

Culture and Communities Committee

10.00am, Thursday, 5 December 2024

Water of Leith Conservation Trust Grant Funding

Executive/routine
Wards

Executive
All

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that Committee approve an increase in revenue support grant funding award to the Water of Leith Conservation Trust to £35,000 per annum (in the region of an additional £10,000 per annum from current award) as a contribution towards the overall delivery of improvements and maintenance along the Water of Leith, for three years beginning 2024/25.

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Water of Leith Conservation Trust Grant Funding

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report seeks approval of grant funding for the Water of Leith Conservation Trust (WoLCT) to deliver nature conservation activities along the Water of Leith river, walkway, and adjoining areas.

3. Background

- 3.1 The City of Edinburgh Council [declared](#) a Nature Emergency in February 2023 and officers have been responding to this through the delivery of a number of strategies, programmes and action plans that include the [draft Climate Ready Plan 2024-2030](#); the [Edinburgh Biodiversity Plan 2022-2027](#); the [Edinburgh Nature Network](#); and the [Edinburgh 2050 Thriving Greenspaces Vision and Strategy](#).
- 3.2 The Water of Leith Conservation Trust is a registered charity. Since 1988, the WoLCT has carried out work to conserve and enhance the river, its heritage and wildlife: promote education and recreation through the Visitor Centre at Lanark Road; and work with volunteers and community groups to deliver around 300 river clean-ups and habitat improvement tasks annually. Its 2023-24 Annual Report is available [here](#).
- 3.3 The WoLCT have a long history of partnership working with the City of Edinburgh Council. Over the last year, more than 4,000 volunteer hours have been spent undertaking river clean-ups; treating and managing invasive non-native species (INNS); maintaining the Water of Leith walkway and adjoining path network; planting and maintaining wildflower meadows and community gardens; undertaking river patrols; and carrying out biodiversity surveys to monitor wildlife.
- 3.4 The WoLCT has been working with the Council on The Coalie Project at Coalie Park, a former coal depot, railway yard, and place for ship repair. Coalie Park serves as an important blue and green space.
- 3.5 The WoLCT have developed a new five-year strategy, and work is underway to sketch out the scale of the investment needed and key areas of work to be delivered over the next five years. Clarity of funding, at least for the first half of the

strategy period provides some reassurance and stability for projects being worked on in partnership with the Council.

4. Main report

- 4.1 Evaluating the value of the work completed by WoLCT last year (based on the grant awarded (Appendix 1)) indicates a return on investment of £68,239.
- 4.2 In addition, the WoLCT:
 - 4.2.1 Operates a Visitor Centre facility open seven days a week, offering a free exhibition, walkway information, a volunteer-run community café and toilets for walkway users;
 - 4.2.2 Delivers an all-year-round programme of outdoor learning and low-cost public events – on average delivering 180 learning session per annum or 3.5 sessions per week;
 - 4.2.3 Funds and maintains a website and online presence promoting the Walkway and the river;
 - 4.2.4 Takes a lead in the delivery of the Water of Leith Management Plan and chairs the River Action Group, bringing together partners such as SEPA, Scottish Water, Forth Ports, NatureScot, relevant Council services and local stakeholders, to tackle the many issues such as flooding, pollution, and resilience to climate change that affect the river; and
 - 4.2.5 Fund and deliver transformative projects (such as the Coalie Park Improvement Project and a £500,000 investment in a Council asset entirely planned, delivered, and fundraised by the Trust).
- 4.3 The WoLCT are looking to the Council to increase its current revenue grant funding by c.£10,000 to £35,000 per annum for this and the next two financial years.
- 4.4 Officers support awarding the additional c.£10,000 grant of revenue funding as work carried out by the WoLCT has been curtailed in recent years due to the increase in costs and restrictions in how much work can be completed by the grant awarded.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 Subject to Committee approval, officers will proceed with putting the necessary agreements in place.
- 5.2 Culture and Communities Committee will receive an annual update by way of a briefing note on progress to date and proposed work programme for the upcoming year.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 It is proposed to increase the grant funding for the WoLCT to £35,000 per annum for three financial years (2024/25, 2025/26 and 2026/27), The proposed investment can be contained within the Neighbourhood Environmental Services revenue budget.
- 6.2 Any risks associated with the awards of grant to WoLCT will be mitigated by grant monitoring and annual assessment and reporting arrangements set out in the funding agreement.

7. Equality and Poverty Impact

- 7.1 The proposals will assist the Council to better deliver its equality and rights outcomes and the delivery of the Equality Act 2010 public sector equality duties to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations.

8. Climate and Nature Emergency Implications

- 8.1 As a public body, the Council has statutory duties relating to climate emissions and biodiversity. The Council

“must, in exercising its functions, act in the way best calculated to contribute to the delivery of emissions reduction targets”

(Climate Change (Emissions Reductions Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019), and

“in exercising any functions, to further the conservation of biodiversity so far as it is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions”

(Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004)

- 8.2 The City of Edinburgh Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and committed to work towards a target of net zero emissions by 2030 for both city and corporate emissions and embedded this as a core priority of the Council Business Plan 2023-27. The Council also declared a Nature Emergency in 2023.

Environmental Impacts

- 8.3 It is anticipated that the activities delivered by the WoLCT will have positive impact on the climate and nature emergency through the delivery of nature conservation activities across the river catchment. Active management of invasive non-native species has a significant impact on biodiversity and reduces the spread of hazardous species, such as Giant Hogweed.
- 8.4 Nature conservation and local improvements to blue and green space will provide opportunities for increased use by residents and visitors and the implementation of

nature-based solutions will protect and enhance biodiversity, improve the physical environment and access to blue and green space, and promote sustainable forms of travel along the river walkway and connect communities.

9. Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact

- 9.1 It is envisaged that activities will have positive impacts on the community and support the Council in advancing equality of access to quality blue and green space along the Water of Leith.

10. Background reading/external references

- 10.1 [Edinburgh Biodiversity Plan 2022-2027](#)
- 10.2 [Edinburgh Nature Network](#)
- 10.3 [Edinburgh 2050 Thriving Greenspaces Vision and Strategy](#)
- 10.4 [The Water of Leith Conservation Trust Strategy 2024-29](#)

11. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Value of work currently delivered.

Appendix 1 - Value of work currently delivered

Litter picking and river clean-ups

The biggest area of work continues to be the regular cleaning-up of the river and local areas around it. The monthly clean up in Leith, including the use of a boat to sweep the basin areas, results in around thirty bags of rubbish each time. Over the year, volunteers waded from Balerno to Leith three times removing rubbish, keeping it healthy and in good condition for local wildlife. Most of the rubbish is found in hard-to-reach places that can only be removed by hand, without this regular work the riverbanks would be strewn with plastic waste and fly tipping. In addition, unexpected events, such as cleaning up following concerts, along the riverside path have also been completed.

Annual WoLCT volunteer hours spent litter picking: 2,500

Value based on Living Wage 2023/24: £26,050

Path maintenance and repair

Volunteers carry out significant amounts of cutting back vegetation, scraping off mud, raking leaves, opening drainage, cleaning graffiti, painting railings when needed on the walkway, which frees up the council teams to work in other areas. This regular and often strenuous work means the walkway, that stretches through the city centre, is a well-maintained resource for commuters, visitors, and residents.

Annual WoLCT volunteer hours spent on path work: 1,800

Value based on Living Wage 2023/24: £19,332

Invasive non-native species (INNS) removal and treatment

Currently, 4 trained operatives have treated 5,000 Giant Hogweed plants and seedlings between Balerno and Leith and on the Murrayburn tributary, keeping the banks safe and free of this invasive species. In addition, volunteers hand pulled Himalayan Balsam along 13 miles of the river to maintain biodiversity.

Annual specialist staff days spent treating Giant Hogweed: 35 tasks with 2 trained members of staff at £200 per day value 2023/24 £14,000

Annual volunteer hours spent on other INNS removal: 300

Value based on Living Wage 2023/34: £3,126

Total value of INNS works £17,126

Walkway patrols and wildlife recording to inform habitat management

In addition to the priority tasks above, smaller tasks are also carried out on eight wildflower meadows and three community gardens located on Council land along the walkway. Each year, the ecology of each site is surveyed, to identify and carry out tasks to improve the biodiversity of the areas. Our findings are logged to a national database. In the autumn, the meadows are scythed and raked by volunteers. Volunteers also patrol mile-long

sections of the river on average five times per week reporting issues like fallen trees on the walkway, fly tipping, pollution events, as well as recording walkway use, and wildlife.

Annual WoLCT volunteer hour spent on patrolling and managing habitats on Council land:
550

Value based on Living Wage 2023/24: £5,731

In all this a close working relationship between a voluntary and public sector organisation has become a very beneficial partnership - ensuring the city truly has a *'healthy river cared for by its community'*.

Appendix 2 – Draft proposal for expenditure of additional grant funding

1. Revenue Grant Support - £35,000 per annum for 3 years – April 2024- March 2027

This would be an additional £10,000 per annum over and above the existing grant, which would support an increased staffing structure, which would include a Senior Ranger, Conservation Officer and River / Walkway Ranger.

An increase in revenue support would enable the WoLCT to extend the number of staff hours and practical tasks undertaken, and the geographical spread of our ongoing work. This is focused on:

- Litter picking and river clean-ups
- Path maintenance and repair
- Invasive non-native species (INNS) removal and treatment
- Walkway patrols and wildlife recording to inform habitat management.

Simply put additional funding means additional staff time, which means more tasks, more tasks mean less visible litter and a better maintained river and walkway.

Priorities

- Increase the programme of walkway and associated network maintenance - agree with City of Edinburgh Council an annual programme of activities to keep the path surface and associated infrastructure in good order.
- Increase the number of full river wades for litter and frequency of clean-up work.
- Increase our INNS treatment programme to include scoping and surveying upper catchment and tributaries to find and manage the sources of INNS.
- Provide a weekly programme of volunteering opportunities on the river, with WoLCT volunteers, community, and local businesses.
- Support 365 volunteer river patrols; review and improve reporting and recording methods, for walkway issues and wildlife recording.