

## EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

8 January 2019

### White Rock Cottage & the former Simonsbath School

#### Report of the Head of Conservation & Access

**Purpose of the report:** To update Members on the LEADER funding bid for White Rock Cottage and the former Simonsbath School, and to request the release of allocated monies in reserves in order to progress the consolidation of the buildings.

**RECOMMENDATION(S):** The Authority is recommended to:

- (1) Approve the release of up to £200,000 allocated ENPA reserves to be spent on the stabilisation of White Rock cottage and the former Simonsbath School buildings, and on the demolition of later buildings
- (2) Approve in principle the acceptance of LEADER funding for the buildings
- (3) To note that a further paper will be brought during 2019 which will set out an end use for the buildings, in line with the principles set out below.

#### Authority Priority:

Conservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of understanding and enjoyment. Working with the community and business

#### Legal and Equality Implications:

**The equality impact of the recommendation(s) of this report has been assessed as follows:** None

**Consideration has been given to the provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998 and an assessment of the implications of the recommendation(s) of this report is as follows:**

None anticipated

#### Financial and Risk Implications:

On the acquisition of the buildings in 2013, the Authority set aside £200,000 in order to enable the site to be taken forward once uses were identified. This paper recommends that this money is now released to be set beside LEADER programme funding. See Section 5 below.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The redundant White Rock Cottage and former Simonsbath School lie at the centre of Simonsbath. They were acquired by the Authority in September 2013 from West

Somerset Council. The buildings are very dilapidated having not received any substantial investment since before the closure of the school in 1970.

- 1.2 In December 2013 a local Steering Group was set up to identify ways of utilising these buildings and the broader heritage of Simonsbath for the benefit of visitors, the community and local businesses. The Steering Group agreed a Vision for Simonsbath:

*“Simonsbath will be renowned as having a unique history; an ideal place to discover the story of The Royal Forest and Exmoor - a landscape with a ‘hidden’ side: lost gardens, an unfinished mansion, subtle clues to its busy farming and industrial past; with a deeper history stretching back nearly 8,000 years. People will find an excellent visitor experience, and a well-presented range of things to see and do.*

*Simonsbath’s heritage will be well looked after, shared, used and appreciated. Projects will also generate broader benefits for the community, such as business opportunities, access improvements, ‘get involved’ projects, social history projects, other events and activities.”*

The Steering Group has met every two months since then and has carried out research, options appraisals and feasibility studies (the results of the options appraisal was approved by the Authority in April 2016). It also contracted an architect to develop plans for the buildings on the site and a landscape architect to produce a Conservation Statement for Simonsbath village. One of its goals is to see a Trust for Simonsbath, and some of the Steering Groups members are currently submitting a Deed of Trust to the Charity Commission to achieve Charitable Incorporated Organisation status.

- 1.3 New research has identified historical documents in a loft in Kidderminster, relating to the Knight family’s time on Exmoor, and these show that White Rock Cottage (actually two cottages) was built in February 1820 and was one of the earliest – and only complete surviving - of John Knight’s ‘Scottish croft-style’ buildings. It was built to house the head gardener and estate manager, but also provided an eyecatcher in the adjacent gardens, to which they are therefore intimately connected both aesthetically and historically. The uncompleted gardens themselves are a very rare example of a Picturesque landscape, the style of which is to emphasise natural features and to create contrived viewpoints of such phenomenon. The gardens draw inspiration from Hestercombe (near Taunton), Downton Castle (near Ludlow) and Hafod (near Aberystwyth) all of which had familial ties with John Knight. The school building was added to White Rock Cottage in 1857 as the village grew and has since then become the focus of much continuing social history and interest.

- 1.4 The options that were developed by the Group are to create a small unmanned interpretation space in White Rock Cottage and to enable the school room to be used by the community. The neighbouring gardens, of which White Rock Cottage is an intrinsic part, will be restored and revealed. These options were consulted on in December 2015 and received broad support from the community. In 2016 a feasibility study concluded that these options were achievable. A Trust is proposed to run the buildings, to seek further funding and to maintain the sites in the long run.

- 1.5 All of this hard work led to a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2017 to fund the building works, develop the adjacent 1820s gardens and to set up a Trust. Unfortunately the Heritage Lottery Fund rejected the bid in March 2018.

## **2. CURRENT FUNDING SITUATION**

- 2.1 Since the rejection of the Heritage Lottery Fund bid, other funding routes have been investigated. In September 2018, ENPA applied to the Western Somerset LEADER programme which is part of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE). LEADER has various priorities, and our application is under their 'Support for culture and heritage activity'. On 20 November 2018 we were informed that we had been successful in securing £88,000 to progress the restoration of Ashcombe gardens and this includes the building at White Rock Cottage and the former Simonsbath School.
- 2.2 The LEADER funding bid required detailed costings for the build works at the site and we have obtained these figures through a tendered procurement exercise through which five local building firms submitted detailed quotations.
- 2.3 The total LEADER 'on paper' project costs are £305,000. £200,000 is allocated in the Authority's reserves; there is £15,009 allocated from Caremoor and LEADER's contribution is £88,259.64.

## **3. TIMESCALE**

- 3.1 The LEADER funding is dictated by the termination of the European-funded LEADER programme which requires all funds to be spent and accounted for by March 2020. This means that works to the buildings will need to be carried out from March 2019 and completed by November 2019. This allows for a two month snagging period before a project sign off by the end of January 2020.

## **4. PRINCIPLES**

- 4.1 A number of principles underpin the current proposal, and the Authority is invited to support these principles:
- 4.2 White Rock Cottage and the former Simonsbath School represent important historic assets in the history of Exmoor as a whole and also to this isolated, small community.
- 4.3 The Authority is seeking a use for these buildings which benefits the local community, local businesses and visitors. A number of possible uses have been identified, namely a community space, interpretation space or affordable housing. The Authority is not committed to a specific use.
- 4.4 The Authority would prefer no significant continuing obligation to the buildings. However, any change of ownership of the assets would require consent from LEADER prior to the project end date of 2025.
- 4.5 The Authority wishes to ensure that White Rock Cottage retains a strong link to the gardens, which represent a rare and nationally important garden in the Picturesque style.

## **5. FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 5.1 Capital schemes would normally come before Members for approval when there is greater certainty over the end purpose, funding, future ownership and control. For reasons identified in the body of this report there are still some significant unknowns.
- 5.2 The scheme as currently scoped envisages the Authority restoring the building and handing the asset over to a Trust. Should the Trust not materialise then the Authority could explore alternative uses, such as sale for affordable housing which also carries risks.

### **Financial Risks**

- 5.3 In any build project there is a potential for overspend. There are inherent risks in working with old buildings but at White Rock the basic structure of the building has been deplastered and is therefore visible and solid. It is also a single storey building. A significant contingency is included within the budget.
- 5.4 There are some risks in terms of VAT liability. This includes the ability of the Authority to recover VAT on the construction costs. This is dependent upon the eventual use of the asset, how it is disposed of and over how many years ENPA invests in it.

### **Risks Associated with the Trust**

- 5.5 If the Trust did not acquire sufficient trustees, failed to achieve charitable status or could not meet the criteria set out by the Authority as part of its 'duty of care' to the buildings, then transfer to the Trust may not be able to proceed.
- 5.6 To complete and fit out the building will need further funding which the Trust would need to find. In order to mitigate this risk the Authority would put a requirement on the Trust to be financially solvent and to have a viable business plan.
- 5.7 The Trust could require ongoing support from ENPA for running the building and/ or delivering a service. The Authority would need to assess the benefits and costs of its involvement.

### **Risks Associated with the Affordable Housing Option**

- 5.8 An alternative option could be to sell as an affordable home. (If the Authority leases property, tenants acquire rights to buy). Risks associated with this option also include the need for planning permission and the potential for a LEADER grant reclaim. The LEADER grant sets out that ENPA cannot dispose of the asset before the project completion date of 2025 without its consent. However, ENPA officers have discussed this with the Programme Leader of the relevant LEADER programme and have had verbal reassurance that they would in principle consider use as an affordable home.

### **Reputational Risk.**

- 5.9 The Authority purchased White Rock Cottage and the former Simonsbath School in September 2013. For the last five years there has been no discernible progress on the buildings at the site, which have been scaffolded and covered with protective sheeting – although of course a great deal of work has taken place behind the scenes. There is a high reputational risk for the Authority and for the Steering Group if the buildings are seen as purposeless and that no progress is being made towards their renewal.

## **6. PROPOSAL**

- 6.1 In order for any scheme to be progressed which retains the historic buildings, the same programme of works are needed, initially to demolish later additions, and then to stabilise the historic buildings by reroofing, new fenestration and the repair of other openings, floor coverings, wall coverings. The provision of services will also be included (electricity connection, heating and private water supply). These works have been costed at around £260,000 which includes several elements. Firstly, stabilising the building and architectural services (up to £220,000 made up of £88,000 from LEADER and £132,000 from ENPA allocated reserve); secondly the provision of services such as private water supply (a borehole), lighting and basic heating (up to £40,000 from ENPA allocated reserve).
- 6.2 The Authority is asked for approval in principle to accept the LEADER funding (subject to detailed officer discussion with the LEADER team on 11<sup>th</sup> January). Approval is also requested to draw down the necessary funding from reserves to fulfil the terms of the LEADER grant. £200,000 was set aside in ENPA's reserves to enable building work to be carried out at the site. This includes sufficient sums to enable fundamental fitting out and servicing.
- 6.3 As the stabilisation work proceeds, a detailed paper will be brought to Authority to set out the various options for the end use of the buildings. The overall intention is that the buildings will be divested into a trust, but as the trust has not officially come into existence it is prudent to have another option and this, under planning policy, is most likely to be affordable housing. It is envisaged that the paper setting out the options and recommendations will be brought in summer 2019.
- 6.4 In summary, the LEADER funding when combined with the monies currently in reserves and allocated Caremoor funding, will allow the building stabilisation works at White Rock Cottage and the former Simonsbath School to be completed during 2019. This will ensure the preservation of one of the most important structures (and one of the earliest) in John Knight's reclamation of Exmoor. A 'Scottish' cottage (built in February 1820) and the former school which served the children of the farmers and workers who transformed the old Royal Forest of Exmoor from 1857-1970. From January 2019 a group of volunteers will also begin work on the restoration of the gardens. Evocatively named 'The Unexpected Garden' by one of the Steering Group members, because of its surprising situation in a remote valley at over 1,000 feet above sea level, high on Exmoor, the gardens and White Rock Cottage will provide a strong focus for visitors and volunteers, and will benefit the community and local businesses.

**Rob Wilson-North**  
**Head of Conservation & Access**  
**17 December 2018**

**Background papers on which this report, or an important part of it are based, constitute the list of background papers required by Section 100 D (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 to be open to members of the public comprise:**

*Reports must include a list of background papers (ie those documents relating to the subject matter of the report which disclose any facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the report is based and have been relied on to a material extent in preparing the report). A copy of each of the documents included in the list should be open to inspection by members of the public. [Refer to Section 100D(1) of the Local Government Act 1972.]*