

Committee: FINANCE AND RESOURCES

Date: 6 August 2007

Report OPPORTUNITIES FUND: SPENDING PROPOSALS

Purpose of report

1. To seek Members views on the allocation of current reserves to additional project spending in 2007/08.

Background

2. The Opportunities Fund currently contains a balance of **£200.5k**. The following paper lists proposals with a total value of **£33k**.

Detailed Spending Proposals

3. Full descriptions of the proposals contained in the following table can be found in **Appendix A**. It is recommended that Members consider these proposals, and allocate money accordingly within 2007/08. The proposals constitute officer recommendations.

4. By way of background information, the current prioritisation of all of the Authority's programmes is contained in **Appendix B**.

5. All of the following proposals can be delivered within the framework of existing work-load and performance targets.

Item #	Description	£,000	Priority
1	Website Accessibility Audit	3	1
2	Malham Walls	1.5	1-2
3	Yorkshire Dales Apprenticeship Scheme	10	2
4	Events listing in The Visitor newspaper	3.5	2
5	Conference Microphone / Speaker system	15	Corporate
	TOTAL	33	

RECOMMENDATION

6. That members decide which of the detailed spending proposals contained in this report should receive funding in 2007/08.

Richard Burnett
Head of Finance & Resources

16 July 2007
Background documents: None

Spending Proposals (Bids)

1. Website Accessibility Audit (£3k) – Priority 1

Explanation

1. As a public sector organisation, we need to make sure that our website is both useable by and accessible to all audiences including those with particular requirements.

2. A variety of internationally recognised accessibility standards have been established by the Web Accessibility Initiative, in the form of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). The guidelines cover a whole host of issues but include such matters as:

- provision of alternatives to auditory and visual content
- clear language use
- designing for device independence
- ensuring that documents are clear and simple
- providing clear navigation

3. Some of the checks relate to the content and structure of the website and others relate to the background coding.

4. Websites can conform to these standards at three levels – A, AA or AAA. We would like to aim for the intermediate level for the Authority website – AA.

5. Alongside this international standard, the RNIB has developed its own standard: ‘See it Right’. It offers a service to check websites against this standard and also against the WAI standard at a cost of around £5,500.

6. In brief the process is that the RNIB conduct an audit of our site – using both automated checking tools and expert individuals – and then present us with a detailed report of what changes will be necessary before we can display the ‘See it Right’ logo. It is then our responsibility to implement these changes and to ensure that the website continues to comply to these standards in the future.

7. Although costly there are a number of advantages to the RNIB scheme as follows:

- RNIB have specialist knowledge on this subject and access to various specific software applications not available to the Authority.
- Display of the WCAG logos alone does not guarantee conformance of a website to WCAG standards – as it is self-assessed. Displaying the RNIB ‘See it Right’ logo, would provide additional credibility and kudos.
- Support for the maintenance of the website and continued conformance to the accessibility standards is available from the RNIB.

8. We have £2,500 in the web-based services budget allocated towards this work. We had hoped that this would pay for the audit but now find that a further £3,000 is required in order to cover the costs of this proposal.

9. For information, this accessibility testing would form part of a wider programme of survey work that we hope to carry out on the Authority website this year (2007/8) as follows.

June/July 2007	Repeat general user survey on Authority website using questionnaire software. <i>Cost: nil</i> Carry out simple usability testing using Usability Exchange services – this involves people with specific needs (for example, visual impairments, dyslexia) carrying out a series of checks on the website and reporting back on their findings. <i>Cost: £299 (covered by existing budget)</i>
August/September 2007	Collate and review findings of user survey and usability tests – make changes as required.
October/November 2007	In-house work on compliance to accessibility standards with reference to WCAG guidelines in preparation for RNIB audit.
December 2007/January 2008	RNIB Accessibility Audit (AA and ‘See it Right’) <i>Cost: c. £5,500 (£3k covered by this bid)</i> Carry out more advanced usability testing using Usability Exchange services. <i>Cost: £599 (covered by existing budget)</i>
February/March 2008	Make amendments to website as a result of accessibility audit and usability testing and report to SMT by end of financial year. Display AA and ‘See it Right’ logos on website.

Recommendation

10. As noted in this report as a public sector organisation we need to ensure that our website is available to all and we also need to make sure that we are keeping it up-to-date – not just in terms of content but also in terms of the latest internationally recognised accessibility and usability guidelines. Approval of an additional £3,000 should enable us to make progress towards this aim.

2. Malham Walls (£1.5k) – Priority 1 - 2

Explanation

11. The main boundary wall running parallel to the Cove Road and the Cove Path (Pennine Way) has probably been passed by literally millions of people. Over 20 years ago the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority carried out a project to have the top stones

along the boundary wall cemented in place this was done to mainly prevent people from leaning on the walls and dislodging the top stones. Over time the traditional drystone wall has slumped leaving the top stones either suspended or collapsing in sections resulting in a look of neglect and a general lack of care.

12. In the late 1980's the walls to the east of Malham Beck were deemed to be of such intrinsic value from both a historical and landscape points of view that agreements were entered into to with the National Trust (1989) and individual landowners (1991 and 1993 respectively) to maintain these walls. The west side which includes the current boundary wall were not included. The agreements are however still in operation and are reported on to Defra each year although very little money has been spent in the last 5 years.

13. The National Trust has since acquired the field to the west of Malham Beck and this appears to be an opportune time to address the issue of the boundary wall.

Recommendation

14. To re-wall and reset the top stones on a section of the boundary wall (not included in the current agreements). This will be achieved by supporting the walling on a one off payment basis which would be classed as de minimus ('under 3,000 Euros') in relation to state aid in the agricultural sector. The initial estimate to carry out works to the boundary wall is £1,500, but any savings on this price can be utilised on the walls within the maintenance agreements which currently have no budget allocation.

3. Yorkshire Dales Apprenticeship Scheme (£10k) – Priority 2

Explanation

15. The Dales Apprenticeship Scheme (DAS) was developed by the YDMT in conjunction with Craven College, Tyro Training and the Learning Skills Council and other interested parties including the Authority, to offer opportunities for training and work experience placements, linked to the Government's Modern Apprenticeships scheme.

16. Between 2003 and 2007 the Authority has provided seven placement opportunities for young people aged between 16 and 24, five of which are in current countryside related employment. Five other placements have been provided by other partners, including English Nature, The National Trust, The Bolton Abbey Estate, The Field Studies Council and NYCC/Nidderdale AONB (shared).

17. In the past, Apprentices have been offered a works experience placement of 18 months, (running in conjunction with formal classroom opportunities), working alongside skilled practitioners. This has allowed candidates to put training into practice, and gain valuable knowledge, experience and more importantly life skills, all whilst also undertaking an NVQ Level II in Landscape and Ecosystems (administered by Tyro Training and Craven College). Specifically, placements have been provided within the Area Ranger teams, with each individual assigned a named Area Ranger as mentor; individuals receive an allowance equating to the minimum wage whilst participating in the scheme.

18. YDMT submitted a request to the European Social Fund (ESF) in early 2006 for grant-funding for a new round of the scheme, for a further five placements. Confirmation of funding was received late, in October 2006. This caused a significant delay in commencing

the scheme (which we had intended launching in July 2006, and which timescale allowed for an 18 month placement opportunity to be completed by December 2007, when ESF funding ceases).

19. We are currently being informed that although funding was secured for an eighteen month period for each of the five placements, no carry over of funding is permitted beyond December 2007. Due to difficulties experienced in recruitment we were only able to start two placements in December 2006, and the remaining three placements in April 2007. Because of the ESF funding restriction, the scheme will have to be cut back significantly, unless additional funding can be found.

20. As part of the original grant application, the scheme was required to attract funding from other sources, and had been successful in achieving that requirement (£30k). By allocating an additional £10k to the scheme, as a contribution to being able to run it until April 2008 which will mean a 16 month experience for two of the placements and a year each for the remaining three placements. Partners believe this is a realistic period for the participants to gain something valuable from the experience as well as sufficient time for them to complete their NVQs.

Recommendation

21. That £10k be allocated to contribute towards the supporting of placements for the January to April period in 2008. If the scheme is successful in replacing this funding, either through ESF extension or other funding, this allocation will be returned to the Opportunities Fund reserve.

4. Events listing in The Visitor newspaper (£3.5k) – Priority 2

Explanation

22. 'The Visitor' newspaper contains a comprehensive 8-page events listing, covering events across the Yorkshire Dales; 220,000 copies are printed annually and distributed throughout the region.

23. Over the years, The Visitor has gained a reputation amongst businesses and event providers for reaching their key audiences, indicated by the number buying advertising space and supplying their events for inclusion. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that it is considered by visitors to be the premier source of visitor information for the area.

24. As more and more events take place in the area and more event providers are keen to get their events included in The Visitor newspaper, space has become extremely tight. The result is a hard-to-read print size and the inability to include all but the most basic information for all events, including our own in-house YDNPA programme.

25. Driven by feedback from recent questionnaires in the newspaper which highlights the importance of the listing to visitors and suggests that more could be done to improve the detail and presentation, and the Authority's own need to ensure its promotional material carries its key messages, it is essential to make some changes to ensure the listing retains its value to us and to the public.

26. This includes making clear where an event is accessible by public transport, grading and timing of guided walks, accessibility information, categorisation by event type, and better promotion of the key events that pull people into the region. The online events listing on the Yorkshire Dales Tourism website allows for more detail and for events to be added throughout the year, but is not a replacement for the print version which reaches directly those coming into the area.

Recommendation

27. The amount of space allocated for the listings has stayed the same for many years and is no longer adequate. We would like to bid for **£3,500** for the design, print and finishing of four additional pages for the 2008 edition of the Visitor, as a 'one off' proposal.

Note: By way of a reminder that this publication represents excellent value for money, it is funded primarily by revenue generated from advertising sales, together with contributions of £7,000 from the Authority and £4,000 from the Tourism Partnership. Two issues (12,000 copies each) of the residents' newsletter 'Dales' and one issue of 'The Visitor' (220,000 copies) are produced each year, by Harmsworth Press produces under one contract. To put this into in context, the BVPP 2007/8 (400 black and white copies) cost £2,300 to print this year, and the National Park Management Plan 2006-2012 (600 copies) cost £3,000.

5. Conference Microphone / Speaker system (£15k) - Corporate

Explanation

28. This bid is for the replacement of an essential piece of equipment needed to enable both Members and the public to participate successfully in the Authority's various committee meetings. The current equipment is failing both groups in this objective.

29. As a caveat to the above, from time to time bids will be made to the Opportunities Fund that are not new and exiting projects, and which don't assist in accessing additional external grant funding, but more simply relate to one-off calls on unallocated reserves for essential 'corporate' spending; this is one such bid. The Opportunities Fund represents the total of the Authority's unallocated reserves, as it is the current approach to make all such resources available within a financial year, rather than to leave them in unallocated reserves with general objectives. Some other National Park Authorities have adopted a different stance, and have created named reserves, such as ones for replacing equipment. Apart from that approach having the potential to reduce operational flexibility, in some cases these reserves are comparatively large, and would absorb the lion's share of our Opportunity Fund balance if such 'unspecified reserve' accounting was to be adopted. Instead, this Authority seeks to identify the need for such funding (wherever possible) during the annual budget-setting process, and so to meet such costs from ongoing revenue budgets, rather than to match known future spending commitments against past year's underspends.

30. In 2001, the Authority purchased a 'Conference Microphone/Speaker' system to address the problems of poor acoustics that were experienced at most of the venues used for Authority and Planning Committee meetings. The cost of that system was approximately £3,600, although a number of additional delegate units were purchased later, taking the total cost up to approximately £4,500.

31. The system consists of

- a control unit;
- individual delegate units (microphones with built-in speakers); and
- a separate speaker for the 'public gallery'.

32. The system is a 'wired' one. Each delegate unit is fitted with a 2 metre cable which connects to the previous unit in the 'chain', with the first unit in the chain connected to the control unit. The separate speaker is also connected by cable to the control unit, with both the control unit and the speaker needing a power supply.

33. Over the years, as the system has been transported from meeting to meeting (in addition to being used at a variety of other events, such as public enquiries, and staff and volunteers' meetings), problems have developed with loose connections and damage to individual delegate units that have affected the performance of the system. Repairs to the control unit and to individual delegate units (and the replacement of some) have been required, particularly over the last two years. Currently there are a number of units that are not working and several others that work intermittently; at the Authority meeting in March the system failed completely.

34. It is believed that a 'Conference Microphone/Speaker' system is still required, even allowing for the changed pattern of venue use. Although Yoredale has a 'loop hearing system', it is far from ideal. The majority of 'complaints' that are received from members of the public attending meetings of the Authority and/or Planning Committee, are about the acoustics, effectively the result of the interaction of the current sound system and the premises available.

35. A system that worked properly would address these complaints and also be of benefit to members and officers, in addition to being available for use on other occasions such as staff and volunteers' meetings, public enquiries and other 'public' events.

36. With the reduction in size of the Authority in May from 26 to 22, it is estimated that a maximum of 18 delegate units will suffice.

37. Assuming that a system is required, the options are:

- (a) have the current equipment serviced and repaired to provide the 18 units needed;
- (b) replace the existing equipment with 'like for like', i.e. a wired system; or
- (c) replace the existing equipment with a wireless system.

38. Looking at the above options and their respective advantages and disadvantages:

(a) Service and repair: Advantage – initially this would probably be the cheapest cost option. Disadvantages - although the control unit was serviced in late 2006 it has failed again. The long term reliability of the existing equipment is questionable, so this option may not be cost effective in the long run. The microphone units are also becoming increasingly unreliable.

(b) Total replacement with a 'like for like' wired system: Advantage – the cheapest option for total replacement (cost likely to be between £5,000 and £10,000, depending on whether analogue or digital). Disadvantages - another wired system would probably suffer the same problems experienced with the current equipment of gradual failure of connections through day-to-day wear and tear.

(c) Total replacement with a wireless system: Advantages - a wireless system would not suffer the 'wear and tear' deterioration currently experienced and would be considerably easier to set up and transport, as well as being more flexible in terms of use (no limitation such as length of cable). Disadvantage – most expensive (cost approximately £15,000).

39. Officers have seen demonstrations of two wireless systems (one a radio signal based system and the other an infra-red system; both had a cost of **£15k**, +/- £200) and were impressed with the flexibility and ease of use. Both systems would be able to utilise our existing public gallery speaker and could also be 'plugged in' to the loop system. The combination of the loop system, the microphones and the public gallery speaker would ensure that difficulties for members and for the public would be fully addressed.

40. Initial informal cost estimates suggest that there is little to choose between the two wireless systems, although the Authority's Financial Regulations will require three formal quotations.

Recommendation

41. Taking into account:

- the continued need for a system (for our 'in house' meetings, for our formal meetings at other venues and for the other uses mentioned earlier);
- the problems with our current system which are unlikely to be able to be addressed cost effectively; and
- the benefits of a wireless over a wired system in terms of durability, flexibility, ease of transportation and set up,

officers' recommendation would be for the purchase of a new wireless system.

PRIORITIES FOR 2007/08

1. Priority programmes

Biodiversity	Development Control
Green Lanes	Farm Conservation
Limestone Country Project	Rights of Way
Sustainable Development Fund	Web-based Services

2. Programmes where we will maintain a good level of service levels and/or make steady improvements

Archaeology	Enforcement
Recreational Activities	Volunteers
Outreach	Sustainable Tourism Support
Trees and Woodlands	Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust
Education	Building Conservation
Definitive Map	State of the Park
Countryside Skills and Training	Communications
Toilets	Planning Policy

3. Programmes where progress will be limited and/or dependent on external funding

'Access for all'	Park Information Points
Cultural Heritage	Geodiversity
Landscape Policy and Advice	National Park Centres
Historic Environment Record	Open Access
Car Parks	Branding
Pennine Bridleway	Public Transport
Retail	Traffic Management
National Park Management Plan	Events