

Gloucester City Council

Meeting:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Date: 8 January 2024
	Cabinet	10 January 2024
Subject:	European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Gloucester Urban Greening Completion Report	
Report Of:	Cabinet Member for Environment	
Wards Affected:	10 of 18 (see Section 3.2)	
Key Decision:	No	Budget/Policy Framework: No
Contact Officer:	Nick Chadwick - Water & Environmental Consultant	
	Email: nick.chadwick@gloucester.gov.uk	Tel: 396657
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Photographs Of Some Of The Work Carried Out	

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To give an overview of the recently completed ERDF funded 'Urban Greening Project'.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider the information in the report and make any recommendations to Cabinet.
- 2.2 Cabinet is asked to **RESOLVE** that the contents of the report and success of the project be noted.

3.0 Background and Key Issues (Overview)

- 3.1 The ERDF 'Urban Greening' project commenced in 2019 with Gloucester City Council as the lead delivery partner, and three further sub-delivery partners (Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC), Tewkesbury Borough Council (TBC), University Of Gloucestershire (UofG)).

The project was originally forecast to have a three-year duration, but due to a number of factors, ended up taking four years to complete. These factors included:

- COVID-19.
- Serious issues with a contractor led to a contract being terminated and re-procured.
- A delivery partner project manager sadly passing away – Gloucester City Council had to take on responsibility for delivering that organisation's outstanding outputs.

Practical completion was achieved on 31st May 2023

- 3.2 The project entailed many types of interventions across 34 sites in Gloucester, and a further 6 sites in Cheltenham and Tewkesbury. Examples of the types of work carried out are shown in Section 3.4, below. The wards where work was carried out comprise: Abbeydale; Barnwood; Elmbridge; Grange; Hucclecote; Kingsway; Longlevens; Matson, Robinswood & White City; Podsmead & Westgate.
- 3.3 The finance figures are set out in Table 1, below.

Table 1 - Project Expenditure (All Partners):

Delivery Partner	Total Expenditure	Total Hectares Of 'Output' Delivered	Expenditure Per Hectare Of 'Output' Delivered
Gloucester City Council*	£ 1,230,424	48.22	£ 25,517
CBC	£ 61,582	8.66	£ 7,115
TBC	£ 49,706	3.58	£ 13,904
UofG	£ 150,779	4.80	£ 31,406
All (totals)	£ 1,492,491	65.25	£ 22,873

* Includes outstanding commitments such as retention and tree watering

The total funding available for the Gloucester City Council works under the project is £1,242,293, so there has been an underspend of £11,868. This sum will be kept aside for contingency (for example tree replacements) over the next two years.

Observations on the above:

As the lead partner, Gloucester City Council delivered the majority of the interventions / outputs under the project and has had the largest expenditure.

The 'cost per hectare' varies widely depending on the nature of the interventions. For example, CBC's and TBC's cost per hectare is comparatively low since most of the work they delivered was lower cost planting and seeding. By means of comparison, Gloucester City Council's and the UofG's cost per hectare is higher as there were more projects here that involved engineering & construction (for example, river restoration and retrofit SuDS (sustainable urban drainage) schemes).

The area of 'outputs' (improved habitat) contracted under the ERDF funding agreement is 62 hectares. The area that has actually been delivered is 65.25 hectares, so the targets have been exceeded by circa 5%.

3.4 The key interventions delivered under the project are shown in Table 2, below. The project has delivered a number of important benefits including:

- **Improved habitat and biodiversity** (lots of new, varied, habitats have been created, including wildflower meadows, woodlands, wetlands, and streams, supporting and attracting many species of flora and fauna).
- **Flood mitigation** (watercourse re-naturalisation slows flow and delivers enhanced flood plain storage volume; planting intercepts surface water runoff and increases evapotranspiration).
- **Physical and mental well-being for people** (more aesthetically pleasing, nature-orientated spaces have been created for people to enjoy)
- **Water quality improvements** (the various works help reduce polluting inputs to water bodies).
- **Urban cooling** (the increased areas of waterscapes and planting in urban areas are helping to mitigate increased temperatures through climate change).

Table 2 – Summary Of Interventions Delivered Under The Project & The Associated Benefits

	Units	Total	Gloucester City Council	Benefits				
				Improved Habitat & Biodiversity	Flood Mitigation	Physical & Mental Well Being For People	Water Quality Improvement	Urban Cooling
Watercourse re-naturalisation schemes (removal of artificial concrete channel)	no.	3	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Length of riverbank improved or two stage channel	m	1086	606	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Retrofit SuDS (sustainable urban drainage) schemes	no.	2	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wetland creation - new scrapes and ponds	no.	28	23	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Length of new swale (shallow ditch for flood water conveyance)	m	562	562	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wildflower meadow seeding	hectares	32.64	23.05	✓	✓	✓		✓
Change in meadow maintenance (non-seeded)	hectares	26.61	19.26	✓	✓	✓		✓
Semi mature trees planted	no.	432	381	✓	✓	✓		✓
Small trees / whips planted	no.	11748	10925	✓	✓	✓		✓
No. of native spring bulbs planted (daffodil, crocus, snowdrop, fritillary, bluebell, anemone)	no.	102555	90605	✓		✓		
Area of woodland improved by enrichment planting	m ²	23393	23393	✓		✓		
No. of bird and bat boxes	no.	95	95	✓		✓		
Length of sweet chestnut fencing installed (to facilitate grazing)	m	1122	1122	✓		✓		
No. of new gates	no.	13	13	✓		✓		
No. of new benches	no.	18	11			✓		
Area of sustainable (perennial) planting	m ²	850	-	✓		✓		

The above is not an exhaustive list.

3.5 The project has won three CPRE (The Countryside Charity) awards for high quality environmental improvement schemes:

- Oxstalls Campus & Plock Court Nature Reserve
- Sudbrook Riparian Restoration (re-naturalisation)
- Barnwood Park Environmental Improvements

3.6 The only significant negative feedback from the public has been at the Sudbrook site (Linnet Close). This was not opposition to the watercourse re-naturalisation, but opposition to the conversion of an area of short mown utility grass to wildflower meadow.

3.7 Examples of positive feedback from the public on the Holmleigh (Whaddon Brook) re-naturalisation scheme:

'It's lovely to see more wildlife and look at the wildflowers'

'Please continue each year more funding for these projects. Great for education, mental health and generally gorgeous to look at. Increase nature connections'

'It has been wonderful to see the transformation. Thank you and well done.'

4.0 Social Value Considerations

4.1 Since Gloucester City Council adopted the Social Value Policy, three of the sub-projects within the Urban Greening project have met the £50k contract threshold for social value forming a formal part of the tender. These have delivered social value sums as set out below:

- Meadows & Planting 2021 (Ventureserve Ltd) - £22,297
- Meadows & Planting 2022 (R F Gardiner Ltd) - £13,969
- Works Tender 2022 (Sanctus Ltd) – £163,616.5

4.2 In total, £199,882.50 of social value has been delivered through the project.

4.3 It is also worth noting that:

- Gloucester City Council adopted the Social Value Policy part-way through the ERDF project so not all the work has had its social value outcomes measured.
- The Urban Greening project as a whole has delivered significant social value:
 - It is contributing to both the physical and mental well-being of the public who frequent these open spaces, through improved aesthetics and a stronger connection to nature (Themes 1 & 5)
 - It has helped to provide mitigation against climate change (Theme 3)

5.0 Alternative Options Considered

5.1 Not applicable

6.0 Reasons for Recommendations

6.1 Cabinet are asked to note the contents of this report.

7.0 Future Work and Conclusions

7.1 Having left the European Union, the UK is not eligible for future ERDF funding. However, many alternative funding streams are available for biodiversity improvement / flood mitigation / water quality projects. Funding often targets multi-benefit schemes, such as those delivered here. There is also the planning associated BNG (biodiversity net gain), which is likely to provide developer credits to help deliver future biodiversity projects in Gloucester.

7.2 Severn Trent Water (STW) is in the process of investing £76 million in Mansfield into a community integrated SuDS project to alleviate flood risk during storms and reduce sewage spills into rivers. STW has expressed interest in delivering a similar project in Gloucester, subject to match funding being available. This is in the preliminary stages of development. Gloucester City Council has emphasised that maintenance needs to be a key consideration (who will pay for / deliver the maintenance of the rain gardens etc).

7.3 On the back of the success of the ERDF watercourse re-naturalisation schemes, Gloucester City Council has won funding for further projects of a similar nature from the EA / LLFA / Enover / GWT. Notably, Whaddon Brook restoration Phase 2, Plock Court wetland extension and Owl Close river restoration.

7.4 Delivering the ERDF funded project was particularly bureaucratic and time consuming in terms of project management, particularly as Gloucester City Council was acting as the lead delivery partner. When applying for future funding, due consideration needs to be given to the complexity of the administration involved.

7.5 With all these projects, maintenance is an extremely important consideration, particularly in light of the ever-increasing financial pressures on local authority budgets.

8.0 Financial Implications

8.1 In terms of project delivery, the key financial data is set out in Section 3.3, above.

8.2 The financial implications in terms of maintenance are set out in Section 10.0, below.

9.0 Legal Implications

9.1 None, other than the maintenance risks associated with ERDF funded sites either being destroyed, or not maintained, as set out in Section 10.0 below.

- 9.2 Partnership agreements have been put together by One Legal and signed up to by delivery partners, to ensure that any risks associated with outputs not being maintained sit with the relevant delivery partners.
- 9.3 One Legal was consulted on the content of this report and has not requested any amendments.

10.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications

- 10.1 Under the funding agreement, ERDF interventions must be maintained for 7 years post practical completion (31st May 2023). Not maintaining the interventions could comprise two scenarios:

- Removing the intervention - for example, building a play area in an area of ERDF funded wildflower meadow.
- Not maintaining the intervention correctly, in the more literal sense – for example not carrying out annual ‘cut and collect’ on a wildflower meadow.

There is no written guidance from the managing authority (DLUHC) on the ramifications if ERDF interventions are not maintained for this 7-year period. DLUHC has been pressed to provide some kind of steer on this, and on the potential magnitude of any financial penalties which may result. However, they have insisted that they are unable to provide any advice in this regard, and that if an ERDF funded intervention is not maintained, then the lead delivery partner would need to write to DLUHC, and the matter would be assessed on a ‘case by case basis’.

Informally, the ERDF technical advisor who was assisting Gloucester City Council with the project suggested that:

- If an area of intervention is not maintained through either of the scenarios above, then mitigation could be carried out by creating an equal area of intervention, of equal merit, elsewhere. So, if a hectare of meadow is lost at site A, then a hectare of meadow could be created at site B. The replacement intervention must also have a management plan.
- If an area of ERDF funded intervention is removed or not maintained correctly, and no mitigation is carried out, financial penalties apply. In this case, fines of up to 100% of the grant sum could be levied. The exact amount would depend on the area not maintained and the nature of the intervention, but for wildflower meadow works out at an average of circa £12k per hectare.

To mitigate the risks of ERDF interventions being inadvertently destroyed, the ERDF team has provided the POS team with the ERDF GIS layer – so that the ERDF areas can clearly be seen on corporate GIS. The ERDF team has held handover meetings with the POS team, Ubico and the Rangers.

- 10.2 The bulk of the maintenance associated with the ERDF project is related to the wildflower meadows. For them to thrive and support good biodiversity (and be aesthetically pleasing), they must undergo ‘cut and collect’ each year – that is, when they undergo their main annual hay cut in the summer, the arisings must be gathered up, rather than dropped in situ.

The ERDF project team assisted the POS team in the purchase of a specialist cut and collect machine to be towed behind a tractor to conduct this work. This has been used successfully the last two summers at all the Ubico cut and collect sites.

- 10.3 Once the arisings have been gathered up by the machine, they must be put somewhere. This leads on to the topic of potential fire risk relating to piles of grass clippings, which arose in the hot, dry summer of 2022. The extremely hot and dry weather resulted in wildfires in certain parts of the country. This led to concerns that piles of meadow clippings piles could combust – either via arson or by natural means.

The only solution to fully eliminate the risk of fire is to remove the clippings from site, but this is extremely time consuming and expensive and not very sustainable – multiple lorry-loads at each site - plus a location is required to deposit them. In the end, a pragmatic approach was taken, following risk assessments, and clippings were only removed from sites where it was considered there was no sensible place to leave them, or where there had previously been arson. The considerations for ‘sensible’ included being away from property and being tucked away in a more discrete location. None of the grass clippings piles in Gloucester combusted in 2022, and 2023 (a very wet summer) has similarly been trouble free.

- 10.4 Under the funding agreement, the ERDF asset register must be maintained for 7 years post completion. All project data, including all procurement records, must be maintained until 31st December 2033. This data is currently held on Gloucester City Council’s corporate OneDrive / The Southwest (procurement) Portal.
- 10.5 It is worth noting that the watercourse re-naturalisation schemes have actually reduced Gloucester City Council’s risk exposure going forward. Prior to the project, the concrete channels were significantly deteriorating in places – their elimination has removed an expensive maintenance liability for Gloucester City Council at these locations.

11.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA) and Safeguarding:

- 11.1 A PIA is not applicable. Safeguarding is not applicable.

12.0 Community Safety Implications

- 12.1 Creating more aesthetically pleasing, nature-orientated spaces, can reduce anti-social behaviour leading to an increased sense of security for the public. In certain places, dense undergrowth next to through-paths has been managed to provide increased safety and security.

13.0 Staffing & Trade Union Implications

- 13.1 Not applicable

14.0 Sustainability

14.1 The ERDF project as a whole has been focused on sustainability.

Background Documents:

Appendix 1 – Photographs Of Some Of The Work Carried Out