

**Meeting:** Executive  
**Date:** 10 November 2009  
**Subject:** Countryside Access Service 2009/10 capital programme  
**Report of:** Cllr Stephen Male, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Skills  
**Summary:** The report proposes approval of Project Initiation Documents for 3 schemes in the 2009/10 Capital Programme as detailed in the report.

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**Advising Officer:** Edwina Grant, Director of Children Families and Learning  
**Contact Officer:** Roy Waterfield, Assistant Director Leisure, Culture, Libraries, Adult and Community Learning  
**Public/Exempt:** Public  
**Wards Affected:** All  
**Function of:** Executive  
**Key Decision** Yes  
**Reason for urgency/ exemption from call-in (if appropriate)** To ensure that the Council has a robust and deliverable Capital Programme for the remainder of 2009/10.

## **CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS**

### **Council Priorities:**

- Supporting and caring for an ageing population
- Educating, protecting and providing opportunities for children and young people
- Managing growth effectively
- Creating safer communities
- Promoting healthier lifestyles

The three Capital Programme Project Initiation Documents (attached as appendices A - C) relate to the work of the Countryside Access Service and its delivery of the outcome themes in the Outdoor Access Improvement Plan and the objectives of the Green Infrastructure Plan. They are concerned with its 'linear access', or rights of way network and portfolio of countryside sites and green spaces, more precisely:

- Ongoing Health and Safety and statutory or legal obligations including DDA compliance in relation to the assets and infrastructure (Appendix A)
- the enhancement of the assets in ways that improve their use, the quality of service associated with them, and their achievement of Council policy objectives and to meet the demands of the area's Growth Agenda (Appendix B)
- the maintenance and enhancement of the infrastructure of Swiss Garden and the avoidance of long term increased cost through not acting now (Appendix C)

This work contributes directly and indirectly to all of the Council's objectives - more specific detail being provided in each of the Scheme attachments - and helps support performance against National Indicators 175 and 198, 6, 7, 110, 120 and 197.

**Financial:**

<b>Scheme</b>	<b>Value - 2009/10</b>
Rights of Way and Countryside and Heritage sites – structural improvements to bridges, surfacing and structures	£475K
*Outdoor Access and Greenspace Improvement projects	£224K
*Heritage Lottery Fund Project – The Swiss Garden	£50K

Those indicated \* involve third sector partnerships and/or external funding opportunities mentioned in the individual PIDs (e.g. 1:4.5 gearing ratio from the Heritage Lottery Fund (Swiss Garden) – Appendix C) and reduce future outlay on repairs and maintenance (All).

The capital spend proposed is primarily for asset maintenance and enhancement in line with procedural requirements relating to capital expenditure.

The Service also has a capital programme scheme for “Open Spaces” that is geared to generating new income to assist future revenue expenditure commitment. It includes capital funds, with £68K interest, received from the Highway Agency to acquire and enhance new ‘open space’ following the loss of greenspace land asset at Brogborough through the A421 dualling work. The Executive Report on the acquisition of the Rushmere Estate involved capital expenditure from this scheme and a further report is expected later this year in relation to a partnership venture at Corbett’s Hill Farm that has been the subject of discussion at Children, Families and Learning Management Team.

**Legal:**

The capital programme schemes relate to several statutory duties (e.g. Highways Act 1980 s.141 duty to maintain the network of public rights of way), specified in each of the Scheme documents. They will ensure that all the Council’s obligations are met. Failure to approve would increase the risk of the Council not being compliant with legislation.

**Risk Management:**

The asset management of the Council’s linear access network infrastructure (paths and bridges) and Countryside sites infrastructure (buildings etc) involves compliance with Health and Safety, accessibility legislation and the authority’s legal responsibilities, e.g. to ensure bridges on routes are safe and listed buildings are not at risk.

**Staffing (including Trades Unions):**

None

**Equalities/Human Rights:**

The enhancement of the assets will increase the people able to use the facilities through the removal of physical restrictions – a statutory requirement following the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 - and the increased attractiveness of the ‘offer’ made available to the public.

**Community Safety:**

Asset enhancement at countryside sites will increase their security and safety and make them more available to the public, meeting the requirements and expectations of the public of all ages for leisure and recreational activities in the locality.

**Sustainability:**

Much of the enhancement of the countryside sites and greenspace asset is directly linked to the management of our environment and growth in Central Bedfordshire. The works involved help support wider environmental awareness and engagement, and improve the quality of our local countryside and environment (our 'green infrastructure'), sustainable communities and quality of life. They also contribute to the potential for 'modal shift' in support of Local Transport Plan objectives by offering people the opportunity to walk and cycle to work, local facilities and school.

**RECOMMENDATION(S):**

**That the Executive approves the Project Initiation Documents for the Countryside Access Service's Capital Programme for 2009/10 (as part of the Review of Capital Programme proposing a revised 2009/10 Capital Programme for recommendation to the Council for approval), namely:**

- **Appendix A - Rights of Way and Countryside and Heritage Sites – structural improvements to bridges, surfacing and structures (£475K)**
- **Appendix B - Outdoor Access and Greenspace improvement projects (£224K)**
- **Appendix C - Heritage Lottery Fund – The Swiss Garden (£50K)**

*Reason for Recommendation(s): To obtain approval for the progression of a number of specific schemes in the Capital Programme for 2009/10. As noted in the September Budget Management Report to Executive, the capital approvals process in the Constitution is currently under review and is being considered by the Constitution Advisory Group. Until amendments to the Constitution are made, the Executive is still required to approve Project Initiation Document to enable individual schemes to proceed.*

**Countryside Access Service**

1. The Countryside Access Service is responsible for 1343km of rights of way – footpaths, bridleways and byways – the 'linear access' network. These provide a practical value (local travel on foot, cycle and horseback), by providing vital links to community facilities, and a wide range of leisure opportunities and benefits. Its countryside estate, managed with third sector partners including the National Trust and Greensand Trust, amounts to over 60 sites in excess of 1050ha. of land area. These sites include tourist destination visitor sites, such as the Country Parks at Dunstable Downs and Stockgrove, heritage sites such as Swiss Garden and a wide range of local woodland, and other areas of public open space that get an estimated 2 million visits each year. The Service is also involved in managing public access agreements over another 400 ha. of land and the management of 242 ha. of Open Access land, 41 commons, and 28 town and village greens, and developing new access opportunities and public open space. It also runs a network of 63 community volunteer groups (P3) working on a wide range of local environmental projects.

- 2 Central Bedfordshire's countryside is a great asset - a unique part of its cultural and natural heritage which is both distinctive and special. Access to the countryside and greenspace provide opportunities for residents to benefit their physical and mental health through getting 'fresh air', peace and quiet, walking and cycling, exercising and sport, to socialise and 'get out' as families, to learn about their local places (the wildlife, natural and local history), and to volunteer and get involved in their local place and community. Our countryside and greenspace also attracts visitors and tourists to the area with the consequential benefits for local businesses and the area economy. Much of it is available for people to access and enjoy and their enthusiasm for this is very strong. In survey evidence in 2007, residents, across the age range, said that getting out into the countryside (for walking, riding, cycling etc) was the most important of the seventeen 'cultural activities' on which they were questioned. The survey work also showed high percentages of residents regularly visiting countryside sites and using rights of way near their homes, and the important contribution 'getting out' makes to their lives – getting exercise, spending time with families, relieving stress etc - and benefits for the local economy.

### **Capital programme Schemes**

- 3 The Service depends on a Capital Programme to be able to fulfil its statutory duties in relation to its linear access network and meet and comply with its statutory, Health and Safety, and husbandry and DDA obligations in relation to its other landed estate that is managed for outdoor access and environmental benefit. It also requires capital expenditure to be able to enhance and make more accessible its countryside assets in ways that increase public use and engagement (meeting present and future needs), and improve the quality of public service (opportunities for exercise, health and other forms of recreation and enjoyment) and so as to achieve the Council's corporate policy objectives, the theme outcomes in the Service's Outdoor Access Improvement Plan and objectives of Bedfordshire's Green Infrastructure Plan.
- 4 The specific schemes are attached to this report as appendices. They each explain the scope of the work involved and how it relates to the Council's assets and their enhancement in line with the capital regulations. Each of these schemes has been individually considered the Corporate Asset Management Group and any comments incorporated. They are now being brought to Executive to complete their approval in line with the requirements of the Council's Constitution.

### **Appendices: A - C**

Appendix A – PID - Rights of Way and Countryside and Heritage Sites – structural improvements to bridges, surfacing and structures

Appendix B – PID - Outdoor Access and Greenspace improvement projects

Appendix C – PID - Heritage Lottery Fund – The Swiss Garden

**Background Papers:** None

**Location of papers:** Not applicable