

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

9 SEPTEMBER 2020

FOREST CORNER MASTERPLAN

1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 To provide the Economic Development Committee with an update on the Forest Corner Masterplan including the feedback received through the recent public/stakeholder consultation exercise.

2.0 Background Information

2.1 Further to the update provided to the Economic Development Committee in November 2019 on the implementation of the Destination Management Plan (DMP) for Sherwood Forest, NSDC is now leading a collaborative masterplanning project for Forest Corner. This is part of working to pro-actively support and shape tourism and town centre activity, as opposed to simply offering promotion support.

2.2 Following the appointment of masterplanning consultants earlier this year, we undertook a programme of engagement with the various landowners/managers at Forest Corner and the surrounding area to understand their concerns and aspirations for the site, and how we could all work together to create a vision for its longer-term development. This enabled us to develop an initial masterplan outlining some conceptual ideas for consideration and discussion. In order to gather the views, ideas and contributions of wider stakeholders and members of the public, we conducted a public consultation exercise throughout July 2020.

2.3 The consultation audiences were:

- Stakeholders – A wide range of organisations and businesses in the Sherwood Forest area were invited directly to provide their input. Many were members of the Sherwood Strategic Management Group and some were members of the district-wide Tourism Action Group
- Residents – Sherwood Forest is an important asset to communities in the area and we particularly wanted local residents to get involved and share their experiences, any concerns and ideas
- Visitors – We were mindful that given the Covid-19 pandemic visitor numbers and thus ability to capture opinions would be significantly reduced. In some ways this was helpful to understand a local view, noting that visitor views have been captured in our visitor market research presented to Members in 2019.

2.4 Although some Covid-19 restrictions were being relaxed, social distancing measures and the priority need to ensure public health and safety meant that face-to-face engagement was not possible at the scale originally envisaged. Therefore, engagement was conducted through a dedicated consultation webpage and an online survey which was promoted locally and via various online channels. This also enabled us to reach more people in a relatively short amount of time. The activities comprised:

- a) A dedicated consultation webpage at <https://visitsherwoodforest.co.uk/forest-corner-consultation> containing:

- An invitation to people to “Be part of the Sherwood story...”
 - Video featuring Cllr Keith Girling, Chairman of Economic Development Committee, outlining the purpose of the consultation and why we want people to get involved
 - Video presentation of the masterplan consultation pack
 - Link to the online consultation survey
- b) The dedicated consultation webpage was promoted widely through:
- Visit Newark & Sherwood social media channels (including paid-for posts)
 - NSDC Corporate Comms social media channels
 - Emails to stakeholders including members of the Sherwood Strategic Management Group and the Tourism Action Group who were asked to publicise it through their own networks
 - Display boards at public and visitor locations in the Forest Corner area such as Edwinstowe Village Hall, RSPB Visitor Centre and Sherwood Forest Arts & Craft Centre
 - Printed advertisements and editorial in Sherwood Life, Worksop Life and Retford Life during the last week of the consultation to make people more aware of the imminent deadline and to give it a final push

Some images/screen shots can be seen at **Appendix B**.

- c) The above promotion was successful in delivering the following reach and engagement:
- 544 completed online surveys submitted
 - 26,000 video views
 - 151,423 people reached
 - 17,610 engagements

3.0 Proposals

3.1 The public/stakeholder consultation exercise proved an effective way to gather feedback, views and ideas on the conceptual masterplan. The full results, including all free text comments, can be seen at **Appendix A**.

3.2 An executive summary of these results is as follows:

- a) The majority (two thirds) of respondents had viewed the masterplan consultation pack prior to completing the survey.
- b) There was a fairly even split of respondents by age between the ages of 35 and 64 years (66.18% in total), but less respondents aged under 34 years (15.81%) or over 65 years (15.63%). This reflects the demographics of both residents and visitors.
- c) The majority of respondents (73.35%) were local residents, and 21.14% described themselves as visitors.
- d) Respondents were more likely to visit Sherwood Forest and Edwinstowe village more than once per week, and to visit ‘Other places in the Sherwood area, e.g. Thoresby Park, Rufford Country Park, Sherwood Pines’ 2-3 times per month.
- e) The majority (69.23%) of respondents were local, normally travelling 1-9 miles to Sherwood Forest. Most (45.73%) travel by private car or walk there (44.86%).

- f) The most popular reasons for people visiting Sherwood Forest were 'Nature and wildlife' (71.12%), 'Physical activity' (65.43%), 'Relaxation and wellbeing' (63.89%).
- g) The services/facilities that respondents rated most highly were: 'Access to woodlands, nature and wildlife'; 'Walking routes'; 'Information about woodlands, nature and wildlife'; 'Welcome areas'; 'Signage/wayfinding'.
- h) The services/facilities that respondents rated lowest were: 'Robin Hood experience/interpretation'; 'Information about local history'; 'Car parking'; 'Food and drink – takeaway'.
- i) Most respondents rated their overall experience as 'Good' (34.80%) or 'Satisfactory' (29.52%).
- j) Respondents' top priorities for developing the experience would be 'Robin Hood experience/interpretation' (weighted average 1.46); 'Experiences of nature, landscape and wildlife' (weighted average 1.45); 'User facilities, e.g. car parking, toilets, signage' (weighted average 1.30); 'Links with Edwinstowe village' (weighted average 1.28).
- k) Respondents voiced a range of comments and concerns about potential developments at Forest Corner. These can be seen in full in the results to Q11 and Q12 on pp.27-57 at Appendix A. Largely, these comments and 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
- l) However, other respondents equally 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. Many respondents also expressed continuing disappointment/anger at the closure of the old Visitor Centre, and compared the new RSPB Visitor Centre unfavourably. The masterplan provides an important opportunity to remedy some of the ongoing pain still being experienced following the closure of the old Visitor Centre.
- m) With regard to car parking and access, the current zebra crossing from the main car park to Forest Corner was a safety concern for many and some expressed concerns about accessibility to and around the site for those with mobility difficulties.
- n) The stakeholders who completed the survey were mainly involved in 'Land management / forestry' (40%); 'Nature/wildlife' (40%); 'Events and festivals' (36%); 'Retail' (36%) and 'Local history' (32%).
- o) The stakeholders' top priorities for developing the offer would be 'Protecting the natural environment and wildlife' (weighted average 1.71); 'Robin Hood experience/interpretation' (weighted average 1.67); 'Visitor facilities, e.g. car parking, toilets, signage' (weighted average 1.67); 'Walking / cycling / horse riding routes and links' (weighted average 1.50).

- p) As with the responses from the public, the stakeholders expressed a range of comments and concerns about potential developments at Forest Corner. These can be seen in full in the results to Q15 and Q16 on pp.66-71 and in the three written submissions at Appendix A. Largely, these comments and concerns centred around:
- Potential negative environmental impacts of development on natural landscape and wildlife
 - Need for an improved Robin Hood experience/interpretation
 - Need for visitor dispersal to the wider Sherwood Forest area, attractions and businesses
- q) More specifically,
- Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust proposed a major, long-term (50 years) landscape-scale habitat creation and restoration, recreating the ancient hunting forest landscape of Sherwood to increase tourism potential.
 - Sherwood Forest Friends of the Earth proposed that the masterplan be viewed as an opportunity to lead the way in environmentally sound development for the leisure industry with activities geared towards educating visitors on the importance of adopting new ways of living for humans that are in harmony with, and beneficial to, the natural world.
 - The Woodland Trust proposed that any developments serve to improve Natural England's 'Unfavourable – No Change' rating of the area around Forest Corner and alleviate visitor pressure on the site.

4.0 Equalities Implications

- 4.1 The consultation was promoted widely 'on-the-ground' and via online challenges. Completion of the survey, given the pandemic, was an online only format which may have restricted the ability of some without access to contribute. This was mitigated by some organisations by an offer to assist completion of the survey. The external platform used for the online consultation survey and the communications used to promote it were fully accessible.

5.0 Financial Implications – FIN20-21/1529

- 5.1 None. The costs of the masterplanning consultants were approved by members of the Policy & Finance Committee at its meeting in September 2019.

6.0 Community Plan – Alignment to Objectives

- 6.1 The aims of the Forest Corner Masterplan align clearly with two strategic objectives of the Community Plan
- Increase visits to Newark & Sherwood and the use of visitor attractions by local residents
 - Protect, promote and enhance the district's natural environment

7.0 Comments of Director

7.1 I welcome the engagement from the consultation process, which has raised a range of issues which it is clear are of importance and concern. Undertaking the survey within the restrictions of the pandemic has allowed a local view to be captured in a way not previously done. The visitor view, in terms of facilities and offer, can already usefully be captured from previous visitor survey information gathered. It is clear that there is a need to address 3 principal areas of concern/opportunity: 1) protection and acknowledgment of the international importance of the area in ecological and environmental terms; 2) the need to develop a Robin Hood experience and offer; and 3) the need to address the physical environment, movement of people, and user experience, from car parking, way-finding, congestion, and appropriate visitor facilities. There will be a balance to strike in seeking to achieve a masterplan to achieve this.

8.0 RECOMMENDATION

That officers present the finding of the consultation to stakeholders, and continue to liaise with the various landowners/managers in producing a masterplan for Forest Corner, to be presented at the next meeting of the Economic Development Committee in November 2020.

Reason for Recommendation

To update Members on the public consultation, and to enable Officers to continue with the development of the Forest Corner Masterplan.

Background Papers

Nil.

For further information please contact Richard Huthwaite, Business Manager - Tourism on Ext. 5951.

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