

**OUTWOODS MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE
26TH OCTOBER 2022**

PRESENT: Councillors Campsall, Fryer (Chair), K Harris, Parsons, and PB, RE (Vice-Chair), DG and CN

Julie Attard, Charnwood Forest Landscape Partnership Officer
Cllr B Gray and Ms B Worrall, petitioners

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

APOLOGIES: Councillors Bailey, Morgan and Smidowicz and GM

1. DISCLOSURES OF PECUNIARY AND PERSONAL INTERESTS

Disclosures of personal interests were made as follows:

- (i) PB who farms land adjacent to the Outwoods.
- (ii) RE whose wife is a member of ArtsSpace Loughborough.

During the consideration of item 5 (Officer Update Report) Councillor Fryer declared a personal interest as the Chair of the Loughborough in Bloom Committee and Councillor Campsall as a member of the committee.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING & MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting held on 20th July 2022 were agreed. It was noted that the standard disclosures of interest had not been included in the minutes by error. The declarations were as follows:

- (i) Cllr Smidowicz as a member of Charnwood Arts Council.
- (ii) RE whose wife is a member of ArtsSpace Loughborough.

3. PETITION – TREE FELLING / OUTWOODS RESTORATION PROJECT

A petition was presented to the Outwoods Management Committee by Cllr B Gray and Ms B Worrall.

It was noted that the number of signatures had been recorded incorrectly on the agenda and there had been 170 signatures obtained.

Cllr B Gray and Ms B Worrall were invited to present their position and stated the following:

- the petition was not against the felling activities in the wood, the petitioners understood the purpose and supported the vision to improve biodiversity and use native species, but it questioned the pace and scale of these activities and noted a recent acceleration with larger areas being felled. Reference was made to agreement in the minutes of the Committee from January 2022, October 2022

and April 2021 for the number of years to complete the felling activities to be reduced.

- with reference to Forestry Commission England document (managing ancient and native woodland in England), tree felling should be completed gradually to allow for wildlife habitats to recover, and for soil structure and drainage capabilities to remain undamaged. There was an area near to a felled compartment which was now flooding since the trees nearby had been removed.
- accelerated felling could promote more vigorous growth of bracken and bramble which tended to smother any new saplings – reference was made to an area visible from the Nanpantan Sports ground car park.
- there was potential impact of windblow on nearby trees without the canopy to protect them. Some of the saplings already planted were not looking very healthy.
- the restocking and allowance for natural regeneration seemed to be quick bearing in mind the slow growth of oak trees and was allowing for more vigorous species to regenerate.

They concluded that the Petitioners wanted to understand why the acceleration of the programme was being implemented, were concerned about the speed going forward and whether the principles mentioned above were being considered.

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment (formerly the Head of Cleansing and Open Spaces) with assistance from the Senior Green Spaces Officer responded as follows:

- the 10-year tree felling programme had been agreed with the Forestry Commission England in 2018. The programme was approximately halfway through and was on schedule with the original time scales agreed with the Forestry Commission England. It was noted that the Committee had agreed to accelerate the programme, but this had actually not been implemented.
- the acceleration of the programme had been agreed with the Forestry Commission England, was in accordance with Ancient Woodland guidelines and the programme had been funded under their stewardship programme. If there were any concerns, it was expected that funding would have been withdrawn.
- larger areas did look as if they were being felled but this was due to 1-2 compartments being felled at the same time for economic and logistical reasons. The contractors required clear access to get to the compartments, the car park was closed to allow for safety of the public whilst the logs were being stacked for removal and it was considered appropriate to limit the time of disturbance to the woods by felling several neighbouring compartments at one time.
- going forwards the remaining compartments for felling would be completed within approximately 3-4 years which would be close to the original ten-year timescale. The contract allowed for the 'beating up' of the bracken and natural regeneration of rowan and birch with planting of oak. The contractors were obligated to replace any losses within the first three years. 1100 trees per hectare had been agreed under the stewardship scheme and some losses were to be expected. It was noted that there had been more losses than predicted during the extreme hot weather this summer.
- it was hoped that the next session of tree felling would be scheduled for after Christmas when the ground was harder / frosty to reduce the impact on the soil

and that the regeneration would then occur in summer. Any gaps would be identified in late summer and filled with oak saplings.

Following the above there was a discussion between the Petitioners and Trustees as summarised below:

- the impact of climate change and that there is a climate emergency at present - the hot temperatures seen this year were likely to be repeated in future, assurance was sought that this was being considered when implementing woodland management programmes.
- with reference to compartments 6A and 6B looking barren with no tree cover and bracken growth - it was not possible for the trees to be felled individually. The conifers had been planted as a cash crop and under the stewardship scheme the Council were obligate to remove them. Logistically it was more practical to complete one compartment at a time with the trees being removed in sequence.
- whether options to remove trees more individually had been considered. Trees could be removed by hand or compartments thinned rather than removal over large areas - this required niche woodworking skills and could be costly to do. It would be funded by the Council and therefore the Borough's residents and result in more disturbance for members of the public visiting the woods as they would be closed for longer periods which could result in complaints.
- concerns raised that future planned felling over 3-4 years was still quick as oak trees needed approximately 20 years to grow tall enough and robust enough to start to absorb carbon from the atmosphere.
- it was noted that prior to the planting of the conifers, the Outwoods had been a species rich woodland and the vision behind the tree felling programme was to return the woods back to this kind of habitat.
- the Committee was focused on maintaining and managing the Outwoods as a SSSI ancient woodland for the benefit of the residents of the Borough and this required the balancing of priorities.

Trustees thanked the Petitioners for attending the meeting and welcomed the opportunity to hear alternative views. Cllr B Gray offered to share the Forestry Commission England document referenced with the Committee.

AGREED that the Committee will consider the points raised by the petitioners and respond to the petition in writing.

4. OFFICER UPDATE REPORT

A report of the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment (formerly the Head of Cleansing and Open Spaces) was submitted (item 5 on the agenda). Julie Attard attended the meeting to assist the Committee in its consideration of the report.

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment drew the Committee's attention to the following:

- Car parking - the completion of a parking strategy had been delayed. There had been issues over the summer with capacity in the car park. Funding from the Charnwood Forest Landscape Partnership was available for improvements, and it was proposed to make more permanent markings to improve capacity and car park bay designation. Better utilisation of public rights of way was also in progress to encourage more residents to park and walk to the Outwoods.

- Tree felling – as discussed earlier, the programme was in progress and the points raised by the petition were to be considered by the Committee. There was a budget expectation to receive £10K of timber sales this financial year. Work was in progress to identify the compartments to fell after Christmas to achieve this income.
- The Outwoods calendar - a Loughborough in Bloom calendar for 2023 had been created and funded by Loughborough in Bloom. To also sell an Outwoods calendar could be challenging. There was a possibility that the two calendars could be amalgamated for 2024.
- New seating area – Julie Attard explained that this had been funded through the Charnwood Landscape Partnership and National Lottery Community fund in collaboration with the charity ‘Men and Women in Sheds’. She thanked the Committee for allowing the Outwoods to be a recipient of the new seat and noted that it had been part of a project for the charity to improve their creative skills. It was suggested that a photograph shared by the Senior Green Spaces Officer be included in the next Rangers Report.
- Sculpture trail – ArtSpace wished to host a smaller event of Tree People for 2024 and sought the Committee’s approval in principle. It was noted that the trail attracted many visitors of all ages to the woods.

Summary of discussion:

- whether signs could be located at the Nanpantan Sports Ground car park indicating the time required to walk to the Outwoods. Noted that there could be concerns about mobility and being accessible for all.
- whether the Nanpantan Sports Ground car park should be renamed ‘Lower Outwoods’. It was noted that capacity in this car park was better during the week.
- that any work carried out to designate car parking bays in the Outwoods Carpark should be completed sympathetically and take into consideration the wild informal nature of the woods. It was possible to embed slate or stone into the ground to indicate car parking bays or use wood. Contractors were being considered.
- that there was scope for the Council to utilise its assets more effectively at the Nanpantan Sports Ground. The site was shared between the Sports Ground, the new Cemetery and potentially the Outwoods. A place for visitors to obtain refreshments could greatly improve its use as a lower car park to the Outwoods.
- whether the County Council would implement double yellow lines around the brow of the hill and near the car park entrance. It was noted that red lines (that indicate *you must not stop or park your vehicle on this road*) could be used, as anecdotally, there were rarely abused. However, it was believed that there were none currently implemented in Leicestershire.
- it was possible that the issues seen this year with car parking might not be as significant next year as the Sculpture Trail would not be so extensive.
- funding was being obtained to improve the right of way between the Nanpantan Sports Ground carpark and the Kissing gate and also to improve the footpath from the Moat Road Car park to the Deans Lane.
- it was noted that there wasn’t a photograph of the Outwoods in the Loughborough in Bloom calendar 2023 and that Trustees who were appointed to the Loughborough in Bloom committee could discuss next year whether a joint calendar could be developed for 2024.

- whether it was possible to create an 'Instagram trail' through the Outwoods and that art was a powerful tool for enticing more visitors to the woods. Concerns regarding staff resources and data protection were raised but it was noted that photographs could be shared with a hashtag 'the Outwoods' on social media platforms. The café was a possible venue for sharing of photographs, but it was acknowledged that space was limited and that the interpretation boards already in the cafe were in danger of being hidden and could need to be relocated.

AGREED

1. that the report be noted.
2. that the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment present a report including details of the car parking strategy, the card payments progress and car parking bay designation plans to the next meeting of the Committee on 25th January 2023.
3. That the Outwoods calendar 2023 is not progressed.
4. that Julie Attard is invited to attend the meeting of the Committee on 25th January 2023 to present an update regarding the Charnwood Landscape Partnership.
5. that it be agreed in principle that the 'Tree People Trail' is held in 2024 in the Outwoods and representatives from ArtSpace are invited to a future meeting of the Committee to share detailed proposals.

5. FINANCE UPDATE

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

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment presented the report. Trustees discussed the following:

- the income from the car park charges was welcomed. It was clarified that any surplus could not be rolled over into the next financial year but went towards the Council's maintenance costs for the Outwoods.
- whether the increased car parking income suggested that the tree felling budget of £10K was not required. It was possible not to complete any felling this year, but this could impact future resources. The compartments would be reviewed to determine the most appropriate location to fell trees rather than to ensure £10K worth of tree felling occurred.
- whether parking was charged at the Nanpantan Sports Ground car park and how this could impact the car parking income. It was explained that the Nanpantan Sports Grounds car park was free and not chargeable at present. It could have a negative impact on the car park income for the Outwoods carpark if it was advertised as the Lower Outwoods car park. There was scope to develop a strategy whereby visitors could be encouraged to walk to the Outwoods by using free car parking on the periphery and increasing the charges at the Outwoods car park.

- the parking charges had been implemented in the Outwoods car park approximately four years ago and it was difficult to justify not increasing the charges when the cost of everything else was increasing but it was acknowledged that some Trustees would prefer not to raise car parking fees. It was also explained by the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment that the priority at the moment was to arrange for card payment / pay by phone options and the completion of the parking bay designations before seeking the Committee's views on a fee increase. It was noted that there was a cost-of-living crisis and that the revenue was increasing without a price increase. The car parking strategy would consider how to manage the car parks in a way to encourage more visitors to walk to the Outwoods.
- the Outwoods budget showed that it was possible for the finances to break even and for the management of the Outwoods to become self-sufficient. It was therefore appropriate for the Committee to now consider its future strategic direction, what it wished to prioritise, and that a framework or set of guiding principles could be identified to support the Committee in its future strategic decisions. The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment noted that the rent of the café was discounted for the first 12 months and would therefore be increasing and that the budget was moving towards being self-sufficient, there were options to cut back on some fixed costs or to increase income but it might not quite be enough to offset the maintenance costs paid by the Council for the Outwoods.
- it was important to recognise that investment was required to keep the Outwoods in perpetuity for the residents of the Borough and it would be retrograde to return to the period when the Council was funding all the maintenance required.

Having stated he agreed with the need for clear strategic direction, Cllr Campsall left the meeting.

The meeting became INQUORATE.

Trustees present considered that a facilitated discussion with an independent person could assist the Committee in determining its strategic direction. The Council would provide information regarding any financial constraints to support of the Committee's discussion.

It was proposed by the Trustees present that a plan for a strategic workshop be presented to the next meeting of the Committee.

6. A.O.B

In response to a request the Trustees present agreed to having a defibrillator fitted to the Outwoods Visitor centre / café.

It was noted that due to resource issues the Rangers Report had not been available for this meeting.

There would not be a walk before the meeting scheduled on 25th January 2023.

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