

**CABINET**  
**24 SEPTEMBER 2015****FUTURE OF THE BISHOPS WOOD CENTRE**

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**Relevant Cabinet Member**

Mrs L C Hodgson

**Relevant Officer**

Director of Business, Environment and Community

**Local Member**

Mr M H Broomfield

**Recommendation**

**1. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Localism and Communities recommends that:**

- (a) the Director of Business, Environment and Community, in consultation with the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Localism and Communities, is authorised to enter into discussions and finalise the relevant due diligence and transfer agreements in order that the delivery of the Bishops Wood Centre is transferred to the Field Studies Council; and**
- (b) the Director of Business, Environment and Community, in consultation with the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Localism and Communities, is authorised to consult with staff and Unions over the process of transfer.**

**Background Information**Executive Summary

- 2. The Bishops Wood Centre is managed through a partnership between Worcestershire County Council who manage the service and National Grid which owns the site and buildings.
- 3. In November 2012 a review was carried out of future options for the Centre. It concluded that the best option at the time would be to keep the service in-house, carry out a staff restructure and develop a strategy for the Centre to become self-financing by 2017-18. In May 2013 a further review was carried out and it was recommended that management of the Centre should transfer to the Business, Environment and Community Directorate (BEC). The objective of the Centre becoming self-financing by 2017-18 was retained and it was acknowledged that if this was not achieved, a further review of the Centre's future would need to take place.

4. Since the Centre was transferred to BEC, the management team and staff have worked hard to reduce the subsidy from the County Council. However, in line with its objectives around commissioning, the County Council has also been exploring the possibility of the Bishops Wood Centre being managed by an alternative provider to ensure its longer term sustainability and focus. Following an extensive evaluation process, an alternative delivery organisation has been identified that could manage the site in the future.

### Background

5. The County Council has been in a partnership with National Grid at the Bishops Wood Centre since 1994. The site and buildings are owned by National Grid which makes a maintenance contribution towards their upkeep, while the service is delivered by Worcestershire County Council. The services provided include:

- Environmental education for schools - day visits
- Alternative Curriculum for 11 to 19 year olds
- CPD courses for teachers and educators
- Forest School Practitioner training
- Lettings – room / conference centre hire
- Office base for WCC Duke of Edinburgh Team
- Leisure courses
- Community engagement via monthly events
- Venue for Youth Offending Service work
- Allotment space for Orchard Street Day Centre.

### Footfall

<b>Category</b>	<b>10/11</b>	<b>11/12</b>	<b>12/13</b>	<b>13/14</b>	<b>14/15</b>
Pupils	8845	7521	6571	5579	6829
Courses	679	757	1271	945	1194
Venue hire	2845	2364	2100	4274	3560
Community	1975	1600	717	1250	1042
<b>Total</b>	<b>14344</b>	<b>12242</b>	<b>10659</b>	<b>12048</b>	<b>12625</b>

### Classes visiting

<b>Classes</b>	<b>11/12</b>	<b>12/13</b>	<b>13/14</b>	<b>14/15</b>
WCC	177	143	126	132
Out of County	57	64	74	83
<b>Total</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>215</b>

6. All services are developed in partnership with National Grid, and the County Council's performance is measured through a number of Key Performance Indicators and where possible relate to the corporate priorities of the County Council.

7. At present the net cost to the County Council is projected to be £37k for 2015/16.

8. The objective of the project is to secure the Centre's long term future by enabling the partners' focus to remain on environmental education rather than on income generation.

9. Whilst this project was not initiated by National Grid, it is entitled to terminate the current lease and partnership with the County Council and manage the site and service as it sees fit – including identifying a new partner. However, it is the National Grid's wish that, given the success of the existing partnership with the County Council, the organisations should work together to ensure its long term sustainability.

10. To that end, the Bishops Wood Working Group, which includes representatives from the County Council and National Grid, has carried out an extensive exercise to identify a suitable organisation that could potentially take on the County Council's delivery role. Invitations were sent to the following potential delivery organisations in March 2015:

- The Trust for Conservation Volunteers
- The Eden Project
- The Field Studies Council
- Groundwork West Midlands
- The Malvern Hills Outdoor Education Company
- Worcestershire Wildlife Trust and
- The Young Pioneers.

11. Of these, the Eden Project and the Trust for Conservation Volunteers indicated that they were unable to progress to making a formal proposal but the Field Studies Council, Groundwork West Midlands, the Malvern Outdoor Education Company, Worcestershire Wildlife Trust and the Young Pioneers made formal submissions by the deadline of 8 May 2015. An evaluation process was carried out on 26 May 2015 against the following agreed criteria:

#### Criteria and weighting

- The organisation must be focussed on environmental education - 25%
- The organisation gives appropriate consideration to employment and staff issues - 15%
- The organisation works with communities, stakeholders and other groups - 15%
- The organisation has the ability to manage the 70 acre site at Bishops Wood - 15%
- The organisation has experience of working in a challenging commercial environment and taking advantage of opportunities to attract and leverage core funding - 30%.

12. Following this process, four of the organisations were invited to clarification meetings on 18 June 2015. It was decided not to progress with the fifth organisation as it did not meet one of the key criteria.

13. Following the clarification meetings, the Field Studies Council was identified as the preferred alternative delivery organisation should this delivery model be pursued.

#### The Field Studies Council

14. The Field Studies Council's (FSC) mission statement is "Bringing environmental understanding to all" and its vision for 2020 is "Inspiring environmental understanding through first-hand experience". It is registered as a limited company and a charity

which currently manages 14 residential centres and 5 day centres across the UK. In 2014 it delivered learning experiences to 141,500 learners totalling over 3 million learner hours.

15. The FSC is self-financing and does not rely on external funding. It has never closed one of its centres. FSC have a 'back office' support network in place and experience in acquiring other similar centres. There would be an immediate support network for school tutors and trainers, a marketing team with specialist knowledge of the market sector and access to existing FSC networks

16. Bishops Wood already has a national profile and joining FSC would enhance this further by enabling the Centre to benefit from FSC's national marketing strategy. The Centre would be promoted as a conference and training venue through existing national education and biodiversity networks and contacts thus increasing its income generation from lettings. In addition through joining with Field Studies Council also fits in with Corporate Priorities around the forming of Active Alliances and WCC moving forward as a strategic commissioning authority.

17. The core visions of FSC and Bishops Wood are the same. Having FSC as the new delivery organisation would secure the future for Bishops Wood by enabling the Centre to focus on the delivery of innovative and creative environmental education, providing a channel to bid for capital projects and leverage funding in order to develop and grow thus ensuring the Centre retains its high national and international profile in the environmental education sector.

18. The FSC is fully committed to continuing to serve Worcestershire schools and to provide opportunities for disadvantaged young people.

## **Legal, Financial, HR and Equality Implications**

### Legal Implications

19. There are no significant legal implications of the County Council reconfiguring the partnership with National Grid or of no longer directly providing the current service. Legal implications regarding personnel and disposal of assets are covered below.

### Financial Implications

20. The 2015/16 gross budget for the Service is £365k, which is offset by £340k income and £25k from reserves. The latest 2015/16 outturn forecast for the Service suggests that an additional £12k will be required from reserves i.e. the full cost to the County Council for 2015/16 will be £37k.

21. It should be noted that the Service's 2015/16 budget includes £42k in Central and Property recharge costs and that this income would be lost to the County Council if the recommendation is approved as it would no longer be providing those services to the Bishops Wood Centre.

22. In summary, if the recommendation were to be approved and other financial factors remained constant, the County Council would save c.£37k pa in subsidies to the Bishops Wood Centre but would lose c. £42k pa in recharges i.e. there would be a net loss of £5k pa to the Council.

23. The County Council's interest in Bishops Wood is limited to a long lease. The Council is clear that the lease has no market value due to restrictive terms (it can be terminated with six months' notice; cannot be assigned; is for a specific purpose). The asset valuation of £1.233m only reflects the value of the County Council's use of the property for service delivery, not its market value. If the lease were to be surrendered because a decision had been made not to deliver the service, the asset would no longer be required or need to be replaced. It should be noted that the nominal value of the asset would need to be written down. As the lease has no market value in itself, a transfer or assignment of it does not engage Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972 (section on under-value disposals).

### HR Implications

24. The County Council currently employs 15 staff (5 on casual contracts) at an annual cost of £233,000 projected for 2015-16. HR advises that, of these, TUPE applies to 10 staff and they would therefore be entitled to transfer their employment contracts to the Field Studies Council in the event of either of the options being pursued.

25. Regular communication has been maintained with staff at the Bishops Wood Centre concerning these discussions. Trade Unions have also been briefed. Consultation with staff at the Centre and Trade Unions about the transfer process would follow approval of the above recommendation.

### Equality Implications

26. No equality implications have been identified as the Field Studies Council and National Grid would deliver a similar service to that currently provided. An Equality Impact screening has been completed for this transfer (see Appendix 1), which is seen as compliant with the Public Sector Equality Duty.

### Privacy Impact issues

27. The Council's information sharing protocols will be followed in terms of any information that is shared with the Field Studies Council.

28. The Corporate Landlord Board has not raised any objections to the proposal.

### **Conclusion**

29. The Bishops Wood Centre has been a resounding success over the past 20 years providing environmental education opportunities for an average of 12,000 people per year. The recommendations above will enable the Centre to continue to thrive in the future and ensure that the focus remains on environmental education rather than on income generation.

### **Supporting Information**

Appendix - Equality Impact Screening

## **Contact Points**

### County Council Contact Points

County Council: 01905 763763

Worcestershire Hub: 01905 765765

Email: [worcestershirehub@worcestershire.gov.uk](mailto:worcestershirehub@worcestershire.gov.uk)

### Specific Contact Points for this report

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## **Background Papers**

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Director of Business, Environment and Community) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

- [Discussion on the Potential Options for the Future of Bishops Wood Centre - 28 November 2012](#)
- [Final Position for the Future of Bishops Wood Centre - 1 August 2013](#)