TITLE	**Covid Memorial Woodland**
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Tuesday, 21 March 2023
WARD	(All Wards);
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Simon Dale
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure - Ian Shenton

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

A desire to create a Covid Memorial Woodland in remembrance of those lost during the pandemic has been highlighted and officers have considered the suitability of an area of Council owned land recommended for this proposal.

Officers are seeking Executive approval to proceed with the proposed site and concept planting scheme for the Covid Memorial Woodland with commencement of planting recommended to take place during the November 2023 - March 2024 planting season.

This project will make a contribution towards the WBC Climate Emergency Action Plan (through the 250,000 Tree Project) and the Wokingham Biodiversity Action Plan.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive:

1. Approve that the Covid Memorial Woodland will be located in the SE corner of Rooks Nest Farm

2. Approve the implementation of a Covid Memorial Woodland, which will generate Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) units, including the required capital expenditure of £254,000 and the establishment equalisation reserve to manage the ongoing maintenance costs.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid Memorial Woodland will provide an opportunity for the Council to support the community and residents with an area to reflect and remember those who were lost during the pandemic whilst supporting the Council's tree planting target. In addition to contributing to Carbon Sequestration targets of the Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP), delivery of the Covid Memorial Woodland will build further on the Council's commitment to reach Tree Cities of the World status.

An area of Council land has been identified for this purpose and officers have considered its suitability to achieve this goal. The area of land proposed is located in the South East corner of Rooks Nest Farm, Barkham; a map identifying the area has been included in Appendix A. The area of land has been identified as surplus to requirement

by Wokingham Borough Council Estates and the site is considered to be suitable for implementation in the 2023/2024 planting season.

The woodland will consist predominantly of UK and Ireland Sourced and Grown British native saplings (60-90cm) and will be designed to maximise the full potential planting area. The design will also include a footpath to facilitate access through the site and benches to provide areas for reflection.

A summary of the benefits to delivering the Covid Memorial Woodland on the proposed site include:

a. Building on the Councils CEAP tree planting commitment by providing a contribution of 7.7ha of land to be converted into woodland
b. Building on the commitment to achieve Tree City of the World Status
c. Contributing to the Wokingham Biodiversity Action Plan
d. Utilising existing facilities to reduce Capital investment
e. Utilising existing grant funding already in place
f. Available for implementation in the 2023/2024 planting season
g. Improvements to air quality
h. Reduction in flood risk

Costs

The upfront cost for tree supply, planting and early establishment can be funded through the existing Woodland Trust Emergency Tree Fund which is available to utilise until March 2024. Implementation after March 2024 would require funding to be secured through alternative resources.

Capital expenditure being sought is £254,000 with £90,000 covered from Woodland Trust Grant (net borrowing of £165,000 over 5years).

The current high-level programme for the project is as follows:

Activity	**Commencement**	**Completion**
Undertake BNG baseline habitat assessment	April 23	June 23
Finalise design proposal	April 23	May 23
Develop and submit planning application (if required)	May 23	Aug 23
Procure contractors to undertake footpath works	Aug 23	Sept 23
Procure contractors to undertake planting	Aug 23	Oct 23
Undertake footpath work	Sept 23	Oct 23
Undertake tree planting works on site	Nov 23	Feb 24
Procure and install additional infrastructure ie. benches and sculpture	Nov 23	Feb 24

BACKGROUND

A desire to create a Covid Memorial Woodland within the Borough as a long-lasting memorial to those who lost their lives during the pandemic has been highlighted and

officers have considered the suitability of an area of Council owned land recommended for this proposal.

In March 2021, through a Notice of Motion, the Council committed to achieving Tree Cities of the World Status. The Tree Cities of the World programme developed by Food and Agriculture Organization of United States provides worldwide recognition to towns and cities who have met a set of core standards demonstrating dedication to their urban forest. Implementation of a Covid Memorial Woodland would support the Council in demonstrating their commitment to achieving the status.

As well as supporting residents with an area to reflect and remember those who were lost during the pandemic, the delivery of the Covid Memorial Woodland will provide multifaceted benefits including; contributing to the Council's (CEAP) Tree Planting Project, providing an uplift in Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) units, building on the commitment to achieve Tree City of the World Status, improvements to air quality and reduction in flood risk.

The site proposed, located in the SE corner of Rooks Nest Farm, has been identified as surplus to requirement by Wokingham Borough Council Estates and a desktop assessment has been carried out by Green and Blue Infrastructure Officers to determine the suitability of the area. It is considered that facilitating the woodland as an extension to an existing country park, would demonstrate a cost-effective scheme that, if approved, could be delivered in the 2023/2024 planting season.

The site measures approximately 7.7ha and is located adjacent to California Country Park. Maximising the tree planting potential on the available planting area would deliver approximately 7000 new trees and would demonstrate a 4.5% contribution towards the CEAP carbon sequestration target to convert 170ha of land. A combination of tree planting and wildflower seeding in this location is also expected to generate an uplift in BNG units.

In November 2021, a presentation was delivered to the Strategic Growth and Asset Board considering the location of the SE corner of Rooks Nest Farm and outlining broad cost estimates. Officers were asked to continue work and provide more detailed cost estimates, establish requirements and consider concept design options. Appendix A, attached, demonstrates the type of informal woodland planting scheme that could be delivered with the estimated costs included in the Business Case further below. It should be noted that the cost estimates are based on the requirements and desires that have been expressed to Officers however, the concept design can be amended or omitted if the decision is made to reduce the Capital cost.

The initial upfront cost for tree supply and planting can be funded through the existing Woodland Trust Emergency Tree Fund that has already been secured as part of the ongoing delivery of the tree planting project. The uplift in BNG would provide the opportunity for the Council to generate an income to cover the capital, monitoring and ongoing maintenance costs. Utilisation of existing facilities such as parking, café and toilets at California Country park would significantly reduce the capital investment required to deliver the project. Public access to the site can be obtained from the existing Bridleway which would further reduce the capital fund requirement.

It is expected that the change of use from agricultural land might require submission of a Change of Use planning application. This has been factored into the project programme

and capital cost requirement however will be confirmed during the design and survey stage of the project.

California Country Park is already managed by the Countryside Service team. With this in mind, the team are well positioned to take on the long-term management and maintenance of the new Covid Memorial Woodland. The ongoing cost of this has been factored into the financial considerations and it is expected that the cost would be covered through the sale of BNG units generated from the woodland planting.

The current high-level programme for the project is as follows:

Activity	**Commencement**	**Completion**
Undertake BNG baseline habitat assessment	April 23	June 23
Finalise design proposal	April 23	May 23
Develop and submit planning application	May 23	Aug 23
Procure contractors to undertake footpath works	Aug 23	Sept 23
Procure contractors to undertake planting	Aug 23	Oct 23
Undertake footpath work	Sept 23	Oct 23
Undertake tree planting works on site	Nov 23	Feb 24
Procure additional infrastructure ie. benches	Oct 23	Nov 23

BUSINESS CASE

It is considered that facilitating the woodland as an extension to existing country parks, such as California Country Park would demonstrate a cost-effective scheme that, if approved, could be delivered in the 2023/2024 planting season.

The upfront costs associated directly with the tree planting will be funded through the existing Woodland Trust Emergency Tree Fund that has already been secured through the ongoing Tree Project. The site and scheme proposal have been designed to keep the capital costs for delivering the scheme to a minimum however it is expected that an improvement to habitat will generate an uplift in BNG. The sale of generated units is expected to cover some of the expected capital, monitoring and ongoing maintenance costs (for at least 30yrs) and provide a capital receipt to the Council.

The general principle around BNG is that where a site can demonstrate that habitats for wildlife have been extended or improved, units are generated. This is measured through a site baseline survey and post intervention assessment which will identify the uplift in BNG units. Recently, in the Environment Bill, the Government announced its intention to mandate a 10% net gain for biodiversity and it is expected to become mandatory for all TCPA developments in November 2023. Where a development can not demonstrate the required BNG on-site, off-site units will need to be purchased. Where Wokingham Borough Council has carried out habitat improvement schemes that generate an uplift in BNG there will be opportunity to generate sales to cover capital implementation costs and provide a capital receipt to the Council.

The actual scale of capital receipt will depend on the uplift in BNG generated from the planting scheme and the eventual sale value of the BNG units. It is worth noting that WBC has already sold BNG units for £20k each and are aware of others being traded within the

borough for around £35k/unit. Taking into consideration the expected increase in demand, once the BNG uplift is mandatory, it is expected that the value of units could range from £35k-£50k/unit. It also worth noting that there is no fixed price for a BNG unit and the Government envisages that this will be a commercial market with the price being sent by supply and demand. It is expected that the price of BNG units would cover the following costs:

- a BNG assessment of the site (both as is and proposed),
- the capital investment to deliver proposed habitat enhancements such as wildflower meadow seeding (including a contingency to cover risk of any required remedial works),
- the required ecological monitoring,
- the specialist habitat management required to maintain the new habitats and,
- an element of land value (at least equivalent to a 30yr plus lease on the land).

The current estimated costs for the project are as follows (although this might be adjusted as part of the detailed design process and can be reduced if items are omitted or the quality of materials/finish are adjusted):

Item	Cost	Commentary
Initial BNG Baseline habitat assessment	£1,885	Capital – Invest to Save Payback expected from BNG sales
Design and survey work: • Design work • Localised topographical survey • Tree Survey • Arboricultural Impact Assessment • Ecological survey • EIA	£10,000	Capital – Invest to Save Payback expected from BNG sales Depending on other workloads and assuming a simple woodland design is adopted, it may be possible to undertake the design work in house to reduce this cost.
Breedon gravel path within memorial site	£60,000	Capital – Invest to Save Payback expected from BNG sales Based on an estimate between £52000 - £68000 This cost could be reduced by: opting for a lower quality material such as Type 1 and dusting finish, reducing the length or by having mown paths only inside the memorial site.
Flexipave surface to bridleway	£28,500	Capital – Invest to Save Payback expected from BNG sales This cost could be reduced by: opting for a lower quality material or omitting the bridleway connection entirely.
Wildflower seeding	£10,000	Capital – Invest to Save Payback expected from BNG sales Based on wildflower seeding across 1ha of the site. Estimated at £10,000/ha.

2 wooden benches including installation	£5,000	Capital – Invest to Save Payback expected from BNG sales
Sculpture	£26,000	Capital – Invest to Save Payback expected from BNG sales Based on an estimate between £15000 - £37500 and dependant on the complexity of design.
Delivery of proposed woodland planting and early establishment weed control	£90,000	Existing grant funding– Based upon the creation of 6ha of new woodland planting
Contingency	£23,000	Capital – Invest to Save Payback expected from BNG sales 10% of total costs
Total Implementation cost (excluding ongoing management costs for 30yrs)	**£254,385**	

Revenue impact and support
It is unlikely that receipts would be sufficient in the early years to cover the ongoing maintenance costs and hence we will be establishing an equalisation fund to manage the project costs.

Contribution to Earmarked Reserve to cover ongoing BNG monitoring requirements	£25,000	Capital - It is recommended that contribution to a dedicated BNG Monitoring earmarked reserve is made in year 1 as draw down will start in year 2
Contribution to Earmarked Reserve to cover management requirements	£22,000	Capital - It is recommended that contribution to a dedicated BNG Maintenance earmarked reserve is made from the early receipts as draw down will start in year 2. £349,069 is the estimated cost for ongoing maintenance carried out by Countryside Services for a period of 30 years. It is expected that this cost would be covered through the sale of generated BNG units and the cost is not being sought as part of this report

The cost estimates are based on a draft scheme that may be altered through the detailed design process but it currently forecasting the creation of 19 BNG units that could be sold at a cost of around £35k-£50k each (including ongoing monitoring and maintenance).

Benefits and risks:

Benefits	Risks
Utilisation of existing surplus WBC owned land which has been agreed by WBC Estates as suitable for use as memorial woodland.	Due to time constraints, delays in moving forward with the site could impact on the use of the Woodland Trust grant funding.
The site will provide a contribution of 7.7ha of land towards the Councils climate emergency tree planting target to plant 170ha of woodland.	The amount of BNG units to be generated is currently unknown and can not be confirmed until a baseline assessment is carried out.
Maximising the planting potential would significantly contribute to the CEAP carbon sequestration target.	Delays to the decision may impact procurement of tree stock if not secured in advance of the planting season.
Utilisation of existing facilities such as car park, toilets and café would reduce the cost of Capital funding required.	Refusal of 'change of use' planning application would mean an alternative site would need to be sought.
Implementation achievable within 2023 – 2024 planting season.	
Grant funding available until March 2024 through the Woodland Trust Emergency Tree Fund already in place through the Tree Project to contribute to the cost of tree stock, tree guards, tree planting and early establishment costs.	
Public access already established via Bridleway adjacent to California Country Park.	
The site is adjacent to Barkham Solar farm which will be benefitting from new woodland planting. Planting in the location identified would demonstrate a continuation to the solar farm woodland planting which would provide further valuable biodiversity benefits.	
Building on the commitment to achieve Tree City of the World Status	
Improvements in biodiversity and amenity	
Reduction in air and water pollution	

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£254,385	£90,000 available through the Woodland Trust Grant funding. Shortfall of £165,000 required for infrastructure, design and BNG assessment costs.	Grant funding Capital Invest to Save
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Nil		
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Nil		

Other Financial Information
See attached high level financial implications. The Woodland Trust Emergency Tree Fund is available to access until March 2024. A delay in the decision could impact implementation in the 2023/2024 planting season. If planting does not take place before March 2024 the Woodland Trust grant funding will not be available to utilise and the cost for tree supply and planting will need to be funded through an alternative funding stream.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation
Stakeholder engagement will be made with Town and Parish Councils and ward Councillors on the proposed woodland planting location and scheme and opportunity for Borough resident involvement in the planting will be made. WBC Communication and Engagement Officers will be engaged to publicise the proposal however it is not expected that a formal public consultation will be required. Given that the site is not currently a public open space and the planting scheme will be contributing directly to the Councils CEAP and BAP commitments, it is not envisaged that this would be particularly contentious.

Public Sector Equality Duty
EqIA form completed.

Climate Emergency – *This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030*
This project will result in an additional 7.7ha of woodland planting which will contribute to Key Priority 5 (Increase the Levels of Carbon Sequestration in the Borough Through Greening the Environment) of the Council Climate Emergency Action Plan. Based on a recent Natural England research report, assuming that each hectare would sequestrate 7.83 tCO2e in the first year, which would raise to 13.7 tCO2e in subsequent years this project will eventually sequestrate 105.49 tCO2e per year. A new planting site of 7.7ha would be providing a 4.5% contribution towards the CEAP carbon sequestration target to convert 170ha of land.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

Not applicable.

List of Background Papers
Appendix A - Covid Memorial Woodland Concept Design Appendix B - Covid Memorial Woodland Capital Finance Case

Contact Laura Buck	**Service** Delivery and Infrastructure
Telephone	**Email** laura.buck@wokingham.gov.uk