

SALISBURY CITY COUNCIL

Report

Subject : Broken Bridges Funding Request
Committee : Full Council
Date : 04 November 2024
Author : Asa Thorpe, CEO

1. Report Summary:

1.1. This paper presents a proposal from Broken Bridges Nature Reserve Limited (BBNR) to Salisbury City Council to provide £50,000 towards the acquisition of Fitzgerald Farm, locally known as Broken Bridges, for the benefit of residents and visitors of Salisbury.

2. Background:

2.1. BBNR was established in 2008 as a not-for-profit entity to secure 14.2 hectares of land at Fitzgerald Farm as a nature reserve and public amenity. The land, located between Lower Bemerton and Harnham in Salisbury, includes parts of the River Nadder, its banks, and two small islands. It holds significant ecological importance, including Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC).

2.2. The land has a rich natural history, previously supporting a wide range of botanical and bird species. However, due to neglect and unsympathetic farming, the area has seen a decline in biodiversity. Jane Holmes, in her work *Footloose in Wiltshire*, referred to these meadows as "Paradise" in the 1930s and 40s but later lamented their decline, calling it "Paradise Lost."

2.3. The reserve area includes 35 acres of pasture, woodland, and riverbank, providing a crucial green corridor in Salisbury. Public footpaths crossing the area serve local residents, linking suburbs, schools, and employment zones. However, these paths are often impassable due to poor maintenance and flooding, particularly affecting users with restricted mobility.

2.4. BBNR now seeks to revive the land by acquiring it through community ownership.

3. Project Overview:

3.1. The project aims to purchase Fitzgerald Farm and restore it for community use, biodiversity enhancement, and improved public access. Specific goals include:

- **Biodiversity Restoration:** The woodland and meadow habitats will be conserved and enhanced to support species such as otters, water voles, and various bird species.

- **Public Access Improvements:** Upgrading paths to ensure access for people with disabilities and improving connectivity between suburbs and employment centres.
- **Environmental Education and Wellbeing Programs:** Collaborating with local organizations to offer conservation and wellbeing programs for the community.

4. Community Support:

- 4.1. Strong community backing has been demonstrated with over 220 public comments in support of the site's designation. Comments emphasised the value of the area for recreation, family activities, and nature appreciation. The need for restoration and improved accessibility was a common theme.
- 4.2. During the 2024 "People in the Park" event, BBNR engaged with over 200 local residents, all of whom expressed support for the project.

5. Salisbury City Council Financial Perspective

- 5.1. The Council's Responsible Finance Officer (RFO) acknowledges the Council's duty to balance a variety of pressures and demands on its limited resources. Financial consideration is only one of many, often competing, pressures and councillors may well choose to prioritise non-financial criteria when determining any matter.
- 5.2. Nevertheless, in discharge of his statutory duty, the RFO respectfully reminds the Council that its financial position is far from secure. The general reserve is only 43% of the minimum level which the Council requires the RFO to maintain. Irrespective of which 'pot' is used to fund a donation to BBNR, ultimately all council money impacts upon the general reserve. As soon as the financial position was clarified earlier this year, your senior management team prioritised stabilising the Council and bolstering the general reserve. Senior managers have explicitly sought councillors' endorsement of this approach in committee recommendations.
- 5.3. At this time when there are still several large financial risks which could reverse the current in-year underspend and cause another year-end drain upon the general reserve, any request for significant unbudgeted, new expenditure should have a strong business case. One-off expenditure that either reduces costs or produces income is risky but could be warranted if its business case demonstrates payback and adequate rate of return. This requested donation offers no Council business case, no payback and no rate of return.
- 5.4. For the above reasons the RFO recommends the Council against making this donation; and recommends against making any significant non-essential expenditure prior to the general reserve being returned to its stipulated minimum level.

6. **Background commentary:**

- 6.1. The opportunity for a nature reserve to be created and kept in perpetuity for the people of Salisbury is not something which regularly presents itself. Through the work of the BBNR, the Council now has the opportunity to make a one-off, yet significant donation.
- 6.2. This donation comes without liability or commitment to ongoing costs.
- 6.3. The issue of general reserves is of uppermost concern to professional officers. Our clear mission is to return the authority to a financially sustainable position. We are not at that point yet.
- 6.4. In addition, we are exploring the opportunity for Councillors to have greater say in how Community Infrastructure Levy fees are spent and would look to reflect this in future years committee structure and Standing Orders.
- 6.5. The only way in which this unbudgeted expenditure should be considered for this is not through general reserve expenditure, but through CIL. This will have a one off impact and therefore amendments will need to be made to the medium term financial plan.

7. **Recommendations**

7.1. It is recommended that Full Council:

- Considers the financial implication of a one-off donation to BBNR, and decides whether it wishes to financially support the creation of a Nature Reserve at the Broken Bridges site.

8. **Wards Affected:** All

9. **Background Papers:**

10. **Implications:**

- 10.1. **Financial:** As outlined above.
- 10.2. **Personnel:** Nil in relation to this report.
- 10.3. **Environmental Impact:** Nil in relation to this report.
- 10.4. **Equalities Impact Statement:** Nil in relation to this report.