

Committee(s)	Dated:
Epping Forest and Commons Committee Finance Committee	11052015
Subject: Branching Out Project Extension SEF 24/15	Public
Report of: Superintendent of Epping Forest	For Information

Summary

This report seeks to update your Committee on the delivery programme for the City's £6.8million Branching Out project, which began in August 2009 with a grant of £4.76 million from Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The projected programme has been extended, with agreement from the HLF, to reflect the need for more time to complete the Car Parks and Access element of the project, specifically delivery of the important 'gateways' to the Forest and the visitor hub interpretation panels.

The revised project end date for delivery of the outstanding work is 31 October 2015 and a further 2 months, until 31 December 2015, has been approved to close the project and make the final grant payment claim.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

Main Report

Background

1. Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) approved a grant of £4.756 million (in addition to the £231,500 already granted for development of the Stage 2 bid) towards the implementation of the £6.829 million project on 6 April 2009.
2. The Branching Out project was divided into four projects, reflecting the management and reporting to both the HLF and the City of London, namely; Coach House, Butler's Retreat, Open land and Car Parks and Access.
3. An agreement was entered into with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for grant aid to deliver the project over the planned five year period.

4. The Coach House and Butler's Retreat projects have been completed and the outcome reports presented to your Committee on 12 May 2014.
5. The Open Land Project aimed to implement a grazing strategy to protect the tradition of wood-pasture and also to undertake an accelerated intervention programme for 1500 veteran trees to enhance the natural aspect of the Forest.
6. The Car Parks and Access aimed to undertake car park improvements allowing the maximal capacity for visitors whilst halting Forest damage and also to install gateway, site interpretation and way finding signage to promote better public access.

Current Position

7. The Open land project is largely complete but some highways work, related to the grazing strategy, is yet to be delivered by Essex County Council (ECC) our project partner. Once complete ECC will have reached their match funding commitment to the project. There is no associated unspent HLF grant.
8. The Car parks and access project has not been completed within the grant agreement period. Both the installation of the 20 gateways to the Forest and the 12 interpretive panels to be sited at the improved visitor hubs remain outstanding. The remaining budget for the outstanding items is £216k.
9. The grant agreement with the HLF expired in September 2014.
10. During regular project meetings with our appointed case officer, the HLF indicated that they were content to grant an extension to the project duration. However, CoL was advised that a formal extension request should not be submitted until the duration of the extension was certain.
11. After revising the programme for gateways to allow for the various complex issues, which delayed delivery of the gateways and interpretation signage, a formal request was submitted on 7 March 2015 requesting an extension until October 2015.
12. The request was granted and the project has been extended to permit delivery of the gateways and interpretation signage until 31 October 2015 and submission of the final grant drawdown by 31 December 2015.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

13. The delivery of the gateways and interpretation panels meets the Forest Transport Strategy objectives to 'Improve the Forest Environment' by helping to orientate visitors and change the perceptions of those travelling through the Forest, making a clear statement of the Forest's identity and emphasising its historic importance.
14. Full delivery of the Car Parks and Access aspect of Branching Out meets the Epping Forest Management Plan (2004-2010) objectives of protection and

access by protecting the Forest from further harm from roads and traffic and by providing a clear indication to visitors that they have arrived at Epping Forest.

15. The project extension allows the Conservators to fully meet the Open Spaces Business Plan (2014-17) aims and objectives by promoting the role of the City of London in managing and funding the Forest using the Open Spaces identity.
16. The project also meets the Corporate City Together Strategy aim to provide a world class city which protects, promotes and enhances our environment.

Implications

17. **Finance** – The extension permits the delivery of the Gateways and interpretation signage thus maximising the grant award, retaining the associated £161k grant investment by the HLF.
18. **Legal** – The project extension allows the City to continue to operate within the grant terms.
19. **Property** - Resurfacing of the car parks and access trails as part of the HLF funded project should provide new durable surfaces and relieve pressure on annual maintenance costs at least in the short to mid-term. The new gateway signs will replace some of the existing older sign panels and will complement signs information provided elsewhere. The older gateway signs will be renovated and recycled for use on other open spaces where possible.
20. **HR** – The Branching Out Project Manager contract, and associated funding expired at the end of March 2015. For a period of 1 month the role was retained within Epping Forest Local Risk staffing budget. Project management for the outstanding items will be absorbed and prioritised within the existing Project Officers role at no further cost.

Conclusion

21. The gateways are the most visually significant aspect of the Branching Out project across the whole Forest and, whilst demarcating the Forest from its urban surroundings, this threshold signage aims to both complement and support the wider project achievements.
22. The HLF support the extension of this project to permit delivery of the gateways and meet the objectives as laid out in the project plan.

Appendices

- None

Background Papers

CS 026/13: Outturn Reports for Branching Out - The View Interpretation Centre and Butlers Retreat

Laura Lawson

Branching Out Project Manager, Epping Forest

T: 020 8532 5334

E: laura.lawson@cityoflondon.gov.uk