

**REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, YOUTH, FAMILIES AND CULTURAL SERVICES****RUFFORD ABBEY COUNTRY PARK – NEW DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2013 - 2023****Purpose of the Report**

1. This report sets out a proposed Development Plan for Rufford Abbey Country Park. Central to the plan will be the production of a new conservation management plan for the site and a proposal to seek funding from external sources to develop facilities and infrastructure across the site.
2. The Committee is asked to approve the outline Development Plan and the processes for its implementation and note the progress to date on the “quick win” site improvements”

**Information and Advice**

3. The County Council has managed Rufford Abbey Country Park since 1969. It is recognised as being a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC), and a Scheduled Ancient Monument lies at its centre (a site plan is attached at **Appendix 1**). The whole of the Council owned park is within an area of Grade II ‘Registered Historic Parkland’ which stretches beyond the Park’s boundaries, especially to the east and south. All the historic buildings constructed before 1948 that are within the Council’s curtilage have individual entries on the official governmental list of buildings of historic and architectural interest (i.e. they have “listed building” status):
  - Rufford Abbey and Jacobean Block – Grade 1 and Scheduled Ancient Monument
  - Stable Block – Grade 2
  - Coach House and adjoining boundary wall – Grade 2
  - Orangery, Fountain and Garden Wall – Grade 2\*
  - West Gate, Screen Wall and Fence Posts – Grade 2
  - Garden Urns – Grade 2
  - Major Icehouse – Grade 2
  - Minor Icehouse – Grade 2
  - Sawmill and adjoining outbuildings – Grade 2
4. During the 1990s and 2000s, a number of major site improvements were made to the main Abbey complex and more latterly the Rufford Mill site. Conservation of the site’s heritage has been a key component of the Council’s approach to the management and

maintenance of the overall site. Site improvements have often focussed on the repair and reuse of the listed buildings, an approach that over the years has brought about a significant improvement to the quality of the visitor experience at Rufford. Rufford is now the second most visited country park in the East Midlands (469,700 visitors in 2010/11), and is an accredited site under the VAQAS (Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme).

5. The majority of the Rufford site is owned by the County Council, but the ancient Cistercian Abbey is under the Guardianship of English Heritage, which has a management arrangement with the County Council to provide day to day management.
6. Rufford covers 210 acres; in view of its high annual visitor numbers however, there is currently great pressure on the physical infrastructure in terms of wear and tear. For example, the two children's play areas have been very well used but now require refurbishment, whilst the major pathways in the woods and around the lake require resurfacing. Similarly, the planting in the main garden areas, which dates from the 1980s, is now over-mature and is in need of replanting, and a number of the park features, such as the two Georgian ice houses, require further conservation work.
7. The vast majority of Rufford's visitors arrive by car. On occasion, there can be insufficient hard standing car parking spaces to accommodate all those who want to visit the Park, particularly when special events are organised (for example the annual Earth and Fire Festival). Opportunities for the expansion of hard standing in a manner sensitive to the designated heritage and special character of Rufford are very limited. In addition, during peak times vehicular access/egress to the Park from the A614 can be difficult.
8. Rufford has an operational management plan that is reviewed and updated annually. A new Conservation Management Plan (CMP) is also under preparation. This is critical to the future development of the Park, as it will provide a clear position statement from the Council on the future management and development of Rufford. This is not only important in its own right, but an absolute requirement to support any future application for funding to bodies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Without such a plan, any application would not be approved.
9. However, in view of the continuing popularity of Rufford, the issues set out in paragraphs 3-8 above, and the current financial pressures on the County Council that require all services to operate as cost effectively as possible, the time is now appropriate for a new vision and longer term strategic development plan to be established.
10. To help develop and define this new vision and plan, the Rufford Development Group was established in 2012 and its Project Scope is set out in **Appendix 2**. The Group comprises colleagues from relevant County Council departments and external organisations such as English Heritage, Experience Nottinghamshire, the National Trust, Newark and Sherwood District Council and Rufford Parish Council.

## Strategic Development Plan

### *Fit With Strategic Priorities*

11. The broad context for a new development plan for Rufford is set out in the Action Plan of the County Council's Cultural Strategy which was approved in December 2011 and reviewed in October 2012.

### *Quick Wins*

12. While the focus of the Rufford Development Group is the longer term, some shorter term 'quick win' Park improvements have been undertaken over the last 12 months, with further activity underway at present. Most of these site improvements have focussed on improving visitor use, and have been also designed to enhance the setting and character of Rufford's heritage. These are set out below with their costs (estimated costs are included if the work is not already completed):

Upgrade site pathways	£98,000	Completed
Improve site signage, access and interpretation	£30,000	Underway
Complete resurface of Rufford Mill car park	£30,500	Completed
Renew wooden bridges around Lake	£22,000	Completed
Re-commission the operation of the Nemi fountain	£6,500	Completed
Open up lakeside vistas	£5,000	Completed
Review opportunity for volunteer/community support for garden maintenance	£6,000	Completed
Update and revise Conservation Plan	£32,000	Underway

13. Alongside the programme of works listed above, a review of current maintenance arrangements with English Heritage (EH) is ongoing. At present, the level of works required for the effective maintenance/improvement of the Abbey significantly exceed the funds that English Heritage has available for Rufford.

### *Long Term Vision*

14. Rufford requires a working vision around which ambitions for its future development can coalesce:

*An historic public space which offers a variety of enjoyable cultural and leisure experiences to local residents and tourists alike, while enhancing the heritage and natural qualities of the site.*

15. The working vision acknowledges the dynamics that exist around the need to preserve the heritage and conservation aspects of Rufford, whilst accepting the increasingly important commercial drive to generate income from its catering, retail and events offer.

### *Factors Influencing the Development Plan - (i) Conservation Management Plan*

16. In December 2012, a multi-agency workshop was held at Rufford Mill to review the context and requirements of a CMP, while at the same time considering the current and future operating context for the Country Park.

17. A key outcome was that the existing conservation documentation provided a sound baseline from which a revised and updated CMP could be constructed. Fuller details of the main points arising from the workshop which have influenced the production of this plan have been included in the operating objectives below.

*Factors Influencing the Development Plan - (ii) Target Audience Development*

18. Rufford Abbey Country Park operates within a wider competitive visitor and tourism market across north Nottinghamshire.
19. The 2012 Visitor Survey suggested that the main users were people over 65 years, followed by children aged 5-12 years, adults 55-64 years and children under 5 years. Visitors in the age categories 13-17, 24-34 and 35-44 years are not high users of the site. A typical family group comprises young children and parents or grand parents.
20. Playing to the strengths of the site, while Rufford will continue to attract visitors of all ages, it is suggested that services and plans should be shaped around better meeting the visitor needs of the key customer groups described in paragraph 19 above.
21. Future applications for external funding, including, HLF funding, will require an Audience Development Plan, a key function of which is to ensure that the developments or improvements proposed are rooted in the views of visitors/local communities and that there have been appropriate consultations carried out, particularly with hard to reach groups.

*Factors Influencing the Development Plan - (iii) Visitor Surveys, Tourism Information*

22. Rufford's annual visitor surveys show a year by year increasing satisfaction with the site (98% in 2012). The Visitor Accreditation Quality Assurance Scheme was re-awarded in 2012 and 2013.
23. It could be argued that little more needs to be done to retain such high levels, but this does not take into account the need for the Park to remain a high quality visitor destination that operates in a highly competitive market. If visitors perceive that they are no longer getting value for money or enjoyment, then they will no longer visit.
24. The relocation, in March 2013, of the Newark and Sherwood Tourist Information Office from Ollerton to Rufford will not only help boost visitors to Rufford, but will also support a more coordinated and effective tourist promotion for the wider Newark and Sherwood district.

*Outcomes*

25. The Development Plan sets out a number of outcomes to be achieved during the next five to ten years. These can be summarised as:
  - to maintain visitor numbers and/or to increase the on-site dwell time of existing visitors in order to maximise commercial income

- to undertake infrastructure improvements to improve the visitor offer and sustain the fabric of the Park
- to retain the range of quality assurance accreditations (e.g. the annual VAQAS award), as such accreditations enable the service to be compared against national best practice standards
- to retain current visitor satisfaction levels
- to ensure that the Park's core conservation, cultural and heritage offer is maintained
- to generate more income to further offset operating costs.

### *Operating Objectives*

26. To help achieve the outcomes, a clear set of operating objectives for Rufford are proposed which will underpin the longer term management and development of the Park, and ensure a fair balance between its countryside, cultural, conservation and commercial activities.
27. These objectives are set out below, supported by a series of key actions, which provide an indication of the scale and scope of works that could be carried out, though these are not exclusive:

#### **Objective 1: To ensure that Rufford Abbey Country Park remains a high quality visitor attraction that puts the customer at the heart of its operational activities**

- to continue annual visitor surveys
- to retain annual VAQAS accreditation
- to re-acquire Natural England Country Park accreditation
- to complete an Audience Development Plan by March 2014
- to reacquire Green Flag Status by March 2018.

#### **Objective 2: To ensure that the conservation and heritage aspects of the Country Park are secured**

- to complete a new Conservation Management Plan for the Park by December 2014 including an assessment of the potential of the buildings on site and the Council's use of them
- to re-negotiate the repairs and maintenance schedules with English Heritage in Autumn 2013
- to explore conversion of ground floor of the Jacobean Block from office space into visitor/community/exhibition space
- to explore the need and feasibility of creating further covered space within the Abbey complex for flexible use, e.g. roofing over the Orangery/ extension to The Coach House by June 2014
- to refurbish the water mill and square at Rufford Mill by March 2016
- to repair the northern gates on Broad Ride by March 2016
- to update and implement the Nature Conservation Management Plan by March 2014

- to repair and conserve the Ice Houses by March 2016
- to ensure that the Council's Asset Management Plan system (P2) identifies and properly assesses the heritage significance and maintenance needs of the Park's designated heritage assets
- to review the access/egress from the site to ensure maximum public safety.

**Objective 3: To develop a long term programme of artistic, heritage, cultural and environmental events to support the social and commercial development of the site**

- to undertake a review of the range of activities and events and their impact on the commercial aspects of the site by March 2014
- to continue the annual organisation of a series of anchor visitor attractions throughout the year, e.g. Earth and Fire, 1940s event
- to organise a series of smaller bespoke events to make use of different parts of the site (ongoing)
- to encourage outside operators to use the Country Park for event purposes (ongoing).

**Objective 4: To upgrade the landscape and countryside facilities on the site**

- to commission new research and refurbishment of the formal registered gardens by March 2015
- to commission a major redesign of the two children's play areas by March 2014
- to investigate the provision of activity areas for older people
- to improve public access routes throughout the park by September 2014
- to examine access improvements to the Rufford Mill ford by 2016.

**Objective 5: To review all Park facilities and operating elements and optimise income generating opportunities.**

- to secure planning permission for seasonal marquee provision in 2013 for a temporary period until the provision of permanent undercover event space is secured
- to investigate the commercial viability of providing new retail outlets by October 2013
- to explore the feasibility of a second function/wedding offer at the Abbey site by October 2013
- to investigate improvements to the provision of external theatrical/performance/workshop spaces
- to review and upgrade the catering and dining experiences on the Abbey site by March 2015
- to investigate the possibility of creating additional car parking spaces by June 2015
- to investigate the refurbishment of Rufford Mill cottages to bring these into commercial use.

**Next Steps**

28. A number of the smaller schemes have been incorporated into revised business plans for the respective service areas for consideration and implementation during 2013/14.

29. The more significant commissioning schemes that require feasibility funding will each require a business case to be developed and a model of operation and funding to be determined.
30. To achieve a step change in the development of the site infrastructure will require significant levels of capital investment over the next 10 years. In turn, this will require a strengthening of the existing partnerships with existing stakeholders, particularly English Heritage as they have both site responsibilities and access to funding via the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).
31. Encouraging meetings have already taken place with officers from the HLF to consider the scale and scope of site development opportunities. Feedback has been given to the Council related to the importance of a credible conservation management plan being required to support any proposed bids for funding. This work is being undertaken currently and will be concluded by March 2014. A major application for funding via the HLF would take around 18 months to complete and would be driven predominantly by the outcomes of the conservation management plan.

### **Other Options Considered**

32. The ambition and aspiration that the County Council has for ensuring the continuation of Rufford as a key cultural and visitor destination requires a coordinated, well planned and resourced programme of works to be developed. There is a greater risk to the condition of the physical infrastructure of the site in not taking any preventative actions in the coming years.

### **Reason/s for Recommendation/s**

33. The recommendations, if approved, will set the direction of travel for the future strategic and operational development of Rufford Country Park. The recommendations will give a mandate for action aimed at securing a sustainable future for the site for the foreseeable future.

### **Statutory and Policy Implications**

34. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, the public sector equality duty, human resources, crime and disorder, human rights, the safeguarding of children, sustainability and the environment and those using the service and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

### **Implications for Service Users**

35. The purpose of the Rufford Development Plan is to bring about a planned, coordinated and phased set of improvements to the Park in which users and visitors will be the prime beneficiaries.

## **Financial Implications**

36. The present operation of the Country Park (excluding Arts Service provision) results in a net annual revenue cost to the Council of £447,000 (base budget review 2013).
37. The costs of maintaining the Rufford Development Group will be met from within existing estimate provision within Country Parks.
38. The completed 'quick wins' were funded from Council revenue budgets in 2012/13. Where those works could not be completed by 31 March 2013, funding was carried forward into 2013/14.
39. The commissioning and feasibility works may require additional funding. Funding of these works will be considered within the resources available to the Country Parks and Green Estate Service.
40. It is further anticipated that a major injection of capital funding will be required for the longer term development plans and a key part of the work of the Development Group during the course of 2013/14 will be to identify and secure the necessary funding. It is anticipated that the primary source of such funding will be external - for example, the major conservation and landscape works are considered to have the potential to be funded through the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Discussions are taking place to explore how this might be accessed. It should be noted, however, that the HLF usually require a 10% funding contribution from applicants in order to offer funding.

## **Equalities Implications**

41. The Country Park has a good track record of meeting the needs and aspirations of minority groups. There have been a number of recent improvements to facilities for disabled people, e.g. new bays for car parking for disabled visitors, the ladies toilets including baby changing facilities, and new mobility scooters. Developing Rufford so that it benefits all sections of the community will be a key objective and an equality impact assessment will be carried out on the various elements of the development plan.

## **Crime and Disorder Implications**

42. The new Development Plan will consider public safety and opportunities to design out crime and disorder.

## **Human Resources Implications**

43. The Country Parks service has completed a major structural reorganisation which will provide an appropriate level of management for the foreseeable future. However, it is anticipated that further staffing changes may be required in the light of the delivery of the Development Plan. Significant structural changes will be subject to the approval of the Committee.



## **Implications for Sustainability and the Environment**

44. The County Council has recently agreed a Cultural Strategy which has a key theme of “Conserving and providing access to our history and heritage and supporting environmental sustainability”. The new development plan will have sustainability and the environment as key objectives to be achieved.

## **RECOMMENDATION/S**

That the Culture Committee:

- 1) approves the outline Development Plan for Rufford Abbey Country Park and in particular the Operating Objectives as set out in this report
- 2) notes the progress made on the programme of ‘quick wins’ to improve the Country Park during the course of the past year
- 3) notes that a Conservation Management Plan will be produced to provide the conservation, heritage and commercial planning and policy context for a range of new development opportunities to take place
- 4) approves the actions to be taken to prepare a major external funding application.

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## **Constitutional Comments (NAB 14/05/13)**

45. The Culture Committee has authority to approve the recommendations set out in this report by virtue of its terms of reference.

## **Financial Comments (KLA 13/09/13)**

46. The financial implications of the report are set out in paragraphs 36 to 40 above.

## **Background Papers and Published Documents**

A Cultural Strategy for Nottinghamshire – report to County Council on 15 December 2011  
Review of the County Council Cultural Strategy – report to Culture Committee on 30 October 2012  
2012 Visitor satisfaction surveys in Country Parks – report to Culture Committee on 27 November 2012

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

**Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

All.

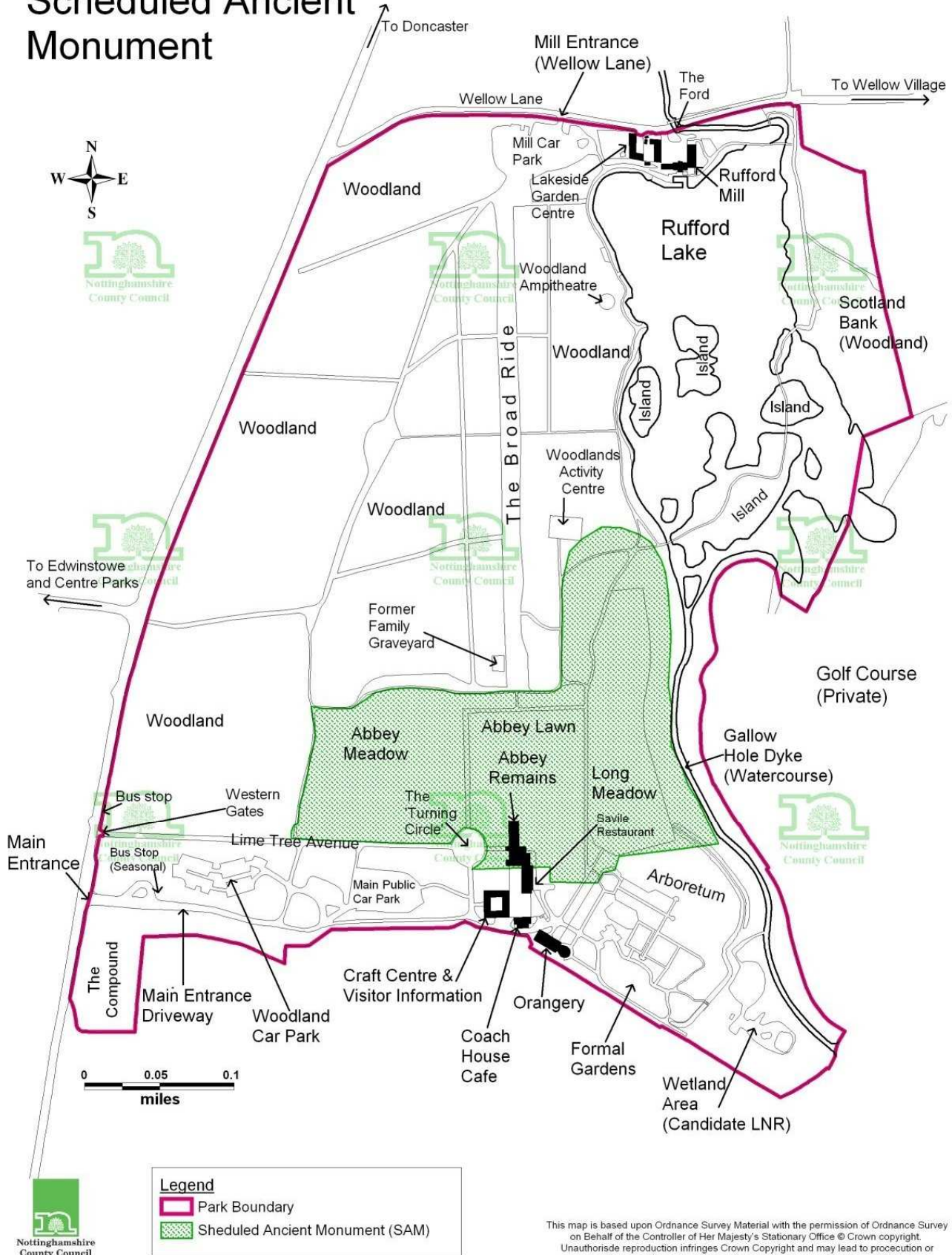
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## **APPENDIX 1**

**SITE PLAN OF RUFFORD ABBEY COUNTRY PARK DEPICTING THE SCHEDULED  
ANCIENT MONUMENT (see overleaf)**

# Rufford Abbey Country Park

## Scheduled Ancient Monument



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## **APPENDIX 2**

### **RUFFORD DEVELOPMENT GROUP – PROJECT SCOPE**

#### **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

1. To develop a new shared vision for Rufford Abbey Country Park.
2. To develop a design and audience ‘master plan’ to deliver a new vision for Rufford Abbey Country Park, comprising:
  - a short term, quick wins (one year) plan for the physical improvement of the Rufford Abbey site
  - an Audience Development Plan
  - a longer term (five years plus) plan for a major upgrade and site improvement for Rufford Abbey.
3. To ensure appropriate consultation and involvement with all interested parties/partners.
4. To develop a long term programme of artistic, heritage, cultural and environmental events to support the social and commercial development of the site.
5. To prepare external funding applications for site improvements.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

1. To set up the Rufford Development Group (RDG) as the key organisation through which the vision and master plan will be coordinated.
2. To have specialist Task and Finish Groups to focus on specific areas of work, reporting back to main RDG.
3. To involve specialist partners (e.g. English Heritage, National Trust, HLF) as well as the local community and interest groups.
4. To examine and incorporate best thinking and practice from across the country.
5. To consider the engagement of external technical and specialist support in the preparation of the masterplan.

## **OUTCOMES**

1. A new shared vision.
2. A new Audience Development Plan for visitor engagement and improved accessibility.
3. A design 'master plan' for the physical improvement of the Country Park.
4. Improved heritage, conservation and learning opportunities.
5. A successful application for funding for the site improvements.
6. A long term sustainable programme of artistic and cultural events.
7. Increased financial sustainability of the site.