

COUNTRYSIDE EDUCATION TRUST

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Countryside Education Trust has approached the Council for support towards completion of its New Forest Tree House Study Centre project. This project is to provide two tree houses; toilet block; heating system and related external works. The Trust is well established and well supported by visits from young people. This scheme replaces and extends previous facilities to better meet demands.
- 1.2 The scheme is well developed with significant funding support from a range of sources. However, there is a funding gap and assistance with this through a loan provision is sought.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

- 2.1 The primary aim of the Countryside Education Trust (a registered charity) is to promote and deliver learning through activities and facilities that enable children and adults to learn about, understand and care for the countryside. The Trust operates from two sites – New Forest Study Centre (where this scheme is based) and the Out of Town Centre.
- 2.2 The original facilities at the Study Centre were second hand when acquired and had gone beyond their useful life. The lack of facilities had also significantly restricted wider community use. The Centre does service a wide catchment, however there are local links with schools, charities, groups and a particular connection to Totton College where students with learning difficulties attend for entry level NVQ courses. As a whole, the Centre specialises in working with disadvantaged groups, as well as providing their open access programmes.
- 2.3 The project will provide two teaching spaces that will be multi use – allowing community bookings to take place, effectively for the first time. It is expected that throughput (about 10,000 students per annum) will increase by ten percent. Great care has been taken in the development of the project to deliver buildings with strong environmental credentials in how they are built and operated.

3. COUNCIL OBJECTIVES

- 3.1 The project reflects a number of Council objectives as contained in “Leading our Forest Communities”. In particular it is relevant to Empowering Young Lives (key priority); Encouraging Active Communities through Leisure and Culture; Improving People’s Health; Protecting the Environment and Promoting Wise Use of Natural Resources and it also addresses through its targeted work, Tackling Crime and Disorder (key priority).

- 3.2 Whilst there is work to be done to develop local community use, there are strong networks locally. Council officers can facilitate these outcomes.
- 3.3 The Trust is an organisation meeting needs from a wide catchment across the region and which is able to produce funds to support its on-going costs through earned income. In this situation a loan may be felt to be the most appropriate form of assistance. It is understood that the Trust would welcome such support.
- 3.4 The circumstances of this case are particular and distinct. The project fits well with Council objectives, there is potential for local community development, the building is an exemplar of sustainable development; there is multi - agency financial support for the capital scheme and the Trust is able to support a loan arrangement through its revenue raising.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The project cost is £672,000. Great efforts have been made to raise funding and contributions have been forthcoming from many Trusts and Foundations, Hampshire County Council and New Forest National Park Authority. There is a funding gap of £90,000. However, it is understood that the business plan for the project could fund a level of shortfall.
- 4.2 Given the above, it is suggested that an offer is made of an interest free loan of up to £30,000, to be repaid over a period of ten years. This will have a cost to the Council of approximately £1,500 per annum over the period of the loan. Should Cabinet be mindful to agree that a loan be made, appropriate security will be needed.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The project is an exemplary one with extensive use of timber, biomass heating system, solar powered lighting, rainwater harvesting and so forth. It will become an inspiring development to champion these approaches and of course continue to deliver their environmental education programmes.

6. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There is some work undertaken with targeted groups which aims to facilitate behavioural change.

7. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The Trust expressly target groups who do not usually have access to opportunities for environmental education / countryside experiences. The project specifically includes for access via ramps to the tree houses themselves.

8. PORTFOLIO HOLDERS COMMENTS

- 8.1 The Portfolio Holder for Leisure Culture and Youth Matters supports the recommendations.

9. RECOMMENDATION

9.1 It is recommended that:

- a) A loan is offered to the Countryside Education Trust for up to £30,000, interest free, over a term of ten years.
- b) The Head of Communities and Employment make appropriate arrangements to secure the loan in consultation with the Executive Director (Finance) and Head of Legal Services.
- c) Officers work with the Trust to develop the community use elements of their business plan.

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Background papers:
Published reports

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