

WOODLANDS STRATEGY

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides Members with details of the draft Woodlands Strategy produced for the management and development of the Council's Woodlands areas.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The attached Appendix A provides details of proposed works, plans and initiatives related to the management and development of the Council's Woodlands areas. These are primarily Hockley Woods, Grove Woods, Kingley Woods and Betts Wood and the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park.

3 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 The effective management and promotion of the Council's Woodlands areas will have a positive impact on the environmental standards that exist within the District.

4 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Should the application for the Environmental Liaison Officer be successful, which would in effect bring in around £100,000 of resource then funding for the I.T. and office furniture would become a priority and therefore need to be identified within the core budget strategy.
There is no specific funding available for new signage in 2003/04 other than what may be supported from external funding. This will need to be taken into account in developing the budget for 2004/05. However this programme may need to be accelerated if the application for the Environmental Liaison Officer is successful.

5 RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**
- (1) That Members consider the information contained within the Draft Woodlands Strategy and give their views on the various proposed initiatives within this document.

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- (2) That the Community Services Committee be recommended to the adoption of the Action Plan.
 - (3) That officers report back with the finalised Woodlands Grant Scheme documents.
 - (4) That progress reports on the Action Plan be brought back to this Committee annually. (CD(F&ES))

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Background Papers:

None

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APPENDIX A

DRAFT WOODLANDS STRATEGY.

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this document is to provide an overview of the areas of Woodlands that are managed by the District Council, what has been achieved in recent years and the programme of works and initiatives that will continue to develop the Woodlands in the future.

It also recognises the importance of the outside organisations, with whom the Council has formed partnerships on both a formal and informal basis. These have included primarily the Forestry Authority and English Nature, in addition to a number of other local, regional and national bodies. These organisations have provided considerable assistance by way of grant funding, but also by offering valuable and professional support and advice on many occasions.

The future development of the Woodlands is strongly guided by the new five year Woodland Management Plan, currently being formulated with the Forestry Authority and English Nature. Both these plans are now at an advanced stage, with final consultation due to take place in the very near future, prior to the agreement of formal contracts with both bodies.

The District Council's Corporate Plan has six strategic objectives identified for the Authority. The future development of the Woodlands will contribute to a number of these objectives, primarily:

- To improve the quality of life for people within our District.
- To promote a green and sustainable environment.
- To maintain and enhance our local heritage and culture.

2. WOODLANDS AREAS

The Woodland areas that are relevant to this document are as follows.

Grove woods

Grove Woods is located between Rayleigh and Eastwood, forming a haven for both people and wildlife. The trees and plants are a mixture of common hedgerow plants and exotic garden plants, including oak, hawthorn, stitchwort, campion, golden rod, snowberries and fruit trees. The woods can be reached from Grove Road or Connaught Road in Rayleigh and also include a car park and an established network of paths.

Kingley Wood

Kingley Wood stands on a steep hill slope beside the A127 and is visible from several kilometres as you approach Rayleigh from London. This small wood is the only surviving ancient wood in Rayleigh and it has a rich and varied wildlife. At the crest of the hill are two giant sweet chestnut trees, with the lower and middle slopes dominated by oak and hornbeam, in addition to the presence of holly, hazel and elm. The wood can be approached on foot from Western Road, Hollytree Gardens or Weir Farm Road.

Betts Wood

Betts Wood is an 8 acre ancient semi-natural woodland incorporating predominantly hornbeam coppice and oak standard, but also has a rich ground flora with areas of bluebell. It is located adjacent to Hockley Community Centre and is used by local residents to access the adjacent school and as a green open space resource.

Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park

The Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park is being created on the agricultural Blatches Farm site, ownership of which recently transferred to Rochford District Council from Essex County Council. The site is a 100 acre piece of land running along the Roach Valley from Gusted Hall Woods in the West, to the Cherry Orchard Link Road, the B1013 in the East. The site is an attractive shallow valley, with a plateau area towards the South East end and, in the past, has been managed for intensive arable agriculture.

The development of the Country Park will be carried out in a series of phases, which commenced last year, and will continue for the next three to four years.

3. PREVIOUS DEVELOPMENTS

The Council has had a Woodland Grant Scheme and associated felling licences from the Forestry Authority for the last ten years and a grant from English Nature for the last eight years. The Forestry Authority Grant applies to all four of the woodland areas, whereas the English Nature Grant is applicable only to Hockley Woods.

Detailed below are some of the more significant works and developments that have taken place:

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- Completion of the surfacing of the permissive horse route in Hockley Woods.
 - Completion of the two circular way-marked routes in Hockley and Grove Woods, which are accessible by both able bodied and those with mobility problems.
 - The reinstatement of all woodland ponds.
 - Resurfaced and fenced the main works compound of Hockley Woods.
 - Established linked-up system of wide-ride management regimes, which has resulted in the spread of the heath fritillary to all recently coppiced blocks, making Hockley Woods one of the largest and most important sites in the U.K.
 - The first Local Authority to achieve an economic return on coppice management, primarily from the sale of logs. Sales are in the region of £5-7,000 per year.
 - Purchased specialist log conversion equipment in order to make this coppicing viable.

4 RESOURCES

The Council has its own Woodlands Section that is positioned within the Contracted Services Division. This is led by the Woodland and Environmental Specialist, Patrick McKenna, who is supported by a full time Woodlands Supervisor and a full time Woodlands Assistant, both of whom are based in Hockley Woods.

The section is also supported by an unemployment initiative, whereby there is a group of currently unemployed who are based in Hockley Woods, with a supervisor, who assists the Specialist Woodlands staff in some of the day to day tasks. However, although this Group is extremely useful to the service, its numbers can vary and they cannot carry out many specialist works that our own trained staff undertake.

As this human resource is relatively small, then external contractors have to be employed to undertake various arboricultural works on a regular basis.

In addition to the Council's own revenue budget, the Section has been successful in obtaining external funding. This has come from a number of different sources and is to be pursued further in the future.

- Forestry Authority - 5 year Woodland Grant Scheme – grant of £4,500 per annum for 5 years.
- English Nature - 5 year Species Protection Grant – grant of £4,500 per annum for 5 years.
- Forestry Authority Jigsaw Grant - £102,000.
(Cherry Orchard)
- Thames Gateway Grant - £50,000.
(Cherry Orchard Lake and Arboretum)
- Farm Woodland Premiership Scheme - £3,600 per year for 15 years.
(Cherry Orchard)
- Community Woodland Supplement – approximately £11,400.
(Cherry Orchard)

In respect of the Cherry Orchard Jubilee County Park, it has been identified that a

programme of maintenance will be necessary and therefore a revenue resource of £20,000 has already been identified in the Council's budget for 2003/4. It is considered that the most productive use of this revenue budget would be to fund a new specific post within the Woodlands Section, that although based at Hockley Woods, would have the primary responsibility for the maintenance of the country park. Operating in this way would provide the Woodlands Section with greater direct control, rather than utilising a variety of external contractors which could prove more expensive and still involve an internal resource in supervising and authorising their work. It would also start to address the limited human resources available in the Section and assist in cover for staff holidays etc. enabling certain works to continue. As a result of the Civil Aviation Authority's comments with regard to the lake, then this post could also take responsibility for the monitoring of bird numbers agreed with this organisation.

In conjunction with the works / initiatives contained within this Strategy, this would have a significant impact on the level of responsibilities of the Woodlands and Environmental Specialist, who also currently manages the Council's Tree Preservation Orders and provides advice to the Council's Building Control Section on environmental issues.

For these initiatives to be implemented and operated efficiently, extra technically qualified resource would need to be identified, such as an Arboricultural Officer, who could assist in dealing with the volume of technical advice and work that is required. At present an external contractor has been used temporarily to carry out many of the site visits and assessments in relation to TPO enquiries. However there will still be input into these assessments and the final decisions from the Woodlands and Environmental Specialist.

Equally if the application for the Environmental Liaison Officer were to be successful (detailed in section 7) then whilst this is additional resource, it would also increase the overall activity and range of work undertaken by this Section. At present the Woodlands and Environmental Specialist is the only Officer, with the appropriate technical knowledge, to undertake this nature of work.

5 WOODLANDS GRANT SCHEMES

As previously mentioned, the Woodlands and Environmental Specialist is currently working in conjunction with both the Forestry Authority and English Nature, to secure grants for further five year management plans for the four woodlands areas.

Recent negotiations with these bodies have resulted in a series of provisional documents being produced in the form of grant based five year work programmes. These work programmes are based on the Woodland Grant Scheme and Woodland Improvement Scheme of the Forestry Authority and the Species Recovery Programme of English Nature, linked to flagship species of the Bio-Diversity Action Plan.

Works will include:

- The maintenance and provision of public access and information.
- Wide-ride management regimes and hornbeam coppicing to facilitate heath fritillary breeding and dispersal.
- Stored coppiced rotation to improve silvicultural quality and the generation of timber related income from timber and timber products.

These documents are at present with the respective organisations, who are now considering the provision of grant aid towards the works highlighted each year, for a five year period. If successful, the grant aid for these two projects would total approximately £11,000 per year for the five year period.

The outline contract documents will be presented to Members for their approval once they have been finalised and suitably formatted.

Research and consideration is also to be given to the opportunities that may be available for funding via the Heritage Lottery Fund's Public Parks Initiative, with particular regard to the expansion of the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park.

6 CHERRY ORCHARD JUBILEE COUNTRY PARK

Despite this winter's adverse weather conditions, significant progress has been made in the various works included within the initial phases of the creation of the country park. This has involved significant resource from both external contractors and utilising our the Council's Specialist Woodlands staff.

Works Carried Out

- The planting of approximately 28,000 trees in six planting blocks.
- The near completion of fencing works.
- Cutback of vegetation.
- Ditching works.
- Extensive ground preparation works.
- Tree condition survey, bat survey, water vole survey and land level survey.
- The near completion of bridleway construction.

Current / Imminent Works

- Completion of the bridleways.
- Completion of the fencing works.
- Further ground preparation.
- Construction of the lake.
- Creation of the arboretum.
- Creation of the orchard.

Future Phases to Include

- Benches/Seating.
- Car Park.
- Toilets.
- Picnic Area.
- Information Boards.

A consideration is also taking place around the possible future expansion of the country park, both westwards to Edward Hall Park and eastwards to the Cherry Orchard Link Road. Specific details on this will be included within the Local Plan.

7 MARKETING & EDUCATION

From the information detailed about the individual areas, it can be seen that the District has an impressive portfolio of woodland areas. In order to maximise the value of these areas to the local community, there needs to be in place effective processes and information that can promote public awareness of the facilities and also provide an educational service, which cannot be achieved at present with the resource available. For these purposes the following initiatives are proposed.

Environmental Liaison Officer

A grant application has been put together, but not yet submitted, to English Nature for an Environmental Liaison Officer to be based at Hockley Woods. If this application was to be successful, the grant would cover all staff costs of the post for five years, except accommodation and equipment. There is already available space within the portacabin at Hockley Woods that was purchased last year and therefore this would just leave resource to be found for some basic office furniture and the installation of appropriate I.T. The estimated cost for this provision is in the region of £5-6,000.

Any successful bid would have an outline contract document between the Authority and English Nature and this would be presented to Members for their approval before any final agreement.

This post would be able to provide guided walks, talks, education and other information for Hockley Woods and also could be utilised, where appropriate, in the promotion of the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park, without getting caught up with carrying out the manual works in which the other Woodlands staff are involved.

Signage

At present the signage at the four woodland areas has been in place for approximately eight years and is of a fairly basic nature and ideally in need of replacement and upgrading. As part of the new five year Woodlands Grant Schemes in respect of promoting access to and usage of these areas, new signage, particularly to the entrances to the areas would be required. These would contain not only the name of the woodland but also a plan of the area, its walks and other

relevant information. This would also greatly benefit the work carried out by the Education Liaison Officer, if this post were to come to fruition. The estimated cost of this signage is in the region of £6,000.

Leaflets

The Council currently has information leaflets on each of the woodlands areas with the exception of Betts Wood. These were produced nearly ten years ago and as the stock is now very depleted, they would need to be replaced and revamped to reflect their current status. Again these leaflets would be an essential requirement if the Council secured the Education Liaison Officer Grant, as they would be used extensively for the guided walks and educational walks and visits that would take place.

Events

Within the Leisure Contract, Holmes Place have allocated £25,000 per annum towards the staging of various events, either at the facilities themselves or around the District. Currently one of the suggestions is a “Living Land” event. This could be a week long event held either in Summer or Autumn, to promote the rural heritage of the District and educate residents and visitors as to the leisure benefits of having the countryside on their doorstep. Partners could include the PCT / Health Promotion Unit, Ramblers, Tidy Britain Group, Pubs and would include the woodlands unit and playspaces. The intention would be to certainly link in Hockley Woods and the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park but possibly the other woodland areas too.

Within this strategy, there would also be significant scope to extend the working links with the Council’s Leisure Section. This could be by way of a Healthy Living aspect in terms of general leisure pursuits and also by opportunities within the area of Arts Development in utilising the Woodlands facilities for various projects.

Practical examples of this joint working have already commenced and could be developed further in the future. The Sports Development Officer has been staging a programme of health walks as part of the Walking the Way for Health Initiative, promoted by the P.C.T., the Countryside Agency and the British Heart Foundation.

The Arts Development Officer has arranged an event titled “Whispers in the Woods” to be staged in Hockley Woods in April. This is a three day programme of activities for children covering drama, music and arts and crafts, all with particular attention to the Woodlands environment.

8 KEY ACTIONS

Action	<u>Benefits</u>	<u>Potential Timescales</u>
Obtaining Forestry Authority Woodland Grant Scheme.	Assist in the development and funding of an effective management plan for	Spring 2003 through to Spring 2008.

	the long term protection of the Council's four woodland areas.	
Obtaining English Nature Woodland Grant Scheme.	Assist in the development and funding of an effective management plan for the long term protection of Hockley Woods and in particular, the coppicing and protection of key species.	Spring 2003 through to Spring 2008.
Continued development of Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park.	The creation of a new country park facility that would provide potential benefit not only to all residents of the District but also to schools and visitors to the District.	Phased works ongoing up to 2006.
Expansion of the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park.	To increase the extent and accessibility to the country park and increase the overall benefit.	2004 onwards, depending on Local Plan progress and land assembly progress.
Creation of new post from revenue budget for maintenance of Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park.	To effectively manage, develop and maintain the country park facility.	Spring 2003 onwards.
Explore possibilities of securing key woodland areas by use of trust ownership.	Ensure current use of these areas would continue.	Initial investigations to take place during 2003/04.
New signage at all four woodlands areas.	Improve the prominence of the information relating to each of the woodlands facilities.	2003/04.
Production of new woodlands leaflets.	Increase public awareness and provide an educational resource.	Spring 2003 and restock as and when required.

Submit grant application for Education Liaison Officer Post to English Nature.	A grant funded post that would be able to have a significant influence on the promotion of the Council's woodlands within the local community.	To submit application as soon as possible with post to be funded for five years.
To submit application for Kingley, Betts and Grove Woods to be allocated local nature reserve status.	Would reflect their ecological and community value and would mean there would be more nature reserves within this District than any other in the County.	As soon as practicably possible.

9 SUMMARY

This strategy provides an up to date analysis of the current situation regarding the Woodlands section of the Council and its associated facilities. It also provides a table of key actions and initiatives that it is considered will enable benefits of the District's Woodland areas to be maximised, maintained and further developed for the next five years.

These key actions will provide the basis to achieve the following overarching objectives:

- The continued management and development of the Council's four woodlands within the structure of the five year Woodlands Grant Schemes from English Nature and the Forestry Authority.
- To continue to maintain Kingley, Betts and Grove Woods to their current standard as a valuable local scale resource but also to apply for them to be allocated Local Nature Reserve status.
- To continue to develop Hockley Woods and Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park, in a manner that enables them to become a regional resource for the South East of the county. This would hinge on the linking of the two areas by way of the footpath network but also with the expansion of Cherry Orchard from the B1013 to abutting Edwards Hall Wood.
- The completion of the planned phased works at Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park and then to effectively promote and develop the facility as an asset to the local community.

To provide an educational and informative resource to all sections of the Community, on the benefits of and facilities contained within, the Council's Woodlands areas thus encouraging their usage and accessibility.