

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO CABINET

11 APRIL 2023

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR COMMUNITIES

VALLEYS REGIONAL PARK FUTURE FUNDING

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the Valleys Regional Park (VRP) and to seek approval, following a request from the VRP board, that Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) continues in its role as host of the VRP to the end of the 2023/24 financial year. The report also seeks approval to accept a grant offer of £265,000 from Welsh Government (WG) for funding VRP for the remaining 9 months of the 2023/24 financial year following the end of the current European Social Fund (ESF) funding in June 2023.

2. Connection to corporate well-being objectives / other corporate priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate well-being objectives under the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**:-

- **Supporting a successful sustainable economy** – taking steps to make the county borough a great place to do business, for people to live, work, study and visit, and to ensure that our schools are focussed on raising the skills, qualifications and ambitions for all people in the county borough.
- **Helping people and communities to be more healthy and resilient** - taking steps to reduce or prevent people from becoming vulnerable or dependent on the Council and its services. Supporting individuals and communities to build resilience, and enable them to develop solutions to have active, healthy and independent lives.
- **Smarter use of resources** – ensure that all resources (financial, physical, ecological, human and technological) are used as effectively and efficiently as possible and support the creation of resources throughout the community that can help to deliver the Council's well-being objectives.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Valleys Regional Park (VRP) has been developed through the Welsh Government Ministerial Taskforce for the Valleys in partnership with the Valleys local authorities (Merthyr Tydfil, Blaenau Gwent, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Caerphilly, Torfaen, Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot, Swansea and Carmarthenshire), Natural Resources Wales, Visit Wales and Welsh Government officials in Health and Environment Divisions. It reflects the views of stakeholders from Valleys communities, the Third Sector, Public Health Wales and feedback received through a series of engagement events. The VRP prospectus was published on 18th October 2018 and plans have

been further developed through the partnership led by the VRP team, hosted by Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC).

- 3.2 Valleys Regional Park is an environmental vision for the Valleys, developed and delivered through a growing partnership of local authorities, government agencies, local health boards, charitable trusts and voluntary organisations, working closely with private enterprise and local communities.
- 3.3 Geographically, the Valleys Regional Park covers the footprint of the former South Wales coalfield, extending from Carmarthenshire in the west to Pontypool in the east and bordering the Brecon Beacons National Park to the north. The region is home to nearly a third of the Welsh population.
- 3.4 The Valleys Regional Park vision is of a high quality, sustainable network of greenspace offering outstanding skills, learning, recreational and economic opportunities which will help change the image and perception of the Valleys forever. It will improve the quality of life, health and well-being for local people, generate pride in their area whilst creating an environment that stimulates inward investment and becomes an attractive destination for visitors.
- 3.5 This vision is being developed and delivered through the VRP partnership, generating environmental and associated social, health and economic benefit whilst embedding a meaningful regional response to the Climate and Nature Emergencies.
- 3.6 In April 2019 discussions took place between the partner local authorities and the Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport. The Deputy Minister expressed a desire for a local authority to act as host for the delivery team element of the next stage of the VRP – to March 2021. BCBC was invited to be the host authority.
- 3.7 In July 2019 BCBC accepted the invitation from Welsh Government to be the host organisation for the initial phase for a period from August 2019 to March 2021. A funding agreement was established between BCBC and Welsh Government and a legal agreement was developed, but is yet to be agreed and signed by all Local Authorities forming the VRP area.
- 3.8 In the autumn of 2019, Welsh Government and Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) indicated that funding opportunities existed through Rural Development Programme (RDP) and European Social Fund (ESF) resources to potentially support the continuation of the VRP delivery from March 2021 to June 2023. At its meeting in March 2020 the VRP Board invited BCBC to apply for funding through ESF and RDP in its role as host. This funding was awarded with an expectation that the VRP approach would be piloted across the Valleys with a business case for a long term operating model developed.

4. Current situation/proposal

- 4.1 ESF funding is coming to an end with VRP costs covered until the end of June 2023. A business case for future operating was presented to the VRP Board in February 2023 and also shared with the Deputy Minister for Arts and Sport. The Board and Deputy Minister both supported the business case and agreed to further discussions around a funding model.

- 4.2 On 20th March 2023 the VRP Board met to consider the response from the Deputy Minister on a formal request for funding beyond June 2023 and review the business case alongside the Welsh Government position. There was an indication from the Deputy Minister that Welsh Government grant funding could be made available to cover the shortfall that will allow VRP to continue to the end of the 2023/24 financial year. The Board asked BCBC to proceed with discussions with Welsh Government to receive the grant and continue to host VRP until March 2024.
- 4.3 As a result of these discussion a grant offer of £265,000 has been made to BCBC from Welsh Government to cover costs through to the end of the 2023/24 financial year. This will provide the basis for planning the long term approach including;
- Agreement on the approach and delivery of a successfully transition of the administration of the VRP into the South-East Wales Corporate Joint Committee
 - A commitment from the lead local authorities of the VRP to provide funding for the administration of the VRP and as part of any negotiations with Welsh Government on future funding.
 - Development of a viable business plan to secure sustainable funding for VRP by the 31 March 2029.

5. Effect upon policy framework and procedure rules

- 5.1 There is no direct impact on the Council's policy framework and procedure rules.

6. Equality Act 2010 implications

- 6.1 An initial Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) screening has identified that there would be no negative impact on those with one or more of the protected characteristics, on socio-economic disadvantage or the use of the Welsh language. It is therefore not necessary to carry out a full EIA on this policy or proposal at this stage.

7. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 implications

- 7.1 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 Assessment Template has been completed and a summary of the implications from the assessment relating to the five ways of working is below:
- Long-term: The activities that form part of the scheme have been identified by the partners that will take part and are closely aligned with the long-term ambitions set out in the VRP prospectus. A regional collaborative approach, linked to regional working as part of the Cardiff Capital Region area works towards long-term delivery.
 - Prevention: On their own none of the partners or participating areas would be able to achieve the scale of impact that such a partnership approach offers. Therefore delivering in this way offers the opportunity to build on success to date and prevent a deterioration of the value that the development of the VRP brings to the region.
 - Integration: The scheme will achieve this way of working by recognising the approaches that are proposed for support are those that have been identified by partner organisations due to their synergy with local, regional and national priorities.

- Collaboration: The proposals have been developed and will be delivered through a strong partnership between BCBC and those partners that will form part of the delivery.
- Involvement: The scheme will be delivered in close partnership with a range of local stakeholders in each area. Discussions and development with neighboring Counties has taken place through BCBC's Economy, Natural Resources and Sustainability team and relevant officers from neighbouring Councils as well as representatives from a range of private and third sector partners.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1 Welsh Government have made available funding of up to £265,000 for the 2023/24 financial year to be allocated to VRP and the work involved to be paid via a grant to BCBC. This will cover costs from July 2023 to the end of March 2024 following the end of the current WEFO funded phase of VRP. Any costs incurred by BCBC through hosting the VRP will be covered by the grant funding available.
- 8.2 The Section 151 Officer will ensure that the grant funding provided is used solely for the purposes outlined in the respective grant offer letters. Expenditure of the grant will comply with all statutory requirements for accounting and internal audit (including supporting records and all systems of internal checks and control), and will be included with any internal or external audit of the Council's funding.

9. Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 9.1 Note progress to date in developing the VRP.
- 9.2 Approve the request from the VRP Board that BCBC continue in its role as host of the VRP to the end of the 2023/24 financial year.
- 9.3 Delegate authority to the Corporate Director Communities, in consultation with the Chief Officer – Finance, Performance and Change and the Chief Officer - Legal and Regulatory Services, to approve the final terms of the grant offer, accept the offer of funding from Welsh Government and to enter into any appropriate funding and legal agreements necessary to fulfil the role as host the VRP delivery team.

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Background documents:
None