
Briefing to Overview and Scrutiny Board

Date: 7 October 2020

Subject: Update on Northern Roots

For Discussion

Report of: Anna da Silva, Project Director

Summary of the issue:

To update on the progress in developing the Northern Roots project in line with the guidance provided by the O&S Board in February 2020.

Recommendations to Overview and Scrutiny Board:

To note the implementation of the O&S Board's recommendations and the wider progress in the project.

1.0 Background

The Northern Roots project aims to develop the UK's largest urban farm and eco park in the heart of Oldham, on the 160 acre Snipe Clough site, directly adjacent to Alexandra Park. Currently an under-utilised site, it offers opportunities for agriculture, horticulture, forestry, food production, sports, eco-tourism and cultural and educational activities. Following two years of initial exploration, Cabinet approved two years' initial revenue funding for the project in January 2019. This funding was to deliver the following outcomes by March 2021:

- An operative brand and businesses trading under licence
- Strong community engagement and involvement
- Delivery of early implementation projects
- Planning approval for the full Northern Roots opportunity site
- Inward investments secured and an investment strategy and pipeline
- Legal infrastructure in place and operational
- Contracts and commissioning contracts operational
- Growing social enterprise eco-system operating under Northern Roots licence

A report was brought to the O&S Board in June 2019 updating on the status of the project. This was followed by a visit by O&S Board Members to the Northern Roots site in September 2019. In February 2020, following a discussion at Labour Group, the O&S Board held a workshop to help decide the best legal and governance structure for the establishment of the Northern Roots Company. On the basis of the guidance provided at this workshop Cabinet approved a paper in March 2020 proposing that the Northern Roots company be established as a Charitable Company, Limited by Guarantee, with an initial board of nine members comprising four Council nominees and five independent Directors.

2.0 Current Position

Over the last 18 months good progress has been made in delivering the objectives set out in the January 2019 Cabinet paper:

-
- The Northern Roots trademark and wordmark have been registered; a master and sub licence document and structure have been developed. Licensing relationships with social enterprises and other community businesses were due to be trialed as part of pilot project delivery planned for 2020 and 2021, however this has had to be suspended due to Covid 19.
 - Community, partner and stakeholder engagement took place throughout 2019. A programme of pilot projects and consultations was planned for and initiated in 2020. Much of this programme has had to be paused due to Covid 19, but all initiatives that can safely continue have taken place. These include a beekeeping project, a creative writing competition, and a joint walking project with Mahdlo Youth Zone. Communications activities, to raise awareness of the project and support engagement, launched in January 2020. The Northern Roots website can be found here: <https://northern-roots.uk/> and the project is building a following on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. A new phase of public and stakeholder consultation will be launched in November 2020 to help inform the development of the planning application and operating model for the site.
 - Over the course of 2019, ownership of the land within the Northern Roots site boundary was confirmed and, where necessary, registered. A register of easements, covenants or other constraints in place over the land have also been identified and recorded. The Charity Commission has approved the broadening of the terms of a charitable covenant which limited the usage of one plot of land.
 - Over the past six months the following reports have been completed: Business Modelling, Woodland Management, Carbon Banking, Sustainable Urban Drainage, Biodiversity Net Gain, Commercial Financing Options, Low Carbon Technologies, Planning Strategy, Signage and Wayfinding Strategy. These come in addition to earlier reports assessing the site's soil and ecology. Having reviewed all of these reports the initial site Masterplan has been updated. On the basis of the revised Masterplan, a planning application is now being developed which is in keeping with the Greenbelt status of much of the site. The project is on schedule to submit the application before the end of the current financial year.
 - Since January 2019 Northern Roots has leveraged additional external funding to supplement the current revenue funding. This funding will cover the costs of developing a submitting the planning application. In parallel the project has been developing a pipeline of external capital and revenue funding to facilitate the development and operation of the site. The project has been included as a significant element of Oldham's application to the Towns Fund, which could provide capital funding from 2021 onwards. Conversations are ongoing with a charitable foundation to provide revenue funding to complement this capital investment. A number of other smaller capital and revenue funding bids have either been submitted or are under development. No OMBC funding for the project, either capital or revenue, has been approved beyond March 2021.
 - In keeping with the recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Board the Northern Roots company has been established as a Charitable Company, limited by guarantee. The company board now comprises six Directors – four nominated by Oldham Council (Cllrs Jabbar, Brownridge and Chauhan and Rebekah Sutcliffe) and two independents (Anne Selby and Jonathan Bland). Two Board meetings have taken place. A further three independent Directors will be recruited in the coming months from the local community. An application to register the Northern Roots company as a charity is being prepared for submission to the Charity Commission.
-