

REPORT TO:	ENVIRONMENTAL AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE (SPECIAL - BUDGET)	AGENDA ITEM: 6
DATE OF MEETING:	4th JANUARY 2022	CATEGORY: DELEGATED
REPORT FROM:	CHIEF EXECUTIVE	CATEGORY: OPEN
MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT:	FRANK MCARDLE (01283 595702) frank.mcardle@southderbyshire.gov.uk	DOC:
SUBJECT:	HEART OF THE FOREST DRAFT MASTERPLAN VISION	
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	ALL	TERMS OF REFERENCE: EDS10,11

1.0 Recommendations

- 1.1 That the proposed answers to questions, as set out in Appendix A, be forwarded to the National Forest Company as the Council's response to the Heart of the Forest Draft Masterplan Vision.

2.0 Purpose of the Report

- 2.1 To agree the Council's response to the Heart of the National Forest Draft Masterplan Vision consultation.

3.0 Detail

Background

- 3.1 The Heart of the Forest Draft Masterplan Vision has been developed over recent months by the National Forest Company in partnership with the National Forest Charitable Trust and North West Leicestershire District Council. The National Forest Company is now consulting with relevant local authorities, landowners, and tourism operators to help inform the final Vision and next steps.
- 3.2 The Heart of the Forest is approximately 10 square miles in the centre of the National Forest, a landscape previously scarred by coal and clay mining which has been transformed since the creation of the National Forest in the early 1990s. This Draft Vision looks ahead to the next 25 years and how the area can be further established to demonstrate that enterprise, people and habitats can work together to mitigate and adapt to climate change whilst also improving the experience and wellbeing of local communities and visitors.
- 3.3 The Heart of the Forest Draft Masterplan Vision can be viewed at Appendix B. The Draft Vision builds upon existing assets including Conkers, Hicks Lodge Cycle Centre, Moira Furnace Museum, YHA National Forest and the Camping and Caravanning Club site, alongside opportunities from ongoing restoration of the area.

It also aspires to significantly improve, and extend, the existing path and cycle network including providing better links to nearby urban areas such as Swadlincote, Ashby de la Zouch and Measham.

The Draft Masterplan Vision

- 3.4 The Draft Vision for the Heart of the Forest sets out ambitious interventions and investments which will create not just a place for leisure activity in an attractive forest landscape, but one which will actively contribute to the mitigation of climate change and help achieve net zero targets ahead of national timetables.

“We will create a unique destination which enhances facilities for local communities, attracts visitors from across the region, and has moments of national significance. We will do this through developing experiences which connect people to nature, encourage positivity, are fun to explore, and deliver an authentic sense of culture, possibility and place. Our programme will be delivered through collaboration and partnership with public and third sector partners, communities, businesses and landowners.

We are laying the foundations for nothing less than a model for sustainable living, sustainable tourism, and sustainable enterprise in a transforming and connected environment here in the heart of the National Forest.”

- 3.5 The Draft Vision focuses action around three over-arching themes which bring the values of the National Forest’s 25-year vision alive and create a ‘Heart’ to the National Forest:
- Place: A high quality, accessible, sustainable and connected place that supports the development of a thriving society and showcases an environment adapting to and mitigating climate change.
 - Experience: An attractive, sustainable destination where local communities and visitors can access a range of experiences that connect them to the landscape, improve their wellbeing and enhance awareness of the importance of the National Forest.
 - Enterprise: A flourishing and sustainable local economy that is facilitating the transition to net zero, promoting green business and supporting enterprises to innovate and be inspired by the transforming woodland landscape.

4.0 Financial Implications

- 4.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

5.0 Corporate Implications

Employment Implications

- 5.1 None

Legal Implications

- 5.2 None.

Corporate Plan Implications

5.3 The Draft Vision could contribute to the achievement of the:

‘Our Environment’ theme, which aims to keep a clean, green District for future generations:

- Improve the environment of the District – enhance biodiversity across the District.
- Tackle climate change – work with residents, businesses and partners to reduce their carbon footprint.
- Enhance the attractiveness of South Derbyshire – enhance the appeal of Swadlincote town centre as a place to visit; Improve public spaces to create an environment for people to enjoy.

‘Our People’ theme, which aims to work with communities and meet the future needs of the District:

- Engage with our communities – support and celebrate volunteering, community groups and the voluntary sector.
- Supporting and safeguarding the most vulnerable – promote health and wellbeing across the District.

‘Our Future’ theme, which aims to grow our District and our skills base:

- Develop skills and careers – attract and retain skilled jobs in the District.
- Support economic growth and infrastructure – encourage and support business development and new investment in the District.

Risk Impact

5.4 The further development of the Heart of the Forest area is an opportunity to enhance access to leisure facilities for local communities and to strengthen the National Forest as a visitor destination.

6.0 Community Impact

Consultation

6.1 The District Council has been invited to comment on the Draft Masterplan Vision by the National Forest Company, along with other stakeholders.

Equality and Diversity Impact

6.2 The Draft Vision seeks to engage and provide facilities that meet the needs of local communities. The proposals include, for example, ensuring that main routes are accessible for all users, facilitating and promoting mobility as a unique selling point for the destination.

Social Value Impact

6.3 The Draft Vision seeks to create a thriving Forest community, including: Creating spaces and places in which communities can come together and flourish including community orchards, allotments and wildflower gardens; Community arts; Community recreation and wellbeing; and, Community involvement and volunteering via community planting, workshops, nature conservation and management.

Environmental Sustainability

- 6.4 The Draft Vision envisages the Heart of the Forest as a model for sustainable living, sustainable tourism, and sustainable enterprise. This includes enhancing the accessibility of the Heart of the Forest by foot, cycle and public transport. Further studies are planned including a biodiversity audit to inform an ongoing programme of biodiversity enhancement and a renewable energy assessment to consider the potential for zero carbon energy generation in the landscape.

7.0 Conclusions

- 7.1 Proposed responses to the relevant questions posed by the Heart of the Forest Draft Masterplan Vision consultation can be found at Appendix A.

8.0 Background Papers

National Forest Company: Our 25 year vision for the National Forest - A greenprint for the nation (Draft)

Appendices

- A. Proposed Response
- B. Heart of the Forest Masterplan Draft Vision

Appendix A

Is there anything missing from the SWOT analysis?

Weaknesses

There is scope to enhance the connections between communities in the Swadlincote urban area and the Forest – bringing the Forest into neighbouring residential areas, both existing and planned, and encouraging residents to use the Forest on their doorstep.

Opportunities

The Heart of the Forest could be a catalyst to the realisation of local authority environment and climate change ambitions, which can then be extended beyond the Forest boundary.

There is untapped potential for business tourism given the area's central location and proximity to major transport infrastructure.

Threats

Regular investment is needed in the area's visitor attractions in order to maintain their appeal, and refresh the offer to attract repeat visitors.

Do you agree with the six outcomes?

An established visitor destination - a gateway to the National Forest located within a newly restored landscape with its own recognisable character and sense of place.

A demonstration of how the 25-year vision for the National Forest is being delivered, which will evidence how the economy, society and environment can work together to address the urgency of climate change and meet net zero targets.

People engaging and interacting with nature whilst exploring a growing network of diverse and connected habitats where wildlife thrives.

Visitors and local communities accessing a range of attractions and outdoor experiences from the more active and adventurous to the more leisurely, cultural, or mindful. All experiences will connect people to the landscape and improve wellbeing.

New and growing enterprises, inspired by the forest and the opportunities emerging from this sustainable visitor destination.

Create new employment and volunteer roles providing opportunities for people to learn, develop new skills and live more fulfilling and prosperous lives within a sustainable, low carbon and woodland economy.

Yes

Rank the items in the Place theme from highest priority to lowest.

The green infrastructure, orientation, connectivity, character, housing and public realm which make this is a high quality, accessible, sustainable and connected community and destination. This theme will:

1. Improve the physical gateways and connections within the Heart of the Forest and to the surrounding communities
2. Improve sustainable ways to travel to the destination and get around once here
3. Strengthen the sense of place and build pride among its communities
4. Ensure development is an exemplar for sustainable design
5. Enhance the natural environment and transforming woodland landscape

Is there anything missing under the Place theme?

Further develop the walking and cycling routes into communities in South Derbyshire, segregated from vehicular traffic wherever possible, in particular cycle routes into Swadlincote town centre. Similarly, bridleways and associated parking facilities linking into the rural areas to the north and south of the Heart of the Forest that can offer longer distance off road routes for both horse riders and cyclists.

Improve links to areas beyond the Heart of the Forest, to the National Forest Way and Trent Valley Way, and to locations such as Rosliston Forestry Centre.

Develop circular walks/cycle paths with good signing and interpretation that will particularly appeal to less experienced visitors.

An opportunity to tell the story of the Heart of the Forest in terms of its role in carbon sequestration and carbon storage, especially considering the area was previously used for coal mining/fossil fuel generation and will be an example of reforestation/rewilding.

Rank the items in the Experience theme from highest priority to lowest.

The experiences, attractions, events and supporting infrastructure such as accommodation which will give reasons for people to come here. This theme will:

1. Create new appealing, high-quality and sustainable reasons to visit
2. Improve gateways and hubs and re-focus Conkers to attract and disperse visitors across the National Forest
3. Promote the Heart of the Forest (this healed landscape) as a place for health and wellbeing
4. Encourage and support cross promotion of attractions and experiences to present the National Forest as one distinctive destination
5. Align experiences to the 25 year vision's values and showcase the whole of the National Forest

Is there anything missing under the Experience theme?

There is greater scope to develop links with visitor facilities in this part of South Derbyshire, including Swadlincote Woodlands/Snowsports Centre, the new County Park/ Golf Centre at Cadely Hill, and Sharpe's Pottery Museum.

Develop the year-round appeal of the destination, which will boost occupancy in visitor accommodation outside of the peak periods, including indoor attractions and events in the shoulder periods.

Whilst maintaining the Forest as the focus and the unique selling point, the growth of the destination would benefit from broadening the appeal to engage attractions and businesses that are not directly Forest-related.

Events and activities that appeal to overnight visitors, who will use local accommodation and food and drink outlets, are particularly valuable.

Consider adoption of a green accreditation scheme for visitor economy businesses that want to promote their environmental credentials.

Rank the items in the Enterprise theme from highest priority to lowest.

The forest enterprises, local supply chains and circular economy to make this a carbon neutral destination. The volunteering, community involvement, learning and skills to make this a great place to live and visit. This theme will:

1. Use the evolving landscape, to enable volunteering, learning and skills, education and job creation
2. Extend the range of varied, high-quality, distinctive sustainable accommodation that underpins the visitor economy and the jobs it creates
3. Support existing and new enterprises to thrive and promote sustainability in a forest setting
4. Attract funding and investment to enable the values and ambition of the Heart of the Forest to be achieved

Is there anything missing under the Enterprise theme?

It is important that the proposals contribute to local town centre viability rather than threaten it. Any proposed retail offer should complement and not compete with the town centres which are already under pressure from the growth of online shopping. In the future, town centres are expected to be increasingly reliant on leisure activities.

Provide an overview of how your organisation could contribute to the next stages in developing and implementing the Masterplan Vision.

- Engagement in cross-border land use planning discussions.

- Contributing to the development of plans for footpath and cycleway network improvements.
- Involvement in feasibility work where proposals extend into South Derbyshire.