

County Council

25 July 2023

Addition of Lias Line Improvement Scheme to Capital Programme

Recommendation

That Council approves the addition to the Capital Programme of £2,434,735 secured from the Government's Active Travel Fund for the purpose of improving the eastern section of the Lias Line traffic free greenway as part of the creation of a walking, cycling and wheeling route which connects Rugby, Long Itchington, Leamington Spa and other rural communities.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 In March 2023 the County Council received £2.5 million (£2,434,735 in capital funding and £65,265 in revenue funding) from the Government's Active Travel Fund for works to improve the eastern section of the Lias Line greenway. As the value of the Active Travel Fund grant exceeds £2,000,000, a decision of Council is required to add the project to the Capital Programme.
- 1.2 The Lias Line is part of the Rugby to Leamington Spa and / Leamington Spa to Daventry disused railway lines and is owned by Sustrans, a charity dedicated to making it easier for people to walk, wheel and cycle and the custodian of the National Cycle Network. The Lias Line extends between the Fosse Way near Offchurch in the west and Rugby in the east, with a branch line connecting to Model Village near Long Itchington. At Fosse Way the Lias Line connects with the County Council owned Offchurch Greenway which extends west to the Grand Union Canal close to Radford Semele. The County Council and Sustrans have an aspiration to create a network of approximately 15km of high-quality accessible traffic-free greenways for walking, wheeling and cycling based on the Lias Line and Offchurch Greenway which connect the communities of Rugby, Leamington Spa and Long Itchington and which form part of the National Cycle Network.
- 1.3 In 2022 Sustrans completed a first phase of improvement works to the Lias Line, providing 4.5km of traffic-free path with a sealed surface between a point just east of Fosse Way and following the branch line to Long Itchington. The route has proved popular with the local community and is well used for leisure activities.
- 1.4 The £2.5m funding secured from the Active Travel Fund will extend the upgraded section of the Lias Line greenway eastwards towards Rugby. The funding bid committed delivery of a further 3.5km of upgraded route between

Long Itchington Road near Hunningham Hill and Birdingbury Road between Marton and Birdingbury, however it is hoped that the funding will also be sufficient to improve a further 1.2km, extending the route to Bourton Lane, Birdingbury.

- 1.5 The proposed improvements extend across land in Warwick District, Stratford-on-Avon District and Rugby Borough and were granted planning permission by each planning authority between November 2020 and July 2021. The works will need to overcome engineering challenges, including replacing the recently demolished bridge over the A423 near Marton which had been repeatedly damaged by vehicle strikes, replacing a further bridge and meeting ecological requirements.
- 1.6 The works will be managed and delivered by Sustrans, and they will also be responsible for the future operation and maintenance of the facility. The County Council has entered into a grant agreement with Active Travel England in respect of the Active Travel Fund grant and is required to use the funding as proposed in the submitted funding bid. The funding cannot be transferred to an alternative scheme without the agreement of Active Travel England.
- 1.7 The Active Travel Fund grant is required to be committed (i.e. allocated) by the end of the 2023/24 financial year with completion of the works to be no later than March 2025 which is a realistic timescale given the scope of the work and scheme readiness. Design work is at an advanced stage, some preliminary works have been completed and the project has an existing site compound. The scheme has secured the required planning approvals and been scrutinised by Active Travel England through the funding bid assessment process to ensure it meets the fund requirements. Sustrans has significant local and national experience of delivering schemes of this type. As with the first phase of the Lias Line works which opened in 2022, Sustrans will utilise their Midlands based in-house network development and engineering teams to complete the scheme design work and project manage delivery and will commission construction contractors to undertake the scheme build.
- 1.8 Subject to Council agreeing the recommendation, the Council will enter into a sub-grant agreement with Sustrans to facilitate delivery of the project in line with the Active Travel Fund grant conditions and on terms and conditions acceptable to the Executive Director for Resources.
- 1.9 The Council will work with Sustrans as the scheme is developed to ensure it is delivered in line with the funding agreement and this will include ensuring it has no adverse impacts upon people with protected characteristics.
- 1.10 Concerns have been raised regarding the impact of the scheme on current equestrian use of the facility between Long Itchington Road and the A423 Coventry Road. Sustrans have confirmed that consideration is being given to this issue as part of the design process, however it is recognised that the Council in all likelihood will not have significant influence over the design given this is a Sustrans led project with the route being owned and upgraded

by them.

- 1.11 Sustrans hope to upgrade the remaining sections of the Lias Line in future years, subject to feasibility work and securing funding. East of Bourton Lane Birdingbury, the Lias Line is accessible for walking, wheeling and cycling for a further 2.4km to Popehill Lane, but the route is of poor quality and in need of upgrade to make it suitable for comfortable multi-user year-round use. From Popehill Lane users can connect to Rugby's cycling network via a circuitous route following quiet lanes and Draycote Water. The final 2.6km section of the Lias Line between Popehill Lane and the B4642 Coventry Road at Cawston will provide a more direct route to Rugby, but much of this section is currently inaccessible having been largely untouched since the railway closed.
- 1.12 Work is being carried out on the western section of the Rugby to Leamington Spa route. Sustrans is working on the provision of a short section of approximately 100 metres between the upgraded section of the Lias Line opened in 2022 and the Fosse Way where HS2 is required to provide a bridge over the road to connect the Lias Line to the Offchurch Greenway. HS2 is also providing a pedestrian / cycle bridge for the Offchurch Greenway crossing of HS2 and working with partners including the County Council, Sustrans, District Council and Department for Transport to identify options for how the Offchurch Greenway will cross Welsh Road as part of HS2 works to reconfigure the junction of Welsh Road and Long Itchington Road.
- 1.13 The County Council has secured an additional £150,000 revenue funding from the Active Travel Fund to undertake scheme development work with a view to upgrading the Offchurch Greenway to a standard consistent to the Lias Line, and to further improve connections to Radford Semele and Leamington Spa. A project to upgrade the cycling and walking infrastructure between the Radford Road entrance to Newbold Comyn and the western end of the Offchurch Greenway is due to be delivered later this year. This project involves providing a new toucan crossing on Radford Road, improving an existing access and creating a new access to the canal towpath and improving sections of the towpath. It is being delivered by Sustrans, the Canal and River Trust and County Council.

2. Financial Implications

- 2.1 In March 2023 the County Council secured £2.5 million (£2,434,735 capital and £65,265 revenue) from the Government's Active Travel Fund for the purpose of improving the eastern section of the Lias Line greenway, as set out in a funding bid to the Active Travel Fund. The terms and conditions of the grant are set out in a Grant Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Active Travel England. This includes a requirement to commit the grant funding by the end of 31 March 2024. The MoU also places responsibility for meeting any costs over and above the Active Travel Fund grant contribution, including cost overruns, on the Council, though this responsibility will pass to Sustrans as part of the sub-grant agreement. Failure

to comply with Grant Agreement / MOU could result in clawback of the grant.

- 2.2 The Lias Line is owned and managed by Sustrans which will design and deliver the works. Subject to Council agreeing the recommendation, the Council will release the grant funding to Sustrans on terms and conditions which will be set out in a sub-grant agreement prepared to ensure the County Council is able to meet its obligations to Active Travel England and other legal requirements. The sub-grant agreement passes responsibility for meeting all the terms and conditions set out in the Grant Agreement and MOU between the Council and Active Travel England to Sustrans. This will include responsibility for meeting any unfunded costs and any potential clawback of funds by Active Travel England. The Council will work closely with Sustrans on the project and will monitor progress against the terms of the agreement through project governance measures.
- 2.3 Should delivery costs escalate and exceed the grant funding the options will be to work with Sustrans and Active Travel England to agree a reduced project scope, for example by accepting a lower quality finish or reducing the length of route being upgraded, or to stop or delay the project delivery until additional funding can be secured to complete it. The County Council has not committed to contribute funding to the scheme and there is no expectation that it should do so.
- 2.4 The project is expected to support the growth and development of the rural economy, bringing increased trade for pubs, cafes, and other businesses. The development of the route also provides an opportunity for start-up businesses linked to the cycle route for example bike hire and cycle maintenance, as well as within the hospitality sector. Work by Sustrans using a Department for Transport approved methodology demonstrates the investment in the route will have a benefit cost ratio of 3.39 which the Government considers represents high value for money.

3. Environmental Implications

- 3.1 Transport is the single largest cause of carbon emissions in the UK. The Lias Line improvements will form part of a network of high-quality active travel infrastructure, which when complete will connect Rugby and Leamington Spa and many smaller rural communities located on or near the route including Long Itchington and Birdingbury. In common with other active travel infrastructure projects, improving more of the Lias Line for walking, cycling and wheeling will support journeys to be made by sustainable forms of transport and will contribute to reduced carbon emissions as well as lower levels of congestion and improved air quality.
- 3.2 The greenway has the potential to become a popular leisure destination which could generate car-based trips to access it. To help overcome this issue work is being carried out to make the route accessible by walking, wheeling and cycling from the key local population centres of Leamington Spa, Rugby and Southam, including connections to the stations at Leamington Spa and Rugby.

3.3 The Lias Line is an important ecological resource with identified populations of protected species including great crested newts and badgers. Work will be carried out to ensure the ecology of the route is understood and to manage and mitigate the impact of the scheme in line with the planning conditions and the project's Landscape and Ecology Management Plan.

4. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

4.1 The decision is required to enable the project to progress. Sustrans is progressing design work and it is anticipated that construction works will commence in the early part of 2024, but that a phased delivery approach may be followed to enable all necessary design requirements to be undertaken.

Appendices

None

Background Papers

None

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

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Other members: Clarke, Chilvers, Feeney and Fradgley