



Meeting **COMMUNITY SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE**

date **27 July 2004**

agenda item number

Report of the Assistant Director Leisure and Culture

Progress on Country Parks Development Plans

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To update Members on progress to date on four development projects at the Nottinghamshire Country Parks and to recommend a programme for the next phase of work.

Information and Advice

- 2 The background and progress to date on the four projects under consideration is as follows:

Rufford Country Park

- 3 The Heritage Lottery Fund Public Parks Initiative awards grants for the restoration and regeneration of historic parks and gardens. A bid to this fund for Rufford Country Park was first mooted in 1997.
- 4 A historic landscape survey and feasibility study was commissioned by the then Head of Country Parks. This survey identified the historic features of Rufford's historic parkland and gardens, and was carried out by Landuse Consultants of London in 2002. The accompanying feasibility study by leisure consultant Ian Parkin proposed a £5m bid to restore key aspects of the park's heritage landscape.
- 5 Achievement of this "Vision for Rufford" was incorporated as a target for Culture in the Strategic Plan 2001-5 "Building A Future" and the 2003/4 Best Value Performance Plan. An allocation of £1.2m was earmarked in the capital asset management plan of the County Council to provide match funding for a future grant application. However, due to changes in the grant conditions set by HLF,

by the time the submission was made, it no longer matched the main priorities of the funding body.

- 6 On advice from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the submission was withdrawn in September 2003. This saved the proposal from being given rejected status by HLF, which would effectively jeopardise any subsequent bids.
- 7 In tactically withdrawing the bid, the County Council was given the opportunity to respond to a list of critical points raised by the HLF Board of Trustees.
- 8 The current Head of Country Parks, commissioned PHT Consultants to work with Landuse Consultants to co-ordinate a response, present an addendum report and create a leaner bid, better adapted to the priorities of the visitor and the new strictures of the Lottery Fund.
- 9 The addendum report and reformatted bid will be ready for re-submission by the end of July 2004.

The re-submission focuses on:

- A renaissance plan for the historic Rufford parkland landscape.
- Concentration on the 19th Century landscape plan and aesthetic principles.
- Development of a conservation* and bio-diversity plan.
- A whole park arts and events strategy.
- Development of an education and life-long learning plan.

(*Many of Rufford's parkland features, West Gates and original sculpture are classed as "at risk" by English Heritage.)

- 10 Elements removed from the re-submission include:
 - The proposal to create additional visitor car parking space within the panels of woodland adjacent to the A614.
 - Rufford Mill which was included in the original bid in an attempt to arrest its decline and offer alternative use as a conference centre and visitor interpretation facility.

Removal of both of these elements reduces the total sum requested by £2m.

However, both elements will need addressing and supporting via alternative funding streams.

Potential sites for overspill car parking beyond the Park boundary are currently being assessed. This is being done in collaboration with Corporate Property division. Rufford Mill is the subject of a feasibility study dealt with later in this report. The revised application for Rufford will be submitted in July 2004.

Rufford Mill

- 11 The Heritage Lottery Public Parks Initiative is for restoration of parks and gardens, not for the renovation of historic buildings. For this reason, Rufford Mill will be removed from the Stage One lottery bid for Rufford Park restoration. Because the 18th century Mill buildings are likely to demand high maintenance costs in the future, to assure long term financial sustainability, it is necessary to find new commercial uses for the currently under used spaces on its upper floors.
- 12 The specification of the study demands that the consultants focus on assessing opportunities for greater inclusion within the range of buildings. This will mean providing costings for lifts to allow full access to the first floor of the former Georgian corn mill and the Victorian saw mill.
- 13 To this end, an application was made to the Alliance SSP in January 2004, for funding to carry out a condition survey of the building and a feasibility study into possible future conversion to a catering outlet (bistro and bar) and community arts space.
- 14 A 100% grant of £20,000 was made by the SSP and work tendered through County Council Architectural Services. Architects William Saunders of Newark were selected. Initial surveys were completed in June 2004, with feasibility work ongoing.

Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre

- 15 The designation of Sherwood Forest Country Park as a National Nature Reserve in 2002 means that this heritage landscape now enjoys more stringent legal protection to conserve its rare oak woodland and heath, under the European Habitats Directive.
- 16 In addition, Sherwood Forest is a candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC). This is a European designation, Sherwood being one of four candidate sites designated in this category in England.
- 17 English Nature has indicated that all National Nature Reserves must be in “favourable condition” by a target date of 2010. For Sherwood this means the removal of car parks and the relocation of the current visitor facilities. This presents us with a major challenge, as Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre and Country Park, managed by Nottinghamshire County Council, are amongst the most popular visitor destinations in Nottinghamshire. They attract around 500,000 visits each year, from users ranging from school groups and local residents to overseas tourists. It makes a major contribution to the local visitor economy (alongside Rufford).
- 18 The economic impact of the Centre in this former coalfield area is considerable, and for this reason, total closure of the centre is not seen as an option.

- 19 In January 2002, a successful bid was made to the Alliance SSP for £26,000 to part fund a feasibility study into potential sites for a re-located visitor centre. Backed by the Environment Department and Culture and Community, the work was put out to tender and the successful consultants, Lathams Architects, aim to complete their study by July 2004. The report is attached as an appendix.
- 20 Initial public consultation in the form of an exhibition at the Visitor Centre and a printed questionnaire was organised by the Country Parks service. Results (available as background papers for inspection) indicate that both local residents and visitors fail to appreciate the ecological reasons why the centre must be re-sited, and have a high degree of resistance to changing the present visitor facility. There is also considerable sensitivity in the village of Edwinstowe over one of the potential sites identified.
- 21 As the feasibility study is now nearing completion, the relocation project now awaits acceptance by the County Council. Progress will demand close partnership working between the landowner (Thoresby Estates), the County Council Environment Department, |Culture & Community, English Nature, Newark & Sherwood District Council, Edwinstowe Parish Council, and the new tourism partnership for Nottinghamshire, Experience Nottinghamshire.

Bestwood Winding Engine House

- 22 The Winding Engine House at the entrance to Bestwood Country Park is a scheduled ancient monument currently classed as “at risk” by English Heritage. It includes the former headstocks of Bestwood Colliery. In 2002 the Heritage Team within the County Council’s Environment Department undertook a condition survey of the premises, jointly funded by Country Parks and Environment. The conclusion was that the fabric of the building required considerable urgent remedial work and that external funding was potentially available to help finance this.
- 23 A feasibility study was started in 2003 by Lathams Architects. This recommended a £1M bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund under the Heritage Grant Initiative. The feasibility study was funded from the Country Parks revenue budget. To support this, a full structural survey by civil engineers, costing £3000 was completed in June 2004, again, funded from the Country Parks revenue budget.
- 24 A stage one application will be made to the regional office of the Heritage Lottery Fund in September 2004, for restoration of the Winding Engine House and installation of a glass lift to enable everyone, including disabled visitors, to access this important monument to Nottinghamshire’s industrial history.
- 25 Conversion of the adjoining brick substation buildings to offices and a small visitor centre will provide a new ranger base and additional facilities; toilets and cafe for visitors to the Country Park. In addition, the scheme allows for a

classroom facility to replace the temporary accommodation currently provided by Education Service at Alexandra Lodges.

- 26 The development of a visitor facility in close proximity to Bestwood Model Village and the conservation programme focussing on the Winding Engine House is seen as a catalyst for Gedling Borough Council to initiate a conservation scheme within the Model Village.
- 27 Development of visitor facilities at the Bestwood Winding Engine House site presents an advantage in terms of community safety. There is potential to reduce incidents of car crime at the car park. An increased presence of Rangers and land management team will provide early warning and measures to prevent Traveller invasions and occupancy of the site. Incidents of invasion and occupancy have caused considerable problems for the Bestwood community.
- 28 This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, personnel, Crime and Disorder and those using the service. Where such implications are material, they have been described in the text of the report. Members' attention is however drawn to the following:

Statutory and Policy Implications

- 29 This report outlines the authority's obligations under current conservation legislation to protect and conserve historic buildings and landscape in its management.

Personnel Implications

- 30 Rufford Country Park Landscape Restoration – Presents opportunities for training and development of existing staff in terms of new land management regimes which will reflect the “Estate” principle of site management.
- 31 There is potential to develop countryside skills training schemes in collaboration with Nottingham Trent University (Brackenhurst College). This would enhance job creation opportunities in the area.
- 32 Rufford Mill Feasibility Study – There are no personnel implications at this stage.
- 33 Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre Relocation Study – There are no personnel implications at this stage.
- 34 Bestwood Winding Engine House Conservation & Development – There are no personnel implications at this stage. However, dependant on successful outcome in terms of HLF support, relocation of the Ranger and Education facilities to the Winding Engine House site will free up office space at Alexandra Lodges.

Financial Implications

- 35 **Rufford Country Park Landscape Restoration** – As detailed in this report, capital match funding of £1.2m currently exists in the County Council's capital asset management plan.
- 36 Revenue implications in terms of additional land management and operational activity are currently being costed.
- 37 The Heritage Lottery Fund Board require a written undertaking that the County Council is prepared to meet such revenue costs before a grant is given.
- 38 **Rufford Mill Feasibility Study** – There are no additional financial implications other than the costs of the study being met from external funding. However, the long-term sustainability of the Rufford Mill range of buildings will require a capital allocation to support attempts to secure further external funding. This has not been secured.
- 39 **Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre Relocation Study** – There are no financial implications other than the costs of the study being met from within existing budgets and external funding. However, the mid to long term ambition to relocate the visitor centre and car parks in order to meet the strictures of English Nature, will require a capital allocation to support attempts to secure external funding, for relocation and restoration of the current site.
- 40 **Bestwood Winding Engine House Conservation and Development** – There is currently no capital allocation for this project. The total conservation and development project is estimated to be £1.5m. It will possibly require a match funding element from the County Council of 25%.
- 41 Revenue implications are estimated to be £35,000 from the Country Park budget. This could be offset by potential savings in relocating staff from other divisions to take up the vacated space at Alexandra Lodges.

Equal Opportunities

- 42 All of the development proposals present positive opportunities in terms of equality and inclusion and access to the parks and their buildings. These have been identified in the report.

Implications for Service Users

- 43 All of the proposed developments present positive opportunities in terms of extending physical and intellectual access to our three Country Parks.

- 44 All of the plans have been developed with assistance from NCC Environment teams in order to ensure that they fit with the *Building Better Communities* programme in addition to the aims of the *Community Strategy*.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Implications

- 45 The development proposals for Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre and Bestwood Country Park will provide for better capability to deal with anti-social behaviour patterns, which prevail at both sites. Increased site security will reduce car crime and substance abuse, which are a current cause for concern at Sherwood and Bestwood Country Parks.

Corporate Property Implications

- 46 The development proposals for both Rufford Park and Rufford Mill are reliant on securing additional parking facilities to avoid using sensitive ecological and archaeological sites used currently.
- 47 Opportunities for additional peak season parking at Rufford Country Park would need to be investigated by Corporate Property.
- 48 At Bestwood Country Park, the on-going cost for maintenance of a scheduled ancient monument will be alleviated if a bid for Heritage Lottery Fund support is secured.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to the Committee are as follows:

1 Rufford Country Park Landscape Restoration

That Members note the intention to submit a Stage One bid for £3-5M to the regional office of the Heritage Lottery Fund by September 2004. This bid will be supported by £1.2m match funding from Nottinghamshire County Council.

2 Rufford Mill Feasibility Study

That Members recognise and support the intention to find a viable and economically sustainable future for this historic estate building.

3 Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre Relocation

That Members acknowledge receipt of the completed feasibility study.

Members recommend a process of local consultation.

Furthermore that Members support both Culture & Community and Environment in the declared ambition to relocate the Country Park's visitor facilities to a site beyond the National Nature Reserve boundary.

4 Bestwood Winding Engine House Restoration

That Members recognise the ambition of Culture & Community and Environment to improve facilities for visitors and the local community by conserving this unique monument to Nottinghamshire's industrial history.

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Background Papers Available for Inspection

All background papers and consultants reports are held in the office of the Head of Country Parks' service at Rufford Abbey.

Electoral Division(s) Affected

Rufford Country Park and Sherwood Forest Country Park, Sherwood division.
Bestwood Country Park, Newstead division.

