

Cabinet – 22 March 2006

Forest of Mercia

Portfolio: Councillor Adrian Andrew, Regeneration

Service Area: Environmental Regeneration

Wards: Potentially all wards but particularly those in the east of borough which fall within the Forest of Mercia boundary (ie Brownhills, Aldridge North & Walsall Wood, Blakenall, Bloxwich East, Bloxwich West, Pelsall, Rushall/Shelfield, Birchills/Leamore, Aldridge Central & South, Streetly, Paddock, Short Heath, Pheasey Park Farm, Palfrey, St. Matthews).

Forward Plan: Yes

Summary of report

One of Walsall Council's key corporate vision priorities is to create a clean and green borough. For over 15 years the Forest of Mercia (FoM) has been working in partnership with the Council making the borough a greener place through tree planting, open space management and involvement by local communities. Renewing this partnership for a further five years would continue this work and further the Council's ambitions to create a greener borough.

The Forest of Mercia is one of 12 Community Forests established in the UK in 1990 to provide woodland-based recreation on the edge of large conurbations. A local plan showing the Forest of Mercia's boundary with Walsall is attached as Appendix A. Walsall Council has been one of the project's funding partners from its outset and the purpose of this report is to seek Cabinet approval for continuation of this financial support. This report details the benefits to the Council from its partnership with the Forest of Mercia and recommends that funding is continued. The report also recommends priority work for inclusion in a new service level agreement.

A cabinet report has been submitted because of the recommendations to enter into a contract with an outside organisation for 5 years and because of the need to nominate elected members to serve on the Forest of Mercia Members' Advisory Group.

Recommendations

- (1) That approval is given to enter into a new Memorandum of Agreement for the continued funding of the Forest of Mercia for 5 years until 31st March 2012.

- (2) That officers be authorised to negotiate a Service Level Agreement between the Council and the Forest of Mercia, in accordance with the proposals set out in this report.
- (3) That Council be recommended to nominate three elected members to represent the Council on the Forest of Mercia Members' Advisory Group

Resource and legal considerations

The funding support would require £16,700 per year for the next 5 years, with an amount added for inflation in years 2-5. Funding was previously approved the Council and has been met from within the budget of Environmental Regeneration. Subject to Cabinet's approval, funding will continue to be provided either from within the existing budget or from new sources if opportunities arise.

Entering into agreement with the Forest of Mercia will commit the Council to a legally binding agreement for five years.

Citizen impact

The work of the Forest of Mercia in relation to environmental improvement and community involvement has a positive citizen impact. The Forest of Mercia has always facilitated community involvement. For example, in 2004/5, 678 people were involved in organised walks and 25 local people have been trained to lead such walks. Local people have also been involved in collecting tree and wildflower seed for planting in new woodlands.

Community safety

Environmental improvements, in consultation with the local community, have positive community safety benefits. For example, tree planting schemes have involved people from local communities in thousands of days voluntary effort. In addition, since 2004, two teams were set up to provide training in land management industries for pupils excluded from mainstream school.

Environmental impact

The Forest of Mercia is one of 12 Community Forests set up by the Countryside Commission and the Forestry Commission in 1990 to establish woodland for recreation and economic benefits on the edge of large urban areas.

The designated boundary covers some 92 square miles and extends northwards from land in the east of the borough as far as the southern edge of Cannock Chase. A plan of the boundary is appended to this report.

The Forest of Mercia is jointly funded by the Forestry Commission, Staffordshire County, Cannock Chase District, Lichfield District, South Staffordshire District and Walsall Councils.

In addition to the projects described above, over the years the Forest of Mercia has undertaken the following activities:

- Planting new woodland. (In the last five years 255 hectares has been planted. In Walsall sites include: Grange Farm, Ryder's Mere and Bentley Lane.)
- Managed existing woodland. (In the last five years 234 hectares has been brought under management. In Walsall sites managed include: Potters Wood, Black Cock Farm, Rough Wood, Sneyd Reservoir and Cuckoo's Nook and the Dingle.)
- Involvement in creating, managing and improving rights of way and public access to the countryside. This involved stile repairs, removal of fly-tipping, strimming of overgrown vegetation and installation of way-markers on strategic routes. In the last five years 99 kilometres of footpath routes have been restored, upgraded or created.
- Overseeing the Walsall Free Trees scheme which contributed 3,000 new trees to the borough over a 5 year period.
- Providing work experience in land management for pupils in secondary schools for up to 20 pupils.
- Fostered good relationships with local landowners and farmers to implement landscape improvement schemes.
- Environmental education projects. For example, the RELEAF Project involved 20 local schools collecting tree seed for germination and woodland planting.
- Established the Forest Innovation Centre at Chasewater.
- Replanting and managing the Millennium Forest.

Advantages in continuing to support to the Forest of Mercia include:

- Securing woodland planting, management and public access benefits which fit in with the Council's own objectives.
- Unlocking funding for projects in the Borough to which the Council does not have access.
- Establishing new partnerships in implementing Local Area Agreements.
- Continuing to build partnerships with neighbouring authorities.
- Reaching communities which the Council may not normally engage with effectively.
- Providing volunteers to create and manage the forest area.
- Partnership working with neighbouring local authorities through the Forest of Mercia.
- Helping to implement regional planning guidance.

Performance and risk management issues

The council is represented on the Forest of Mercia's Chief Officer Group and the Members' Advisory Group which oversee the running of the project. It is possible that these two groups will be combined in the future.

There would be a financial commitment for the council to fund this project for the five year duration of the agreement.

The original purpose of the Forest of Mercia was to establish and maintain woodland and tree planting and to secure community access to new areas. Encouraging timber-based business was also a key purpose. Over the years the project has been established, the opportunities for new planting have become more limited and the closure of the Woodland Grant Scheme in 2004 has forced the project to review its role and remit. The current funding agreement has expired and the Council has been asked to consider putting in place a new memorandum of agreement, together with the other public sector funding partners.

As such, it is proposed to negotiate a new service level agreement which contains the following activities.

- Carrying out tree and woodland planting.
- Undertaking woodland management works.
- Participating in the Council's Environment Forum.
- Carrying out work to establish, improve and maintain public rights of way.
- Facilitating the implementation of habitat management and creation schemes.

The exact targets would be discussed with the Forest of Mercia. It is intended to build in some flexibility to allow additional projects to be undertaken when the need arises.

These projects would fit in with the following strategic objectives:

- Local Area Agreement.
- Biodiversity Enhancement Area.

In addition, partnership with the Forest of Mercia would help the Council to comply with the Audit Commission key lines of enquiry for the natural environment.

Equality implications

The Forest of Mercia is committed to equal opportunities and the projects they deliver benefit the whole community

Consultation

Discussions with the Forest of Mercia and partner local authorities have been undertaken.

Vision 2008

The main impact of the Forest of Mercia is to help in **creating a cleaner and greener borough**. The project's work in encouraging innovation and business development in the forestry and wood working sector helps in **strengthening the local economy**. The involvement of the public in many of its project contributes to **listening to what local people want**, indirectly, the operation of the Forest of Mercia is likely to make people feel **safer and more secure** by involving them in environmental improvement projects which affect their communities.

Background papers

All published.

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Signed:



Executive Director:
T Johnson

Date: 10.03.06

Signed:



Portfolio Holder:
Councillor A Andrew

Date: 10.03.06

Appendix A – Forest of Mercia Boundary within Walsall

