

**OUTWOODS MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE
9TH AUGUST 2023**

PRESENT: Councillors Campsall, Fryer (Chair), A Gray, Infield Smidowicz, Tillotson, D Taylor, Worrall and PB, GM, CN, RE (Vice-Chair), and DG

Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment
Senior Green Spaces Officer
Democratic Services Officer (NC)

APOLOGIES: Cllr B Gray

As there were new Corporation Trustees, all present introduced themselves.

1. DISCLOSURES OF PECUNIARY AND PERSONAL INTERESTS

Disclosures of personal interests were made as follows:

- (i) PB who farms land adjacent to the Outwoods.

2. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR

In accordance with the Trust Deeds, the Mayor of Charnwood had been invited and declined to be appointed as the chair of the Outwoods Management Committee.

AGREED that Cllr Fryer be appointed as the Chair of the Outwoods Management Committee for the period of 2023-24.

AGREED that RE be appointed as the Vice-chair of the Outwoods Management Committee for the period of 2023-24.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING & MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting held on 25th January 2023 were agreed.

4. OFFICER UPDATE REPORT

A report of the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment was submitted (item 5 on the agenda).

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment noted that a Head Ranger had been appointed and had attended the walk before the previous (inquorate) meeting. There were still vacancies in the ranger service which Idverde would be recruiting. The Head Ranger had extensive local experience and knowledge, the Senior Green Spaces Officer who had oversight of the Outwoods was working closely at present with the Head Ranger since his appointment in March 2023.

Management Plan

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment explained that the Outwoods Management Plan would require renewing this year and that the Senior Green Spaces Officer was progressing a new draft. This could be circulated to the Committee for its review prior to the next meeting and would include the three criteria identified at the Strategic Workshop.

Summary of discussion:

- the refreshed plan would cover the period of 2023 – 2028. It was not stipulated to be a five-year plan but officers considered this to be a manageable time period, particularly with the number of changes that had occurred in the last five years.
- whether it would be more beneficial to have a 10 year plan with a review period of 5 years. In light of the climate emergency this was considered to be too long a period without a review although it was noted that changes to woods occurred over longer time periods and that advice from the National Forest could be sought.
- the plan was regularly checked by Natural England and the Forestry Commission to ensure it was in line with their expectations of a SSSI wood. It could be challenging to obtain feedback from these organisations if the plan was to be reviewed every two years.
- the plan once adopted could be internally reviewed at any time by the Committee if the situation changed or it became not fit for purpose.
- it was important in the market for the source of timber to be sustainable and transparent. The tree felling programme, which had been agreed at the previous Committee meeting, was improving biodiversity in the Outwoods. Timber from the Outwoods would supply building materials to local businesses and would not involve import shipping which was a large carbon contributor.

Double Yellow Lines outside the Outwoods

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment explained that a consultation on the yellow lines proposed by the County Council was in progress and that he had asked for the lines not to cover the informal laybys.

Summary of discussion:

- the yellow lines were likely to cover the brow of the hill near the Outwoods carpark only and should not prevent parking in the informal laybys although it was noted that it was illegal to park in a layby where yellow lines had been applied. The consultation could be shared with the Committee after the meeting.
- it was dangerous to park on the road near the Outwoods. Officers were considering several measures: application of yellow lines, lining of the car park to make parking more efficient, more use of footpath access to the woods and increasing car parking charges. The number of cars rather than number of visitors to the woods was the overriding concern.

Car park lining / foot access to the woods

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment explained that lining of the car park would stipulate where cars could park as currently it was more haphazard.

Summary of discussion:

- the lining of the car park would be done sympathetically to fit in with the green space. In considering options it was noted that Bradgate Park had lined one of its car parks using tarmac.
- it had been complex to find an appropriate medium to use. Two options were being considered; a thin tarmac insert (painted) or tree trunks but this was potentially a fall hazard as the car park was unlit. The Senior Green Spaces Officer was meeting with the surveyor to discuss options.
- the footpath from Nanpantan Sports Ground carpark to the Outwoods required improvement if this was to be encouraged as an access route to the woods. It was noted anecdotally that the cemetery car park was being used as a high-speed driving circuit. The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment stated he would investigate this.
- the cemetery car park would have capacity for additional parking as its use was currently reduced. It was possible that increasing car parking charges would not increase its use but encourage more parking on the road.

Car Parking Charges

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment explained that to enable any agreed increases to the car parking charges to be included in the Council's budget cycle for 2024-25, he would require an agreement by the Committee by end of October 2023. This would enable appropriate administrative tasks (raising a car parking order etc.) to be completed in time for the increase to become effective in April 2024.

Summary of discussion:

- in comparison to other local parks the charges for the Outwoods were very competitive and had been held at the same price for 5-6 years. Increasing the charges would enable the Trust to become more self-sufficient.
- a survey of users had been conducted prior to implementing car parking charges which had included visitor habits. It would be beneficial to repeat the survey to determine how long visitors were staying. Maintaining a low price for short term stays would improve turnover and support better use of the capacity available in the car park.
- noted anecdotally that some users were parking in the Outwoods car park and walking to the Beacon to avoid using its car park (at a higher charge).
- the survey could be short, asking the visitors their purpose and how long they were staying. It was possible that an iPad could be located in the café to obtain feedback, although it was noted that the café was busy. The Committee would be involved in obtaining responses to the survey.
- the survey could be run online or face-to-face with visitors in the car park. It could also be shared on the Council's social media channels.

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment presented the rest of the report to the committee. It was noted that a Bluebell Service held elsewhere could be considered for future Bluebell walks.

Ongoing actions noted:

- To line the car park at the earliest opportunity
- The Borough Council to consider making remedial repairs to Moat Road Car Park.
- Moat Road Car Park to be promoted as an alternative to parking at the Outwoods.
- To promote the use of Nanpantan Rd Sports Ground/Cemetery Car Park as an alternative to parking at the Outwoods. Consideration should be given to renaming the car park.
- The tree felling be deferred until November 2023 and that the tree planting began in November 2024.
- the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment to share designs for the Alan Moss Plaque with the Committee.

AGREED that

1. the Head of Contracts, Leisure, Waste and Environment drafts the Outwoods Management Plan for five years but also includes a vision going forward to support the potential for obtaining future grant funding for projects.
2. the Head of Contracts, Leisure, Waste and Environment to circulate the draft Outwoods Management Plan to the Committee prior to the publication of the agenda for the next meeting to enable Trustees to provide comments.
3. the consultation plans for yellow lines be circulated to the Committee when available.
4. the Democratic Services Officer and Comms team to liaise in creating an online survey to determine visitor use of the Outwoods and share via the Council's social media channels.
5. a parallel paper survey to be created for Trustees to use on a day (to be identified) during half term week in October to obtain maximum coverage.
6. that the report be noted.

5. FINANCE UPDATE

A report of the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment was submitted that covered the revenue budget (item 6 on the agenda).

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment presented the report and noted the following:

- significant overspend outturn variances in buildings (R&M), and cesspit emptying.
- the variance in fees and charges was due to the postponement of tree felling and not receiving monies from the sale of timber.
- the Year-to-Date table showed from April to July of this year – it would be more constructive to review this later in the year.
- the car parking income was showing a steady increasing trend. This was currently offsetting the cost of maintaining the woods by the Council by 40% and was supporting the Trust to becoming more self-sufficient.
- the biggest loss of income to the Outwoods budget had been the postponement of tree felling for this financial year.
- if car parking charges were increased there would be free parking at the Moat Road and Nanpantan Sports ground car parks, blue badges would continue to be allowed to park for free and annual season tickets would continue.

Summary of discussion:

- a report was sent to the Council if the cash/card machine stopped functioning enabling officers to repair it promptly. It now accepted card payments which would also allow for more flexibility if car parking charges were increased/varied.
- payment of the café rent had initially been staggered to allow for start-up costs. This was now up to its full charge and consisted of a percentage of fixed rent and a share of the turnover in accordance with the contractual agreement. The lease was for fourteen years and included an interim review date.
- the general overspend on the budget was concerning and indicated a need for more proactive action and forward thinking. The buildings (R&M) overspend was due to responding to repairs as required and did not include a cyclical preventative maintenance plan at present. Buildings in the Outwoods could be surveyed routinely as part of preventative maintenance - the café agreement included a repair clause but the toilet block had been vandalised on occasion which required retrospective repair. A budget line could be included for vandalism if this occurred regularly.
- Season ticket charges would be considered alongside any proposals to increase car parking charges. It was possible that if the budget broke even that buses could be used to ensure the Outwoods remained accessible for all the residents of Charnwood.

It was noted that the subsidising of the cost of maintaining the Outwoods by the Council had been higher in the past.

AGREED that

1. the Head of Contracts, Leisure, Waste, and Environment circulate the car parking income for July 2023.

2. the Head of Contracts, Leisure, Waste, and Environment to include explanatory commentary for any overspend or underspend items on the Financial Update report in future.
3. the report be noted.

6. OUTWOODS STRATEGIC WORKSHOP

A report of the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment was submitted (item 7 on the agenda). It was introduced by the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment and the Democratic Services Officer who both attended the workshop as observers.

Trustees welcomed encouraging more visitors to the woods but did not wish to do so to the detriment of the environment. It was noted that Community groups, local companies and a home-schooled children network were using the woods, and that the barn was underutilised.

In considering the outcomes of the Workshop it was recognised that the Trust Deeds although not necessarily of a modern calibre had not prevented the Council or the Committee in maintaining the woods appropriately since 1946.

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment explained that the three identified criteria of community use/accessibility, conservation & environment and financial viability all interacted and it was necessary to balance these.

AGREED that

1. a review of the Trust Deeds to consider including 10 acres donated by Alan Moss was not required.
2. The Committee received detailed analyses of current finances and also a year end budget report.
3. visitors accessing the Outwoods are surveyed to determine use of the car park, visiting the cafes and footpath access to the woods.
4. the three criteria are to be explicitly stated on each report submitted to the Committee for its consideration to be included in decision making at the meeting.
5. the Outwoods Management Plan be updated to include the three criteria of the decision framework.
6. agreeing a priority listing of the three criteria in the short term to meet long term vision be deferred until the Outwoods Management Plan is reviewed.

7. creating a short term and long term Strategic Plan be considered during the review of the Outwoods Management Plan.

7. A.O.B

In response to general queries by Trustees, the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment agreed to investigate the location of a geology sign to determine the best location for this sign and noted that the biodiversity of the footpath from the Nanpantan Sports Ground could not be improved as it crossed private land.

Questions submitted by absent Trustees

A document was circulated to the Trustees present of questions that had been submitted prior to the meeting, including the responses provided by officers.

Summary of comments:

- plastic spirals were being removed by visitors from quite mature saplings to prevent strangulation. In some cases, the plastic was being left in the woods. The Senior Green Spaces Officer asked to be shown the locations of these trees on a map he circulated at the meeting and stated that a plan was required to review the planted saplings on a rotational basis.
- the clear felling and planting of saplings was having a negative impact on CO2 emissions. It was noted that pine trees did not absorb the same CO2 as semi-mature native trees so there would be a drop in absorption initially. However, the clear glades had increased biodiversity in bird life. Any saplings that died were a part of an annual replacement plan. Statistics for numbers of trees that had died could be circulated to the Committee after the meeting.
- the clear felling was in line with Government policy and was part of a long term strategy to return the woods to a natural ancient woodland. The mix of trees to be planted was prescribed in the Felling License and included native species and allowed for some natural regeneration.
- the poor state of some of the drystone walls in the woods was noted. There was a reliance on volunteers for repair. Funding approved by the National Lottery had allowed for an apprentice to be appointed to maintain drystone walls across the Charnwood Forest Geopark, of which the Outwoods was part. 'Drystone wall experiences' could be organised but further investigation into costs and impact on insurance was required.
- funding had been allocated from the County Council to improve the footpath from Nanpantan Sports Ground car park.
- recycling of crockery from the Cafe was complex and experiences in other locations suggested the recycle would become contaminated. Compostable cups were costly and difficult to manage.
- there were no plans to extend the car park.

- the creation of a footpath along Breakback Road from the Priory Inn junction required private landowner permission which had not been obtained and would also require significant capital monies to progress.

AGREED that

1. Julie Attard (Project Manager for Geopark) be invited to the next meeting of the Committee to provide an update on the Geopark.
2. Options for rescheduling the next meeting of the Committee to ensure maximum attendance be circulated by the Democratic Services Officer.
3. the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment consider options for arranging for drystone wall experiences to be run in the Outwoods.
4. the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment circulate statistics for numbers of trees that had died to the Committee.
5. the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment and Senior Green Spaces Officer to arrange a walk around the felling compartments for Trustees to further understand the tree felling programme.
6. the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment provide timelines and a progress update regarding the improvements to the Nanpantan Sports Ground footpath.

ADDENDUM - DECISIONS WHEREBY A VOTE WAS TAKEN

At the meeting of the Committee held on 6th September 2017 it was agreed that when the Committee voted by a show of hands on decisions made by the Committee that this information was documented as an addendum to the minutes (minute 2.2 refers).

NONE