



Report to: Cabinet Meeting - 21 February 2023

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Rhona Holloway, Economic Development & Visitors

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Report Summary	
<b>Type of Report</b>	Open Report, Key Decision
<b>Report Title</b>	Next Steps with Delivery of the Forest Corner Masterplan & Project
<b>Purpose of Report</b>	An update for Cabinet on the work to develop a revised masterplan and strategy for the Forest Corner area near Edwinstowe. This includes proposals to allocate resource for 2023-24 and to develop a second phase of work to maximise the wider Sherwood Forest offer.
<b>Recommendations</b>	<p>The Cabinet:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) note the update and endorse the direction of travel for the Forest Corner project;</li> <li>b) welcome plans to commence a second phase of work to develop the wider offer for Sherwood Forest; and</li> <li>c) approve £75k revenue for 2023-24 to sustain this work through project management, specialist studies and short-term improvements.</li> </ul>
<b>Alternative Options Considered</b>	A 'do nothing' alternative has been considered with regard to the Forest Corner project. This would have significant reputational risk given the undertaking made to stakeholders in 2020 to revise the masterplan in light of consultation responses. It would also fail to realise the potential of the area and close the gap between visitor expectation and experience.
<b>Reason for Recommendations</b>	<p>These recommendations are made in order to ensure Cabinet is aware of recent work and intended next steps and to secure the necessary resources to maintain momentum.</p> <p>The proposals align with the Community Plan objectives to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver inclusive and sustainable economic growth</li> <li>• Enhance and protect the district's natural environment</li> </ul> <p>Improve the health and well-being of local residents</p>

## 1.0 **Background**

- 1.1 A number of proposals have been developed in recent years for development at Forest Corner, the area immediately north of Edwinstowe village which includes the Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre and acts as a primary entrance point to Sherwood Forest (a site location map is at appendix 2). A new visitor centre operated by the RSPB under a lease from Nottinghamshire County Council (NCC) opened in 2018 following the closure of the previous centre which had reached its end of life. The new centre is located outside of the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in order to avoid the damage to protected habitat that had arisen from the previous centre (located within the SAC). The area also features NSDC owned properties including the Arts and Craft Centre, the youth hostel (leased to YHA) and the recently redeveloped gateway lodge.
- 1.2 Whilst the new visitor centre has provided modern facilities and interpretation, and regular events are hosted at the site, the overall experience at Forest Corner is widely acknowledged as falling short of visitor expectations given the internationally recognised brands of Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest. This gap was one of the drivers for the council's 2019 Destination Management Plan for the Sherwood Area and subsequent work to develop a masterplan for Forest Corner, which was supported by the Tourism Action Group as a needed, tangible, and (likely) deliverable intervention which could be transformational.
- 1.3 As outlined in a report to the Economic Development Committee in September 2020, an on-line consultation on a draft masterplan was carried out during the summer of 2020, setting out proposals for change in the area aiming to:
- Maximise the Sherwood Forest visitor offer and experience
  - Increase visitor volume, dwell time and dispersal to other attractions
  - Consider improved connectivity including to Edwinstowe village
- 1.4 The same report noted that the consultation (75% of the responses to which were from local residents) raised a number of concerns, centred around:
- Increasing traffic volumes, noise, car parking issues and pressures on local infrastructure
  - Potential negative environmental impacts on nature and wildlife
  - Overdevelopment and overcommercialisation
- However, other respondents commented that there does need to be more for people of all ages to do, that the perceived loss of a Robin Hood experience/interpretation needs to be addressed and 'a proper tourist attraction' created.
- 1.5 Following the publication of the consultation response, it was clear that a range of landowner partners would need to be engaged, notably NCC in the first instance. A change in leadership at NCC has resulted in this project being a higher priority to the new leadership, with a relationship having been built amongst the officer and Member cohort to such a degree that this project will be the key focus of their future Visitor Economy Strategy. Moreover, following Covid recovery and LUF 2 priorities the Council now has an ability to focus resource on leading discussions.

## **Current Project**

- 1.6 Discussions about Forest Corner resumed in mid-2022, with the RSPB and NCC both agreeing to work closely with the District Council to revise the masterplan and set out a strategy for realising the potential of the area. A workshop for officers of the three organisations was held on-site in late September 2022 to review the draft masterplan proposals in light of the consultation responses and explore the options for change within the area. Through this workshop and subsequent discussion, a strong consensus is developing regarding the changes that are desirable for the area, both short and long-term.
- 1.7 Supporting this activity, dedicated NSDC resources have been allocated to the project (currently utilising underspend from an officer vacancy) and steps taken to put the project on a firm footing. This has included setting up an internal project group which has met regularly since October 2022, putting in place structured project management arrangements with a number of workstreams established and developing the governance for the project in conjunction with RSPB and NCC. Stakeholder engagement has also resumed, though this remains targeted at this stage.
- 1.8 The work to date has reaffirmed the potential of the area and the opportunity to realise the objectives set out in the Council's Destination Management Plan for Sherwood and the subsequent draft masterplan for Forest Corner. Development in the area will bring growth to the visitor economy, creating local jobs, spend and skills. Done appropriately, it will also help to conserve and enhance the natural environment and valued habitats, bringing further potential for training and jobs within environmental sectors where future demand is set to outstrip supply.
- 1.9 One of the key workstreams within the project is 'connectivity', seeking to improve movements within and around the area by car as well as walking and cycling access. To this end, a year one allocation of Shared Prosperity Funding has been used to commission additional traffic survey information in liaison with NCC. This will provide key baseline data against which alternative proposals for the area can be modelled and assessed.

## **Wider Offer**

- 1.10 The same period has also seen consultation on a revision to NCC's Visitor Economy Strategy, which includes a commitment to making the most of the brand of Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest.
- 1.11 This need to establish and promote a wider offer for Sherwood Forest (well beyond the Forest Corner site) has been a recurrent theme emerging from the Forest Corner project and previous stakeholder discussions. Maximising the Robin Hood brand also forms part of the expectations of the RSPB within their contractual arrangements. Forest Corner is part of this plan, albeit it is unlikely that Forest Corner will fulfil its potential or close the gap between reality and visitor expectations without a wider agreed offer in place. Developing and coordinating such an offer would realise opportunities to drive visitor economy growth and protect and enhance valuable natural assets.

## **District Council Roles**

- 1.12 It is important to note that as well as leading the above policy work in collaboration with partners, the District Council has important planning and property roles relating to the Forest Corner site.
- 1.13 The Amended Core Strategy includes a number of planning policies relating to the area which includes designations for the Special Area of Conservation, a National Nature Reserve and Edwinstowe Conservation Area. Policy ShAP1 Sherwood Area and Sherwood Forest Regional Park includes the following:

*The District Council will work with its partners to maintain and enhance the ecological, heritage and landscape value of the Sherwood Area whilst promoting sustainable and appropriate leisure, tourism and economic regeneration*

Planning representatives are included within the internal project group and it will clearly be vital to ensure that proposals for the area remain in keeping with the district's planning policies.

- 1.14 As noted above, the District Council is also the landlord and manager of a number of properties in the area. It owns and manages the Arts and Crafts centre, opposite the RSPB visitor centre, which is currently well occupied with a range of craft and food and drink outlets including a café. It owns the youth hostel currently on a long lease to the YHA (lease terminates 30th April 2033) and a small new building at the entrance to Forest Corner that was intended to complement the visitor offer and has recently been leased to a dog treat bakery. However, this site has suffered from repeated break-ins and opportunities are currently being explored to utilise the Rural Crime Prevention Programme to fund target hardening initiatives to improve lighting, safety etc. and bring the building back into productive use. Again, colleagues from corporate property are part of the internal project group and future growth in the area offers the potential of increasing revenue for the council from its existing assets.

## **2.0 Proposal/Options Considered**

- 2.1 As noted above, there is an emerging consensus around the nature of changes at Forest Corner that would realise the ambitions for the area. This includes the need to:
- Create a sense of arrival and destination
  - Host a permanent Robin Hood visitor offer
  - Create flexible areas for activities, events and 'programmable spaces' focusing on audiences including families and day visitors, and themes of environmental, outdoor experiences
  - Enable a logic and flow to the visitor journey through the site
  - Provide for a safer crossing arrangement of Swinecote Road
  - Manage traffic flows, mitigating the impact on the village and encouraging dispersal to sites and attractions across the wider area
  - Expand the range of current businesses catering to visitors and give them presence within the core visitor flow
  - Improve links with Thoresby Vale and Edwinstowe High Street (taking account of recommendations from the recent High Streets Task Force study)

Realising the above will require sensitivity regarding current land uses and stakeholder ambitions. Delivery will also depend on developing realistic options for funding and finance.

- 2.2 It is proposed that the current project with its workstreams continues with the aim of finalising a revised masterplan that articulates the above objectives in more detail, alongside a strategy for delivery in the short and long-term. The strategy will take account of the planning implications, potential funding, environmental impact and economic benefits. It will also set out a route for both short- and long-term changes including any further consultation and engagement that will be required. The intention is to come back to Cabinet in July once this work, including stakeholder engagement, has been undertaken and a strategy and masterplan are ready for approval.
- 2.3 In addition to the current project, it is proposed that a second phase of work commences, working closely with NCC, to develop and coordinate a wider offer for Sherwood Forest. This could build on the previous proposals for a Regional Park (which were well-received by partners), which remain within local planning policies. In any event, bringing leadership and coordination to a Sherwood Forest proposition would:
- Enable a more effective approach to habitat protection and enhancement
  - Bring a scale for both commercial opportunities and the development of skills in both the visitor economy and relating to land management and habitat protection
  - Ensure a visitor offer of greater scale, value and diversity can be developed and promoted, helping bridge the gap between reality and visitor expectation and reaching wider and deeper into potential visitor markets
  - Allow a properly coordinated gateway and dispersal model to be developed, spreading benefits to more attractions and relieving pressure on growth at popular sites
  - Enable a clear identity and brand to be established and used to leverage the global recognition of Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest
  - Allow a sense of arrival and destination to be created across the whole area, underpinned by a coherent signage and wayfinding strategy
  - Enable the current walking and cycling assets to be maximised through a proper network of trails
  - Mitigate environmental impact, including through developing alternative approaches to visitor movement that become more viable at scale
  - Open up additional sources of funding and finance, strengthening bid business cases
- 2.4 The prospect of a future Combined County Authority for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, with powers and funding devolved to an elected mayor, offers the potential for a Sherwood Forest offer to be fully developed and maximised. A Sherwood Forest Regional Park (or similar) would provide a good balance to the offer already in place in Derbyshire with the Peak District and National Forest, ensuring that Nottinghamshire can benefit in similar ways to a growing visitor economy. It would also present government with a new and distinct offer in support of its growth and levelling up objectives. The recent consultation on the devolution proposals featured a map showing the natural assets across the two counties that included Sherwood Forest (see Appendix 1). Yet at present the assets in Derbyshire make a far more effective contribution to the local and regional economy than is the case for Sherwood Forest.

2.5 In order to maintain momentum and deliver this work, it will be important that NSDC continues to allocate resource to the current project and second phase. This will include a leadership role to drive the agenda and raise profile. As noted above, activity during 2022-23 has been largely funded through existing resources supported by a small allocation of Shared Prosperity Funding to deliver specialist feasibility work. For 2023-24, it is proposed that a budget allocation of £75k revenue is made available within the Economic Growth and Visitor Economy business unit in order to support:

- Continued project management resource, working collaboratively with partners, coordinating the internal project group and establishing the second phase of the project
- Further specialist studies including sound economic analysis and ecological capacity analysis to underpin the proposals and pave the way for future business cases for funding and finance
- Short term improvements at the site that can help build local resident and wider stakeholder confidence. This could include signage and wayfinding improvements, including links to Edwinstowe village and Thoresby Vale, improvements to the arrival area and infrastructure to enable more 'pop-up' retail and experiences along the visitor route.

2.6 Implementing the proposals above will directly contribute to key priorities within the Council Plan, in particular to:

- Deliver inclusive and sustainable economic growth
- Enhance and protect the district's natural environment
- Improve the health and well-being of local residents

They will also enhance the council's reputation and relationship with key partners by taking a leadership role to realise the potential of not just the Forest Corner site but the wider Sherwood Forest area, addressing the long-standing mismatch of visitor expectation and reality of offer.

### **3.0 Implications**

In writing this report and in putting forward recommendations officers have considered the following implications: Data Protection, Digital and Cyber Security, Equality and Diversity, Financial, Human Resources, Human Rights, Legal, Safeguarding, Sustainability, and Crime and Disorder and where appropriate they have made reference to these implications and added suitable expert comment where appropriate.

3.1 There are no detrimental implications within the content or recommendations of this report for Data Protection, Digital and Cyber Security, Equality and Diversity, Human Resources, Human Rights, Legal or Safeguarding.

#### **Financial implications –(FIN22-23/4400)**

3.2 The report proposes a requirement to fund £75k for the Forest Corner Project in 2023/24. The Business Manager (Economic Growth & Visitor Economy) has identified a carry forward budget request of £28k from 2022/23 that supported additional capacity in the delivery of the Forest Corner Project. This will be used for the continued project management resource identified at 2.5. The additional £47k will be funded from the Change Management Reserve for a 12 month period commencing April 2023.

### **Sustainability Implications**

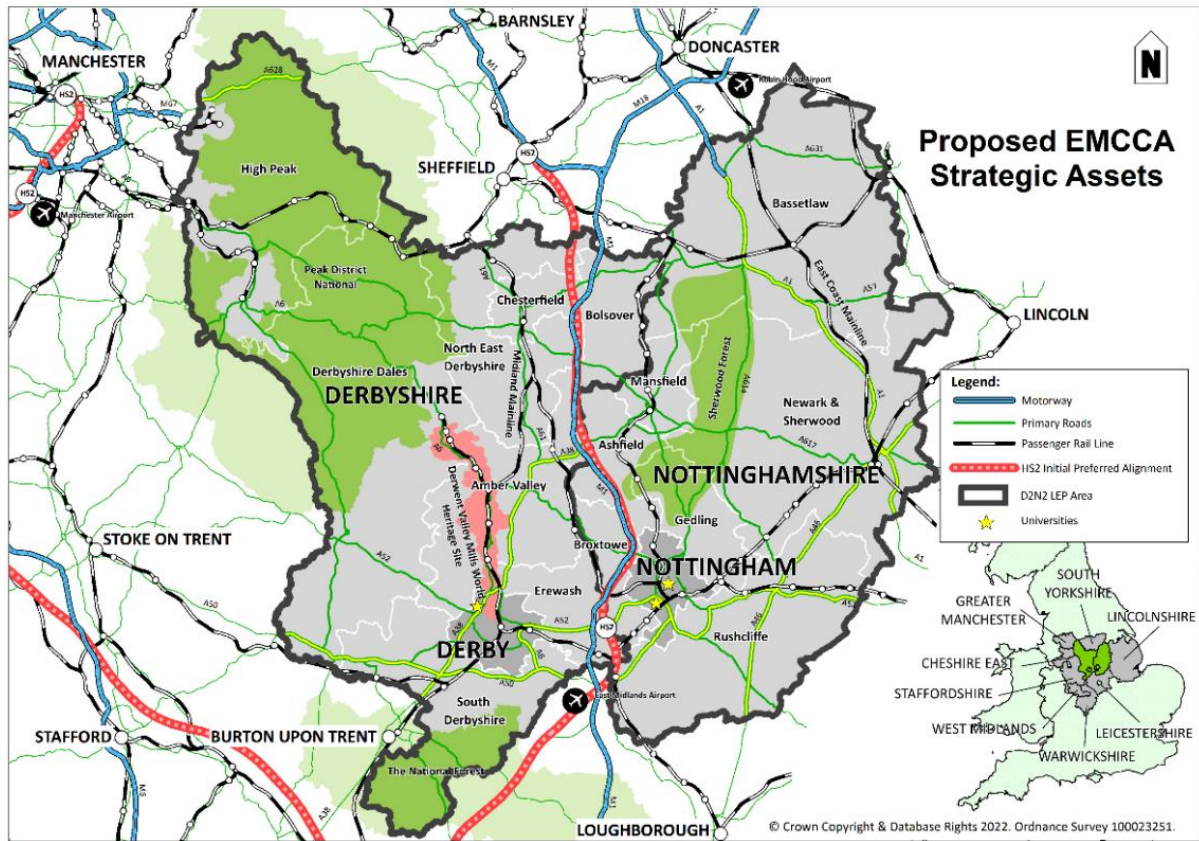
- 3.3 The environmental impact of any future development proposals at the Sherwood Forest site will be considered throughout the duration of this project. NSDC will seek to mitigate environmental impact and continue to enhance and protect our district's natural habitats, aligning with the Community Plan objectives of enhancing and protecting the district's natural environment and delivering inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

### **Background Papers and Published Documents**

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.

2020 Forest Corner Masterplan

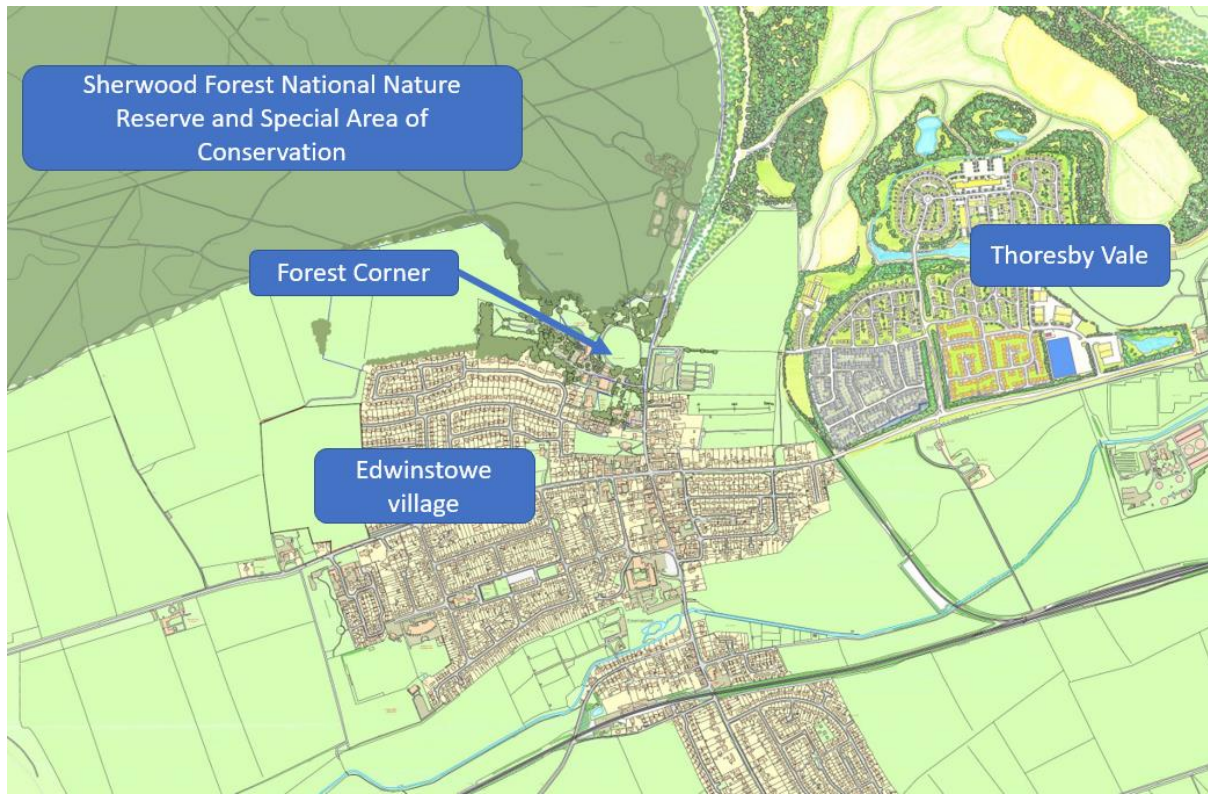
Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Map from Recent Devolution Consultation



Source – East Midlands Combined County Authority – Draft Proposal (Nov 2022)



**Site Location Map**



*Source – 2020 Forest Corner Masterplan (Leonard Design), NSDC annotations*