

# Swadlincote Woodlands Scrutiny Committee Report September 2010

## 1.0 BACKGROUND

As part of the Government's Challenge Fund SRB (Single Regeneration Budget) a delivery plan for the Swadlincote Woodlands Scheme was drawn up by the Made in Swadlincote Partnership and signed by members of the Board in February 1999.

The Scheme aimed to create new investment and sustainable employment opportunities in Swadlincote by building on the area's heritage, traditional skills and values and taking advantage of the town's location at the heart of the National Forest.

One of the key objectives of the scheme was to create a new Forest Park, to benefit local people and encourage visitors to the town. 35 hectares of land were identified for reclamation from disused coal and clay workings, with the associated problems of poor soil quality, unstable land and gas/chemical leachates from the former refuse tip.

Close to the town centre, the site would effectively join with adjacent existing green spaces The Common and Midway Fishponds, to become a major green wedge highly visible from key routes into the town. The creation of the Park was seen as an opportunity to bring the National Forest into the heart of Swadlincote, to substantially increase the value of this neglected site to the community and for demonstrating best practice in its design and management.

Consultants were appointed and a Masterplan for the site was drawn up illustrating how the site would be landscaped. See *Annexe A*. The shared 'Vision' of all the partners was to create:

- A naturalistic park with wild and semi formal areas
- Multi use public areas and trails
- Woodland planting
- Management and creation of nature conservation habitats
- Recreation areas and spaces for outdoor events

The project was also hoped to encourage:

- Incorporation of arts features
- Interpretation of future park proposals and its past heritage
- Community and schools involvement in its creation and management
- Linking of housing development landscaping to the park

Community Engagement was a large part of the original development, and local schools were actively engaged in creating pieces of sculpture/artwork for display on the site. A Millennium Time Capsule was also buried as part of the opening of the site.

Much of the original vision was delivered, with the exception of an Events Arena, and a commuted sum payment of £400,000 was paid to The Council under a Section 106 agreement on transfer of the land to The Council. This was secured to support the establishment and aftercare of the site for a 10-year period. At the current rate of spend this funding could run out by July 2011 and options have to be looked at as to the future management of the site.

## **2.0 CURRENT SITUATION**

### **2.1 Site description**

Swadlincote Woodlands is now a well-established tree-covered site, criss-crossed by a network of surfaced paths. An adventure play area provides activities for children of all ages, with a car park and toilets providing visitor facilities. The main features of the site are:

- A brick building housing the staff office with public toilets and a store
- Adventure Play Area
- Climbing Boulder
- Woodland plantations
- Balancing ponds
- Water spines (open water courses)
- Meadow
- Surfaced paths
- Art/Sculpture trail

### **2.2 Site Users**

The site is used regularly by local people and has a large local catchment. Dog walkers and families are the main visitors, and the site is frequently enjoyed by people taking part in walking/jogging clubs and participants in various “Get Active in the Forest” initiatives such as Health Walks and Bikeability.

The site has hosted two Sport Relief Mile events, where over 250 runners run one, three or six- mile laps of course through the Woodlands to raise money for Sport Relief.

The adventure play area is also a draw to people from further afield, and is one of our better play sites in the urban core. A climbing boulder provides challenge for older children, whilst the equipped play area caters for a wide range of ages and abilities.

### **2.3 Biodiversity**

In 2005 the north part of the site was designated as a Local Wildlife Site by the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust (DWT). This means that the site supports locally rare types of habitat, or species of flora and fauna, and the Trust encourages landowners to carry out positive management of the site to protect the special habitats. There is no funding attached to this designation, although there is a Local Wildlife Site Officer who monitors the site regularly and advises on positive management techniques. It is the large meadow and the wetland areas that are of importance here being locally rare habitat types, which need careful management.

The South Derbyshire Community Partnership granted funding in 2008 for DWT to produce a Biodiversity Management Statement for the site, which mapped the existing habitats and advise on management recommendations to achieve a ‘desired state’ of biodiversity. This is currently used as guidance for external contractors and SDDC Grounds Maintenance to ensure that maintenance or improvement works are carried out to benefit the site’s biodiversity (*see Annexe B*).

In 2009 a partnership project was set up with The Council, the National Forest Company and British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) to fund 12 conservation action days per year. These practical workdays regularly bring in up to 15 volunteers each session from the

local area to work on projects identified in the Biodiversity Management Statement. This arrangement costs £3,300 per year, but brings in a gift in kind contribution of £18,900 (180 semi-skilled volunteer days per year) and they are able to carry out conservation management tasks to benefit the site.

## **2.4 Staffing**

The site has always had a staff presence on the site since it's opening in 2000. One full time ranger, plus part-time park keepers ensure a daily presence during daylight hours who between them have responsibility for the overall maintenance of the site including opening up/locking up of vehicle gates, grass cutting, woodland management, litter picking, opening up/cleaning/locking up of the toilets and visual inspection of play equipment.

The caretaking of the Woodhouse Recreation Ground across the road also falls within the remit of these staff, including opening up/cleaning/closing the changing rooms for weekend football matches.

As part of the Community Services restructure, which came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010, the Woodland Warden was seconded to the Culture & Community unit as a Tree Officer. This post was not backfilled, and the Park Keeper was retained on a 22 hour per week basis, to undertake litter picking and opening and closing of the site during weekdays, and to have an all-day presence on Sundays throughout the summer. The operational costs of the site have subsequently reduced – detailed in Section 7.

This revised staffing arrangement is due to be assessed as part of a service-wide Parks Staffing review, and a decision made as to how the site will be staffed in the future. The reduction in staff presence on the site has not received any negative feedback from the public to date.

The ongoing transfer of the Woodland Warden is dependant on the permanent appointment of the Tree Officer post, which has the potential to be funded through commuted sum monies and a contribution from Planning Services. If provision is not made for this it post will revert back to the Woodland Warden role and continue to be a revenue cost for the site.

### 3.0 STRATEGIC CONTEXT

#### 3.1 Corporate Plan Themes & Priorities

The site delivers against the following Corporate Plan Themes:

- **Sustainable growth and opportunity**

Economic Development

Contributes to the Economic Development priority by offering opportunities to provide training and job creation in conservation and woodland management to increase skills.

Enhancing the environment to attract inward investment into the area.

National Forest and beyond

Promoting The National Forest as a source of sustainable and renewable fuel – by realizing the potential of the tree stock to become productive woodlands

Site for tourism – an attraction for visitors into Swadlincote

- **Lifestyle choices**

Promoting healthy facilities and lifestyles

Delivers against the Get South Derbyshire Active project – the site is an excellent venue for activities such as Sport Relief Mile, Health Walks, Bike rides and Orienteering. It also forms part of the Swadlincote Open Spaces walk.

#### 3.2 Sustainable Community Strategy

The site also meets some of the key aims of the Community Strategy:

- **Healthier Communities**

Increased levels of participation in physical activity across communities, through providing a venue for activities and organised events

Increased mental well being, providing a green space for relaxation and nature

- **Safer Communities**

Reduced occurrences of anti-social behaviour and criminal damage

Increase range of opportunities and activities available to young people through the Get Active In the Forest activities and community projects

- **Vibrant Communities**

Increased participation in community and voluntary action through partnerships with BTCV, Groundwork and the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust

Improvements in the management of open space and local sites to benefit their value to people and wildlife

Promote and support The National Forest

An increased number of people taking part in cultural activities

- **Sustainable development**

Maximise the potential of The National Forest to support growth in tourism and the woodland economy

Take opportunities to implement environmental improvements alongside growth

## **4.0 STAKEHOLDERS/PARTNERS**

At the time the site was originally being developed, there was a good level of community involvement in various aspects of the project. Local schools were involved in the creation of artwork which is located around the site. Mosaics and brass plaques were created with the help of local artists, and a Millennium Time capsule was buried to celebrate the opening of the site.

The local community was just forming, as the houses were being built at the same time as the site was created. There was an early intention to form a “Friends of” group, although this has never been successfully achieved. Partly because of a lack of staff resources, as this can be a time consuming process, and also possibly that the community was too “new” and not yet established to take enough interest in the site.

The site was developed as a partnership between a number of organisations, and this partnership ethos has continued to strengthen and develop over time. The National Forest Company and Forestry Commission have had involvement from the inception of the site. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust with their interest in the Local Wildlife Site have been an active partner from the early days and more recently BTCV, through their volunteering/community engagement approach, have come on board.

In order to maximise resources as the current funding nears an end, this partnership approach will be crucial to ensure that the potential of the site is realised. New partnerships will continue to be forged, and new opportunities for existing partners will need to be identified.

The balance between site maintenance and development will also need to be struck, to ensure that any improvements made to the site do not have long-term implications scarce resources.

## **5.0 OPPORTUNITIES**

The site has matured well since it's creation, and is well used by local people as an informal open space.

Small improvement projects have been carried out in recent years such as a new footpath link from Bernard Street, and tidying up of the entrance and additional tree planting. The majority of the original vision has now been achieved, although parts of the site have been less successful than others, largely as a result of repeated vandalism and the cost to repair. The Gallery Grid area and Adventure Play Area are two prime examples, and it is perhaps time to re-evaluate where we are now, and how we can make the site work for us.

There are many potential opportunities for improvement and development which have been identified to further raise the standard of the site. These have come about through discussions, meetings, observations, consultation and also from partners. The table in *Annexe C* illustrates these ideas, outlines the benefits and how the costs could be met.

## 6.0 THREATS

The largest threat to the site is related to funding. With the loss of external funding running out and without careful consideration, planning and action now, the future of the site could be in jeopardy.

- Lack of revenue funding secured from external sources puts pressure on Council finances
- No management plan in place to establish future vision for site or priorities for maintenance and development
- Lack of community engagement with the site
- Disease of trees – Alder phytophthora, Sooty Bark disease – selective thinning and good woodland management needed
- Vandalism, especially to the play area - the timber equipment has been subject to repeated vandalism and much has since been removed. The delivery time on parts is approximately 8 weeks, so it can be closed for repairs for long periods of time.
- Illegal Traveller encampments which can incur large costs in clearing up and security measures
- Lack of investment leads to deterioration in quality of facility, with negative impact on visitor numbers

## 7.0 BUDGETARY IMPLICATIONS

In 2009/10 the annual operating costs for Swadlincote Woodlands were £57,270, including CEC's.

The approved budget for 2010/11 is £66,978.25.

Approximately two-thirds of this amount is paid for by Commuted Sum monies and covers the shortfall once the Council has contributed to the cost of CEC's and £11,500 as an annual revenue payment.

As of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010 there was £57,833.55 remaining in the Section 106 Commuted Sum pot.

Without changes to the staffing or operational costs of the site, The Council will have to pick up this cost once the Commuted Sum pot dries up. The tables below show different scenarios.

### Scenario 1: Retain 2 site-based staff (do nothing)

Operational costs remain high and the Commuted Sum monies area depleted by next financial year.

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Commuted sum	40,870	44,178	9,384	0	0
SDDC (incl. CEC's)	16,400	22,800	59,603*	71,056*	73,188*
<b>Operational cost TOTAL</b>	<b>57,270</b>	<b>66,978</b>	<b>68,987*</b>	<b>71,056*</b>	<b>73,188*</b>

### Scenario 2: Permanent removal of Woodland Warden's post (as current temporary arrangement)

Operational costs are reduced, some site presence is retained but Commuted Sum monies are depleted by 2013.

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Commuted sum	40,870	19,200	19,776	18,858	0
SDDC (incl. CEC's)	16,400	22,800	23,484*	25,699*	45,893*
<b>Operational cost TOTAL</b>	<b>57,270</b>	<b>42,000</b>	<b>43,260*</b>	<b>44,557*</b>	<b>45,893*</b>

### Scenario 3: Move to mobile staffing (removal of site-based staff)

Operational costs are reduced dramatically, the Commuted Sum monies are retained until 2019/2020, and the site falls within the general parks maintenance programme.

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Commuted sum	40,870	7,363	7,584	7,812	8,047
SDDC (incl. CEC's)	16,400	22,800	23,484*	24,188*	24,913*
<b>Operational cost TOTAL</b>	<b>57,270</b>	<b>30,163</b>	<b>31,068*</b>	<b>32,000*</b>	<b>32,960*</b>

\* projected as 2010/11 costs plus 3% inflation per year

## **8.0 NEXT STEPS**

These are the suggested next steps which are required in order that an informed decision can be made about how the site is managed and maintained in the future. All will help to give a better understanding of the potential operating costs of the site, but also outline the potential for the site and how it can best be achieved.

### 1. Explore Site Management Options & costs

Carry out further work to identify the funding and resource requirements of two potential options for future management arrangements.

- Option 1: Retain In-house

The staffing arrangements and subsequent costs are currently being reviewed across the Grounds Maintenance service. Assess the annual operating costs of the site under the revised arrangements, which would also include maintenance costs.

Remove site-based staff to mobile teams to reduce site-based operational costs.

Grounds maintenance team continue to mow grass and carry out woodland management as part of winter programme.

Identify partners and potential funding opportunities to take forward the management plan and contribute towards maintenance costs.

- Option 2: Contract out

Scope out potential agencies/partners who could be contracted to manage and develop the site on The Council's behalf, in line with the Management & Development Plan.

Determine what the likely annual management cost would be to The Council.

Explore opportunities and likely take up for a Partnership Management Contract with a third party, to manage & develop the site on The Council's behalf. Due to the size and nature of the site the opportunities for income generation are largely in relation to the building.

## 2. Explore external grant opportunities

It has been identified that the site is eligible for England Woodland Grant Scheme funding, operated by the Forestry Commission. The site falls within the target areas for both Woodland Birds and Quality of Place Woodland Improvement Grant, and is eligible for up to 80% funding of capital works.

There is also a revenue grant that would be accessible, as well as funding to assist with the production of a woodland management plan.

A 'shopping list' of capital and maintenance works needs to be detailed to form the basis for discussions with the Forestry Commission. This could offer good capital and revenue grant streams over a number of years, so exploring the grant application process is worth pursuing at this stage.

## 3. Develop a 10 year Site Management & Development Plan

This site-specific plan sets out the aspirations for the site and acts as a guide for future maintenance and development works.

It includes identifying opportunities for community engagement and partnership working and is defined within an Action Plan.

The site could be a possible candidate for a Green Flag in future years.

The format for the document would follow the existing management plans for Maurice Lea Memorial Park & Eureka Park.

## **9.0 ANNEXES**

**Annexe A – Map of site – original Vision**

**Annexe B – Biodiversity Management Statement (extracts from)**

**Annexe C – Table of Opportunities**