
By: Amanda Honey, Corporate Director, Customer & Communities

To: Mike Hill, Cabinet Member, Customer & Communities

Date: 22 March 2013

Subject: The decision is needed to progress with a lease of the site at White Horse Wood. To develop and extend the country park and to provide improved community facilities, achieved through the development of part of the site for woodland burials.

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: There is an opportunity for KCC to enter into a long-term lease agreement with the Greenacres Group (formerly Woodland Burial Parks) for White Horse Woods Country Park to be used for natural burials. In return, KCC would take a share in the income, the country park would be extended and there would be new facilities constructed on the site for use by the public. The Country Park would continue to operate, but under the management of Greenacres, rather than KCC. The potential income generation from the arrangement would help to support the county-wide Country Parks provision. The decision is needed to progress with a 99-year lease of the site at White Horse Wood and delegate authority to Director of Property and Infrastructure Support.

Recommendation:

The Cabinet Member for Customer & Communities is asked agree the change of use of White Horse Wood Country Park and the development of a 99-year lease of the site to Greenacres Ltd and to delegate authority to enter into the contract to Director of Property & Infrastructure Support to enable its implementation.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 White Horse Wood Country Park was created by KCC to mark the millennium. It is situated just off the A249 at Detling (opposite the County Showground). The park, comprising 65 acres has a car park for 50 vehicles, but no other infrastructure. Hence, attendances at the site currently are low. Car parking income is approximately £4k per annum. The net cost to KCC of managing the site is approximately £20k per year.
- 1.2 There is scope for the site to be used for woodland burials through KCC entering into an agreement with Greenacres, which is connected to the Bibby Group and operates woodland burial sites elsewhere. Initial work started in 2008 and groundwater assessments were trialled at White Horse Wood in 2009. During 2009, site visits to a woodland burial site

owned by Greenacres were undertaken and a meeting held to discuss a potential partnership project.

- 1.3 Work continued 2010 - 2012, and a Cabinet Member's Meeting paper was presented on 21 May 2012. Greenacres have progressed the project and are working towards a planning application submission in May 2013.
- 1.4. The proposal would be for KCC to issue a long-term lease (for 99 years) on the whole of the White Horse Woods site to Greenacres for the development of part of the park as a woodland burial site, with Greenacres retaining and improving the whole Country Park for community, resident and visitor use.
- 1.5. Greenacres would fund the project and undertake any work required to submit a planning application, community consultation and the development of the park. Greenacres would develop a woodland hall for funeral services, seating up to 130 people; a gathering hall (a meeting place for attendees, with toilets, catering provision and space for wakes) and a reception centre attached to the gathering hall, which would provide a reception area, bereavement/family rooms, administrative offices and staff facilities. In addition, a barn for the storage of machinery and hand tools, a biomass boiler and fuel storage area would be provided. The Park would be open to the public with a network of stone paths and rides, electric buggies for elderly and less-able, and staffed by Greenacres for 364 days per year. The facilities would also be available for environmental education, community group use and casual visitors.
- 1.6 In order for the proposal to be financially viable, Greenacres would have to enter into an additional agreement (comparable 99-year lease) with another landowner adjacent to the Country Park, who would also benefit financially through taking a share in the income stream. This proposal has met with support from the landowner to date. The extent of financial benefit to be secured by KCC from the arrangement would be subject to a number of variables, however the expectation is that it would exceed the current annual cost of maintaining and managing the site, with any surpluses beyond this amount used to off-set costs of the remainder of the KCC Country Parks estate.
- 1.7 The clear benefit for White Horse Woods Country Park and the local community would be the provision of new facilities that KCC would otherwise not be able to provide for the site. The arrangement would represent a long term viable solution to the management and use of the Country Park without any financial implications for the County Council. Indeed, KCC would derive an income from Greenacres which would increase as the business became established, thereby supporting the management of other Country Parks across the County.
- 1.8 Once all the burial plots had been filled, White Horse Woods would be maintained by a Trust as a nature reserve and Country Park, funded by a percentage of the income taken on the sale of plots in the preceding years.

2 Relevant priority outcomes

- 2.1 It supports the aim within Bold Steps for Kent to deliver services through new partnerships. It will enhance the cultural and sporting facilities for residents, provide new jobs and maintain/extend woodland habitat and biodiversity via the creation of a new partnership with the private sector.

3 Consultation and Communication

- 3.1 There are no additional legal requirements to consult. Consultation on the planning application will be led by the lessee. This will include consultation with parishes, residents and statutory consultees to the planning application as well as a public exhibition (to be held locally to the site) in April 2013.
- 3.2 The local Member has been briefed on this proposal.
- 3.3 The decision was endorsed by Members of Communities Cabinet Committee on 14 March 2013.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 The site will be leased and all running costs/maintenance costs handed to the lessee. Projected savings and income along with risk management will be set out in the separate report to Members once the lease has been finalised. Income is a % of turnover and is subject to a minimum value. A Trust Fund is established during the first 74 years when burials take place; this is used to maintain the Park when no burials take place in the last 25 years of the 99 year lease. However the business model allows for a renegotiation of the lease in the first half to extend the operating period. The site could sustain woodland burials for around 200 years without the need to reuse a burial plot.

5. Legal Implications

- 5.1 The decision is needed to progress with a 99-year lease of the site at White Horse Wood to the Greenacres Group.

6. Equality Impact Assessments

- 6.1 The Country Park facilities will be improved widening availability and access to customers. The woodland burial development is non-religious and open to all to access. EIA completed, to be submitted for assessment.

7. Sustainability Implications

- 7.1 The planning application will address all aspects of sustainability including building design, management and enhancement of the landscape and habitat and supporting local communities.

8. Alternatives and Options

- 8.1 No other suitable alternative uses have been found for White Horse Wood that provide additional customer facilities at no cost to the Council whilst generating an income to help sustain the Country Park service.

9 Risk and Business Continuity Management

- 9.1 The proposal is likely to be high profile and therefore Greenacres would have to demonstrate that the proposal would generate significant benefits for local communities.

10 Conclusion

- 10.1 The clear benefit for White Horse Woods Country Park and the local community would be the provision of new facilities and an extension to the Country Park that KCC would otherwise not be able to provide for the site. The arrangement would represent a long term viable solution to the management and use of the Country Park without any financial implications for the County Council. Indeed, KCC would derive an income from Greenacres which would increase as the business became established, thereby supporting the management of other Country Parks across the County.

11. Recommendations

- 11.1 The Cabinet Member for Customer & Communities is asked to make the decision to agree to the change of use of White Horse Wood Country Park and the development of a 99-year lease of the site to Greenacres Ltd and to delegate authority to enter into the contract to Director of Property and Infrastructure Support to enable its implementation.
- 11.2 No specific officer delegations will be included within the formal decision as the Officer Scheme of Delegation, under Appendix 2 part 4 of the Council's Constitution provides a clear and appropriate link between this decision and the actions needed to implement it. For information it is envisaged that the Director of Property & Infrastructure Support will sign contracts on behalf of the County Council in this instance
- 11.3 Officers performing tasks under the scheme of delegation are expected to keep the relevant portfolio holder informed of progress.

Background Documents

- Previous committee report: report to Cabinet Members' Meeting, 21 May 2012
- Further information on Woodland Burials by Greenacres can be found at www.greenacresgroup.co.uk

Contact details –

Kate Phillips; Countryside Partnerships Manager / Project Manager 07920 428494 kate.phillips@kent.gov.uk

Chris Hesse; Head of Culture & Sport Group 01622 605002