

# Proposed Funding Bid for 'Wild Aire' project at St Aidan's and Fairburn Ings Nature Reserves

Date: 24 July 2024

Report of: Director of Communities, Housing and Environment

Report to: Executive Board

Will the decision be open for call in?  Yes  No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?  Yes  No

## Brief summary

St Aidan's and Fairburn Ings are large public green spaces adjacent to the River Aire in the Garforth and Swillington and Kippax and Methley wards. They are mostly owned by Leeds City Council and leased to the national charity, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The sites, principally wetlands on a former coal mines, have three main purposes as set out in their management plans, which are to deliver for nature conservation, public recreation and flood mitigation. An endowment exists for St Aidan's which is administered by the St Aidan's Trust (of which the Council is the Sole Trustee) and can only be spent on legitimate management and development of the 355-hectare site.

The RSPB have been managing Fairburn Ings since 1977 and relatively recently took on the management of St Aidan's in 2017. Since then, the sites have become valuable community assets and visitor attractions in addition to being thriving nature reserves and homes to rare wetland bird species.

Recognising the need for further development of visitor infrastructure and accessibility at the sites, along with conservation of natural and historic features, this report recommends that the Council gives in principle support for the RSPB to submit an £8.5 million bid to the National Heritage Lottery Fund (NHLF) for the 'Wild Aire' project.

This project (with a total budget of £11.5m), which mainly focusses on St Aidan's, will better meet the needs of the local community and visitors to the sites, make the reserves more accessible, deliver further improvements for nature and generate an income via a new café at St Aidan's to help the site become financially sustainable. Match funding for the 'Wild Aire' project will come from the RSPB, with a contribution from the St Aidan's Trust Fund.

## Recommendations

Executive Board is recommended to:

- a) Give in principle support as landowner, for the RSPB's proposed £8.5 million bid to the National Heritage Lottery Fund (NHLF) to invest in St Aidan's and Fairburn Ings, as part of the 'Wild Aire' project, for the purposes of improving the visitor offer, engaging more diverse

communities, making the sites better for wildlife and helping St Aidan's become financially sustainable. This support is to be demonstrated through the provision of a letter of support delegated to the Chief Officer, Climate, Energy and Green Spaces.

- b) Approve the allocation of £805,000 from the St Aidan's Trust as match funding for the project if the bid is successful.
- c) Defer and delegate, to the Director of City Development, any requirements to negotiate and agree terms for the variation of the lease of St Aidan's to the RSPB, to help facilitate the successful delivery of the project.

## **What is this report about?**

### St Aidan's and Fairburn Ings Nature Reserve and the RSPB

- 1 This report sets out proposals for the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) to submit a funding bid for £8.5 million to the National Heritage Lottery Fund (NHLF) for investment into St Aidan's and Fairburn Ings nature reserves as part of a proposed £11.4 million project, called 'Wild Aire', that will, if the bid is successful, take place over 5.5 years.
- 2 The sites are mostly owned by Leeds City Council and leased on 99-year leases to the RSPB.
- 3 The RSPB is a charity for the conservation of birds and nature which aims to bring people together who love birds and other wildlife, and who take action to restore the health and diversity of the natural world. It manages over 230 nature reserves across the UK.
- 4 The sites are large, between them totalling 650 hectares (1600 acres) in size and consist of a range of natural habitats including reedbeds, wetlands, grasslands, hedgerows and woodlands which are home to a wide range of wildlife.
- 5 In particular, they are known for their wetland birds. Fairburn holds nationally and internationally important breeding and wintering populations of wildfowl such as gadwall, pochard and shoveler and also supports a heronry with breeding cormorant, grey heron, little egret and, more recently, spoonbill has also colonised. St Aidan's supports breeding bittern, bearded tit, pochard, 2,500 pairs of black headed gulls and the UK's largest colony of black-necked grebes.
- 6 They are also popular visitor attractions with people coming to enjoy the large open green spaces, access the extensive walking and cycling routes, watch and learn about local wildlife and a visit a small but busy café at St Aidan's. Between them, they currently host over 170,000 visits a year.
- 7 Also of interest at St Aidan's, is a walking dragline that once helped mine the coal from the site. Although not part of the land leased to the RSPB, it is an interesting, important and iconic reminder to local communities and visitors of the site's industrial heritage.
- 8 The sites perform three important functions:
  - a) Nature conservation - providing a nationally and internationally important home for a wide variety of wildlife including nationally rare wetland bird species such as black-necked grebe, spoonbill and bittern.
  - b) Flood risk management - taking excess flood waters from the River Aire to help to protect Castleford, Brotherton, Ferrybridge and beyond from flooding (St Aidan's operates as part of the Environment Agency washland system and can store 7 million cubic metres of flood water).
  - c) Public recreation – providing an opportunity for local residents and visitors to experience nature and enjoy a range of recreational activities including walking, running, cycling, horse-riding and fishing.

- 9 The RSPB's aims in relation to St Aidan's, as set out in its public management plan, are for the site to:
- Be instrumental in saving nature, with thriving populations of threatened species.
  - Become a regionally important visitor destination.
  - Be a leading example of the integrated management of public open spaces delivering for people, wildlife and flood resilience.

### Existing Funding

- 10 St Aidan's and Fairburn Ings are managed by the RSPB using a combination of RSPB core funds, grants, income from the café and car parking and, at St Aidan's, an endowment set aside in a Trust for the management of the site.
- 11 UK Coal, the owners and operators of the open cast mine that preceded the nature reserve at St Aidan's (who became Harworth Estates in 2004), set aside an endowment of £1 million for the upkeep of the restored site once operations ceased. This was signed over to the St Aidan's Trust, who oversee its disbursement for the sole purpose of funding the on-going management and development of St Aidan's in line with the Trust Deeds which were set out in 1994. Leeds City Council is the Sole Trustee of the St Aidan's Trust.
- 12 It was acknowledged, in reports to the Council's Executive Board in 2005 and 2010, that this endowment, even with interest, would not be sufficient for the effective long-term upkeep of the site which was one of the key reasons why it was leased to the RSPB who appreciated its wildlife value afforded by its extensive wetlands and location along the River Aire – a key bird migration route. For more information the relevant reports can be found here: [Report to Executive Board, 6 July 2005](#) and [Report to Executive Board, 25 August 2010](#).
- 13 The work of the RSPB at St Aidan's is currently supported by an annual contribution from the St Aidan's Trust fund as agreed in the Grant Funding Agreement of 2017. However, that Fund is likely to be exhausted by the end of the decade which means it is necessary to explore other options to secure the long-time sustainability of the site.
- 14 Proposed Funding Bid for 'Wild Aire' project
- 15 The RSPB have developed a project, called 'Wild Aire', which will deliver a range of improvements at St Aidan's and Fairburn Ings (with the main focus of the project being on St Aidan's), get more people engaged with the sites and, also, help St Aidan's become more financially sustainable. They have submitted an Expression of Interest to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) and have had it accepted. They now propose to submit a funding bid, in two stages (a 'Development' phase, followed by a 'Delivery' phase should the Development phase be successful) to the NLHF for £8.5 million. This will make up the bulk of the £11.5m overall project budget.
- 16 The bid will include:
- a) A development of a new accessible Welcome Building and café at St Aidan's to replace the temporary visitor centre, toilet and staff facilities there and generate an income to help cover the costs of running the site.
  - b) A major programme of engaging local communities and under-represented audiences with the nature and history of St Aidan's supported by a community space for events and workshops in the Welcome Building.
  - c) An increased range of employment, volunteering, traineeship and skills development opportunities based at the sites.

- d) The proposed building at St Aidan's will also provide a permanent base for *Experience Community*, a charity which specialises in helping people with disabilities access nature.
  - e) A small play area at St Aidan's.
  - f) Wildlife viewing structures to offer shelter at various locations across St Aidan's so visitors can enjoy it in all weathers.
  - g) Refurbishment of the wildlife viewing structures at Fairburn Ings to make them more resilient to the increasingly regular flooding events there.
  - h) Natural habitat enhancements to make the sites even better for wildlife.
  - i) A car park extension at St Aidan's because the existing one is already too small for the number of visitors the site receives which causes problems for visitors and impacts on local highways and residential streets. The car park extension will allow for EV chargers and disabled parking at the site.
  - j) A condition survey and management plan for the 'Oddball' dragline mining machine heritage feature (which is based on St Aidan's but is not within the RSPB's lease).
  - k) A management plan for Newton Abbey, the Scheduled Ancient Monument at Fairburn Ings.
- 17 The RSPB has two primary partners for the bid with the aim of increasing the diversity of the people experiencing and getting involved at St Aidan's.
- a) [Experience Community](#) – a charity focussing on helping people with disabilities access the countryside.
  - b) [Sheffield Environmental Movement](#) - a charity who are national experts in their field at engaging ethnically diverse people and refugees with nature. (Note: their role in this project isn't Sheffield focused – it is about drawing on their skills to deliver for the people of the Aire valley).
- 18 The conditions of the NLHF will also require Leeds City Council, as landlord, to be named as a partner although the Council will not be required to play any major role in the project beyond offering support for the project via a 'letter of support' and making some minor changes to the lease as set out in the recommendations above and the legal section at point 45 below.

### **What impact will this proposal have?**

- 19 The project will improve the sites for both visitors and wildlife.
- 20 More people will visit St Aidan's and be engaged and connected with the site.
- 21 St Aidan's will be more accessible and engage a greater range of audiences.
- 22 The operation of St Aidan's will become more financially sustainable.
- 23 Plans will be put in place for the long term management of the key heritage assets of the site.

### **How does this proposal impact the three pillars of the Best City Ambition?**

Health and Wellbeing

Inclusive Growth

Zero Carbon

- 24 This proposal supports Health and Wellbeing through providing good quality, free, accessible public green space full of opportunities to walk, run, cycle and enjoy nature and wildlife. In particular it contributes to '*creating a well-connected and welcoming city where every community has access to local green spaces, and people of all ages can enjoy activity that supports their mental and physical health.*'
- 25 It supports Inclusive Growth by providing an '*opportunity to create growth in our economy*' by developing a new income-generating visitor centre and 'green tourism' offer at St Aidan's. It will also play a part in '*ensuring people of all ages and backgrounds can enjoy access to education, skills development, and employment opportunities to meet their needs and the needs of a*

*growing economy, where businesses and educators are encouraged to invest in upskilling people and supporting them to reach their full potential* by providing volunteer and job opportunities and targeted apprenticeships. The project is also an example of the Council's *'supporting our organisations to be productive, innovative, creative, ambitious and connected to their local community'*

26 And it supports Zero Carbon by *'working together with local communities, landowners and partners to protect nature and reverse the loss of biodiversity, adopting innovative and sustainable practices which enable everyone to enjoy the benefits of abundant and thriving wildlife.'* In particular, the project proposes to increase biodiversity by improving some of the habitats at the site and improving access to nature (the more people that are able to enjoy and appreciate nature, the more likely it will be that they will care for and protect it in future). In addition, as mentioned above, the sites, particularly St Aidan's, provides a valuable role storing flood water from the River Aire to protect the communities downstream – the project proposes to use some of the grant funding to ensure the visitor infrastructure is more resilient to such flood events (which are becoming increasingly common). The potential car park extension will allow for EV chargers to be installed to support the use of more sustainable vehicles. And the proposed new Welcome Building will be designed with environmental best practice in mind - the RSPB's architect's brief for the early designs stated that the building should have 'sustainability baked in' to every aspect e.g. by using sustainable materials, solar panels to generate energy and minimising the energy required to keep the building at the right temperature by insulating it well.

### **What consultation and engagement has taken place?**

Wards affected: Garforth and Swillington and Kippax and Methley

Have ward members been consulted?       Yes       No

27 The Executive Member for Climate, Energy, Environment and Green Spaces, local ward members (from Garforth and Swillington, Rothwell and Kippax and Methley) and local parish councils have been kept up to date with the proposals and invited to contribute their thoughts and ideas on the scheme.

28 An initial programme of public consultation was undertaken by the RSPB in 2017 to find out what local residents and visitors would like to see happen at St Aidan's and Fairburn Ings in the future. Over 850 questionnaires were completed with the most common requests being the following, all of which will be addressed by the proposed project:

- more signage and information
- a new café and shop
- more opportunities for seeing wildlife
- more visitor facilities including new toilets

29 The initial concept designs for a welcome building at St Aidan's were consulted on via an exhibition and online consultation in December 2022, generating 193 responses. Of these, 73% rated the plans as 'Excellent'.

30 Updates on the project are regularly shared and feedback sought at the St Aidan's Community Forum.

31 In July 2022, Executive Board gave approval for the submission of a number of Levelling Up Fund bids including an (unsuccessful) proposal to invest in 'upgrades and accessibility to parks and wetland areas' including St Aidan's.

32 In addition, if the funding bid is successful, there will be further extensive community engagement as part of the 18-month Development Phase of the project as that phase includes

the co-creation of detailed plans for the welcome building and other infrastructure and for events and interpretation.

### **What are the resource implications?**

- 33 The Council is the Sole Trustee of the St Aidan's Trust (SAT). The Trust was endowed with £1 million by British Coal in 1994 for the purposes of managing the Trust Land as part of the planning conditions around the open cast mining that took place at the site prior to it becoming a nature reserve.
- 34 The Trust Deed of 1994 sets out the lawful purposes of the Trust as 'To provide a nature conservation lake...a further lake for recreational and conservation purposes...an area of reed bed and marsh for the attraction and observation of wildfowl and an education and field studies centre' and 'To make the Trust land available in the interests of social welfare for the recreation and leisure time occupation for those living or working in or resorting to the South Leeds area within which the Trust land is situated'.
- 35 The endowment has since grown with interest and a commitment was made by the Trust, as reported to Executive Board in 2010, to transfer a regular, annual sum of money (a 'grant') to the RSPB for the management of the site.
- 36 As set out in the Grant Funding Agreement of 2017 the sum of the grant is agreed annually between the RSPB and the Council's 'nominated representative' (currently the Parks Operations Manager) in line with the lawful purposes in the Trust Deed outlined above.
- 37 However, it has been acknowledged, since 2005, that the original endowment sum provided to the St Aidan's Trust was not sufficient to maintain the site in the long term and this is one of the reasons the RSPB have proposed the funding bid to the NHLF.
- 38 It is anticipated that, if successful, the NHLF funded project will enable the RSPB to make St Aidan's financially sustainable in the long term whilst improving the visitor facilities and natural environment that have made it so popular so far.
- 39 The RSPB have requested that approximately £805k from the St Aidan's Trust fund is contributed to the proposed NHLF funded project as match funding for the St Aidan's element of the project if the bid is successful. Although the executive board report from 2010 allows the Council's nominated representative to make this decision, this request is beyond the level envisaged in 2010 Executive Board report and therefore it is appropriate to refer this decision back to Executive Board for approval.
- 40 There are no financial implications for the Council with regards the Fairburn Ings elements of the project.
- 41 The implications of this proposal on Council staff resource are considered to be minimal, with the commitment being for Council officers to continue to meet the RSPB for regular updates about the sites and be offered the chance to give feedback on proposals as per the current arrangements.

### **What are the key risks and how are they being managed?**

- 42 There is a risk that the funding bid to the NHLF will not be successful. However, the NHLF have given the go ahead for the RSPB to submit a bid following their initial Expression of Interest which means they are supportive of the proposed project so far. If the funding bid is unsuccessful, other options for securing the future of the nature reserve will be explored.
- 43 There is a risk that full match funding will not be secured, so the RSPB are working on a comprehensive funding plan which they believe is achievable. Any shortfalls in funding will be underwritten by the RSPB.

- 44 There is a risk that the costs of the project will over-run so the RSPB have worked up infrastructure plans to concept stage ahead of submission, and had these costed by Quantity Surveyors, to ensure they are realistic. They have also accounted for contingency and potential inflation. As the project is being led by the RSPB on land they lease and there is no financial commitment to it from the Council (except the potential match from the St Aidan's Trust referred to in the Financial Implications section above), it is not a financial risk to the Council.
- 45 There is a risk that planning permission will not be granted for the proposed infrastructure elements of the scheme, particularly the visitor centre, so pre-application advice will be sought in the early stages of the project.
- 46 All the risks above will be dealt with in detail at the Development phase of the project, before a commitment is made to the more expensive and impactful Delivery phase.

### **What are the legal implications?**

- 47 St Aidan's was leased by the Council to the RSPB in 2017 for 99 years on a peppercorn rent.
- 48 The aims and objectives of the RSPB's proposed funding bid to the NHLF are in line with the St Aidan's Trust Deed of 1994.
- 49 The 2017 grant funding agreement between the Council and the RSPB establishes that the Council's 'nominated representative' (the Parks Operations Manager) can make decisions on funds transferred to the RSPB annually for the purposes of managing St Aidan's nature reserve.
- 50 To deliver the project, it may be necessary to make some changes to the lease to meet the requirements of the funder (e.g. the RSPB committing to not using break clauses) and to allow the RSPB to sublet some of the visitor centre to a third party (*Experience Community*, the charity, mentioned above, which works to help people with disabilities access to the countryside). These changes have been discussed with Asset Management and it is recommended that any decisions around these are sought from the Director of City Development.
- 51 Planning permission and all other necessary legal consents (for example, from the Environment Agency) will be sought for the new visitor centre, car park extension and any other building works as appropriate.
- 52 There are no legal implications of the work proposed at Fairburn Ings.

### **Options, timescales and measuring success**

#### **What other options were considered?**

- 53 The option not to support the funding bid was considered but rejected in the light of the many potential benefits of receiving the funding (particularly in relation to securing the long-term future of St Aidan's as a nature reserve and visitor attraction of regional significance) and the low level of risk related to it.

#### **How will success be measured?**

- 54 A funding bid for the 'Wild Aire' project will be submitted by the RSPB to the NHLF for investment of over £8 million centred on St Aidan's, but also including some infrastructure and habitat works at the nearby RSPB Fairburn Ings nature reserve.
- 55 If the bid is successful, the resulting investment will deliver improved visitor facilities, the engagement of more diverse communities and improved wildlife habitats at the sites which will have benefits for local residents and visitors from further afield, nature and the local economy. In addition, the developments will allow the RSPB to generate income to cover the costs of running the reserve, and thus remove the need for annual funding from the Trust fund.

## What is the timetable and who will be responsible for implementation?

56 The RSPB are responsible for implementation with the Parks Operations Manager as lead contact for Leeds City Council.

57 Time Table:

Date	Action	Notes
Aug 2024	RSPB submit funding bid to NHLF	
Late 2024	Decision received	<i>If successful:</i>
April 2025 – Oct 2026	Development Phase (18 months)	Testing ideas, working up more detailed plans, seeking planning permission for infrastructure. Delivery Phase' funding bid to be submitted at end of this period. <i>If successful:</i>
April 2027 – Apr 2031	Delivery Phase (4 years)	Visitor Centre opens 2029.

### Appendices

- EDCI screening

### Background papers

- None