

WORKSHOPS

The conference was divided into seven workshop groups all of which considered the same five questions.

Question 1

Based on the morning's presentations and your own knowledge and experience :

**Is the forest of sufficient quality to justify special treatment?
Is the forest under sufficient threat to justify special treatment?**

There was general agreement on both parts of this question. The geology, ecology and landscape are all recognised by both professionals and non-specialists as being of special interest, but overall recognition is seen as being necessary.

There is a wide range of threats to this relatively small area, many of them linked to regional population growth.

The Area of Particularly Attractive Countryside (APAC) designation is seen as having been beneficial to the area, but there is uncertainty over its continued existence as a planning policy.

Question 2

What existing or proposed initiatives/developments are you aware of within the broad forest area?

Within each workshop group existing and proposed developments and initiatives were written on post-it notes stuck to a large map of Charnwood Forest and the surrounding areas. The map did not include any suggested boundary. Please note that the following lists have been transcribed directly from the post-it notes and represent the knowledge or perceptions of individual delegates.

Existing
Beacon Hill management
Friends of Holly Hayes Wood (Coalville)
National Forest - new woods – creating and managing - new access - new habitats - farm diversification - <i>not planting</i> trees on prime heathland/meadow sites
Charnwood Reservoir Project (aggregates funded)
Hinckley & Bosworth Green Space Strategy
Community Heritage Initiative – local database recording
Rights of Way Improvement Plan

National economic need for roadstone/construction aggregates
100-200 new houses near Groby
Bagworth Heath Woods/Bagworth New Wood
Thornton Reservoir
Hill Hole Quarry Nature Reserve
Billa Barra Hill
Charnia Research Group
British Geological Survey new geological map
Leicestershire & Rutland Geodiversity Action Plan
Beaumont Leys North housing development
Holly Hayes Biological Records Centre
Ashton Green development
5000 new dwelling units at Birstall
Soar Valley TC&H Dec
Mountsorrel Quarry – landscape, biodiversity, public access, management of Buddon Wood SSSI
Garendon Park Protection Group
Shepshed Countryside Protection Group
300-400 new houses at Shepshed
EMA expansion
Markfield – Charnwood Forest building characteristics
Beacon Hill heathland management
Heathland restoration at Charnwood Lodge NNR and Ulverscroft
Stepping Stones Countryside Management Project
Habitat work around STW Charnwood reservoirs
Natural England JCA targeting for agri-environment schemes
New Charnwood Forest geology/geotourist map and booklet
CSS agreements not getting into HLS or getting alternative funding
Changes in agriculture
Few bridleways in Forest area as a result of Enclosures
Recreational pressures on ecology at Bradgate Country Park
Sign clutter

Proposed
M1 widening including landbridge (wildlife corridor) across M1
Hotel development 2012 (Shepshed)
Housing development in Garendon Park area (2000 houses)
Ulverscroft Priory renovation
National Forest long distance trail
Great Central Railway development – Nottingham/Leicester green corridor
National economic need for roadstone/construction aggregates
Cliffe Hill Quarry development
Land in CSS throughout Charnwood Forest protecting SSSIs, enhancing landscape and biodiversity

Bradgate Park Management Plan
Hinckley & Bosworth Habitat Survey and Biodiversity Plan
Increased level of air traffic
Three Cities growth area
Thurmaston urban extension
Mountsorrel Quarry – quarry extension schemes (5-10 years) - water management opportunities (Swithland Res)
8000 new dwellings east of Loughborough
Development south of Loughborough
Newhurst Quarry landfill
Increased numbers of traveller sites
Nailstone Colliery development – nature park vs waste site
Regionalisation of planning system more threat than opportunity
Rights of Way Improvement Plan proposals for improved access from Leicester towards Loughborough
Grazing Animal Project near Syston
Coalville Sustainable Urban Extension
Light pollution
Bradgate Quarry
Thornton – development of trails/woodland/park
Bardon summit management
National Forest improvements to public access and rights of way – creation of linked rights of way network
History of River Lyn – cultural landscape investigation
Charnwood BC initiative to have their Charnwood Forest area reclassified from APAC to AONB
Pre-Cambrian fossils – proposals to relocate key rock faces of international geological importance
Waste management park south of Shepshed
Geopark?
Swithland Slate Quarry
Charnwood reservoirs – Swithland, Cropston, Blackbrook
Wind energy
New road infrastructure linked to growth around Loughborough
Sheet Hedges Wood woodland management
Natural England revised spatial approach to agri-environment targeting to deliver wide multiple outcomes

Question 3

What are the main issues for the forest over the next 20 years? Are these the ones highlighted by speakers or are there others?

The list of issues below has been compiled from the workshop flipcharts and grouped into broad topic areas as far as possible. There is clearly some overlap with Question 2.

Agriculture

Agricultural change/diversification
Loss of farm dwellings
Declining local skills
Possible question mark over local farming viability
Poorly managed set-aside
Large sheds and livery yards on small holdings
Biofuels
Loss of drystone walls
Changing crops linked to climate change
End of subsidy? (2013)

Aggregates

Nearest location to SE/Olympics for aggregates
Could quarries be included within a designated Charnwood Forest?

National Forest

Increased tree planting in some areas
Increased tourism (also linked to geological interest and potential Geopark) – need for accommodation of all types

Growth points/planning

Loss of APAC protection after 2009
Residential development around area linked to 3 cities new growth point
Danger of Forest being ringed by joined-up settlements
Different approaches in different places
Development pressures/mixed use pressures/traffic pressures
Gentrification of rural housing stock
Uncertainty over role of Regional Park – what is it? does it give protection?
Design of development within the Forest
Green Infrastructure opportunities

Potential new business opportunities
Housing infill in villages/growth of villages
Locals being priced out of housing market – any form of designation could raise house prices
How much more growth can Charnwood take without losing its special nature?
Aspirations for access to greenspace close to where people live

Land management

No overall plan for management
Different approaches in different places
Very few bridleways within the Forest
Over-used recreational sites
Increased recreational use/facilities as a result of increased population

Landscape

Declining tranquillity
Declining dark skies
Importance of views out of the Forest and of the Forest from a distance
Impacts of renewable energy – wind/biofuels

Ecology/biodiversity

Need for preservation of existing biodiversity
Eutrophication of aquatic habitats
Fragmentation of habitats
Water quality impacts from increased areas of hardstanding associated with recreational facilities

Transport

M1 widening
Increased traffic through the Forest resulting from surrounding development
Increased recreational traffic ditto

Other

Climate change
Politics

Question 4

What initiatives might be needed to address these issues?

As with Question 3 the list below has been compiled from the workshop flipcharts and grouped into broad topic areas as far as possible. There is clearly some overlap with Question 5.

Agriculture

Look at areas currently not supported by agri-environment schemes and identify potential funding

Aggregates

Re-open limited Swithland slate operation to maintain vernacular style

Better access to funding eg from aggregates – retain money (capital and revenue) within the county

Growth points/planning

Opportunity to agree Local Development Frameworks (Charnwood BC, Hinckley & Bosworth BC, North West Leicestershire DC)

Maintain existing controls over aggregate industry

Undefined nature of Regional Park presents opportunity to develop unique proposal

Need for control of design of development within the Forest through LDFs, possible cross-boundary Special Planning Documents (SPDs), revised Village Design Statements

3 Cities could help the Forest if urban extensions reduce building demand elsewhere

Need to be protectionist to minimise impacts in key areas and pro-active elsewhere

Possible 'roof tax' or equivalent to raise funds for Forest

Land management

Need for more public rights of way to create circular paths

Additional staffing to manage recreational use of land

Possibility of National Forest helping to relieve recreational pressures on Charnwood

Need for management, particularly grazing

Possible to enhance water power?

Cohesive management plan for the Forest

Landscape

Need for identity to be formalised
Need to preserve undeveloped corridors in/out/through the Forest

Geology/ecology/biodiversity

Green bridges over widened M1
Improve green links between areas
Build on existing biodiversity and geodiversity
Re-linking fragmented habitats
Consider Geopark designation (includes economic aspect)

Transport

20mph limit quiet lanes
Revitalised rail links – Ivanhoe?
Co-ordinated public transport
Need for screening of motorway corridor

Education

Education important to improve understanding of rural environment
Use the media
Greater promotion of RIGS sites to schools

Tourism

What type? What are its limits? Park and rides + limited car access?
Alternative recreational sites on Forest periphery

General

Need to define the Charnwood Forest area
Need to define the timescale – long-term
Need to work with the economics of the area and with landowners,
and therefore objectives must be multi-purpose
Need for a unified partnership approach which bridges district
boundaries
Need for a focussed approach with clear leadership and appropriate
'champions'
Need for a working group based around district reps + specialists
Need for 'branding'/defining the area's identity
Need for funding to take forward

Question 5

What does the workshop group see as the preferred future direction for the forest?

Each workshop group was asked to try to reach some broad conclusions which the workshop facilitators presented very briefly to the conference in a feedback session.

Group GW

Need for an overall co-ordinated long term plan with support by all concerned. Need for convergence among Local Development Frameworks. Option for a Regional Park to be an expanded National Forest?

The overall plan would contain :-

- a green transport plan
- a tourism plan
- an ecology/geology conservation plan
- an economic plan
- an agricultural and diversification plan

This would be funded by :-

- agri-environment schemes/EWGS
- aggregates funding directed more to local area
- 3 cities?
- local planning authorities?

and supported by making local information readily available.

A new partnership is needed starting from conference day.

Group RM

Charnwood Forest is and should remain a working landscape.

The area needs to be defined.

Need for a robust strategy to build on the best of Charnwood Forest, produced by the three districts and led by the County Council.

Need to produce an identifiable organisation, working with partners, that enables resources to come in and things to happen.

Possibly a Regional Park, but unsure.

Something needs to happen quickly.

Group TP

Need to define and agree a Charnwood Forest boundary at an early stage.

Need to establish a management body.

Need for districts to develop common planning policies for Charnwood Forest.

Uncertainty as to whether a Regional Park would provide protection for the Forest. A combination of a Geopark and a single cross-boundary SPD should be considered.

Need to define key corridors in/out/through the Forest and be aware of the dangers of settlement coalescence around it.

Group KD

Planning policy together with a comprehensive management plan.

Group PW

A combination of policy through LDDs and initiatives through Local Area Agreements and LSPs.

Badging the area.

A project which includes local planning authorities, Local Area Agreements, landowners, the voluntary sector, transport authorities, and other agencies working together through goodwill, planning policy and a shared love for the area.

Group CH

Some sort of strategy is needed and someone needs to take a lead, but not enough is known about the implications of a Regional Park. Whatever route is taken it must encompass all aspects of life in the area and not just be about planning.

The interaction of the area with the National Forest needs to be considered.

There is a need to map baseline data.

The conference delegates do not represent the absolute audience and there is a need for wider communication.

Need to get in 'front-loading' through LDFs and green infrastructure

Group DL/AC

LDFs will be developed over next year so any influencing/development of Charnwood policies needs to happen quickly.

Green Infrastructure Strategy.

Geopark, World Heritage Site.

Links with Soar Valley/Watermead Park

Need to maintain the landscape through sustainable farming.



Group KD in action

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION

QUESTION SESSION 1

Simon Evans (NFC) pointed out that the National Forest was written into national planning policy guidance through PPG7, so those parts of Charnwood Forest that fall within the National Forest are afforded some degree of protection through this. In addition the National Forest Strategy is Government endorsed and also gets national recognition from this process.

Christine Radford (Shepshed TC) was concerned about the need to safeguard Garendon Park which appeared to be shown as a growth point option within the draft Regional Plan.

Lonek Wojtulewicz (LCC) responded that when it came to taking decisions at a more detailed level this would have to be taken into account.

David Sprason CC (LCC) raised the issue of waste disposal pressures.

Lonek Wojtulewicz (LCC) explained that the Bradgate landfill site was coming towards the end of its active life, although there is a further possible site within Charnwood Forest. However, most of the county's waste is dealt with outside the county boundary.

David Sprason CC (LCC) was also concerned that there will be increased funding pressure as Government funding reduces due to Lottery monies going into the 2012 Olympics rather than to environmental projects.

Heather Broughton (LCC) said that this was true and that there would be a need to be smarter and more creative in bidding for funding.

Clifford Jones (Friends of CF) asked what is the defined boundary of Charnwood Forest. Among the district councils only Charnwood's Local Plan indicates a Forest boundary. The block map given in the draft Regional Plan omits the Coalville and Shepshed areas from the Forest.

Lonek Wojtulewicz (LCC) responded that the Charnwood Forest area shown in the Structure Plan had always been defined in a very generalised way. The conference was part of the process needed to agree a common boundary.

Tony Squires pointed out that for the purposes of his presentation he had taken an area of 41.7 square miles based on the Loughborough Naturalists' Club's work in the 1970s.

Mr Snartt CC (LCC) asked how the outcomes of the conference could feed into the Regional Spatial Strategy and the emerging Local Development Frameworks. If the proposals in the draft Regional Plan were accepted by the EIP the Regional Park policy would need to be picked up through the LDFs. The new planning White Paper is strong on the need for cross-boundary co-operation on issues such as this

Mr Snartt CC (LCC) also asked if farm numbers within Charnwood Forest have declined.

Julia Hawley (ADAS) said that she could provide figures on this. Whilst the number of people making their living from farming had declined, in some areas the actual number of farm holdings was increasing because of hobby farmers.

Paul Tame (NFU) asked what proportion of Tony Squires' 41.7 square miles fell within the National Forest.

Tony Squires estimated that it was approximately one-third. (NOTE : this is an underestimate based on a misunderstanding of the question and the true proportion is closer to two-thirds.)

QUESTION SESSION 2

Dr Keith Ambrose (BGS) commented that a lot had been said about biodiversity but nothing about geodiversity. The Pre-Cambrian rocks of Charnwood are very important. There is a Leicestershire and Rutland Geodiversity Action Plan and the BGS has just published a Charnwood Forest geological map with the boundary of the area based on the extent of the Pre- Cambrian rocks.

Graham Stocks (CPRE) raised the England Rural Development Programme 2nd tranche.

Geoff Sansome (NE) responded that the new programme co-incides with the Environmental Stewardship review. There will be a change to agri-environment targeting to look at this in more spatial terms. Within Leicestershire this is likely to bring a focus on the Charnwood Forest area because of its high concentration of SSSIs, ASNWs, etc.

Graham Stocks (CPRE) was concerned that sustainability had not been mentioned much and that with 'peak oil' expected to be

reached in 2012, there was a need to consider the implications of renewable energy.

Geoff Sansome (NE) responded that the ERDP included biocrops and that there would be a need to strike a delicate balance between renewable energy demands and landscape issues.

Andrew Shirley (CL&BA) asked what would be the 'additionality' provided by a Regional Park. How would it help the Charnwood Forest area socially and economically? What was its actual function? The River Nene Regional Park which had been cited as an example is still very much in its infancy. He was not sure that its vision was clear, nor what it would really deliver. There was a danger of too much protection and too little pro-action.

Ernie White (Chair) said that this was a good question, particularly as the potential Regional Park area covers a number of districts.

Peter Williams (LCC) explained that the Examination In Public of the Regional Plan had raised the same question last week, asking why the Plan did not include more detail. The County Council and the Regional Assembly considered that the policy was a 'call to arms' for action through local partnerships. This was the main function; too much prescription would run a danger of restricting appropriate local solutions to local problems and opportunities for such important areas.

Andrew Shirley (CL&BA) pointed out that inclusion in the Regional Plan did not mean that the Regional Park had to happen.

Dr Roy Clements (RIGS Group) reiterated the importance of Charnwood Forest's geology. It is of national and international importance, potentially a World Heritage Site, or at least a National Geopark. He felt that in considering a Regional Park the conference was setting its sights too low

Geoff Sansome (NE) felt that there were lessons to be learned from the Abberley and Malvern Hills Geopark, particularly in terms of turning geological assets into economic opportunities.

CLOSING REMARKS

Following the feedback from each workshop group by the workshop facilitators, a further question was taken.

A delegate asked for confirmation that the Regional Plan was what was driving the conference and associated discussions.

Peter Williams (LCC) answered that we are faced with the loss of the Structure Plan policy next year and changed Government policy on protection for non-national designations means that 'APAC' policies are no longer acceptable. In the light of this, the County Council considered it important to have a policy in the Regional Spatial Strategy as 'a peg to hang something on' which can be developed locally. The driving force has to be what is needed and appropriate locally. That has been recognised regionally, hence the non-prescriptive nature of the policy.

Ernie White then brought the conference to a close, thanking the speakers and organisers and concluding,

'I'd like to say thank-you very much for giving so freely of your time today. As I said in my introduction, today's conference is just a starting point. County Council officers will be preparing a summary of today's proceedings, which will be circulated to you in due course and also be made available to the local press.

As you will have picked-up from today's discussions, certain themes, ways forward etc appear to be developing. These give us a useful starting point for further, more detailed consultations with all who have an interest in Charnwood Forest's future. I don't want to prejudge just how long these consultations will take or what their conclusions will be. However, of one thing I'm confident, when it comes to helping plan the future of the Charnwood Forest, we will all be able to say that full consideration was given to it. '