

**OUTWOODS MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE
31ST JANUARY 2024**

PRESENT: Councillors Campsall, Fryer (Chair), A Gray, B Gray, Infield, Smidowicz, D Taylor, and RB, RE (Vice chair), CN and GM

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

APOLOGIES: Cllr Worrall, DG

The Chair welcomed the new Alan Moss Donor Trustee RB.

1. DISCLOSURES OF PECUNIARY AND PERSONAL INTERESTS

Disclosures of personal interests were made as follows:

- (i) RB who farms land adjacent to the Outwoods (noted at end of the meeting)

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING & MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th October 2023 were agreed with an amendment to section 5 (Officer Report item 5b), second paragraph.

Trustees wished it to be clarified that at the time of the last meeting the route for sending in comments, compliments or complaints regarding the Outwoods was not quite as stated in the minutes. It was not considered to be clear how to send in comments, compliments or complaints on the Outwoods Management Committee webpage, although the process on the Council's website was unambiguous. The Council's website page for the Outwoods Management Committee had been updated after the meeting to state that: '*alternatively you can email any comments or concerns to the Chair of the Committee*'.

The minutes to be amended as follows:

"The Chair explained that the recommended route for sending in comments, compliments or complaints was via the Council's website or direct to the Chair of the Committee, noting that if sent direct to the officers it could get lost if that officer was ill. *It was clarified that the process to follow on the Outwoods Management webpage on the Council's website was not clear*".

Matters arising:

- a Trustee queried whether an update on the number of emails received as stated in the minutes (page 4) could be given. It was noted that the email response to members of the public had been circulated to the Committee after the previous meeting and that the Head of Contacts, Leisure, Waste and Environment and the Chair did not think many more emails had been received.

- a Trustee noted that an application had been submitted to the Council for a solar panel site and whether the GeoPark had been asked to comment. The Head of Contacts, Leisure, Waste and Environment explained that the GeoPark would not support or oppose a planning application as they were independent of the planning process and there could be conflicts of interest due to Council officers in partnership with the organisation. However, the GeoPark was able to comment if they considered the site to affect views of important green spaces.

The Chair drew the Committee's attention to a document of queries raised by an absent Trustee circulated to the Committee just prior to the meeting. She asked the Committee if it had an opportunity to read the document and if there were any questions. The Head of Contacts, Leisure, Waste and Environment stated that the queries relating to reports in the current agenda could be considered during the relevant agenda item.

3. WOODLAND RESTORATION

A report of the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment was submitted (item 4 on the agenda). Queries raised by the absent Trustee were included in the presentation. The Head of Contacts, Leisure, Waste and Environment noted the following:

- the restoration programme was approximately 50% complete and had started in 2018-19. The £10K allocation in the budget was for each felling operation and not for the duration of the programme.
- the programme was supported by Natural England, Forestry England, The Woodland Trust and the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust. It was also being completed as part of the Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS).
- the programme would be assessed as part of the Stewardship Scheme and the woods would be visited by representatives to determine if the tree felling was being completed to a high standard.
- the restoration of the woods was anticipated to increase biodiversity and improve habitats for ground flora and fauna. Trees would be felled and the area replanted in a manner to create an environment for survival, providing a mix of light and shade and minimising overcrowding.
- the compartments were replanted at a density recommended by the Forestry Commission in line with common forestry practice and would be higher than required. After approximately 10-15 years the compartments would be thinned.
- it hadn't been possible to commence the felling during 2023-24 (winter).

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment provided an outline of the proposed next steps to be taken for each compartment. He noted that there would

be some selective felling, particularly in compartment 1 C to retain silver birch and beech trees.

Summary Trustee views / officer responses:

- clear felling of compartment 12 B could affect the flora and fauna which enjoyed light/shade habitats and the regrowth of bracken could limit survival. On a recent Trustee tour of the compartments to be felled it was noted that there was habitats under the conifers. The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment stated that habitats under conifers was of poor quality and not significant. The felling would be completed in Winter to minimise impact on bird nesting and when compared with the broadleaf understorey habitats there was a stark difference. In observing the felled area near the Events barn during Summer 2023 foxgloves had flourished indicating the seedbank was there when the right conditions were provided. Bluebells were an indicator of healthy broadleaf woods.
- noted that the clearance of bracken had not been carried out recently, clarification of costs of new contract requested. The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment stated that the costs were calculated for a three-year aftercare plan and was approximately £1.8K. It was anticipated that volunteers would support replanting and aftercare of the felled areas and companies arranging team building events could be utilised, this was seen to increase community ownership of the Outwoods.
- reference was made to an article circulated as an e-link to the Committee just before the meeting about clear felling and thinning and that practice was moving away from clear felling. The Chair stated that it had not been possible to read the article due to the lateness of its circulation and that it could be deferred to a later time once all had the opportunity to read.
- advice was being taken from experts on the appropriate processes to follow to recreate an acid oak woodland. Natural England was a government body assigned to protecting sites of special scientific interest such as the Outwoods.
- the Outwoods had been subject to clear felling approximately 35 years ago and it had recovered satisfactorily as evidenced by the woods today.
- clarification was sought on the procedure to manage bracken growth – the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment stated that bracken was chemically sprayed around the sapling trunks to create a void for the trees to grow. Noted chemical spraying was costly and used selectively, and the bracken was also manually beaten.
- recent weather conditions highlighted concerns regarding soil erosion, water logging and viability of new tree growth. There was acceptance of the long-term approach, but a more moderate approach could be advisable to minimise climatic impact. The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment stated that the Council were working with the Trent Rivers Trust and landowners to implement a natural water storage zone (wet woodland habitat).

This would be approved by Natural England and slow the water flow into the Wood (Moat) Brook. Soil erosion was not considered to be a significant risk and but if this as the case, Natural England would have highlighted this. Clear felling completed near the Events barn 2 years ago had not suffered from soil erosion and regrowth of flora had been relatively rapid which would help bind the soil.

A Trustee proposed a nature walk in late spring to enable the Committee to observe the difference in understorey between broadleaf and conifer areas.

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment stated that after listening to concerns from the Committee and members of the public he considered the proposals outlined in the report were a good compromise. Once a decision had been reached by the Committee, he would update the Outwoods Management Plan accordingly and also include the recently published DEFRA guidance supporting the proposed approach to managing protected landscapes, which would not view conifers as appropriate for a triple SI woodland.

AGREED that:

1. Compartments 12B and 7A should be put out to tender for felling and replanted over the autumn/winter 2024/25;
2. Compartments 1B and 1C should be put out to tender for felling and replanted over the autumn/winter 2025/26 and 2026/27 (depending on timber prices);
3. Compartments 12A and 12C should be left in situ;
4. Compartments 9B and 9C should be left in situ.

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 highlighted the key points in the report as follows:

- an update was not available regarding the upgrade to the footpath from Nanpantan Sports Ground, but this would be followed up after the meeting.
- the Outwoods Management Plan had been circulated to the Committee at its meeting in October 2023 and not many comments had been received. It had not been possible to progress until a decision was reached regarding the tree felling. It could now be drafted and it was hoped to bring an updated version to the Committee for its consideration at its meeting in July.

- the agreed increase to the car parking charges had been included in the Council's draft budget. Preparatory legal work to implement the proposal had begun. The anticipated income would reduce the subsidy by the Council in maintain the woods.
- it was proposed to increase the charge for season tickets to £100 for two cars per annum and to limit the number of tickets available. A waiting list could be used.
- an update on the status of the proposed double yellow lines on Woodhouse Lane was not available. The new path between the Outwoods and the Beacon Hill Country Park was being well used.
- the online survey had not been progressed beyond determining questions to ask. As it had been originally planned as a consultation on car parking charges more information had been requested on rationale for the survey and whether it was still required.

Summary of Trustee views / officer response:

- whether it was possible to employ a shuttle bus from urban areas to the Outwoods, using S106 monies – one of the projects to be delivered by the Charnwood Forest GeoPark would be a viability study on public transport, considering options for subsidies and reducing car usage, this could include considering a shuttle bus.
- clarification was sought for the rationale for increasing the season ticket charges to £100 and not doubling (to £80) as per day car parking charges - officers considered it was good value for the charge to increase to £100 and to then limit the availability of the season tickets to 100 holders as more season ticket holders could reduce the day car parking income, (which reduced the Council subsidy). Compared to other local sites, Trustees considered doubling the season ticket charge to be sufficient.
- yellow lines were required on the brow of the hill to reduce dangerous parking. Dangerous parking should be monitored by the Police although noted no parking restrictions currently in force. The proposal was currently with the Cabinet Lead Member at Leicestershire County Council for decision. The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment considered that as further expansion of the yellow lines had no direct impact on the Outwood Management Committee it should not be funded by the Committee.

AGREED that:

1. the Head of Contracts, Leisure, Waste and Environment drafts the Outwoods Management Plan and circulates to the Committee before 1st July for the Committee to provide comments prior to its scheduled meeting on 24th July 2024.
2. the Outwoods Management Committee approves the increase to £80 per annum for season tickets including two cars on the ticket and limits the number of season ticket holders to 100.

3. the creation and distribution of an online survey be postponed.

4. 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 stated that:

- the report approximately covered the financial position at the end of Quarter 3. The budget was on track for the end March 2024.
- there had been an underspend of £36K and £32K was outstanding as payment to contractors.
- the income for the sale of timber was still included in the budget and would carry forward into the new year.
- enforcement had been carried out at the Outwoods car park. The increased charges would be implemented on 1st April 2024 and relevant signage would be updated.

Officer responses to questions raised:

- whether the events barn could be used for a Bluebell Service (as arranged at Swithland Wood). The barn was underutilised so although the Council could not arrange events itself, it was open to individuals coming forward with proposals.
- the bluebell walk would be arranged in Spring 2024 but noted that the ranger service were understaffed due to the Head Ranger leaving post. The walk was usually well attended and fixing the date required careful determining to ensure the woods were at their optimum. The event would be promoted via social media channels.
- it was unclear what the budget for promotional activities included - the Head of Contracts, Leisure, Waste and Environment would confirm after the meeting.
- the HLS grant for woodland restoration of £4000 had not yet been received. The HLS grant scheme was no longer available and had been subsumed into the Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme. It was anticipated that a new scheme would be launched, and that the Council could obtain a grant through this.

AGREED that:

1. the Head of Contracts, Leisure, Waste and Environment to confirm to the Committee what the promotional activities in the report (total spend of £941.88) included.

2. the report be noted.

6. RANGERS REPORT

A report of the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment was submitted (item 7 on the agenda). The Head of Contracts; Leisure, Waste and Environment noted that there had been an impact on the footpaths in the woods due to the recent volume of rain. Paths that were not of bonded material had suffered and would require repair.

The Committee thanked the Head Ranger for his report.

AGREED that the report be noted and be circulated to all councillors after the meeting.

7. A.O.B

The Chair thanked all who had worked in the Outwoods during a challenging winter.

The Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment stated that he intended to submit a revised Wind Policy to the Committee at its next meeting.

It was confirmed that if the woods were closed due to high winds that the café did not receive compensation as unexpected closures had been included in its contract.

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).

3. **WOODLAND RESTORATION**

It was proposed and seconded that the Committee agreed to Compartments 12B and 7A should be put out to tender for felling and replanted over the autumn/winter 2024/25.

9 voted in favour
2 voted against
None abstained

The Proposal was carried.

It was proposed and seconded that the Committee agreed to Compartments 1B and 1C should be put out to tender for felling and replanted over the autumn/winter 2025/26 and 2026/27 (depending on timber prices).

9 voted in favour
2 voted against
None abstained

The Proposal was carried.

It was proposed and seconded that the Committee agreed to Compartments 12A and 12C should be left in situ.

11 voted in favour
None voted against
None abstained

The Proposal was carried.

It was proposed and seconded that the Committee agreed to Compartments 9B and (C should be left in situ.

11 voted in favour
None voted against
None abstained

The Proposal was carried.

AGREED that:

1. Compartments 12B and 7A should be put out to tender for felling and replanted over the autumn/winter 2024/25;

2. Compartments 1B and 1C should be put out to tender for felling and replanted over the autumn/winter 2025/26 and 2026/27 (depending on timber prices);
3. Compartments 12A and 12C should be left in situ;
4. Compartments 9B and 9C should be left in situ.

5. OFFICER UPDATE

It was proposed and seconded that the Committee agreed to raising the Season ticket charges to £80 per annum for two cars and limit the number of season ticket holders to 100.

9 voted in favour
2 voted against
None abstained

The Proposal was carried.

AGREED that:

1. the Outwoods Management Committee approved the increase to £80 per annum for season tickets including two cars on the ticket and limit the number of season ticket holders to 100.