
Meeting of the Cabinet – 10th September 2008

Report of the Director of the Urban Environment

Strata (Wren's Nest National Nature Reserve) Project and Step Shaft Mine

Purpose of Report

1. To advise Members of the options available to secure the Step Shaft Mine.
2. To incorporate the preferred option within the Council's Capital Programme.

Background

3. Members will recall that the Black Country Urban Park bid, which included the Wren's Nest Strata project, was amongst the final 4 contestants in the BIG Lottery £50m Peoples Millions TV Competition.
4. Unfortunately the Black Country Urban Park bid came second to the Sustrans Connect 2 bid for cycleways. The Black Country bid polled 84,000 of the 287,000 total votes cast while Sustrans received 119,000 votes. The Sustrans bid was based on a nationwide project whereas the other 3 finalist bids were locally focussed. This was thought to have had a significant impact on the voting pattern.
5. The Black Country Urban Park bid included Dudley's Wrens Nest Strata project of which 2 specific elements are referred to as follows:
 - The interpretation facilities on the surface at Wren's Nest and Seven Sisters Mines.
 - The essential temporary infilling and stabilisation of the caverns at Wren's Nest, in particular Step Shaft mine.

Interpretation facilities

6. The interpretation facilities on the surface at Wren's Nest and Seven Sisters Mines including work to entrances, paths, steps and a new accessible route around the site is the focus of a stage 1 bid that submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in March 2008 with a decision due in September this year. The stabilisation of the Stepshaft

Mine is not part of this application and is not considered eligible for funding from the HLF programme.

Step Shaft Mine

7. The Step Shaft mine element is the more urgent and potentially more problematic.
8. The two week opening of the Step Shaft Mine last December provided the opportunity for the council's Mine Manager and other technical officers to undertake inspections of the mine and its condition.
9. From a general inspection of the Step Shaft Gallery mine, it was evident that mine deterioration is accelerating and likely to continue unless proactive measures are undertaken. This suggests that the Step Shaft Gallery's life, if left in its current condition, is much shorter than previously estimated, with collapse inevitable if no active measures are taken.
10. An Options Study has been developed by the Strata project team. In summary, the options and associated costs are:

Option	Activity	Cost (approx)	Implications
<u>Option A</u> No active measures within the Step Shaft Mine	Cost of emergency works to Step Shaft mine if collapse occurs.	£550,000	Requirement to undertake emergency works to Step Shaft Mine in event of collapse. Permanent loss of Gallery
<u>Option B</u> Permanent Infilling of the Step Shaft Mine	Infilling of the gallery with PFA or similar permanent material	£705,00	Permanent loss of Gallery
<u>Option C</u> Temporary support by stone infill	Involves the infilling of the Gallery with aggregate to provide support to the gallery. First phase in the permanent stabilisation of the mine.	£885,000	Potential to retain unique gallery and enable the development of the feature in the future as funds become available.
<u>Option D</u> Full Stabilisation	Full Stabilisation of Gallery, including rock bolting to allow full access.	<u>Option C</u> £885,000 plus <u>£1,240,000</u> £2,125,000	Realisation of Strata Vision -

11. Whilst Option (A) of doing the least possible at the present time has few 'short term' financial implications, any future collapse of the mine could cost £550,000 in the emergency works that would be needed. In addition the mine would be lost forever to future generations. Option B, proactive permanent infilling, has the same end result in that the mine would not be accessible in future.

12. **Option (C) of temporary infilling is the preferred option as it provides the opportunity to support the mine as well as providing additional time for the Council to assess funding opportunities to realise the Strata vision in terms of public access in the future.**
13. Whilst the possibility of external funding for the interpretation facilities on the surface at Wren's Nest and Seven Sisters Mines is considered to have a good chance of success through the Heritage Lottery Fund (referred to in paragraph 6 above) there is little or no likelihood for any potential external funding being available for the Step Shaft Mine options that relate to infilling, either of a permanent or temporary nature, given that funding agencies criteria require measurable outcomes in terms of jobs, regeneration, heritage value etc., and this element does not deliver against those particular outcomes.
14. Therefore the Council is the only realistic source of funding for the Step Shaft mine measures which in the event of a sudden collapse it would be compelled to undertake. The advantage of moving forward with Option C is that Option A is effectively "do nothing" other than maintain fencing and security and will cost the Council £550,000 as and when collapse occurs and the mine will be lost for ever. Whereas the temporary infilling Option C would protect the mine and enable it to be accessed in the future if funds become available. to develop in line with the Council's Strata Vision.

Finance

15. With regard to the Heritage Lottery Fund Application for Wren's Nest National Nature Reserve (referred to in paragraph 6) the match funding is currently being sought from partners including Natural England and English Heritage as well as from existing council match funding and other budgets.
16. Options for the Step Shaft Mine stabilisation are set out in Paragraph 10.
17. Option C involves the infilling of the mine gallery with aggregate to provide support which would be the first critical phase in the permanent stabilisation of the mine and would retain the unique gallery and enable access to be gained in the future if funds become available. The cost for Option C is estimated at £880,000 which would require approximately £88,000 revenue funding per year to finance capital expenditure.

Law

18. The Council may do anything which achieves the promotion or improvement of the economic, social and environmental well-being of its area under Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000.

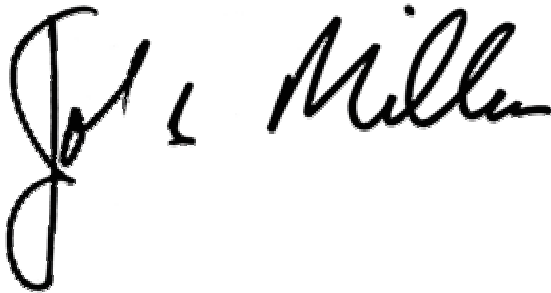
The Council may provide recreational facilities for its area under Section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976.

Equality Impact

19. The Strata (Wren's Nest NNR) proposals comply with the Council's Equality and Diversity policy. All consultation exercises undertaken to date and to be undertaken in the future will comply with Dudley Council Consultation toolkit with particular consideration for the view of children and young people.

Recommendation

20. Members consider the content of this report and support Option C which involves the infilling of the Step Shaft Gallery with aggregate to provide support to the gallery as the first phase in the permanent stabilisation of the mine thereby retaining the unique gallery and enabling access to be gained in the future.
21. The Director of the Urban Environment and Director of Finance to explore Council funding opportunities to fund Option C as part of this year's budget review process and incorporate the project within the Council's Capital Programme.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Millar'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'J' and 'M'.

J MILLAR
Director of the Urban Environment

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