecological connectivity and/or creating new sites;
- multiple benefits can be achieved, for example, to water quality, flood and coastal erosion risk management, development of a low carbon economy and mitigating climate change impacts.

Defra and Natural England are currently working together to select 12 NIAs across the country to each receive support and funding of around £600, 000 over 3 years.

2.0 Proposal Details

2.1 Morecambe Bay Nature Improvement Area

A Morecambe Bay Nature Improvement Area will bring about a step change for nature conservation in one of Britain's most important areas for biodiversity. Morecambe lies right at the heart of an area which is internationally significant for its wildlife in particular birds, flora and butterflies.

For this reason, the Arnside & Silverdale AONB Partnership (for which Lancaster City Council is the host authority) has worked with a wide range of other organisations to develop a proposal for a Morecambe Bay Nature Improvement Area and applied to Stage 1 of this process.

The Morecambe Bay NIA was subsequently selected as one of only 20 projects nationally to be invited to submit a Stage 2 application by December 16th 2011. In order to do this a detailed Business Plan has been developed, agreed and submitted. £657, 000 has been applied for.

If successful, key representatives will then be invited to present the proposal to the national judging panel and 12 NIAs will eventually be selected, with project work due to begin in April 2012.

The Morecambe Bay NIA proposal will deliver nationally significant benefits for wildlife and people by:

- promoting the growth of a low carbon economy linked to the natural environment;
- delivering and monitoring major improvements to the area's ecological network in partnership with farmers, land managers and communities;
- leaving a legacy for future enhancements through an improved integration with the planning system;
- and creating inspiring opportunities for people to connect with the natural world.

A successful application would not only result in a Defra grant of £657 000 over 3 years but would also generate significant added value and support and it is hoped targeting of additional resources.

2.2 Role of Lancaster City Council

As host authority for the Arnside & Silverdale AONB Partnership, the Council would act as the accountable body were a grant to be awarded. No match funding would be required from the Council for this project.

Defra and Natural England require formal confirmation that the Council will act as the accountable body in the event a grant offer is made and require a formal Memorandum of Agreement setting out partner responsibilities to be in place by 31st January.

3.0 Details of Consultation

3.1 A wide range of partner organisations including the local authorities in the AONB Partnership, Natural England, the Environment Agency, the RSPB and the Forestry Commission have been consulted and have engaged in preparing the bid.

4.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

4.1 Option 1 is for the Council to agree to act as accountable body, and to proceed with the bid for funding and in doing so aim to secure three years external funding for project work which could not normally be undertaken either in the AONB or outside the designated area. Insofar as the AONB is concerned project work will help to implement the local authority partners adopted Management Plan. In other areas improvements to the natural environment have been restricted due to reduction in public funding across a wide range of agencies and the success of this bid will help to replace some of those funds.

4.2 Option 2 is for the Council not to agree to act as accountable body, and therefore not to proceed with the application for funding. This would lose the opportunity to obtain external funding for the partnership bodies to invest in improvements to the natural environment. It would mean that the AONB Management Plan's objectives will continue to be harder to achieve in the current financial climate.

5.0 Officer Preferred Option (and comments)

5.1 Option 1 is the preferred option as this presents a unique opportunity in the current financial climate to obtain external funding for projects to improve the very special areas which the City Council has a responsibility to manage, without any match funding burden on the council itself.

6.0 Conclusion

6.1 It is concluded that it is in the City Council's best interests to attempt to secure these funds and that agreeing to act as accountable body is a reasonable action which reflects its leading role within the AONB partnership.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK

Management of the Arnside/Silverdale AONB is a statutory function for the City Council and

partnership working to share facilities and access new areas of funding is a clear corporate priority for the council.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

The enhancement of the high quality environments in the district is important for the districts visitor economy and the council's reputation as a trusted custodian of the special landscapes around Morecambe Bay.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Subject to the final approval of individual projects by Natural England, it is anticipated that the majority of expenditure will be revenue with a small element of capital. Once individual projects are approved it is the intention that AONB officers will award some funding to external partners who will then carry out the works but will also engage contractors directly to carry out some of the works. It is anticipated that any ongoing maintenance for projects and any assets created will be the responsibility of the partner organisation who carries out the works, unless separate approvals are gained from the City Council in advance.

There is no requirement for the City Council to contribute any funding towards this initiative, therefore there should be net nil impact on the City Council revenue and capital budgets.

Natural England's terms and conditions state that grant funding must be claimed quarterly in arrears. Detailed monitoring arrangements in terms of how Natural England grant will be administered and paid over to partners will need to be agreed by Council officers and in place before the projects commence. Standard City Council Contract Procedure Rules will also need to be applied when contracting works.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The s151 Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Legal Services have been involved in the drafting of the Memorandum of Agreement, and will approve the final document.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The Natural Environment White Paper -
The Natural Choice

<http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm80/8082/8082.pdf>

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What the Natural Environment White Paper means for local authorities
<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/documents/newp-summary-la-110607.pdf>

Making Space for Nature (2010) - A Review of England's Wildlife Sites and Ecological Network
<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf>

Morecambe Bay NIA Summary of Vision and Strategic Objectives