



## REPORT TO THE COMMUNITIES' DEPARTMENT BRIEFING

date 14<sup>th</sup> January 2009

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### REPORT OF THE ACTING CORPORATE DIRECTOR COMMUNITIES

#### Sherwood Forest: A New Beginning

##### **Purpose of the Report**

1. To inform Members about the proposed relocation of the Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre and progress towards a Sherwood Forest Regional Park.

##### **Background**

2. In 2002 an agreement was signed between Nottinghamshire County Council and Natural England, designating Sherwood Forest as a National Nature Reserve. Part of the agreement (arising from the Europa 2000 European Habitats Directive), was to divert mass tourism away from the most ecologically sensitive areas of the ancient woodland by 2010. One of these areas is the oak woodland wherein the existing 32 year old Visitor Centre is located.
3. The ecological importance of the site is great. The reserve contains more than a thousand ancient oaks, many of them over five hundred years old. The forest is home to approximately a thousand beetle and spider species - many of which are rare - and over two hundred species of fungi have been recorded. Local birdlife includes the great-spotted woodpecker, green woodpecker, tawny owl, redstart and nightjar. The area also supports a number of bat species, including the noctule.
4. Natural England advise carefully removing from the present site all buildings and car parks, leaving the site to regenerate naturally over a long period of time back to heath and woodland. However, there several reasons why it would be unwise to simply remove the current facilities with no replacement:
  - Economic impact: Sherwood Forest is one of county's best known icons, attracts 400,000 visitors per year. Loss of a visitor centre would have a negative impact on sub regional tourism.

- Proven public demand to visit the Major Oak and legendary home of Robin Hood. If left unmanaged, the ancient forest could be damaged by uncontrolled public access e.g. accidental fires, vandalism and off-roading.
  - The Country Parks Service has a long term agreement with Natural England to manage 450 acres of Sherwood Forest. A ranger base is necessary from which to carry out woodland maintenance operations.
5. The Country Parks service commissioned a feasibility study in 2004 on seven possible new sites for a visitor centre, close to the Major Oak but outside the National Nature Reserve boundary. The site selected as most acceptable was “Naish’s Field” in Edwinstowe. This was purchased by the County Council from the landowner, Thoresby Estates Ltd in early 2008.
  6. Following the failure of a large scale bid to the Big Lottery, a £10.5m financial package to build a new visitor centre was put together:
    - £7.4m from NCC Capital reserves.
    - £2m from the East Midlands Development Agency (emda), agreed in November 2008 by the emda Board’s Resources Group
    - £1.8m additional NCC capital funding agreed in November 2008 (this figure was subject to emda support which was forthcoming)
  7. Work on designing a sustainable new visitor centre building is well advanced, and a planning application is due to be submitted by the end of January 2009.
  8. Dependent on a successful planning application, the proposed timetable is:
    - Work starts on the new site autumn 2009.
    - New site operational autumn 2010.
    - Demolition of old visitor centre begins winter 2010.

Members can be reassured that the old Centre will NOT be demolished until the new Centre is fully operational, so there will be continuity of service for local residents and visitors alike.

### **Sherwood Forest Regional Park**

9. In addition to carrying out work on the relocation of Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre, the Authority is leading a partnership of some 15 different organisations in work to consider creating a new regional park for Sherwood Forest.
10. A feasibility study was carried out in July 2008 by Hallam Consulting and the findings were presented to the Project Management Board in

December 2008. There was strong support for the initiative and this is currently being progressed.

11. A working group has now been set up, chaired by John Everitt, Chief Executive of the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust, with Councillor Chris Baron as Vice Chairman. In December 2008, the group agreed that a Project Officer post should be created for one year, in order to test and proof the concept of a regional park with stakeholders.

### **Financial implications**

12. £7.4m was initially allocated from NCC capital reserves, with a further £1.8m approved in November 2008. Funding for the Project Officer (for one year) to progress work on the proposed Sherwood Forest Regional Park will come from the Building Better Communities Fund.

### **Personnel implications**

13. The current visitor centre employs between 26 and 40 employees dependent on the season.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**Members are asked to note this report.**

**Keith R Stevens**  
**Service Director: Cultural Services**