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Dear Sir/Madam,

Visit Sherwood Forest – Forest Corner Consultation

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Forest Corner Consultation and Masterplan document regarding future development of Sherwood Forest Corner.

Who we are

The Woodland Trust is the UK leading woodland conservation charity. One of our key aims is to protect native woods, trees and their wildlife for the future. Through the restoration and improvement of woodland biodiversity and increased awareness and understanding of important woodland, these aims can be achieved. We manage over 1,250 sites covering around 23,000 hectares (57,000 acres) and have 500,000 members and supporters.

Sherwood Forest and its conservation significance

Sherwood Forest is an area characterised by its ancient woodland setting and nationally significant number of ancient and veteran trees. The varied and unique habitats of Sherwood Forest provide for many of the UK's most important and threatened fauna and flora. The special features of this site cannot be re-created and cannot afford to be subject to damage, deterioration or loss.

Ancient woodland is an irreplaceable natural resource that has remained constantly wooded since at least 1600 AD. The length at which ancient woodland takes to develop and evolve (centuries, even millennia), coupled with the vital links it creates between plants, animals and soils accentuate its irreplaceable status. Ancient and veteran trees are a vital and treasured part of the UK's natural and cultural landscape, representing a resource of great international significance. They harbour a unique array of wildlife and echo the lives of past generations of people in ways that no other part of our natural world is able.

Sherwood Forest is a nationally significant habitat both ecologically and historically. In recognition of this it is covered by multiple statutory designations, including Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Area of Conservation (SAC), and a National Nature Reserve (NNR). The majority of the area is also on the Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI), has hundreds of trees listed on the Ancient Tree Inventory (ATI), and is also on the Wood Pasture and Parkland Inventory (WPPI). This raft of designations makes it absolutely clear that Sherwood Forest is one of the UK's greatest natural assets and must therefore be protected and preserved.

The SSSI citation that covers Sherwood Forest is the Birklands and Bilhaugh SSSI designation. In its assessment of the SSSI's condition, Natural England has described much of the SSSI as being in 'Unfavourable – Recovering' condition, with the area around Sherwood Corner being assessed as 'Unfavourable – No Change'. It has been recognised by Natural England that public access and disturbance is a key adverse impact affecting the condition of the site.

Potential impacts and our concerns

We hold serious concerns over the proposed vision for the area, particularly in relation to potential implications of future development and associated pressures on the ecological integrity of Sherwood Forest and its ancient habitats.

It is troubling to us that the conservation value of Sherwood Forest does not appear to have been considered within the Masterplan, or referenced as part of this consultation. This is most clearly illustrated by the diagram on Page 11 of the Masterplan document, which outlines the key values for which Sherwood Forest is famous; there is not one mention of the conservation value of the site.

Page 10 of the document identifies locations for potential development and other activity and highlights potential development ideas. New facilities and attractions in these areas, alongside new housing provisions, will naturally attract more visitors to the site, though there does not appear to be any consideration of current visitor numbers; it is not clear from the consultation if the current baseline for visitor numbers has been measured or what future visitor numbers are expected to be, and therefore it is unclear how the impact of additional visitors on the ecological integrity of Sherwood Forest has and will be taken into account. The combined portfolio of areas 1-10 therefore presents a considerable risk to the NNR.

We believe access to woods is important, and recognise the need to engage people in these special places, but this also needs to be appropriate for the site. We understand the role of Sherwood Forest in supporting the local economy and tourism, and also the importance of the site from a cultural aspect; however, Sherwood Forest is just as much renowned for its special natural features, such as the Major Oak as well as hundreds of other nationally significant trees and their associated rare or threatened species. With Sherwood Forest already subject to significant recreational pressures, further development in the area has the potential to result in the long-term degradation of the site's natural features. It is absolutely vital that any future development around Sherwood Forest places the protection of the site at the heart of conversations and planning going forward. Based on this initial consultation, we seek reassurance that this will happen.

Next steps

With plans clearly moving ahead for development and associated activity around the Sherwood Forest area it is imperative that due diligence is given to ensure that the Trust, as members of the Sherwood Consortium, is consulted on such matters. Other conservation organisations with relevant expertise, such as the Ancient Tree Forum should similarly be spoken to and their advice sought.

The ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees of Sherwood Forest are a cornerstone of the UK's natural environment. The protection of these irreplaceable habitats needs to be at the very top of the agenda; once lost they cannot be re-created. Any proposals within this area need to work towards improving Natural England's unfavourable rating of the site and ensure they will alleviate visitor pressure on the site.

As plans move forward for the area and more detail is provided, the natural environment needs to be at the heart of any proposals put forward and recognised, not only for the economic benefits but also the unique irreplaceable contribution to biodiversity at a European scale. We would welcome the opportunity to engage with the Council at the earliest stages.

Yours sincerely,

Toby Bancroft
Regional Director - Midlands