

SOUTHERN COTSWOLDS LANDSCAPE ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

PROJECT PROPOSAL

Summary: A project proposal that outlines plans to allocate £500,000 of Network Rail funding as capital grants for projects in the AONB, to compensate and mitigate for the adverse visual impacts of rail electrification works.

Officer Ref: Scott Brown, Project Officer (01451 862005)

Business Case

1. Rail electrification works carried out by Network Rail in the Cotswolds AONB, between Old Sodbury (Gloucestershire) and Alderton (Wiltshire), had an adverse visual impact on the landscape. Network Rail is obliged to comply with the statutory duty of the Cotswolds Conservation Board, so funding was sought to help mitigate and compensate for these adverse impacts.

Following negotiations between Network Rail, the Cotswolds Conservation Board, the Chilterns Conservation Board, and the North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership, a 'settlement agreement' was reached. This included the provision of £500,000 to the Cotswolds Conservation Board. This sum was split equally between the 'Cotswolds Mitigation Sum' and the 'Cotswolds Project Sum', which are required to deliver mitigation and compensation projects respectively.

2. Specific funding criteria for projects capable of delivering of mitigation and compensation will be applied, with reference to local strategies and priorities, notably the Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guidelines. In any case, supported projects must be aligned with the Cotswolds Conservation Board's statutory purpose:
 - a) To conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Cotswolds AONB.
 - b) To increase the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the Cotswolds AONB.
3. A successful grant programme will also demonstrate the Board's ability to administer a large ring-fenced fund and support local project delivery.

Project Structure and Management

4. A Project Officer (0.5FTE) has been appointed to devise and manage the project, which will run for two years, from January 2020 to January 2022.
5. The funding provided by Network Rail will be allocated via two grants programmes, accounting for the terms of the 'settlement agreement':
 - a) Southern Cotswolds Enhancement Programme (Project Sum)
 - b) Inner Rail Corridor Enhancement Programme (Mitigation Sum)
6. After hosting and project management costs have been deducted, just under £410,000 remains available for project delivery (£205,000 per programme).

Communications and Stakeholder Engagement

7. The Southern Cotswolds Landscape Enhancement Project should generate a significant amount of interest from a wide range of stakeholders who may want to access funding or influence the way funding is allocated:
 - a) Local government - parish, district and county
 - b) Statutory bodies
 - c) Farmers, landowners and land managers
 - d) Farming NGOs and industry bodies
 - e) Nature conservation, landscape and heritage NGOs
 - f) Catchment partnerships (esp. BART)
 - g) Cotswold Voluntary Wardens
 - h) Community groups, non-profits and social enterprises
8. Carefully planned communications and engagement will be necessary, specific to each programme, to ensure stakeholders are productively - and manageably - involved to optimise the uptake of grants, secure good project outcomes and mitigate risks. Options to inform and/or engage include:
 - a) Programme marketing (e.g. website and newsletter)
 - b) Word of mouth/networking (e.g. Voluntary Wardens)
 - c) Meetings with key stakeholders
 - d) Workshops (e.g. with local landowners and land management advisors)
9. Further information specific to each grant programme is provided below.

Southern Cotswolds Enhancement Programme

10. **£204,780 total grant pot available**
11. **Grants of £1,000-£50,000 available**
12. This programme is funded with the 'Project Sum'. The primary objective is to offset (compensate) the adverse visual impact of rail electrification works, in the Southern Cotswolds area.
 - a) Compensation projects should involve capital works but may take many forms and do not necessarily need to involve landscape enhancement (although those that do may be given priority). For example, projects principally involving habitat restoration or improvements to access infrastructure would be eligible.
 - b) For the purposes of the project, the Southern Cotswolds is defined as 40km either side of the railway, within the AONB. There may be exceptions to this rule, at our discretion.

13. If there is an oversupply of good mitigation opportunities in the Inner Rail Corridor Enhancement Programme (see below), those projects will take priority and draw down from this fund.

14. Target outcomes:

- a) Better protected, restored and enhanced landscape features (excluding buildings).
- b) Natural habitat protection, creation, restoration and enhancement.
- c) Enhanced opportunities for access, understanding and enjoyment of the AONB.

15. Potential outputs and benefits:

- a) Woodland, tree and hedgerow creation, restoration and management
- b) Management of ash dieback
- c) Drystone wall restoration
- d) Grassland restoration
- e) Protection of priority habitats and species
- f) Protection of historic and geological landscape features
- g) Improved catchment management
- h) Improved access infrastructure
- i) Positive landowner and public engagement with the project
- j) Community engagement and participation
- k) Raised awareness of issues and opportunities facing the AONB

16. Key funding criteria:

- c) Projects must be sited in the Southern Cotswolds project area.
- d) Grants will be open to any individual or organisation capable of delivering a project, providing funds are used substantially for the purposes of non-economic activity.
- e) Eligible projects must support at least one of the target outcomes and the statutory purpose of the AONB.
- f) Projects should be aligned with the Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guideline and/or any other relevant local strategies and guidelines, according to project objectives.
- g) Projects must not have already started.
- h) Funding should primarily be used to finance capital works.
- i) The following may give a project proposal weighting:

- i. Elements of landscape restoration or enhancement
- ii. Proximity to the rail electrification works
- iii. Match funding/services in kind
- iv. Community/volunteer group involvement
- v. Project delivery by community group/non-profit/NGO
- vi. Opportunities for rural skills training

17. Communications and engagement

- a) Eligible projects/applicants will be identified through a combination of targeted stakeholder engagement and an open call for projects, advertised via our media channels and through our networks.
- b) Because this grant programme is more flexible and covers a much larger area, we will promote the independent development of projects and try to avoid extensive direct engagement with applicants ('hand-holding'), as this could be very time consuming. Clear and compelling guidance will therefore be essential.

18. Risks

- a) This programme is especially dependent on potential applicants being able to develop good opportunities independently. Compelling communications and clear guidance will be critical.
- b) We will need to generate goods levels of interest and manage the expectations of potential applicants, to ensure a good spread of grants sizes and project types, and avoid 'hand-holding' applicants.
- c) The broader remit of compensation projects may make it hard to manage funding criteria and agree upon funding decisions internally, especially if the programme is very over or under-subscribed. We must clearly outline priorities and have transparent scoring processes.

Inner Rail Corridor Enhancement Programme

19. £204,780 total grant pot available

20. Grants of £1,000-£50,000 available (possibility of more for partnership / landscape-scale proposals)

21. This programme is funded with the 'Mitigation Sum'. The primary objective is to mitigate the adverse visual impacts of electrification works in the inner rail corridor area.

- a) Mitigation may involve line-side planting and other measures to reduce the impact of electrification works on publically accessible viewpoints (e.g. footpaths, bridleways and roads) and the general visual resource experienced by local communities and/or by visitors to the area.

- b) Target sites have been identified, where direct mitigation may be possible and most effective (for example, the transformer station west of Acton Turville and where the Macmillan Way passes beneath the railway, east of Acton Turville). However, opportunities for landscape enhancement may exist throughout the inner corridor area that will help divert views and mitigate the cumulative impact of electrification works.
- c) For the purposes of the project, the inner rail corridor area is defined as 3km either side of the railway, between Old Sodbury and Alderton in the AONB, and also extending for a short stretch of the railway eastwards, at Old Sodbury. There may be exceptions to this rule, at our discretion.

22. If there is an oversupply of good opportunities, these projects may take priority and draw down from the Southern Cotswolds Enhancement Programme.

23. Target outcomes:

- a) Reduced visual impact of rail electrification works.
- b) Better protected, restored and enhanced landscape features (excluding buildings) throughout the inner corridor area.

24. Potential outputs and benefits:

- a) Woodland, tree and hedgerow creation, restoration and management
- b) Management of ash dieback
- c) Drystone wall restoration
- d) Grassland restoration
- e) Protection of priority habitats and species
- f) Protection of historic and geological landscape features
- g) Improved catchment management
- h) Positive landowner and public engagement with the project
- i) Community engagement and participation
- j) Raised awareness of issues and opportunities facing the AONB

25. Key funding criteria:

- a) Projects must be sited in the 'Inner Rail Corridor'.
- b) Grants will be open to any individual or organisation capable of delivering a project, providing funds are used substantially for the purposes of non-economic activity.
- c) Eligible projects must support at least one of the target outcomes and the statutory purpose of the AONB.

- d) Projects should be aligned with the Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guideline and/or any other relevant local strategies and guidelines, according to project objectives.
- e) Projects must not have already started.
- f) Funding should primarily be used to finance capital works.
- g) The following may give a project proposal weighting:
 - vii. Proximity to the rail electrification works
 - viii. Match funding/services in kind
 - ix. Community/volunteer group involvement
 - x. Project delivery by community group/non-profit/NGO
 - xi. Opportunities for rural skills training

26. Communications and stakeholder engagement

- a) Eligible projects/applicants will be identified through a combination of targeted stakeholder engagement and an open call for projects, advertised via our media channels and through our networks.
- b) Due to the limited geographic spread of this programme, extensive targeted stakeholder engagement will be particularly important for the identification and development of suitable projects. This may involve outreach through existing networks, working in partnership with other locally active organisations (e.g. FWAG), running stakeholder workshops, and exploring the formation of a local ‘farmer cluster’ to consider landscape-scale opportunities.

27. Risks

- a) Due to the need to target specific mitigation outputs, the Inner Rail Corridor Programme will require extensive engagement with local land managers and other key stakeholders. This can be time consuming, unpredictable, and may not match the desired rate of project development – situation to be closely monitored and timeframes reviewed.
- b) Opportunities (sites, scope and costs) for delivery of mitigation projects are relatively unknown. Much is dependent on local landowners/land managers taking interest and developing suitable proposals in partnership with the Project Officer and other key stakeholders. This is especially true for line-side works – it may not even be possible to deliver any; inversely, we may find that the amount of funding available is insufficient to deliver optimal results. To be closely monitored.
- c) Line-side works pose a particular risk of causing further adverse impacts to local landscape character, if not delivered sensitively and in line with local strategy and guidelines. We must ensure projects are

assessed accordingly. Excessive line-side screening may also spoil views for train passengers, causing an adverse effect on public enjoyment of the AONB.

Timescales

28. The following plan outlines key project phases and tasks to be completed:

a) **Development: January - March 2020**

- i. Refine funding criteria
- ii. Develop operational processes
- iii. Identify project team, grant panel and assessors
- iv. Review budget forecasts
- v. Draft communications and engagement plan

b) **Launch and delivery: March 2020 - January 2021**

- i. Launch both grant programmes
- ii. Implement comms and engagement plans
- iii. Target first round of EOIs for submission in late spring/early summer 2020, with subsequent opportunities scheduled quarterly
- iv. Review budget forecasts quarterly, following grant decisions
- v. Aim to have allocated a significant amount of the funding by winter 2020/21, in time for the planting season
- vi. Continue to process grant applications, develop opportunities and review budget forecasts into 2021

c) **Legacy: September 2021 - January 2022**

- vii. Draft Impact Report once all the funding has been allocated – ideally winter 2021/22
- viii. Some projects may take several years to implement and establish – we will need to identify how to manage any ongoing commitments and monitor long-term outcome
- ix. The Project Officer is currently contracted until Jan 2022. If initial interest levels are low, and the uptake of grants slow in 2020, we will address issues and build momentum into the following year. This may require an extension of the Project Officer post.

Resources and Finances

29. People

- a) **Project Officer:** Scott Brown has already been appointed on a 2-year fixed-term-contract (0.5 FTE) to run the Project (responsible officer).

His line manager is John Mills, Planning and Landscape Officer (accountable officer).

- b) **Project Team:** A small (e.g. 5) Project Team will be appointed to advise on the development and delivery of both grant programmes. This should be done early and may comprise internal staff, board members and some key external partners.
- c) **Grant Panel:** A (voluntary) Grant Panel will be convened to review grant applications and make funding recommendations. This could be an extended function of the Project Team, with additional members recruited to provide key expertise. The Grant Panel will need to be identified prior to the first grant application deadline (early summer 2020).
- d) **Project Assessors:** We will identify a small group of (voluntary) Project Assessors with relevant skills and knowledge to scrutinise the standard of individual grant applications, attend site visits and make recommendations to the Grant Panel. This will be most important for larger grant applications. These people may also be members of the Project Team and Grant Panel and should be recruited at the same time.
- e) **Inner corridor landowner group:** We may invite landowners in the inner corridor area to form a working groups to explore collaborative approaches to project delivery and use of funds. This may require facilitation.
- f) **Volunteers:** No direct involvement expected on programme management, but we anticipate some grants will support projects being led by Cotswold Voluntary Wardens and other volunteer groups, adding value.

Equipment

- 30. The Project Officer is based at the Board's offices, with access to a laptop, GIS, phones and a car for business use. This is considered sufficient.

Data

- 31. Network Rail conducted a Landscape and Visual Appraisal which identifies target sites and options for mitigation works in the inner corridor area. This data was substantiated by a series of workshops with the Advisory Group, comprising Chilterns, North Wessex Downs and Cotswolds AONBs. We do not need to conduct further landscape analysis.
- 32. Existing Local/Cotswold Landscape Strategy and Guidelines will also inform project delivery.
- 33. Additional data needs may arise according to the projects seeking funding.

Finances

34. **Budget:** The project is operating at full cost recovery using funding provided by Network Rail. A full budget forecast will be completed before launch and reviewed quarterly.

Budget outline (based on 2-year forecast):

AONB hosting costs (premises, etc.)	£50,000
Project Officer costs (salary, etc.)	£35,410
Running costs (equipment, etc.)	£5,134
Inner Corridor grant pot	£204,780
Southern Cotswolds grant pot	£204,780
TOTAL	£500,103

35. **Match funding:** We are not trying to secure match funding for the project as a whole. However, we do hope that some individual projects will involve match funding, adding value to the project as a whole and potentially adding weighting to grant decisions.

Key issues/risks

36. **Reputational:** The failure to identify suitable projects and allocate funding well could harm the Board's reputation. Good communications, stakeholder engagement and transparent processes will help avoid this.
37. **Network Rail:** Reporting and expectations - we must carefully account for the use of funds to be compliant with NR's 'settlement agreement', otherwise we risk being accused of non-delivery and held to account. Careful accounting and compliance with the 'agreement' will be monitored.
38. **Timescales:** These are very tight to allocate all funds via two new-to-market programmes, especially given seasonal and administrative restrictions. Progress to be closely monitored against key milestones.
39. **Legacy:** Some projects may take several years to implement and establish – we will need to identify a way of managing any ongoing commitments and monitoring long-term outcomes.
40. **Programmes:** Risks specific to each grant programme have been provided above, in the sections corresponding to each programme.