

Meeting:	Cabinet	Date:	11th April 2018
Subject:	Robinswood Hill Visitor Centre		
Report Of:	Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning		
Wards Affected:	All		
Key Decision:	No	Budget/Policy Framework:	No
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Appendices:	None		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To update Cabinet on the progress of the new Visitor Centre at Robinswood Hill and to seek approval to part fund the project.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Cabinet is asked to **RESOLVE** that:

- (1) £200,000 be allocated to help fund a visitor centre at Robinswood Hill;
- (2) Gloucester City Council enters into appropriate funding and legal agreements with Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust to deliver the scheme on terms agreed by the Head of Place.

3.0 Background and Key Issues

- 3.1 For a number of years, Gloucester City Council (GCC) has been working closely with Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust (GWT) on a number of collaborative projects. This has included the 'All paths lead to the hill' project and the recent re-development of the Ranger centre to provide a permanent café, seating area and wildlife friendly garden.
- 3.2 From the start of this partnership, GCC and GWT clearly had joint aspirations for the development of a visitor centre at Robinswood Hill. Also both parties require additional accommodation for their staff and equipment. Discussions have been underway for a while leading to an explicit reference to a new visitor centre in the 2016/17 Business Development Plan and a commitment in the 2016 Conservative Party manifesto.

- 3.3 Early discussions focussed on securing funds from a third party grant giving body. While initially discussions appeared to go well, as time progressed it became clear that the usual large funding bodies were not interested in such a scheme.
- 3.4 As well as a visitor centre there are other aspirations for the site. The number of staff at the trust has grown significantly over the years and from a handful of staff in the 1990s to now where it stands at over 50. Clearly there is an accommodation issue and even with the recent attic and other internal works there is not enough room for their employees. Frustratingly for the trust the existing building was built in an era of lower environmental standards and its Carbon footprint is an embarrassment to them.
- 3.5 The rangers also have accommodation issues and while the move from the old Robinswood farm 6 years ago has meant they are a visible presence on the hill, the actual accommodation is sub-standard. Addressing these requirements will need to be part of the overall re-development.
- 3.6 For both parties therefore the ambition is to construct a new building that would:
- Provide accommodation for GWT staff for their current and future needs;
 - Provide fit for purpose accommodation for the Ranger Service;
 - Provide a modern well equipped Visitor Centre that would include a café, educational centre, community meeting rooms and interpretation area.
- 3.7 GWT have done significant work around a new Visitor Centre over the past couple of years, indeed Cabinet have received presentations from GWT where some conceptual ideas were put forward as to location and potential form. Given their need for more accommodation, GWT has also looked at alternative locations in the County and thankfully has decided to stay in Gloucester.
- 3.8 They have also undertaken fund raising and have secured a mortgage commitment to the extent where they can fund a new HQ for their staff. This would be predominantly for office accommodation and would not provide educational or other wider benefits as discussed above. It would not provide any accommodation for our Rangers who would continue to be housed in their current building.
- 3.9 However, in order to draw down the loan, GWT has indicated that they may have to renegotiate the length of their existing 99 year lease with GCC as well as increase the size of the demise in the lease. This will be tested during the formation of the appropriate agreements.
- 3.10 It is clear therefore that GWT are prepared to invest a £800,000 capital sum in a re-build of their current HQ. What the recommendation asks for is that the City adds £200,000 to this allowing for a visitor centre/café etc. to be constructed as part of the overall build. This would fulfil the aspirations of the manifesto commitment and provide a facility that has been talked about for many years. .
- 3.11 Carrying out the 2 operations together will provide significant savings and should allow the Rangers to be accommodated

4.0 Work to date and the way forward

- 4.1 A significant amount of work has already been undertaken by GWT. For example, a local Architect was employed to understand the issues around uses, constraints and opportunities and a Quantity Surveyor has advised on an estimate of costs. While a strategic view it at least gave all parties a better understanding as to what could be achieved and at what cost.
- 4.2 GWT has estimated that the whole capital project could be delivered for approximately £1,000,000. For the avoidance of doubt, this will provide for new Headquarters for GWT, a new café, visitor/interpretation area toilets and external works as well as accommodation for the Randers. All running costs will be met by GWT.
- 4.3 The design and construction process will broadly align with the 2013 Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Plan of Work. The project is currently at Stage 1 with a strategic brief developed and issued to the market for quotes and design options. The GWT are currently proposing to be on site in autumn 2018 with completion in spring 2019 although it is recognised that this is an ambitious timescale.
- 4.4 GCC will require appropriate agreements to be in place with the GWT committing us to funding in a certain time frame and committing the trust to delivering a completed project that all can be proud of.

5.0 Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Considerations

- 5.1 GWT is an important part of the community. They have worked with local groups and other stakeholders to gauge support for the proposal and in some ways the project could be seen as good example of how the wider community can help deliver a service for the City. It is clear that we alone could not deliver such a facility and we would certainly not be able to take on the running costs of such a large asset.

6.0 Alternative Options Considered

- 6.1 Do nothing i.e. not funding the proposal. In this scenario GWT will go ahead and build its new headquarters hopefully on the existing site but this is not guaranteed. The City of course would lose an important tourism attraction and community asset.
- 6.2 We could opt to go it alone and build our own visitor centre. No detail costs have been done on this but as an indication it cost £150,000 just to convert the existing ranger centre to office and equipment shed. A stand alone visitor centre will be significantly more. Importantly we would then have to staff and look after it which would be a clear revenue cost.

7.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 7.1 We are currently looking at what is probably a once in a lifetime chance to deliver a visitor centre up at Robinswood Hill. This has long been proposed and initially it was hoped that lottery and other funding could help deliver this. This has sadly proved impossible. However, it is considered reasonable to fund the project and thus enable a major new visitor asset to be built in the City.

8.0 Future Work and Conclusions

- 8.1 Work over the next few months will focus around working with the trust and their consultants in bringing forward a design. Following the submission of the planning application there will be a need for some project planning around the construction as this will inevitably have an impact upon the ranger service. Once complete we will need to jointly promote the facility to ensure the most use and optimum income.

9.0 Financial Implications

- 9.1 A budget of £200,000 has been included within the capital programme. A number of assets are in the pipeline to be sold and it is proposed that some of these are brought forward and ring fenced to pay for this project.
- 9.2 Financial Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

10.0 Legal Implications

- 10.1 The Council has to have regard to a number of legal responsibilities in connection with a project of this nature:

(a) the obligation under s123 Local Government Act 1972 to obtain best consideration reasonably obtainable upon the grant of a lease for more than 7 years. The Secretary of State has issued a General Consent to permit disposals at an undervalue where the disposal is for the social, economic or environmental benefit of the Borough/District, and the undervalue is less than £2m. Members need to consider whether the proposed disposal meets the criteria for the General Consent to be relied upon.

(b) where the disposal is of public open space (an expression which includes buildings located on open space), prior to disposal a notice of the intention must be placed in the local press for 2 consecutive weeks, and any objections considered.

(c) if the Council has decisive influence in the project then it will be subject to EU procurement obligations. Alternatively, it could take a more arms-length approach and provide grant or loan funding. Conditions in the finance document (together with use restrictions in the lease) could broadly cover future public use, and the provision of office facilities to the Council, but the Council could not have decisive influence over the construction and layout of the proposed Centre (except for planning and building regulation control)

(d) if a grant or loan at below market investor rates is provided to the Charity, state aid implications have to be considered.

- 10.2 One Legal have been consulted in the preparation this report.

11.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications

11.1 See table below –

Risk	Opportunities
The city can not realise asset sales to the tune of £200k Planning permission not forthcoming Site conditions and other unseen constraints means cost envelope exceeded	Once in a life time opportunity to build a visitor centre. Potential to increase quality of ranger accommodation Potential to promote even closer working between trust and city council

12.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA):

12.1 Improving the visitor attraction is important for all residents who live or visit Gloucester. The proposals will not have a detrimental impact or prejudice against any one group or community.

12.2 The PIA Screening Stage was completed and did not identify any potential or actual negative impacts; therefore a full PIA was not required.

13.0 Other Corporate Implications

Community Safety

13.1 There will be little measurable impact upon community safety.

Sustainability

13.2 The current buildings have a poor environmental performance. It is clear that new build will be to a far higher standard.

Staffing & Trade Union

13.3 None.