

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON REGENERATION, CULTURE AND ADULT EDUCATION –
29th OCTOBER 2007**

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

**REPORT ON THE BLACK COUNTRY AS AN URBAN PARK -
STRATA AND WREN'S NEST NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE**

Purpose of Report

1. To update the Select Committee on the proposals and progress to date in respect of the Black Country's submission to the Big Lottery Fund – A Million People: The Black Country as an Urban Park. A presentation will be made at the meeting to support this report.

Background

The Black Country's Living Landmarks: The People's Millions application to the Big Lottery Fund (BIG)

2. In November 2005, the Black Country Leaders and Chief Executives agreed to submit a bid to the Living Landmarks: the People's Million's Programme of BIG for the development of the "Black Country as Urban Park". The project focuses on four flagship elements to assist in 'kick-starting' the process of delivering the outcomes from the Environment theme of the Black Country Study.
3. The main aims of the Living Landmarks programme are to:
 - champion innovation and excellence in design of the physical environment,
 - encourage best practice in the design, construction and management of projects
 - encourage partnership working and community engagement and participation.
4. The Living Landmarks: The People's Millions Programme will support one national project with up to £50 million of funding which will be part of a televised public vote in conjunction with ITV1 in December 2007
5. The Black Country Consortium submitted the "A Million People: Black Country as Urban Park" Stage 1 bid BIG in January 2006. In August 2006, the Black Country as an Urban Park was one of only six projects to be short-listed nationally to move forward to the second Stage. It is the only bid from the West Midlands.
6. The Stage 2 submission was made by the Black Country Consortium on the 31st May 2007 and a two-day assessment of the project was held in June 2007.

- 7 The short-listed projects are being now being assessed by the Big Lottery Fund and we will be informed on the 23rd October 2007 as to which projects move forward to televised public vote during in December.
- 8 The 5 other short-listed projects are:
- The Edge – The Eden Trust (St Austell)
 - Connect2 (people, places, pride) – Sustrans (Bristol Based, UK Wide)
 - Sherwood: The Living Legend Project - (Sherwood Forest and surrounds)
 - Inspired – The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum (Swindon)
 - Waterlinks - Somerset County Council (Somerset)

Black Country as an Urban Park

- 9 Black Country as an Urban Park has four flagship elements:
- Strata - Wren's Nest National Nature Reserve and the Seven Sisters Mines
 - Canals focusing on Wolverhampton
 - Green Bridge Park – linking West Bromwich town centre and Walsall Arboretum
 - Living Landscapes – 20 nature reserves or sites of public open space across the Black Country focusing on developing community projects for environmental improvements.
- 10 The main partners for the project are:
- Black Country Consortium
 - Dudley MBC
 - Sandwell MBC
 - Walsall MBC
 - Wolverhampton CC
 - Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust.

Strata

- 11 Strata will be a new visitor experience opening up Dudley's underground canals and mines, linking Wren's Nest National Nature Reserve with Castle Hill, Dudley.
- 12 The aims of Strata are to
- Conserve and enhance the Wren's Nest National Nature Reserve, it's canal links, geology, natural history, unique mining features and infrastructure and allow safe access to them
 - Raise awareness of the natural and cultural heritage of Wren's Nest NNR and its role in the development of the Black Country
 - Create a visitor experience that acts as a catalyst for the regeneration of the Black Country, its visitor economy and the local area
 - Increase local residents appreciation of the Wren's Nest area

- 13 The components of the Strata project are:
- a visitor centre at Todds End Field (Dudley Canal Trust)
 - opening up and stabilisation of the Wren's Nest Canal Tunnel from Todd's End field (Dudley Canal Trust, Black Country Living Museum) through to the Step Shaft Cavern
 - stabilisation of the Step Shaft Cavern and enhancement works on the existing Canal basin (the canal basin is believed to be the largest underground canal basin in the world – approximately 70m long and 8m wide)
 - construction of a new basin, alongside the existing canal basin and new tunnel from Step Shaft Cavern up to Wren's Nest NNR.
 - An inclined lift travelling in the new tunnel from the Step Shaft Cavern to Wren's Nest NNR
 - stabilisation of the Seven Sisters Mine Upper Gallery
 - an underground visitor facility at the Seven Sisters
 - Site wide improvements through Wren's Nest NNR, enhanced interpretation and a new education programme
- 14 If the Black Country as an urban park wins the TV vote in December, detailed design work will start in January 2008. It is anticipated that construction work will begin in 2009 and Strata will be open by Summer 2012.

Funding Applications

- 15 The overall Black Country as an Urban Park project is valued at approximately £109million. The Strata project has a development cost of £49million.
- 16 In addition to the Big Lottery Fund additional funding applications have also been made to the Heritage Lottery Fund and Advantage West Midlands.
- 17 Advantage West Midlands has approved an outline application for the Urban Park for a total of £16million - £10million has been allocated to the Strata project.
- 18 A Heritage Lottery Application was submitted in December 2006 to support the Strata element of the Urban Park bid. The application focused on the 'above ground' elements of the Strata project, namely the stabilisation of the Seven Sisters Mines and the Wren's Nest National Nature Reserve. The total cost was £16.3million with a grant request of £11.6million from HLF. Unfortunately, the Trustees at their meeting on the 24th July 2007 decided not to support the project as submitted, the main issue relating to the stabilisation of the Seven Sisters Mine and the 'value for money' which it represented.
- 19 The Trustees were supportive however of the proposals for the wider National Nature Reserve, including the proposals for enhanced interpretation around the site, increased opportunities for education and the educational facilities proposed. The Council have therefore been encouraged to resubmit an application focusing on these areas to the Heritage Lottery Fund which will be completed for the December deadline. A decision would be expected in June 2008.

Finance

- 20 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.
- 21 The financial implications of the Council's participation in the Big Lottery Project were included in the Capital Programme Monitoring report approved by the Council on 16th July 2006.

Law

- 22 Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 empowers the Council to take action to implement measures it considers likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of the Borough.

Equality Impact

- 23 This work has been conducted in full accordance with the Council's equality and diversity policies and should in no way have any prejudicial impact on different racial groups, disabled people, both genders and /or relevant groups. The needs of children and young people have been considered in the development of the project.

Recommendation

24. It is recommended that the Select Committee:-
- note the progress made to date for the Black Country as an Urban Park
 - supports the bid to the Big Lottery Fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund
 - actively engages in the promotion of the project with regard to the televised public vote in December, subject to the project being successful in going through to the televised public vote on October 15th 2007.



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List of Background Papers

Report to Cabinet – 13th September 2006
The Wren's Nest and Seven Sisters Heritage Experience – Big Lottery Fund (BIG) and Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) applications