

SUBJECT: LIVING LEVELS PARTNERSHIP

MEETING: Individual Cabinet Member Report

DATE: 12 January 2022

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: All Severnside

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To confirm continued support for the Living Levels Partnership.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- a. To endorse continued participation in, and support for, the Living Levels Partnership as it moves to its transition / legacy phases.
- b) To approve a financial contribution to the proposed transition phase to be hosted by RSPB Cymru

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 The Living Levels Landscape Partnership (LLLP) core programme supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) has been funded for three years, extended for a further year due to the Covid19 pandemic, from 2018 until its completion in March 2022. The programme seeks to conserve and restore the natural heritage of the Gwent Levels, to encourage appreciation of its value through interpretation and to inspire people to learn about it and participate in its conservation.
- 3.2 The outcomes of the programme have been considerable, reviving interest and enthusiasm in the Gwent Levels across a breadth of audiences from residents, landowners and farmers, visitors, business owners and volunteers. The heart of the Living Levels programme has been about reconnecting people with their history, their environment and across communities.
- 3.3 The programme of events, skills training and volunteering has had overwhelmingly positive feedback. The learning programme has sown the seeds of interest amongst young people from primary age up to tertiary, including partnership with Coleg Gwent.
- 3.4 As well as physical outputs relating to natural heritage restoration, countryside access and destination improvements the midterm evaluation noted that

Living Levels is making a very significant contribution to the area's heritage and to the way people engage with this landscape.

- 3.5 The core partners (MCC, Newport City Council, Cardiff Council, NRW, RSPB Cymru, Gwent Archives, and Gwent Wildlife Trust) have commissioned a consultancy team to develop a sustainable and integrated legacy plan *“that builds upon the success of the current programme and ensures that suitable mechanisms are put in place to deliver long-lasting benefits for the Gwent Levels landscape, heritage and communities”*.
- 3.6 In parallel the Gwent Levels Working Group organised by Welsh Government has identified four priority areas for a Gwent Levels Strategic Action Plan:
 - Continuation / successor to the Living Level Landscape Partnership – based around seeking transitional/succession arrangements to continue the partnership
 - Enhanced planning guidance
 - Developing a more robust evidence base to inform planning guidance and decisions.
 - Looking at potential to widen NRW (SSSI) land management agreements
- 3.7 The Minister for Climate Change also published a written statement in July committing to achieving sustainable management of the levels as part of the wider response to the climate change and nature emergencies in Wales.
- 3.8 The legacy planning process has carefully considered the synergy between a continuing programme and current policy objectives, including national natural resource management and decarbonisation policy and the contribution to local / regional Climate Emergency and Nature Recovery Action Plans. The draft vision and aims are attached at Appendix 2.
- 3.9 Recommendations for the future governance of the programme are also under preparation. It is clear that once the legacy management plan is finalised, it will not be an immediately operational plan which the partners can readily implement – it will need to be further worked up, a sustainable governance and funding model developed and more detail required to plan specific actions.
- 3.10 The Living Levels Partners Board has approved the principle of an 18-month transition phase to see the partnership move forward with the legacy plan and bring the aims and objectives to fruition. This further development phase would be supported by a reduced core Living Levels team, hosted by RSPB Cymru and seek to secure funding and governance arrangements to deliver the ambitious five-year management plan. A draft transition plan has been prepared to facilitate this.
- 3.11 The Living Levels Partner Board on 8 December 2021 approved the draft management plan and the transition plan in principle, subject to adequate

funding for the transition phase being committed by partners. As arrangements need to be in place to ensure an orderly transition from the current scheme formal commitment to the ongoing partnership and to a financial contribution to the transition stage is therefore sought.

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):

- 4.1 The EQIA is attached to this report at Appendix 1. This highlights the positive impacts that the programme has had on all well-being goals, meeting all sustainable development principles and a strong correlation with the well-being objectives and the corporate plan. It also contributes to delivery of the Biodiversity & Ecosystem Resilience duty and Forward Plan, the Climate Emergency Action Plan and nature recovery plans.

5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

Option	Benefits	Risks
Not to endorse / contribute to the Living Levels Partnership transition/ legacy phases	None	The considerable benefits accrued from the current programme will be dispersed and loss of opportunity to positively contribute to national, regional and local Climate Emergency and Nature Recovery Action Plans.
To endorse / contribute to the Living Levels Partnership transition/ legacy phases	Maximises the opportunity to build on the positive outcomes of the current programme and to contribute further to national, regional and local Climate Emergency and Nature Recovery Action Plans.	That it proves impossible to secure sustainable funding for the legacy phase at the end of the transition phase – this risk can be addressed towards the end of the transition phase and is likely to be mitigated by clear commitment to the widely base partnership

6. EVALUATION CRITERIA

- 6.1 A final evaluation of the current programme, as required by the NLHF, has recently commenced. The transition plan will include finalising the management plan including evaluation and monitoring proposals.

7. REASONS:

- 7.1 The continuation of participation in the Living Levels Partnership contributes to the delivery of the corporate plan, the Climate Emergency Action Plan, and to the Biodiversity & Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan and duty.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 8.1 An 18 month transition phase is proposed funded by partner contributions and external grant, for a team of four posts and to allow for a continuation of project expenditure, with an estimated total budget of £320,000. A contribution of £25,000 towards the transition phase is recommended and can be identified from existing budgets in 2020/21.

9. CONSULTEES:

Chief Operating Officer MonLife
Cabinet
SLT

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Appendix 1: Equality and Future Generations Evaluation
Appendix 2: Draft Management Plan Vision and Aims

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Appendix 2:

Living Levels Draft Management Plan Vision and Aims:

Vision

“The Gwent Levels is widely recognised and celebrated as a unique place within Wales, for its abundant wildlife, intricate, hand-crafted landscape, and deep, rich history. It forms a thriving part of our natural and cultural heritage, with a powerful sense of place that enriches people’s lives. The Levels is a resilient, working landscape, highly valued by residents and visitors alike, that makes a positive contribution towards combatting the effects of climate change and reversing biodiversity loss.”

Aims for the Gwent Levels

- A. The conservation and management of the Gwent Levels are informed by authoritative data, gained through ongoing research and monitoring.
- B. The Gwent Levels is a working landscape and an exemplar of landscape-scale conservation, where management involves integrating productive farming with conserving biodiversity, recreation and historic assets, resulting in resilient ecosystems and cultural landscapes.
- C. The Gwent Levels is a landscape where farmers and landowners are valued both as producers of food and other public goods; and as contributors to nature recovery.
- D. The Gwent Levels is a place where people understand and appreciate the landscape, its history and wildlife habitats; where they can access and enjoy its nature and culture; value its benefits for better health and wellbeing; and are inspired to support its protection and management.
- E. The Gwent Levels supports healthy, resilient ecosystems, its footprint is carbon negative and people understand the importance and urgency of preparing for and adapting to climate change.