

**Strategic Planning,
Sustainability and Transport
Committee**

1st Dec 2015

Is the final decision on the recommendations in this report to be made at this meeting?

Yes

River Medway Towpath – Maidstone Sustainable Access to Education and Employment LEP Scheme

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|---------------------------------------|--|
| Final Decision-Maker | Strategic Planning, Sustainability and Transport Committee |
| Lead Head of Service | Head of Commercial and Economic Development |
| Lead Officer and Report Author | Fran Wallis, Local Economy Projects Officer |
| Classification | Public |
| Wards affected | High Street, Boxley, North, South, Coxheath & Hunton, Bridge, Fant, Allington, Barming |

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. That Maidstone Borough Council contribute up to £500,000 to the creation of the River Medway Cycle Towpath project as set in Appendix I to V.
2. That the proposed creation of a “cycling hub” at Lockmeadow is agreed and delegated authority is given to the Head of Mid Kent Legal Services to negotiate and enter into a lease with the operator of Lockmeadow.
3. That delegated authority is given to the Director of Regeneration and Place, and Section 151 Officer in consultation with the Chair of Strategic Planning, Sustainability and Transportation Committee to agree and enter into a funding agreement with KCC.

This report relates to the following corporate priorities:

- Keeping Maidstone Borough an attractive place for all – promoting better use of the River Medway – one of the borough’s key assets.
- Securing a successful economy for Maidstone Borough – encouraging commuters out of their cars and improving sustainable access to employment.

Timetable

| Meeting | Date |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| S,P, S&T Committee | 1 st Dec 2015 |

River Medway Towpath – Maidstone Sustainable Access to Employment Project

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the scheme to create a cycle path along the River Medway from Aylesford to Barming Bridge.
 - 1.2 The report provides background information to allow Members to make an informed decision regarding the potential to create a 'Cycling Hub' at Lockmeadow, and to agree to release £500,000 as per the funding agreement.
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2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Sustainable Access to Maidstone Employment Areas Project was submitted by Kent County Council to the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) for Single Local Growth Funding in 2014 and received an allocation of £2m. The original bid sought to create a riverside cycle path from East Farleigh to Aylesford.
- 2.2 The project has created a partnership with KCC, MBC and Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council. In early discussions, MBC indicated they would contribute between £500k to £1m towards the project – bringing the total available to £3m. At that time there was an expectation that a contribution of £500k from each borough council would be spent within their respective boroughs and the LEP funding would be spread across the whole length of the project.
- 2.3 However it has since become apparent that no monies have yet been specifically allocated to this project from T&MBC. At the time that the project was presented at the SELEP T&MBC had assumed incorrectly, that this was entirely a Maidstone Scheme. T&MBC however had stated a desire to be involved with the project if financially possible and a decision will be made by T&MBC at the end of the 15/16 financial year.
- 2.4 If T&MBC are unable to contribute then the scope and funding profile of the project will change. This may require the business case supporting the project to be reassessed by the SELEP. KCC are willing to progress to detailed design stage and tender the works at their risk until funding from T&MBC is known and SELEP confirm their approval of the project. No contracts will be signed for the construction until confirmation has been received. In order to mitigate risk the design and tender contracts will be divided into two, one covering the Maidstone cycle path and one covering the land in T&MBC.
- 2.5 The details of the scheme haven been examined by SELEP's Independent Technical Evaluator who has approved the business case.

- 2.6 The rest of this report relates to the section of the path within Maidstone Borough. Following consultation with the cycle forum, the project was extended from East Farleigh to Barming Bridge. The section of path within Maidstone Borough therefore runs from Allington Lock to Barming Bridge.
- 2.7 The overall purpose of the investment is to encourage cycling and walking by providing attractive, direct routes for cyclists and pedestrians, to access employment, education and other facilities in Maidstone Town Centre, and along the River Medway corridor. This will be achieved through the construction of a new shared use towpath. The total length of the path is 10.5km, of which 8.8km is within Maidstone borough. The total cost is estimated to be £1.6m, of which £1.1 m will be funded from SLGF and £500,000 from MBC. KCC is contributing £100,000 in design and management costs.
- 2.8 It is intended that this project will deliver benefits to transport and enhance the desirability of Maidstone as a location for employment and residence. The path will provide links into residential, employment and educational locations, together with active marketing of the route. There are over 7,126 households, 3,165 businesses and 7 schools within 1km of the route. This scheme provides an important means to reduce growing demand on the road network. The scheme is co-ordinated with road improvements in the area and will help to lock in the benefits of these investments by reducing car travel.
- 2.9 The project will support the objectives within the Kent Environment Strategy, including works to improve habitats and river bank protection. By creating an ecological corridor with an improved river bank, areas for wildlife and relaxation will be created. The project also provides a carbon free transport option within Maidstone Air Quality Management Area.
- 2.10 By enhancing the towpath, an attractive, sustainable alternative route will be provided to commuters and others, to benefit the health and wellbeing of everyone. The path will become a valuable resource in which daily exercise can be taken as part of a daily commute. Similar towpath schemes across the country have proved to add value to the quality of life, health and wellbeing of local residents. The opportunity the SELEP funding provides can realise the potential of the much underutilised asset of the River Medway.
- 2.11 The project is being led by KCC's Public Rights of Way (PRoW) and Access Service, working with MBC. Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council is engaged in relation to the section of path within their borough.
- 2.12 KCC's PRoW and Access Service have been progressing with the required ecological surveys and outline designs to enable construction of the route during the summer of 2016. Amey has been commissioned by KCC to produce an outline design from Allington Lock to Barming Bridge. Amey have also been working on a separate commission in T&MBC.
- 2.13 The section of tow path from Allington Lock to Barming Bridge already exists however it needs to be upgraded. Much of the path is tarmac however in places it needs to be widened, and drainage needs improving.

Short sections of the path will be improved with resin bound gravel. There are also opportunities to improve the habitat along the riverbank, and enhance the biodiversity. Directional signage will also be installed to link to residential areas, tourist destinations and the town.

2.14 The path is already a Public Right of Way and as such the scheme falls within permitted development. Although cyclists already use the route unchallenged, a Cycle Tracks Conversion Order will be sought, for the avoidance of doubt of users, and enable official signage to be installed.

2.15 The project is supported by the Joint Transportation Board.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

3.1 Option 1 – Do nothing: if MBC chose not to support this project then the financial contribution of £2m from the SELEP could also be lost. Without improvements to the path to upgrade it for cycling, the opportunity to encourage people not to use their cars will be missed, and the knock on benefits of reduced congestion and air pollution will be reduced and improvements to health and fitness through cycling lost.

3.2 Option 2 – Reduce the scope of the project. Subject to the decision that T&MBC makes, there may be a requirement to reduce the scope of the project to just carry out works within MBC's boundary. If the LEP is still supportive, then the project as set out in this report, within Maidstone Borough, will be delivered. The reduced scope relates to the section of path in T&MBC not being deliverable without T&MBC match funding.

3.3 Option 3 – Agree to the proposed project and spend of £500,000 from MBC Capital Budget. The advantages as already set out in this report, regarding health and wellbeing, sustainability, environmental improvements and reduced impact on traffic will then be realised.

3.4 Option 4 – If T&MBC do not fund the project there are 3 further sub-options:

3.4.1 The amount of LEP funding will be reduced (~£1.1m based on outline costs) to just deliver the Allington Lock to Barming Bridge section, with £500k match from MBC.

3.4.2 The amount of LEP funding remains the same, at £2m, and funds the section from Allington Lock to Barming Bridge, without the need for funding from MBC, subject to agreement from the LEP.

3.4.3 The amount of LEP funding remains the same, at £2m, and match funding to deliver the section within T&MBC is sought elsewhere by KCC.

4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 It is recommended that this committee agree to Option 3 – to progress with the proposed project and agree to spend up to £500,000 from MBC Capital Budget. This will allow detailed design and tendering to progress up to a stage when a further decision can be made once T&MBC's intentions are known.

- 4.2 This project provides the opportunity to upgrade the existing tow path to a formal cycle path. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the path is already being used by cyclists however MBC and KCC cannot promote it as such as it is below the required standard to be designated as a cycle path.
- 4.3 There is a great deal of interest in the area of Maidstone town centre for housing and jobs – this project provides a sustainable form for people to travel. This project also contributes to the Destination Management Plan and its actions relating to the river – by improving access, and making the River Medway a destination.
- 4.4 The completed project will provide 8.8km of upgraded, formal cycle track from Allington Lock to Barming Bridge. Subject to approval, a Cycling Hub will be created at Lockmeadow – this will include secure cycle parking, a tyre pump, and an interpretation map of the route and local area.
- 4.5 MBC and KCC PRow team will need to liaise and seek further agreement with landowners at the end of Unicomes Lane which is a private road as MBC currently has an agreement with them to allow access to Fant Wildlife Site but this access does not extend down to the riverside path.
- 4.6 In the urban section from Maidstone East Railway Bridge to the Earl Street Subway (please refer to Appendix 3 of 5), it may be necessary to remove some trees due to the existing issues of path failure and trip hazards as a result of the tree roots, and also due to the narrowing of the path, with no barrier along the river in this section. Options will be confirmed in the detailed design, and *may* include: alterations to the surfacing to minimise the ‘bulge’ effect of tree roots, short sections of railing where the path narrows between the tree trunk and the river edge. If a tree does need to be removed, where possible trees will be replaced in suitable locations – this will be subject to the detailed design.

5. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 5.1 KCC have already carried out a great deal of consultation with various parties who have an interest in the project. These are outlined below:
- Maidstone Borough Council – has been involved from the start in discussing the project and its links to the economy.
 - Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council – as set out earlier part of this project lies within T&MBC.
 - Environment Agency – has been consulted on due to the project’s location along the river, and have offered ‘in kind’ contribution to the project through the use of their equipment and expertise.
 - Aylesford Parish Council (providing £10k investment), East Farleigh Parish Council, Barming Parish Council, North Loose Residents Association – all supportive.
 - River Medway Users Association
 - Ramblers Association
 - Valley of Visions Partnership
 - Peel Ports

- MP for Chatham and Aylesford
- Local Landowners
- Ward members – a meeting is scheduled with Ward members and County Divisional Members in early December.

6. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 6.1 As mentioned above a meeting has been arranged with Ward Members to discuss the detail of the project.
- 6.2 KCC PRoW will progress with the detailed design and costing phase, ready for the construction work to be tendered in April, once confirmation has been received from T&MBC.

7. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

| Issue | Implications | Sign-off |
|---|---|---|
| Impact on Corporate Priorities | By promoting better access to the River Medway and encouraging commuters out of their cars | Head of Finance & Resources |
| Risk Management | Project risks will be managed by Kent County Council. | Head of Finance & Resources |
| Financial | Maidstone Borough's Council's contribution was approved by Council on 25th February 2015. Kent County Council is contributing £100,000. SELEP £2m. | Head of Finance & Resources |
| Staffing | Staff involvement limited to Economic Development and Planning Policy officers including liaison with Kent County Council and support with stakeholder engagement and communication | Head of Commercial and Economic Development |
| Legal | Grant agreement between MBC and Kent County Council will need to be agreed | Head of Legal Partnerships |
| Equality Impact Needs Assessment | An EQIA is being completed by KCC's PRoW & Access Service | Head of Finance & Resources |
| Environmental/Sustainable | Biodiversity will be enhanced | Head of |

| | | |
|-------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| Development | along the river. Commuters will be encouraged with a more sustainable route | Commercial and Economic Development |
| Community Safety | None identified | |
| Human Rights Act | None identified | |
| Procurement | Kent County Council will be the procuring authority but will work closely with MBC in the procurement process. | Head of Finance & Resources |
| Asset Management | The cycle path will be Highway and be maintained by Kent County Council | Head of Finance & Resources |

8. REPORT APPENDICES

The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: Drawing 1 of 5
- Appendix II: Drawing 2 of 5
- Appendix III: Drawing 3 of 5
- Appendix IV: Drawing 4 of 5
- Appendix V: Drawing 5 of 5

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None