

# MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

## EXECUTIVE REPORT

**Lingfield Farm Countryside Centre and Brambles Farm Community Centre**

**Deputy Mayor and Executive Member for Regeneration Cllr. Charles Rooney**

**Executive Director for Commercial and Democratic Services: Tony Parkinson**

**16<sup>th</sup> of December 2015**

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### PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is for the Executive to consider proposals to make best use of both Lingfield Farm Countryside Centre and Brambles Farm Community Centre, which are currently both empty.

### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

2. It is recommended that Brambles Farm Community Centre be offered as a potential base for Early Years provision or for more general commercial use which would bring benefit to the community.
3. It is also recommended that Executive allows for expressions of interest to be sought for both commercial and community asset transfer use of the Lingfield Countryside Centre.

### IF THIS IS A KEY DECISION WHICH KEY DECISION TEST APPLIES?

It is over the financial threshold (£150,000)  
It has a significant impact on 2 or more wards  
Non Key

x

### DECISION IMPLEMENTATION DEADLINE

4. For the purposes of the scrutiny call in procedure this report is

Non-urgent  
Urgent report

x

If urgent please give full reasons

## **BACKGROUND AND EXTERNAL CONSULTATION**

### **Brambles Farm Community Centre:**

5. Expressions of Interest for a Community Asset Transfer were sought in 2012 for Brambles Farm Community Centre. Hope Foundation, a well-established Middlesbrough based voluntary sector organisation, was successful in securing a 25 year lease on the facility.
6. They presented a robust business case showing financial security and also had an excellent track record of engagement within the town. However, in February 2015 they regrettably withdrew from the lease agreement due to lack of sustainable funding.
7. Discussions have also taken place with the Early Years Team with regards to nursery provision in East Middlesbrough. Based on January 2015 headcount the demand for eligible families in this part of town is significantly higher than the level of provision that is currently provided for children.
8. There are a number of reasons behind this. The main one being that schools in the area are close to full capacity, so younger siblings are placed on waiting lists. A provision at Brambles Farm Community Centre would relieve some of the pressure due to its locality in the heart of the community.
9. Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership has also highlighted that poor aspiration in East Middlesbrough has identified that there is greater need to engage with parents and offer opportunities for children. Improving school readiness is an important aspect of Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership's Early Help Action Plan.

### **Lingfield Farm Countryside Centre:**

10. Lingfield Countryside Centre has previously been under the responsibility of Children's Families and Learning. However the building has been left empty for a number of years. A speculative expression for a Community Asset Transfer was submitted by residents of Coulby Newham and Coulby Newham Rangers football team. However this has now dissipated and the building along with the adjacent Farm House remains empty.
11. The Countryside Centre is located within six hectares of protected green space highlighted in the Housing Plan (H26 Coulby Newham).
12. Both buildings are in relatively good condition with Lingfield Countryside Centre receiving a major refurbishment in 2001 and Brambles Community Centre only opened in 1992.
13. An informal exploratory exercise has been conducted during the last couple months to gauge interest and opportunities for both of these assets. Discussions have taken place with various stakeholders in both localities.

14. Early Years have stated that there is no current demand for the provision in South Middlesbrough.

## **IMPACT ASSESSMENT (IA)**

15. Any change to the use of both sites by Council Services will be subject to Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) and this requires that Council Services fully comply with the Equality Act in respect of public access.
16. Both these proposals have been subject to impact assessments, which are attached to this report as Appendix 3 and 4. The impact assessments found that these proposals would not have an adverse impact on groups or individuals as proposals would ensure that buildings are brought back into use for the benefit of the wider community.

## **OPTION APPRAISAL/RISK ASSESSMENT**

17. There are several options available in relation to **Brambles Farm Community Centre**:

A. Keep the building closed and demolish.

This would result in:

- The destruction of a relatively new building
- Associated political and community fallout
- Not allowing for some kind of service provision, communal or commercial use in the heart of a community.
- Potentially reducing opportunities to provide the Council with a sustainable income.

B. Offering as expressions of interest for a Community Asset Transfer:

- This has already been tried without success and also there seems to be little sustainable interest within the community.

C. Offer out to commercial tender as nursery provision, creating a facility that caters for a specific community demand and would provide a sustainable income for the Council.

However it should be noted that:

- Planning permission will be needed to convert to a nursery.
- There may be concerns around noise and traffic/parking management.

D. Offer out as a general commercial tender with an indication that a nursery provision would be an attractive proposition to the Council, but that general commercial interest would also be considered

18. There are several options available in relation to **Lingfield Countryside Centre**:

A. Keep the building closed and continue to maintain in terms of security cover.

However this will:

- Invite opportunities for further vandalism.
- Continue to incur upkeep costs.
- Reflect poorly upon the Council's commitment to a relatively modernised building.

B. Invite expressions of interest for a potential Community Asset Transfer. This was tried before, but proved unsuccessful as the previously interested party failed to progress their proposal, perhaps as a result of including the adjacent dilapidated barn and farmhouse building, but also due to the isolated location of the buildings away from residential areas.

C. Seek expressions of interest for both Commercial and Community Asset Transfer remaining open to considering both of these options and therefore allowing for greater interest in the building.

A framework to **assess** expressions of interest would be designed to allow for an equitable approach:

- Consideration will be given separately to the financial track records and organisational resilience of those bidders with a commercial interest, and those seeking Community Asset Transfer.
- Expressions will then be considered collectively to assess which of the interested parties can offer appropriate enhancement to the local community.
- Detailed Business Plans will then be sought from those organisations that have met the above criteria prior to a final assessment.

## **FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND WARD IMPLICATIONS**

19. **Financial** – Both buildings currently have utility, security and rate commitment's amounting collectively to £3,000 per annum. A rent for Early Years provision at Brambles Farm has been proposed to be set at £6,000 per annum.

20. **Ward** – Ward Councillors in both localities have been consulted with as part of this process

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

21. It is recommended that Brambles Farm Community Centre be offered as a potential base for Early Years provision or for more general commercial use which brings benefit to the community.

22. It is also recommended that Executive allows for expressions of interest to be sought for either the Commercial or Community Asset Transfer of Lingfield Countryside Centre.

## **REASONS**

23. The demand for Early Years provision in the Brambles Farm Ward is a significant priority and ensures that the building is retained for community purposes whilst creating an income stream.
24. However, whilst a demand for Early Years provision has been clearly identified, a poor response or a failure to achieve planning consent for Early Years provision would delay the Brambles Farm building being brought back into use. Seeking more general commercial offers would potentially offset this delay.
25. Keeping a more open option for the use of Lingfield Countryside Centre ensures that the building is more likely to come back into use more rapidly than if the Council was to take a more restricted approach.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

No Background Papers

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