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| SUBJECT: | HOPE WOOD TREE PLANTING INITIATIVE |
| DIRECTORATES: | COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND TOWN CLERK |
| REPORT AUTHORS: | STEVE BIRD ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, COMMUNITIES AND STREET SCENE, JACLYN GIBSON CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER |

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To identify an area of land in Council ownership that is currently in the Council's portfolio for letting as grazing, and to seek agreement to transfer to it being used as a new woodland/nature area.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 To seek agreement to use a specific Council owned site for the development of a new woodland
- 2.2 That this site be the subject of an ecology development plan, based on tree planting, and be used to promote the value of greening in the city, and the wider ecological agenda.
- 2.3 That this site be closed to the public, other than for a circular perimeter casual access footpath, to protect the new habitats, but opened for public use on specific days, as and when the site develops and staff resources permit.

3. Background

- 3.1 The City Council has declared a climate change emergency, and is taking a number of steps to drive local changes where it can, specifically to contribute to mitigating the effects of climate change.
- 3.2 One of the Council's aims in support of the above is to develop a project where more trees can be planted, helping not only to make a physical change, but also to promote the benefits and value of trees in the wider city, signifying as they do, that there is still hope that the most severe impacts of climate change can be avoided.
- 3.3 To do this it has been necessary to consider a wide range of possible sites in Council ownership, and to assess their viability for planting by being mindful of other competing pressures for development, and their existing habitat value.
- 3.4 It is important to note that there are many types of valuable wildlife habitat, not just woodland, and so biodiversity requires a range of habitats to be created and protected. Those working on this initiative have been especially keen to ensure that we do not create a new woodland at the expense of another type of ecosystem.

- 3.5 Having reviewed sites methodically, one site now stands out as being suitable at this stage. See Appendix A.
- 3.6 The site is currently grassland, about 3.45ha in size, and sits between Simon's Hill allotments and the river Witham. It can be accessed from the cycle/footway that runs between Newark Road and Boultham Park.
- 3.7 The ground has been let for horse grazing in the past, but has limited value, even for this use due to having access for vehicles, and its low lying/ wet land nature. Letting has thus been problematic at times, and the site currently does not have a tenant.

4. The Proposal

- 4.1 The site identified in Appendix A be transferred from Property Services management to Community Services for the purposes of creating a new woodland.
- 4.2 Being close to the river Witham the Council has to maintain access for river work as/when required, amounting to a 9m wide strip adjacent the river. Outside of that, all parts of the land are available to be planted with trees.
- 4.3 The ground conditions are wet, which will impact the choice of tree species that are suitable, but as wet ground, it is possible to manage the habitat accordingly and create a special type of habitat that would not be possible in many other areas.
- 4.4 Whilst the aim is to create a woodland, it is also important to recognise that doing this alone would be to miss an opportunity. The proposal is therefore not just to plant trees, but to have a plan in place that creates a total ecosystem, with trees at its heart.
- 4.5 As the focus of this project is nature conservation it is not proposed that this area will be fully open to the public for two reasons: a) Public access spaces carry a higher level of maintenance requirements that impose an extra cost. b) this is a nature conservation area, so disturbance by the public will be minimised so as to maximise ecological value. However, it is recognised that people will be interested in what is happening on the site, and indeed some do take casual access of the site currently for such as dog walking. A perimeter path would therefore be established around the site for this purpose. It is also proposed that although not having fully open access, there will be 'open days' at times, to explain what is being done and why, to promote the benefits of trees and wildlife in the city. In this respect it would be an asset aligned with some existing work in other parks.
- 4.6 The site comprises approximately 3Ha of useable land (within the 3.45Ha site), which will accommodate an estimated 3000 to 6000 trees and wildlife glades, depending on the final details of the scheme. No indicative timetable has been set for this work yet, but is likely that it will be phased over several years to maximise the opportunities for volunteers to engage. It is expected that the first planting will take place in winter 2022.
- 4.7 A detailed site proposal and management plan will be developed as soon as agreement to the land transfer is determined.

5. Strategic Priorities

5.1 Let's enhance our remarkable place

This initiative will add to both the quantity and quality of biodiversity in the city.

5.2 Let's address the challenge of climate change

Aside from the direct impact that adding more trees to the city's inventory will have, this site will act as a catalyst to promote climate change issues, and the wider benefits of greening the city.

5.3 Organisational Impacts

5.4 Finance

The value of the site for grazing is low, if/when the site can be let. It is currently unlet and there is no income budget assumed for this site.

The estimated initial cost of the project has not been established at this stage, so the budget that has been provided will determine the extent to which works can be undertaken both in terms of initial works and ongoing maintenance.

The cost of this project will be funded from the Vision 2025 earmarked reserve which has set aside, £23,000 in 2022/23 with an ongoing budget of £5,000 p.a. Although full details of the scheme have not yet been developed it is clear that this will not be enough to get far beyond feasibility and some initial ground works. Other forms of support will therefore be needed.

Grants

Various grants are available for tree planting at specific times, and these will be sought, where possible, to extend the options for what can be done. They are however only available in certain circumstances, so expectation of obtaining significant long term funding is limited.

However, a new government grant, launched under the Levelling-Up agenda has just become available to the Council. This is specifically for parks creation and rejuvenation, and is supplied in recognition of the importance of access to quality open spaces to the quality of life for communities. It is targeted at areas of deprivation, and initial assessment suggests that this project fulfils the requirements well. The council will therefore be bidding to this pot for our full allocation, which is up to £85k. We will hear about the outcome of this bid in October.

There is potential for enhancement of the site to be funded through the Biodiversity Net Gain requirements of the planning system, as set out in the Planning White Paper and Levelling Up Bill. This would enable developers to achieve the minimum 10% net gain for development where it is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve on site. At this stage we are still awaiting further detail on how this may be delivered and anticipate receiving such detail by the end of 2022.

Sponsorship

The council is aware that some individuals and businesses in the city might want to support and be associated with a project such as this, and so opportunities to draw in support in-kind or in cash, will be used where acceptable and reasonable.

If required recognition would be given, proportionate to the scale of the support, if acceptable to the sponsor.

5.5 Legal Implications including Procurement Rules

Equality, Diversity and Human Rights

The Public Sector Equality Duty means that the Council must consider all individuals when carrying out their day-to-day work, in shaping policy, delivering services and in relation to their own employees.

It requires that public bodies have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination
- Advance equality of opportunity
- Foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities

This report carries no equality, diversity or human rights implications.

6. Human Resources

6.1 Land, Property and Accommodation

The site is a low lying area of land that has poor access. Property Services have let the area at times for grazing, but it is unpopular, and thus of low value.

6.2 Significant Community Impact &/or Environmental Impact

As this project is intended to enhance biodiversity in the city, and promote ecological issue, it is considered that it will have significant positive long term beneficial impacts. The extent to which the public can get access, and the site is used as an engagement resource will be subject to the available staff time.

6.4 Corporate Health and Safety Implications

All Council land has to have a designated Responsible officer and support Responsible officer who undertake and record regular health and safety checks. Currently this work is done by staff in Property Services, but under this proposal this land would transfer to the inventory of Community Services.

6.5 Risk Implications

6.6 (i) Options Explored

- To do this project
- Not to do this project

6.7 (ii) Key Risks Associated with the Preferred Approach

Loss of this site for other uses in the future.

7. Recommendation

7.1 That Community Services develop the site as a new woodland /wildlife habitat to improve biodiversity for the city.

Is this a key decision? No

Do the exempt information categories apply? No

Does Rule 15 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules (call-in and urgency) apply? No

How many appendices does the report contain? One

List of Background Papers: None

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