
EXTENSION TO SKERNINGHAM COMMUNITY WOODLAND

**Responsible Cabinet Members - Councillor Nick Wallis, Health and Leisure Portfolio
Councillor Stephen Harker, Resources Portfolio**

**Responsible Directors - Cliff Brown, Director of Community Services
Paul Wildsmith, Director of Corporate Services**

Purpose of Report

1. To seek Cabinet approval for a change in management of 5.5 hectares of Council owned land, presently under an agricultural tenancy and used for cereal farming, into land managed for nature conservation purposes and as an important addition to land dedicated for access to attractive and biodiverse countryside in this part of Darlington's urban fringe.

Information and Analysis

2. One of the reasons for this initiative comes about because of the pressing need to translocate (remove surface planting and a sufficient layer of soil in a manner that allows flora and some fauna to survive in their new locations) an area of species rich grassland as a part of the proposed development currently under investigation by Argon Properties on a two hectare site at Faverdale. This translocation of approximately 5.5 hectares of turf is aimed at securing the long term biodiversity interest of this grassland and will come with a package of measures including specifications for its long term maintenance as well as measures to ensure that the species richness is both maintained and enhanced across the two receptor sites, one of which is the site described here. The other proposed site for translocation is an area of existing amenity grassland and will be the subject of further consideration. It is likely that both sites under consideration will be needed for this process to take place successfully, as well as adequate compensation for lost biodiversity and access to semi-natural open space.
3. The land in question (see **Map attached**) lies on the urban fringe of Darlington, just to the north of Green Lane and Beaumont Hill and currently outside of the development limit for the Darlington urban area in the Borough of Darlington Local Plan. It is green field and is judged to have low development potential, lying as it does adjacent to the railway line, having a major historical right of way running through it, as well as having high voltage power lines running overhead. It has been described as the 'Jewel in the Crown' in Darlington's Right of Way Improvement Plan' (ROWIP) because of its potential to provide access to very high grade, 'quality countryside' in this part of town, as well as strategically for the whole of the town's population. At the moment however, the land forms a buffer between the very attractive new Community Woodland at Skerningham and the urban fringe of north Darlington, forcing people to walk through uninteresting arable crops in order to access the new 50 hectare Community Forest.

4. The third factor, contributing to the process of identifying this area specifically as one that would benefit from this change of management, is that in order to encourage the use of this site as well as the Community Woodland beyond, we have also identified a possible source of funding for some path surfacing works across this piece of Countryside that will serve to make the access to the Skerningham Community Woodland more commodious for a wider cross section of the public including the disabled, school groups and people with young children.
5. The land is at present tenanted under a long-term agriculture tenancy management agreement and we are currently in negotiation with the tenant in an attempt to attain a suitable agreement to enable the project to take place.

Conclusion

6. The proposed site is, in part, an acceptable and reasonably convenient site for the translocation of this important biodiverse grassland and the value of this process will be enhanced as it also makes a useful contribution to improving the quality of countryside access in this part of Darlington.

Financial Implications

7. The one-off costs of translocating the grassland will be met through the planning consent for Argon Properties referred to in paragraph 2. If this planning permission is not granted then it is proposed that the scheme should go forward in any case in order to address the other issues mentioned above such as the improvement in access to the community woodland and fulfilling aspects of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan. In these circumstances the site will be subject to a woodland grant scheme application and largely planted with mature trees.
8. Providing the tenant agrees to integrate the new management requirements for this piece of land into his normal farm practises then there will be no increase in the Council's costs. He is currently in discussions with his land agent as to whether such a change in management could be carried out without a detriment to his agricultural business. This may be the case as much of the land at present is set aside and difficult to farm. If the Council needs to take the land out of the tenancy agreement then it will need to be managed by the Council's own Countryside Management Services. This will be covered by the Council's current commitment to managing this sort of urban fringe, semi natural green space through our existing contract with the North East Community Forest, and would not lead to an increased revenue cost. The process of taking the land out of the tenancy agreement would increase costs, to be funded either by Argon Properties or by another, still to be identified, external source.
9. The new arrangement, if carried out within the existing tenancy, will not have any financial implications. If the Council is no longer able to maintain the agricultural tenancy it will lose the annual sum of £600, to be met from existing revenue budgets.

Outcome of Consultation

10. There was extensive consultation entered into as part of the ROWIP process that identified this area of land as of very high importance in terms of improved access to 'quality countryside'.

Legal Implications

11. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

12. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. Increased area for quality countryside access has been shown to have positive effects on crime and disorder by providing safe areas for informal activity away from people's homes.

Council Policy Framework

13. This proposal does not represent a change to Council policy or the Council policy framework.
14. The issues discussed with regard to access to the countryside are extensively discussed in the Darlington ROWIP (Draft). In addition, improved access to the countryside also features in Darlington's Local Plan and in the Core Strategy Preferred Options 2005 of the Local Development Framework. The importance of the protection and enhancement of biodiversity is increasing due to recent legislation which is incorporated in Council policy, including the Community Strategy, the Local Area Agreement and the Local Plan, as well as in many other areas.

Decision Deadline

15. In order to allow the translocation process to go ahead it would be beneficial if the decision was made to go ahead with the proposal at this meeting.

Recommendation

16. It is recommended that Cabinet agrees to a change in management of the land at Skerningham in accordance with the details of this report.

Reason

17. The recommendation is supported as the change of management of this Council owned farmland is necessary to allow for the translocation of the important species rich grassland at Faverdale and the improvement of access to quality countryside in this part of Darlington.

Cliff Brown
Director of Community Services

Paul Wildsmith
Director of Corporate Services

Background Papers

- (i) Local Biodiversity Action Plan
- (ii) People and Nature in Darlington
- (iii) Darlington's Community Strategy
- (iv) DEFRA Guidance on Producing a Rights of Way Improvement Plan
- (v) Planning Policy Statement 9
- (vi) The Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000
- (vii) Borough of Darlington Local Plan
- (viii) Darlington Core Strategy, Preferred Options 2005.

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