

Executive Committee

No specific Ward

22 July 2009

ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES – FORESTRY MANAGEMENT

(Report of the Head of Environment)

1. Summary of Proposals

The current five year forestry authority grant aided woodland management programme is due to end and in its place a rolling programme of works can be developed on a two year cycle which allows for flexibility with regard to resources, non-controllable external factors and also enables reprioritising of work to suit market influences. Continuation of the programme will also enable continued enhancement amenity access of the woodlands.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is asked to **RESOLVE** that

- 1) the current five year programme of works be remodelled into a two year rolling programme;
- 2) the existing arrangement with the external forestry consultant be continued until the 31 March 2010 Officers will appoint a suitable consultant via the Councils procurement procedures with effect from the 1 April 2010 for a period of four years with the option to extend the contract for one additional year;
- 3) the works be let on a bi-annual basis based on competitive quotations and subject to availability and satisfactory performance by the contractors; and
- 4) proposals for works to improve the aging footpath network within the woodland areas and any consequential capital bids be brought to the Committee in due course, including the identification of any potential external sources for funding of new or improved footpaths.

3. **Financial, Legal, Policy Risk and Sustainability Implications**

Financial

- 3.1 The work is funded from Forestry Commission grant aid; receipts from the sale of the timber and existing revenue budgets with the aim of breaking even by the end of the programme. The external funding is linked to the type of work carried out in terms of the quality and amount of yield and, the return on that yield is directly influenced by market forces. A more flexible approach to how the programme is carried out may enable a more pro-active stance in taking advantage of potential sources of revenue.
- 3.2 The proposed changes with regard to Planning policy and the development of a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) may be a possible source for additional funding in the future with regard to physical/structural enhancements in the woodland areas and a flexible management system would be able to accommodate and take advantage of such opportunities in terms of the timing of the works.

Legal

- 3.3 As a landowner we have a duty of care under the Occupiers Liability Act 1984 to ensure that land that is publicly accessible is maintained in an appropriate condition and that any work carried out on that land conforms to national regulations such as the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as well to any industry standards and codes of practice. The forestry management work is not work primarily aimed at ensuring that the general condition and safety of the site is maintained as this is done via the Councils in house service however, it is subject to the same legal constraints and must not be at odds with the amenity use of the site.
- 3.4 The external funding that is gained via grants from the Forestry Commission will be subject to some contractual agreements in terms of what the funding will provide for and the time in which it is achieved. The use of the external forestry consultant is meant to ensure that not only do we achieve the funding but also that we comply with any relevant contractual conditions as well as ensuring that we do not operate in a manner that is detrimental to the status or statutory control of the sites i.e. SSSI or English Nature.

Policy

- 3.5 The proposals sit within the key priority of a Clean and Green Redditch and by having a designated programme of works we are able to ensure that the green character of Redditch is maintained in

a manner that realises its potential whilst aiming to ensure that it is sustainable in perpetuity. It will also provide information for inclusion in the data that is required for reporting on NI 197 – Local Biodiversity.

Risk

- 3.6 By not delivering a structured forestry programme external funding streams will not be available and any such work would have to be funded in its entirety from existing revenue sources which will mean that the programme will have to be reduced or, existing resources will have to be diverted from revenue budgets which provide for the general landscape maintenance across the whole Borough. In effect it is probable that only work relating to Health and Safety issues is likely to be undertaken. This may adversely affect the status of the woodland areas, one of which is a SSSI and five of which, due to their excellent condition, are currently classified as Local Nature Reserves.

Sustainability / Environmental

- 3.7 A deterioration of the woodland areas will result in a loss of special designation and will result in a steady decline of the trees to a point where any commercial value is lost and the environmental diversity diminishes due to a lack of natural regeneration and future planting schemes as well as domination by poorer species. The diversity of species is also important for ensuring that should a species become particularly susceptible to disease that major losses are avoided as other species will be present to take their place so that the overall landscape is not immediately lost. Species diversity and management of the species within woodlands is also important to ensure that wildlife habitats are retained and where possible improved upon and well managed woodlands and woodland belts act as wildlife corridors providing a network of habitable green spaces across the borough for numerous wildlife species.
- 3.8 Woodland management can support the climate change agenda in a number of ways, from existing woodland simply acting as an important carbon store, to new woodland being able to buffer existing native woodlands against climate change, or through reducing flood risk by delaying water movements. There is also increasing scope for woodland management to contribute to developing a green economy, with a number of small wood fuel businesses developing within Worcestershire. In addition, through the Worcestershire Partnership, our role in maintaining and supporting Natural England and the West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership through developing biodiversity 'corridors' and using land use planning to both mitigate carbon emissions and to ensure that our woodlands are resilient and adapted to future climate

change impacts in the UK mean that ongoing, high quality maintenance of the woodland network in the Borough is essential.

Report

4. Background

4.1 Redditch Borough Council owns and manages over 168 hectares (415 acres) of woodlands. The majority of this area, approximately 116 hectares (289 acres), is designated Ancient and Semi-Natural Woodland and is divided between 5 major woods and several smaller spinneys. The remaining 51 hectares (126 acres) consists of younger plantations of mixed conifer and broadleaved tree species, established as landscape/amenity, noise and pollution belts, often separating major roads, housing and industrial area throughout the Borough.

4.2 The woodlands are a highly valued part of the landscape of the Borough, providing the backdrop for much of the residential and industrial developments of the town as well as creating green corridors adjacent to the extensive road network.

4.3 The original Woodland Grant Scheme commenced in 1996 after detailed consultation with key agencies and has allowed for almost continuous management of the woodland areas in accordance with best silvicultural practices aimed at a) producing quality mixed age stands and b) enhancing the woodland infrastructure to ensure its long term viability.

5. Key Issues

5.1 The areas included within the current programme and those considered for future inclusion are not commercial woodlands but are intrinsic elements of the parks/amenity space that defines the landscape of Redditch and, as such their status is reflected in the management regimes that are not purely based on a potential financial crop yield.

5.2 The management objectives for each of the woodlands or barrier plantation are variable. They focused on the needs of local residents, consideration of conservation best practice or ideal silvicultural management systems all of which require slightly different management techniques in order to achieve the objectives. There are groups of local wardens and other user groups who have an input into what goes on within the woodlands, although all work is under the control of Officers within the Council, and instructed and supervised by the Council's woodland management agent, Pryor & Rickett Silviculture, whilst wildlife considerations are assessed by the Councils Greenspace Development and Bio-diversity Officers.

- 5.3 There is a distinct difference in approach between the plantation woodlands owned by the Council and the designated Semi-Natural Woodlands, due to their national conservation status and their management history. In broad terms, the management approach for each is broadly as follows:

Ancient & Semi-Natural Woodlands (ASNW)

- 5.4 Due to the general dislike by the residents of large-scale clear felling, a variety of uneven aged woodlands management systems have been adopted across all the Semi-Natural Woodland areas, which are focussed on natural seeding and regeneration where possible. Essentially thinning intervention and under storey management varies at a sub-compartment level, and the Council is looking for a range of different structures, canopies and ages to be created within each wood. Tree species diversity is to be maintained when thinning, only selecting for a stem quality once all species represented are retained in broad natural proportions. A mix of approaches to selection on thinning is adopted – sometimes the stands are marked by the Council and their agents, other times selection is undertaken by a contractor with either sample marking or marking of individual guidance. In broad terms the range of non-woodland habitats (rides and glades) is thereby increased. Dead wood, fallen and standing retentions are important from a conservation perspective, as are the retention and enhancement of character and particularly pleasing amenity trees and other amenity features, such as views and internal landscapes. Silvicultural operations are generally suspended during wet weather, and times to avoid school holidays and nesting seasons, often with forwarding (timber extraction) requiring some delay due to ground conditions. Brash is retained in the core of the stands, but cleared (either removed or scattered at designated points) or chipped if it is in close proximity to major paths and tracks. The degree of tidiness is often relative to major user groups' needs but is also considered in terms of the benefits regarding conservation. Timber sales, whilst important, are viewed as a secondary but intrinsic product of the mainstream management activity however, the manner in which timber is presented is nevertheless important to help maximise sales once the other objectives have been delivered.

Plantation Woodlands

- 5.5 Many of these woodlands were established in the 1960's consisting mainly of mixed conifer and broadleaved tree species – many of which are fast growing - for landscape, amenity and noise pollution purposes. Each of these woodlands has its own particular context and the management approach varies with each. In broad terms there are a number of principles that apply across the woodland spectrum. The Council is seeking to develop more diversified and

interesting plantations, with better age-class and vertical canopy structures. Silvicultural interventions and thinning selection focus on increasing the broadleaved component, whilst favouring sub-storey and seedling trees and shrubs to particularly enhance the under-layer. Faster growing species, such as conifer, poplar and sycamore, are selected for removal, as these species will have delivered their short-term objectives, and are in many cases beginning to result in management issues such as becoming potential risks due to proximity to highways, preventing development of nearby slow growing species and becoming potentially unstable due to their poor growth habit. Native shrub and tree species are therefore favoured wherever possible. Timing of operations in the plantations is a little more flexible due to the reduced conservation interests, but work is timed usually to avoid the main bird nesting season, from April to June. The approach to clearance of brash is dependant upon the local conditions and the visual intrusiveness of the brash concerned. In many cases it is cut through and left within the core of a stand but, near major paths, entrances and higher profile viewing sites, the material is often chipped in situ or racked into habitat piles. Brash throughout is generally cut through by chainsaw and left scattered, lying below knee height in general. Once selection for desired future canopy structure has been undertaken, the selection between tree species is undertaken on a silvicultural basis, and trees of better form and vigour are retained, with a view to assisting with reducing the long-term costs of managing the woodlands.

Highway barrier plantations

- 5.6 There is also be a foreseeable increase in demand throughout the Borough to manage via thinning operations the tree lines that border on to the major road network. Many of these were planted in the late 1960's early 1970's now constitute a densely planted maturing tree stock, the canopies of which have the potential to affect both local carriageways and properties. An additional budget requirement is necessary to meet the traffic management cost but, the most economical way for the Council to manage the level of work required on these plantations in volume is to include them within the future Forestry Management Programme and treat them as woodland areas with a potential yield.

Annual Work Programme

- 5.7 The cycle of intervention within the ASNW and plantation woodlands varies on a 4-15 year cycle, depending upon growth and management objectives. The Council, in any one year, aims to have a broadly even level of intervention, which equates to approximately 18-20 hectares of a mixture of silvicultural operations, ranging from coppicing and early thinnings, to mature oak thinnings in any one

year. A flexible approach is required by the successful contractor, understanding the needs and operational requirements for each of these work types. Full-time commitment to the contracts is not required; however, operations are required to be undertaken in a timely and sensitive manner as mentioned above. The work schedule is quoted for on an annual basis due to cost of materials, fuel, labour and wood sale values being heavily affected annually by the current industrial climate. Close consultation with the Council's representatives and Agent is necessary to tailor the work in line with the woodland management requirements and economical considerations. It is anticipated that ordinarily all work will run from September to March and will be contained within the financial year.

- 5.8 Approximately two thirds of the work schedule in the last five year plan was completed, the short fall being due to a combination of the following:
- a) Poor weather conditions
 - b) Lack of availability of suitable specialist contractors
 - c) Access problems
- 5.9 Therefore it is proposed that the work is delivered on a two year basis which will give the flexibility needed to select suitable sites within that timeframe and to seek the necessary external funding whilst giving the flexibility to forward plan should priorities change. The successful tenderer will, subject to satisfactory performance carryout the work over two years with year two rates being subject to negotiation and normal financial adjustments i.e. RPI. It is hoped that a stable, long-term working relationship can be developed with a suitably qualified contracting firm to deliver best value for the woodland management service to Redditch Borough Council.
- 5.10 As well as ensuring that the woodlands are maintained in a sustainable manner it is important that other improvements are incorporated in to the programme. This can be achieved by updating the existing Management Plans to ensure that the overall objectives are consistent with Council policy and those plans are tailored to ensure sites are appropriately managed to enable further Grant Aid applications along with any other potential revenue sources. In order to facilitate the Forestry Commission grants it is important that the long term relationship developed with Pryor & Rickett Silviculture is continued as they are best able to advise on the appropriateness of the work scheduled and the likely funding that can be obtained. All the Forestry Commission grant funding is obtained via Pryor and Rickett who, on the Councils behalf, submit the relevant applications in line with the most beneficial and likely grant/budget bid criteria.

- 5.11 It is also intended that by retaining Pryor and Rickett and ensuring a continuity of service we will be able to develop long term strategies on how to manage and improve the woodlands. In particular we would to seek advice on replanting schemes - bearing in mind the potential for natural regeneration to take place, the existing site species, the need to avoid creating areas of monoculture and the need to create woodland diversity in terms of trees and under storey cover.
- 5.12 The long term strategies will also seek to include interaction with other interested parties to review how the woodlands are utilised in terms of friends groups, schools involvement, interpretation and presentation of material that will be of interest to the general public as well as creating points of interest i.e. woodland sculptures.
- 5.13 It is also intended that a review of access to the woodlands is also undertaken in terms of how the existing footpath networks could be improved, what new access points may potentially be provided and, what improvements can be made to suit the needs of those less able i.e. undertake a disable access audit using the local group.

6. **Other Implications**

- Asset Management - The pro-active rather than reactive management of the woodlands will ensure that major landholdings of RBC are properly maintained and developed with a long term view and, that such maintenance will encourage the routine repair and long term replacement of structures and fixtures which may otherwise be left to decline. These costs may then have to be met via existing budgets or alternatively by the use of Section 106/Capital funds.
- Community Safety - The enhancement programme will aim to address the Councils responsibility with regard to Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. It will also look to improve the car parking areas by increasing the opportunity for passive surveillance to take place.
- Human Resources - The workload associated with the woodland management is currently built in to the duties and responsibilities of

one of the Landscape and Countryside Officers.

- Social Exclusion - The management of the woodlands will, to some extent, improve access for visitors but it is envisaged that a proactive management regime will lead to overall improvement in terms of disabled access and will enable a review of the woodland routes currently accessible by disabled users together with what improvements are potentially required.

7. **Lessons Learnt**

- 7.1 A five year programme is quite inflexible and does not allow for Officers to take a more pragmatic approach to the order in which the sites are done to take advantage of market forces and contractor availability as well as adapting to seasonal and weather conditions.
- 7.2 Officers are able to say from experience, particularly the last five year contract period that the manner in which the work is currently scheduled is too long given the potential alterations that have to be made in allowing for operational issues.
- 7.3 The visual impact of forestry thinning can be very high and it is often perceived as being extreme by the public who are not fully appreciative of how the work is funded and managed. In light of this we would look to provide information and to inform people when possible on the intended work and its aims and objectives. This is particularly relevant where we undertake work in high profile or more sensitive areas where additional consultation may be necessary.

8. **Background Papers**

Woodland management programme and locations/details of the sites.

9. **Consultation**

- 9.1 This report has been prepared in consultation with relevant Borough Council Officers, Heads of Service and Directors.
- 9.2 A site visit was arranged in order to give a general overview of the forestry work which took place on the 14 July and was an open invitation to all Council Members.

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Committee

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10. Author of Report

The author of this report is Carl Walker, Landscape and Countryside Manager, who can be contacted on extension 3421 or at carl.walker@redditchbc.go.uk for more information.

11. Appendices

None.