

# Longspring Wood

## Feasibility Study

By Sevenoaks Town Council

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Sevenoaks Town Council  
Council Offices  
Bradbourne Vale Road  
Sevenoaks Kent TN13 3QG  
Website: [www.sevenoakstown.gov.uk](http://www.sevenoakstown.gov.uk)  
Email: [council@sevenoakstown.gov.uk](mailto:council@sevenoakstown.gov.uk)

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## BACKGROUND

Longspring Woods is made up of two parcels of ancient woodland, which is defined by Woodland Trust as an area of woodland which has persisted since 1600 in England. They are both located within the Green Belt and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The larger parcel, pictured below comprises 8 separate Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs), with the majority of the woods also being registered as an area of Biodiversity Opportunity.

It abuts two Public Rights of Way SU38 and SU36, as well as a local playing field which is currently used by local schools and groups. There is a well-defined horse-riding network through the woodland and via SU36 which follows the length of Fig Street where it abuts the woodland. SU36 is closed to vehicular traffic and thereby provides a safe and scenic route for walkers, cyclists, and horse riders.

Following notification from the landowners of Longspring Woods, Oak Lane, of their intention to sell the larger parcel of ancient woodland, Sevenoaks Town Council has now submitted an Intention to Bid in order to protect the land as an Asset of Community Value. This was agreed at the Town Council meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2023.



## ASSETS OF COMMUNITY VALUE

The Right to Bid is a national process that has been introduced through the Government's Localism Act. It came into force on 21 September 2012.

The Right to Bid gives voluntary and community groups, as well as town and parish councils the opportunity to nominate local land and buildings to be included on a list of 'Assets of Community Value', maintained by the District Council.

For an asset to be listed, nominators must demonstrate to the District Council that its main use now, or in the recent past, contributes to the social wellbeing or cultural, recreational, or sporting interests of the local community – and that this use will continue.

Examples could include village shops, pubs, community centres and playing fields. Buildings used as administrative offices and land or property where community use isn't the main function would not be included.

If successfully listed, the sale of the asset is paused for an initial period of six weeks, (a moratorium) during which time any community group with a local connection can submit an Intention to Bid to the District Council via their standard form. If this is submitted, the moratorium extends to six months, giving communities the time to prepare a bid and get a business plan together.

Any sale, after the six-month period, takes place under normal market conditions and the owner is under no obligation to sell to a community group. Equally, community groups which have registered an interest are under no obligation to bid or purchase.

Longspring Wood had been successfully registered by Sevenoaks Town Council – alongside another nearby piece of adjacent woodland – as an Asset of Community Value on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2023. This was on the grounds that it furthers the social wellbeing and recreational interests of the community, with reasonable expectation for it to continue to do so in the future.

Sevenoaks Town Council was notified that the woodland, was put up for sale at the end of 2023. On 11<sup>th</sup> December 2023 at its Town Council meeting Councillors resolved to submit an Intention to Bid in order to protect the land as an Asset of Community Value.

### **What does this mean?**

Registering the Council's intention to bid does not constitute an obligation for the Town Council to submit a bid and buy the land, nor does it obligate the landowner from selling to the Town Council. Rather, it extends the period by which the landowner must delay sale on the open market, in order to allow community organisations time to prepare a bid and business plan for how it would purchase and maintain the land.

## PROPOSAL AND BENEFIT TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Retaining and protecting the 14 acres of woodland, the majority of which is a Biodiversity Opportunity Area (BOA) as well as including eight separate trees covered by a Tree Protection Order (TPO), provides the following benefits:

1. Protects an area of woodland which is over 400 years old, located within the Green Belt and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
2. Supporting the retention of local wildlife and biodiversity. Wooded areas have a huge range of habitat niches and increased amount of different species and complex biodiversity, and the Woodland Trust emphasises that we cannot replace the complex biodiversity of ancient woodlands. The identification of the woodland as a BOA means it presents the best opportunity for enhancing biodiversity to provide the greatest possible benefit.
3. Contributes to the government's goal of towards Net 0 and responding to climate change, which serves the local community's health and well-being.
4. Opportunity to improve and enhance access to the woodland, which already abuts two Public Rights of Way, thereby encouraging more walking and healthier lifestyles.
5. Located near Sevenoaks Common and a local playing field used by local schools and groups, creating opportunity to link the green spaces and enhance these assets.
6. Supports a commitment by Sevenoaks Town Council in its Green Community Investment Plan, to obtain additional land if it could be used for community benefit e.g., additional woodland or community orchard.
7. Sevenoaks Town Council already enables educational visits and 'Forest Schools' to take place on Sevenoaks Common, with additional woodland this could be expanded.
8. Supports a commitment in the STNP, to protect, improve and enhance access to existing publicly accessible open spaces and create new publicly accessible open spaces and green infrastructure.

## CAPITAL FINANCING

### Land Purchase

**It is understood that the land sale value is at £185,000.**

Initial feedback from the agent states *“The woodland was already under offer significantly above the Guide Price and therefore you would need to be at that level or above. We had other offers at a similar level so we would consider this to be the “Open Market” value of the property”.*

### Legal Conveyance Costs

Approaching Warners Solicitors for a quotation for legal fees they have stated the following - *This looks to be an interesting and worthwhile project. I would normally estimate about £3,000 - £3,500 plus VAT for legal costs with about £1,000 search fees (this is a VAT inclusive figure but is dependent upon which searches are needed) and Land Registry fees would be either £100 if it is a transfer of whole or £230 if it is a purchase of part. It occurred to me that as you were looking for support from local businesses Warners’ support could be that they could do the conveyancing pro bono and you would only need to pay for the disbursements.*

### Capital Works

The following outline capital works costs were noted for works to be carried out as funds became available in addition to purchase price:

	One Off Capital Expenditure
Interpretation Boards	£2,500
Improving parking area and immediate tracks with crushed stone	£20,000
Possible boundary repairs although	£2,000
Litter Bins	£1,000
<b>Totals</b>	<b>£25,500</b>

## Funding

### External Funding

There is a short time scale to meet the legislation relating to the Asset of Community Value bidding process, the Town Council has to have a plan in place before 4<sup>th</sup> May 2024 and this

provides difficulties in meeting timescales for obtaining external funding. Sevenoaks Town Council Officer's will carry out ongoing research and apply for funds where possible.

Representation will be made to the general public and local businesses and organisations for financial support for the acquisition and protection of this piece of land.

Sevenoaks Town Council Financial Options

Receipts Reserve Capital	Total of £185,000 from Capital Receipts Reserve	Note would reduce options for other planned projects
CIL	A further payment of CIL is due in April 2023	At present the known income is allocated to the commencement of the Town Centre and St John's Hill Masterplan scheduled to commence in January 2024.  The expected April 2024 CIL income is likely to increase between January – March 2024 but amount unknown and has other earmarked proposals for its use.
Combination of Funding	The Council could agree to reallocate some Earmarked Reserves from capital receipts from historic disposal of public green space. Currently at £87,693 with a further £29,230 due in 2024. £100,000 could be used from this.  The balance of £100,000 from potential fundraising and sponsorship and Capital Receipts Reserve and or CIL if allocation increases for April 2024.	Options to be considered alongside other projects.
Public Works Loan Board	A Public Works Loan Board approval normally takes a minimum of 8 weeks to obtain following a Council resolution and certain criteria met.  Current rate of borrowing is 5.31%. £200,000 over 25 years	

	<p>would have an approximate annual payment of £15,000.</p> <p>A loan could be obtained and repaid when anticipated large amount of CIL is received in the future.</p>	
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## REVENUE COSTS

Sevenoaks Town Council manages over 55 hectares of public open space including Sevenoaks Common. The Town Council have a long term 25-year management plan broken down into 5-year programs of work, this is authorised by the Forestry Commission, who also issue a 10-year Felling licence to cover any significant felling i.e. 5 cubic metre of timber per year (equivalent to one large tree or 2-3 coppice trees)

The Management plan currently covers all of our woodlands that we registered with the Forestry Commission:

Mill Pond Wood	Pontoise Close Woodland	Mount Close Woodland
Brittains Lane Woodland	Middlings Wood	Julian Meadow Woodland
Sevenoaks Common	White Hart Beeches	Littlewoods
Judd's Piece		

A considerable amount of revenue costs will be absorbed into the overall management cost relating to the other areas of public open space e.g., insurance and equipment provision.

Based on the annual resource costs of maintaining the Sevenoaks Common at £12,232, the Longspring Woods would add an additional £9,116 per annum an additional £0.97 pence per average Band D council tax payer.

	Sevenoaks Common (6%)	Longspring Woods (3%)
Tree Safety – extending tri-annual survey	£4,000	£1,500
Tree Maintenance	£5,000	£6,000
% of Open Spaces Maintenance	£3,232	£1,616
<b>Total</b>	<b>£12,232</b>	<b>£9,116</b>

There is also the potential for some revenue income generated by the coppicing of the woods, this needs further review.



## RELEVANCE TO STRATEGIC PLANS

### Sevenoaks Town Neighbourhood Plan (STNP)

The STNP was formally “made” by the Local Planning Authority on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023, following a successful Referendum held on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2023.

Objective Six seeks to protect, improve, and enhance access to existing publicly accessible open spaces and create new publicly accessible open spaces and green infrastructure.

While some of Longspring Woods is publicly accessible, the majority is not. Opening it up to the public, and further improving accessibility by linking it to Sevenoaks Common, an already established and highly used green open space, would support both parts of this Objective. In addition, it might encourage more use of the adjoining Longspring Field, which, although owned by a local school, is also used by local sports groups.

Policy L5 supports the provision of new, high quality, publicly accessible open space. As the majority of the woods is currently not publicly accessible, acquisition of the land would support this policy.

### Sevenoaks Town Council Green Community Investment Plan

In November 2019 Sevenoaks Town Council (STC) resolved to make the following its Number 1 Priority:

- *To recognise the Government and KCC declarations for aiming for Zero Carbon.*
- *To integrate this within the vision and throughout the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) and within the Town Council’s general operation.*



Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted some of the STC original plans from 2019. However, STC has used the time to refocus its draft Neighbourhood Development Plan on climate and green issues, identifying policies which would contribute to a more sustainable town.

At a meeting in November 2021, Councillors met to review STC’s original 2019 climate change initiatives and considered additional and new proposals.

These initiatives and proposals are set out in Sevenoaks Town Council’s Green Community Investment Plan, this plan was widely consulted on with the general public and local organisations.

The Green Community Investment Plan has a commitment by Sevenoaks Town Council to obtain additional land if it could be used for community benefit e.g., additional woodland or community orchard.

### **Evidence Base of Sevenoaks District Council’s Local Plan 2040**

In 2018, AECOM produced a SDC’s [Biodiversity Analysis of Sevenoaks District Report](#) to form part of the Evidence Base for the District Council’s Local Plan 2040. Figure 1, located on page 12 of the document identifies the area as High Biodiversity, and the majority of the woodland is further defined by SDC on their [policy map](#) as a Biodiversity Opportunity site.

### **PUBLIC SUPPORT**

There is a short time scale for the Town Council to meet the requirements needed to consider purchasing Longspring Woods, it will during this timescale make every endeavour to communicate and consult with as many local residents as possible regarding the consideration of purchase of the land using the following means:

Press Release	Issued December 2023
Social Media	Issued December 2023
Town Crier article – delivered to each home	Prepared December 2023, delivered February 2024.
Pledge Campaign	Launched January 2024

### Support to date received from:

Warners Solicitors	Providing Pro Bono Legal Conveyance	£3,500
Benedict Bannister	Creation of Information & Pledge Video	£2,000
		£5,500

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### Summary

It is considered that bringing the Longspring Woods into public ownership protects the community asset for the current and future generations addressing the public benefits as identified previously in this document.

1. Protects an area of woodland which is over 400 years old, located within the Green Belt and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
2. Supporting the retention of local wildlife and biodiversity. Wooded areas have a huge range of habitat niches and increased amount of different species and complex biodiversity.
3. Contributes to the government's goal of towards Net 0 and responding to climate change, which serves the local community's health and well-being.
4. Opportunity to improve and enhance access to the woodland, which already abuts two Public Rights of Way, thereby encouraging more walking and healthier lifestyles.
5. Located near Sevenoaks Common and a local playing field used by local schools and groups, creating opportunity to link the green spaces and enhance these assets.
6. Supports a commitment by Sevenoaks Town Council in its Green Community Investment Plan, to obtain additional land if it could be used for community benefit e.g., additional woodland or community orchard.
7. Supports a commitment in the STNP, to protect, improve and enhance access to existing publicly accessible open spaces and create new publicly accessible open spaces and green infrastructure.

It was also considered that subject to funding it would be a good way to commemorate 50 years of Sevenoaks Town Council by providing another area of green spaces for the local community which would be linked via a public footpath to the existing Sevenoaks Common.