

## COTSWOLDS CHAMPIONS STEERING GROUP

**Summary:** To review the progress of Cotswolds Champions Steering Group

**Recommendation:** That the Executive Committee notes the report

**Report by:** Scott Brown – Farming Engagement Lead

### MEMBERS OF THE GROUP

- Scott Brown, Farming Engagement Lead
- Mark Connelly, Land Management Lead
- John Mills, Planning and Landscape Lead (stepped down Sept 2021)
- Garry King, SoS Board Member
- Ben Stokes, Board Member for South Glos Council
- Angela Bence-Wilkins, Principal Planning Officer – Landscape, South Glos Council

### MEETINGS SINCE THE LAST EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

1. The last group meeting was held on 15 December 2020. The March 2021 meeting was postponed and we are yet to reconvene. However, acting as a dispersed group, we have continued to make decisions on supported projects and programme spend (as part of an agreed process). To some extent this has mitigated the need to meet as a group. We plan to meet next in Sept/Oct 2021.
2. Key points of discussion to note:
  - **Monitoring progress against programme objectives and timeframes:** For example, we have discussed barriers to progress, especially difficulties with Badminton Estate, who are generally positive about the Rail Corridor Enhancement Project but slow at responding to enquiries and taking actions that could enable the pace of project delivery to speed up. In general, things are just about on track but still challenging in the rail corridor. Also note recent change to delivery timeframe in point 11 below.
  - **Finalising the partnership agreement between CNL and FWAG South West to act as co-delivery partners on the £204k Rail Corridor Enhancement Project:** This was quite challenging and time consuming, as there was not a precedent for working this way at the CNL. However, we now have a partnership co-delivery model we can re-use for other projects.
  - **Assessing discrete projects and spend on Rail Corridor Enhancement Programme (lineside planting, etc.), using the ‘mitigation sum’:**
    - Lineside planting projects have been approved at Old Sodbury (£7,085) and New House Farm (£3,300). Group updated on further planting opportunities in development at other target mitigation sites.
    - Natural capital mapping underway across multiple landholdings by FWAG.

- **Assessing supported projects and spend on other projects being supported by the Cotswolds Champions programme, using the ‘project sum’:**
  - **Communities for Insects, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust (GWT):**  
Awarded £20k grant towards £126k nature conservation project in the Chalford area, working in partnership with the Royal Entomological Society (RES) and a community of private landowners. This landscape-scale project will enhance, expand and connect wildlife-rich sites between Stroud and Sapperton, delivering a programme of conservation management that drives sustainable action for insects and creates a national exemplar for nature’s recovery in the Golden Valley.
  - **Headwaters of the Little Avon, Bristol Avon Rivers Trust (BART):**  
Awarded £48k to initiate a catchment improvement project. The initial phase of the project involved surveying watercourses and prioritising options for project delivery on the ground. Benefits will include enhanced habitats, reduced flood risk and better water quality. BART have simultaneously been developing opportunities to expand the project downstream, beyond the AONB boundary.
  - **Kingfisher Trail, CNL:** Awarded £25k to initiate project.
  - **Caring for the Cotswolds, CNL:** Awarded £29,700 to support projects in the central and southern Cotswolds.

#### **OTHER ACTIVITY**

3. One of the programme’s core objectives was to support the work of some of our most strategically valuable partners and build stronger ties with them. So far, this has been really successful. We are also raising our profile with farmers and land managers in a part of the Cotswolds where we would like better levels of engagement.
4. The launch of the FiPL programme has been slightly disruptive, with pros and cons. We expected there to be a significant overlap between the outcomes supported by the Cotswolds Champions programme and those supported by FiPL. Therefore, it wasn’t until we had details of FiPL that we could fully consider how to make the programmes complement one another, ensuring we get the most benefit from both.
5. With the launch of FiPL, Scott Brown took on the role of Farming Engagement Lead at 0.8FTE. This enabled us to restructure his time working on the Cotswolds Champions programme to 0.2FTE up until March 2023 (from 0.5FTE up until January 2022). This is a significant advantage, as the main remaining task is completing the Rail Corridor Enhancement Project. This can now be done over a longer time period, providing a whole extra season for lineside planting and other works to take place, at no extra cost to the CNL. It makes more practical sense.
6. Line management responsibilities have now passed from John Mills to Mark Connelly. Consequently, John has stepped down from the steering group.

## **DECISIONS REQUIRED**

7. N/A

## **NEXT STEPS**

8. The main priority is moving things along with the Rail Corridor Enhancement Project and confirming which lineside planting projects may take place this coming winter season (Phase 1 of the project). We also need to start allocating funds to other landscape and environmental enhancement projects in the rail corridor area, informed by the outcomes of the natural capital mapping work already undertaken (Phase 2). We aim to have identified the full project spend by winter 2022/23.
9. Finalise allocation of the remaining project sum, c.£80k:
  - We will soon be assessing a project from Wiltshire Wildlife Trust to deliver a suite of works on the Bybrook, as part of the ongoing work in the catchment. The proposal includes setting up a farmer cluster, community engagement and capital works along the riparian corridor, all in support of their sub-catchment management plan.
  - We have been working with a group of farmers in the southern Cotswolds who would like to form a cluster and run projects.
  - We are very confident that we will spend this sum before the programme ends (March 2023), as there are lots of options already identified.
10. We are increasingly looking at opportunities to use Cotswolds Champions funded projects as a stepping stone towards FiPL applications.

## **SUPPORTING PAPERS**

- No supporting papers

SEPTEMBER 2021