

Report subject	<b>The Stour Valley</b>
Meeting date	26 July 2023
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	<p>The Stour Valley is a regionally significant opportunity to ecologically restore a river valley landscape, with potential to support health and well-being outcomes, access to nature and for local livelihoods for the c. 500,000 people who live near to it.</p> <p>A strong and supported governance model amongst the three core partners of BCP Council, Dorset Council and The National Trust will deliver the aims of the strategy and collaborate to maximise the environmental and other funding opportunities that are available.</p>
Recommendations	<p><b>It is RECOMMENDED that:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>(a) Cabinet endorses the Stour Valley strategy and supports its inclusion as part of the forthcoming BCP Local Plan policies.</b></li> <li><b>(b) Cabinet approves the Stour Valley partnership model, using a Memorandum of Understanding between its core partners of The National Trust, BCP Council and Dorset Council.</b></li> <li><b>(c) Cabinet endorses that the core partners will bring forward fund-raising bids by the partnership to external grant bodies to support delivery of the Stour Valley objectives, specifically DEFRA's Landscape Recovery Fund.</b></li> <li><b>(d) Cabinet approves a delegation of authority for future decision making to the Environment Service director in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Climate Response, Environment and Energy.</b></li> <li><b>(e) Cabinet agrees to interpret the geographic reference for Hick's Farm in Bournemouth Core Strategy policy CS36, to lie within Throop, not Muscliffe'</b></li> </ul>
Reason for recommendations	<p>The Stour Valley offers unique opportunities for people, communities and for nature recovery along the river corridor. The objectives of the project closely align with the BCP Corporate Strategy, delivering a sustainable environment for future</p>

	<p>generations and connecting communities throughout the river valley.</p> <p>Adopting the partnership model provides continued governance and oversight of the project and ensures on-going delivery of the key aims and objectives. It also provides a strong platform to submit funding bids that will lead to more targeted delivery.</p>
Portfolio Holder(s):	Councillor Andy Hadley, Portfolio holder for Climate Response, Environment and Energy.
Corporate Director	Jess Gibbons, Chief Operations Officer
Report Authors	<p>BCP Council, Martin Whitchurch, Strategic Lead for Greenspace and Conservation</p> <p>Dorset Council, Bridget Betts, Environmental Advice Manager</p> <p>The National Trust, Ian Wilson, Assistant Regional Director South-West</p>
Wards	Bearwood & Merley; Christchurch Town; Commons; East Southbourne & Tuckton; Kinson; Littledown & Iford; Mudeford, Stanpit & West Highcliffe; Muscliff & Strouden Park; Redhill & Northbourne; West Southbourne;
Classification	For Decision

## Background

1. The Stour Valley is an ambitious landscape-scale initiative which runs approximately 37 km along the lower catchment of the River Stour from the Kingston Lacy Estate to Christchurch Harbour and serves a local population of approximately 500,000 with a vision of *“An evolving, healthy and thriving river valley landscape that connects and supports people, livelihoods, wildlife and heritage”*.
2. In April 2021 BCP Cabinet noted *“that a Stour Valley Park Landscape Strategy will be developed for Autumn 2021 and recommended to Cabinet for adoption. A more detailed landscape masterplan will be developed by Spring 2022”*. The strategy, with its landscape plans and story-map, are now able to be considered for landscape scale delivery, such as through DEFRA's multi-million-pound Landscape Recovery Fund, to create a multifunctional landscape that will deliver benefits for nature recovery, recreation, health and well-being, and uncover the valley's heritage and ancient history, primarily for its local residents and communities.
3. The Stour Valley will be a major component of a wider Nature Recovery Network in Dorset, providing opportunities within Government required forthcoming Local Nature Recovery Strategies as well as for use of Biodiversity Net Gain credits.

## Stour Valley Strategy

4. The Stour Valley Park Strategy document was made public in October 2022. Funded by the Future Parks project and written by consultants in collaboration with the wider partnership group, the strategy captures the history and vision for the river valley landscape; it details the extensive stakeholder and public engagement that was undertaken between 2020 and 2022.
5. The broad objectives are:
  - Connectivity and access
  - Biodiversity
  - Culture and heritage
  - Economic/business opportunities including energy and food production
  - Housing and development
  - Land management and land use
  - Health and wellbeing
  - Education, training and volunteering
  - River health and flooding

## **Governance**

6. A programme manager was recruited by The National Trust in December 2022 whose role is to drive the partnership forward. Whilst this is a long-term programme there are five key priorities for the next two years:
  - a. Developing and implementing an effective governance structure for The Stour Valley partnership, and programme through which projects will be delivered.
  - b. Developing a short-, medium- and long-term work plan with partners, to enable delivery of 'quick wins' and pilot projects.
  - c. Working with partners to prioritise and engage key stakeholders, particularly landowners and farmers for delivery on the ground, seeking support and buy-in. Additionally of senior leaders so that the Stour Valley strategy is included in Local Plans and similar strategic documents.
  - d. Working with partners to secure investment in delivering the Stour Valley through green financing, grants and corporate fundraising.
  - e. Developing and delivering a communications programme and brand to inform and engage visitors, funders and businesses.
7. A meeting has been held with Dorset & BCP Council Corporate Directors and Officers for the core partners to agree governance. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is attached in Appendix 1 for adoption by each organisation. This sets out a high-level sponsoring group, a programme board of officers who then link in to and deliver the strategy aims through project delivery, or task and finish teams involving the wider partnership where required.
8. The MoU and related work do not impact in any way on BCP's sovereignty of decision making or policy setting.

## **Stakeholders**

9. There are over 40 landowners or tenants along the Lower Stour and this project is of interest nationally in attempting to work with such a diverse and broad range of stakeholders. Through the development phase (2019-2022) the landowners and residents were invited to be part of workshops and engagement sessions, walks and focus groups to help inform & develop the strategy.
10. As project delivery starts to take place, through for example an active travel project, delivery of green spaces, gateway facility or new way-finding infrastructure, the residents and stakeholder groups, such as Ward Councillors, Parish Councils, Friends or residents' groups, will be engaged with as part of that individual project's development.

## **The Stour Valley funding opportunities**

11. As a result of the Future Parks project, (a BCP project funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), The National Trust and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) the Stour Valley is nationally well regarded as having significant potential to deliver a landscape scale project benefitting communities, wildlife and livelihoods.
12. DEFRA's Landscape Recovery Fund is part of the new Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMS) that could fund a range of the Stour Valley's delivery outcomes.
13. The Landscape Recovery fund is for large scale projects, over 500Ha; secures long-term public funding, typically for 20 years, that support outcomes that take a long time to deliver such as habitat restoration. The Stour Valley meets these criteria and could support the delivery of large-scale river corridor habitat restoration programming, improving water quality and habitats, as well as delivering infrastructure improvements for access and active travel along the 37km of river corridor.

## **Local plan context**

14. The forthcoming BCP Local Plan is expected to include policy wording on The Stour Valley strategy and its opportunities to support the potential delivery of its key aims and objectives and acknowledge the Stour Valley's role in land-use decision making in the future.
15. Hicks Farm in Throop contains Grade II listed buildings, which are in poor condition, and have previously been considered for a NLHF bid to secure external funding to improve the buildings and create various opportunities for local communities. The Farm, linked to the Stour Valley Way and extensive river-side green space, provides an opportunity to deliver a strategic link in the wider Stour Valley context. During Summer 2023 there will be opportunities for new public involvement to explore future options for the site and its buildings ahead of any future decisions being made about the farm.

16. The legacy Bournemouth Borough Council Core Strategy policy CS36 brought forward the importance and recognition of the Stour Valley. It states that the Council will consider implementing a management plan that, amongst other objectives, will provide 'a demonstration farm and visitor centre at Hick's Farm, Muscliffe'. It is to be acknowledged that this geographic reference should have stated Hicks Farm, Throop and not Hicks Farm, Muscliffe.

### **Options Appraisal**

17. Approve the recommendations: Approving the model of governance and future partnership working, as agreed at strategic director level of the 3 core partner organisations. This will ensure the continued growth and delivery of The Stour Valley, as opportunities come forward.
18. Do not approve the recommendations: The model of governance and partnership working would not be adopted. This would reduce BCP's role in The Stour Valley in the future, reduce the level of partnership working and limit any potential benefits in the future.

### **Summary of financial implications**

19. There is no direct financial impact from these recommendations. The Stour Valley and its partnership is currently resourced by The National Trust with a Programme Manager in place for two years.
20. The existing staffing resource within the respective partner teams is in place to continue the high-level delivery, as well as consider any funding bids or direct delivery opportunities. As these come forward, they will be subject to individual project process and decision making, whether that be for planning permission, statutory consents (Environment Agency, Natural England etc) or for financing and would be expected to bring forward resourcing for specialist roles.

### **Summary of legal implications**

21. Legal Services have been consulted upon the MoU that forms the partner agreement and supported the writing of this document. The draft MoU in Appendix 1 will be agreed amongst the three partners and should be considered a well-advanced draft version.
22. The MoU is not a legal document or binding in a way that creates any loss in sovereignty or decision making for each of the members. The MoU seeks to put in place a governance and structure that supports the shared aims of the partners.

### **Summary of human resources implications**

23. None currently. If funding is secured for a project, such as the Landscape Recovery Scheme, then resources will be requested within those bids for project managers, landscape architects, farm advisors etc as required, meaning no impact on revenue base budgets.

### **Summary of sustainability impact**

24. DIA completed and noted that the recommendations in this report have no direct or immediate impact. However, the aims of The Stour Valley provide a wide range of opportunities for climate mitigation, sustainable ways of working and nature recovery.
25. The river valley provides many opportunities for flood mitigation through flood plain changes, such as lowering levels to re-wet and store more water, slowing flows and naturalising sections of the river where they have been previously over-engineered.

### **Summary of public health implications**

26. The core aims and objectives of The Stour Valley address health and well-being of residents and communities across BCP and neighbouring Dorset areas. Linking the active travel opportunities, enhanced access to nature and the wider countryside, providing gateways for activation to meet a range of social needs, such as addressing loneliness and isolation, social prescribing opportunities and a depth and breadth of volunteering are all tangible aims.

### **Summary of equality implications**

27. A conversation screening tool has been completed, Appendix 3, the summary states: The current report seeking approval from cabinet relates to high-level / over-arching requirements to ensure future work packages and project deliverables are well managed and provide benefits for all. Approval of the report recommendations will not positively or negatively impact on anyone's equality. Further EIAs will be undertaken for specific work packages throughout the delivery phase of the SVP programme.

### **Summary of risk assessment**

28. The adoption of a shared governance and partnership model shall help to mitigate any individual risks.
29. The core partners of BCP, Dorset Council and The National Trust are committed to working collaboratively with the wider partnership and with landowners and stakeholders. Without this process there is only a mandate to delivery any of the SVP strategies within land under their direct responsibility. The SVP is much wider in scope and potential than that land area, and the real gains lie in an holistic approach, supported by as many organisations, communities and partners as possible.
30. This approach mitigates the risk to any individual organisation and levers greater potential in being a project of national interest.

### **Background papers**

Stour Valley Strategy ([here](#))

### **Appendices**

Appendix 1 Draft Memorandum of Understanding.

Appendix 2 The Stour Valley visual overview

Appendix 3 EIA screening tool summary.