

Subject:	Rewilding of the former Waterhall Golf Course		
Date of Meeting:	8 October 2020 24 September 2020 – Tourism, Equalities, Communities & Culture Committee		
Report of:	Executive Director, Economy, Environment & Culture		
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Ward(s) affected:	Withdean		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT

- 1.1 This report provides an update for TECC Committee, further to approval by Policy & Resources Committee on 23rd January 2020 to lease the former Waterhall Golf Course site. Approval was provided to lease the site to a Community Interest Company for a period of 25 years for rewilding, an events venue and education centre. There was strong support for rewilding to take place at the site.
- 1.2 As the Chairs Communication to the TECC Committee in June 2020 indicated, the preferred leaseholder had confirmed they would not be concluding lease arrangements. In addition, the Chair advised that Cityparks would assess if it was feasible for the service to undertake rewilding at the site. A report on the feasibility would be considered by this committee. Furthermore, consideration would be given to the options in relation to use of parts of the site which would be complementary to rewilding, including potential use of the clubhouse and other buildings located there.
- 1.3 This report requests approval for Cityparks to undertake rewilding at the Waterhall site. In addition, that a marketing exercise is undertaken of the remaining land and buildings not required for the rewilding to seek alternative uses.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Tourism, Equalities, Communities & Culture Committee recommends to the Policy & Resources Committee that it:

- 2.1 Notes that the Community Interest Company (CIC) agreed by Policy & Resources Committee on 23rd January 2020 as the preferred leaseholder for the former Waterhall Golf Course site will not be concluding lease arrangements.
- 2.2 Agrees that the Council's Cityparks Service undertake rewilding at Waterhall and submit funding applications for Countryside Stewardship Grants to support this work. Community engagement will be a major part of the rewilding activities undertaken.
- 2.3 Agrees to a marketing exercise being undertaken of the buildings located on the site as per 3.12 and conclude lease agreements with preferred leaseholders, who will undertake activities which complement re-wilding.
- 2.4 Delegates authority to the Executive Director, Economy, Environment & Culture to implement the recommendations 2.2 and 2.3.

That the Policy & Resources Committee:

- 2.5 Notes that the Community Interest Company (CIC) agreed by Policy & Resources Committee on 23rd January 2020 as the preferred leaseholder for the former Waterhall Golf Course site will not be concluding lease arrangements.
- 2.6 Agrees that the Council's Cityparks Service undertake rewilding at Waterhall and submit funding applications for Countryside Stewardship Grants to support this work. Community engagement will be a major part of the rewilding activities undertaken.
- 2.7 Agrees to a marketing exercise being undertaken of the buildings located on the site as per 3.12 and conclude lease agreements with preferred leaseholders, who will undertake activities which complement re-wilding.
- 2.8 Delegates authority to the Executive Director, Economy, Environment & Culture to implement the recommendations 2.2 and 2.3.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Preferred leaseholder

- 3.1 Upon seeking to confirm the lease arrangements, further due diligence and the impact of the Covid-19 public health crisis led to the preferred leaseholder concluding that the former golf club house would not be financially viable as an events venue. The proposed leaseholder commissioned an industry expert to assess the potential for an events venue to generate income to assist with funding the proposals, but the market assessment was not positive.
- 3.2 However, the preferred leaseholder would still like to see rewilding take place at the Waterhall site and has already supported the council to achieve this aim by funding and instructing an ecological survey to progress the potential re-wilding process. This work is essential to determine the best conservation management plan for the site. Furthermore, this enables potential applications for Countryside Stewardship Grants to manage a variety of habitats including for species rich

grassland. This survey has been made available for the council to use at no cost which is a generous gesture.

Cityparks rewilding feasibility assessment

- 3.3 The council's Cityparks Service have undertaken an assessment of the feasibility for the service to undertake the management of the rewilding at the former Waterhall Golf Course. This is attached as Appendix 1.
- 3.4 In order to achieve the desire for rewilding at Waterhall Golf Course, it is proposed that Cityparks undertake the management of the land. Consultation had taken place with Natural England in respect of the funding streams available to help support the conservation works. To assist with rewilding by any party Cityparks have mapped and registered the land on the Rural Land Register. Natural England had advised that this is a pre-requisite to obtain payments from the Rural Payments Agency which administer the funding for Countryside Stewardship agreements.
- 3.5 A competitive process is undertaken for Countryside Stewardship funding which has an annual application window. Consultation has taken place with Natural England in respect of the most suitable payment options to achieve the desired conservation plan for the site. Cityparks already have a good working relationship with the relevant officer in Natural England due to their existing agreement and joint working on a partnership NHLF bid led by the National Trust. The application for Countryside Stewardship funding requires ecological feasibility surveys hence they have been undertaken. This will enable a thorough and full understanding of the species currently on the land ensuring the best type of management plan can be put in place.
- 3.6 The management plan will dictate the grants that can be applied for in the differing areas of the site, and so once this is established a better idea of the potential funding available will be known.
- 3.7 Cityparks already manages land on either side of the golf course for both public recreation and wildlife benefit. The combination of this with the golf course land will increase the impact of Waterhall both from an ecological and public recreation point of view and offer some economies of scale. CityParks have a proven record of managing a Higher-Level Stewardship agreement (the precursor of Countryside Stewardship agreements).

Clubhouse and outbuildings

- 3.8 If rewilding is undertaken by Cityparks they would require the use of one or two outbuildings. The clubhouse and remaining other outbuildings have the potential for other uses and to generate rental income for the council. Therefore, a further marketing exercise for these buildings would be undertaken over a minimum period of at least 4 months to enable a wide range of responses.
- 3.9 In addition to the clubhouse, the outbuildings on the site could have potential recreational and conservation uses that complement the rewilding in terms of

education use, bike hire, camping etc. These could also be included in any potential marketing exercise.

- 3.10 There is an opportunity to generate an income to help offset the loss of the previous golf management fee by leasing the various outbuildings and clubhouse to other uses that would be compatible and complementary with the land use and conservation objectives.
- 3.11 There is the ability to exclude some land surrounding the clubhouse from the rewilding and so this land could be included in the marketing of the clubhouse. It is proposed that this would be available as an option for any leaseholder. This would be flexible to not deter interested parties if they do not require the land. However, some uses may benefit from an area of land (the inclusion of land may now be even more important due to social distancing).

Marketing of Clubhouse and other buildings (see plan in Appendix 2)

- 3.12 To seek alternative use for the clubhouse and other buildings, it is proposed that the buildings are marketed as below with the potential of outdoor space available if complementary to the proposed building use, if required:
- The Clubhouse (including adjacent storage building)
 - The Outbuildings in the wooded area
 - The above as a combined proposal
- 3.13 During the previous marketing exercise (for the whole golf course), there were no proposals for just the use of the clubhouse. However, there have subsequently been a number of approaches to lease just the clubhouse itself. The criteria for selection of the successful leaseholder(s) would balance financial viability with encouraging wide community use.
- 3.14 The above marketing is with the aim of getting as many varied proposals as possible and capturing all interested parties. Some may only be interested in the clubhouse and do not want the extra responsibility of the outbuildings, or vice-versa.
- 3.15 Subject to the approval for Cityparks to undertake the rewilding, the remaining buildings will be offered to Cityparks for use as storage and welfare facilities (as per 3.8 above). These facilities will also be available to use by local volunteer and community groups connected to the rewilding.
- 3.16 If Cityparks do undertake the rewilding, there is the potential for greater flexibility for other leisure uses to be incorporated into the rewilded area. It would be very difficult to include such flexibility into an arrangement with an external leaseholder.

4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1 As the previous marketing exercise for the whole Waterhall site was ultimately not successful in achieving a new leaseholder, it is considered that Cityparks would provide the best opportunity for desired use of rewilding to be achieved.

- 4.2 The range of options identified in 3.12 for the marketing of the clubhouse and other buildings is considered to provide suitable flexibility to potentially attract a range of interested parties and complementary uses.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 5.1 As indicated above, consultation has been on-going with Natural England and other bodies such as Rewilding Sussex (local branch of Rewilding Britain) regarding the potential for rewilding at the Waterhall site. Consultation has also been undertaken with the South Downs National Park Authority on the potential future use of the site.
- 5.2 It is proposed that an advisory committee is established which would be made up of experts and local stakeholders. Cityparks have extensive experience of working positively with volunteers across multiple conservation projects. Engagement with local community groups will be very important to ensure the views of interested parties can be given consideration for the rewilding.
- 5.3 The marketing exercise will use local advertising to ensure that interested parties in the Brighton and Hove area are aware of the opportunity.
- 5.4 The Local Access Forum has written to this Committee asking for the land to be declared as Statutory Open Access Land. The Cityparks rewilding does not restrict public access to the land on foot and the public will have similar access rights to those they would have on Statutory Open Access Land. However, it would remain within the control of the Council to alter this in the future.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The council's Cityparks Service undertaking the rewilding of the former Waterhall Golf Course would give this aim the most likely chance of success. This is heavily dependent on securing Countryside Stewardship funding from Natural England, as well as from other funding sources.
- 6.2 Marketing of the clubhouse and other buildings not required for rewilding would give the opportunity for potential income generation and complementary uses by the community.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 7.1 The proposal to undertake rewilding at the Waterhall site could potentially be fully self-funded from external grant funding as set out both in the body of the report and in Appendix 1 with "limited cost to the council other than officer time" (Appendix 1, paragraph 6.1). The service have confirmed that there are a range of grants potentially available (Appendix 1, paragraph 6.2 – 6.4). There might also potentially be rental income from marketing the outhouses/ clubhouse as set out in the report.

- 7.2 As set out in the Financial Implications for the January 2020 Policy & Resources report, “mothballing” the site does result in the council incurring additional expenditure. It is assumed that until the buildings have been marketed and a new leaseholder is in occupation ongoing expenditure will be incurred. This expenditure is not currently included within 2020/21 budget assumptions and is therefore an additional service pressure.

Finance Officer Consulted: Jessica Lange

Date: 26/08/20

Legal Implications:

- 7.3 Decisions to dispose of land must be taken by Policy & Resources Committee. The Council is required to achieve the best consideration that can reasonably be obtained when disposing of land (s123 Local Government Act 1972).

Lawyer Consulted:

Alice Rowland

Date: 01/09/20

Equalities Implications:

- 7.4 If Cityparks undertake rewilding at the former golf course, enhanced public access could be achieved by not restricting access to the existing public rights of way. Such access would need to be compatible with the conservation and other uses of the area.

Sustainability Implications:

- 7.5 The focus at Waterhall Golf Course for rewilding would be on achieving a sustainable chalk landscape that would be for the benefit of the local community. Although there are some conflicts between wide ranging public access, a great deal of the wildlife that has evolved to live in a downland environment is tolerant of recreational disturbance. With management the biodiversity of the site can be increased and the creation of a large block of rewilded habitat will make a significant contribution to the management of the cities biodiversity.
- 7.6 Rewilding will help protect the chalk aquifer due to the minimal use of artificial inputs.

Brexit Implications:

- 7.7 None identified

Public Health

- 7.8 At present it is not known how the on-going uncertainty created by the Covid-19 pandemic may impact upon the progress of the proposals in this report.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

1. Cityparks rewilding feasibility assessment
2. Plan of buildings on the former Waterhall Golf Course

Background Documents

1. Report to Tourism, Development & Culture Committee dated 20th June 2019
2. Report to Tourism, Equalities, Communities & Culture Committee dated 16th January 2020
3. Report to Policy and Resources Committee dated 23rd January 2020