

CHARNWOOD FOREST REGIONAL PARK STAKEHOLDER FORUM

Wednesday 30th March 2022

Notes

In person event hosted by Leicestershire County Council at County Hall.

47 people attended (with 8 last minute apologies due to positive Covid tests) and the focus was on work of the Charnwood Forest Regional Park Board.

Presentation – Building a UNESCO Global Geopark in Charnwood Forest

Dr Jack Matthews – Charnwood Forest Geoheritage Conservation and Interpretation Officer - gave a brief explanation of the geological timeline, map, internationally significant fossils and how the geology of Charnwood Forest can be seen in the built heritage locally and across the UK. Introducing the aspiration for the area to become a UNESCO Global Geopark we saw examples of other Geoparks around the world that demonstrate the opportunity to link the geology, history, architecture, art, culture and more. Our approach will be a holistic one where we will celebrate the honeypot sites but inspire people to visit other locations – telling their own chapter and their place in the bigger story of Charnwood.

The international profile of the area is already being raised by our involvement with international committees for Geofood and 3GE Trekking and Climbing in Geoparks ; a piece of Markfieldite from Charnwood has just gone on display in the Wall of Geoparks in Luxembourg; and the launch next month of a sistership with Discovery Geopark in Newfoundland.

New collaborations include Oxford University Museum of Natural Sciences (specimens); researchers at Loughborough University (wellbeing in nature), IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) National Committee UK; BMC (how to accommodate climbing and conservation).

The timetable for our progress towards UNESCO Global Geopark status is as follows (although this is not entirely in our control):

- Operate as a Geopark by 2024
- Visit by UK committee late summer 2025, issue of dossier to committee in Paris
- Year of evaluation 2026 – desk top evaluation and two international visits
- December 2026 – Global Geopark committee visit
- April 2027 – decision by UNESCO Board.

This will be a relatively rapid progress of the application because the Landscape Partnership Scheme projects are already creating the criteria, activity and partnerships required.

Everyone can contribute to this process. It needs to be community led with everyone involved, and we ask at this stage if people can start to amplify our social media messaging.

Questions:

1: Increased tourism will bring benefits to the economy of the area but will increase the amount of traffic.

Response – A number of the projects will help to spread visitors across Charnwood, if people stay there will be fewer car journeys in and out of the area, and we are looking at sustainable travel within the area. If visits to the area are not sustainable then we won't get the designation anyway.

2: Swithland's geology has not been mentioned.

Response: Swithland slate is important in the built heritage of the area – roofing, slabs and graves and is also used in other ways such as cheese stones and troughs. This story will be told.

3: Reference to Morley Quarry how do we get people to move from the Honey-pot sites? Will there be digital walks and drives created?

Response: there will be a website; physical interpretation at hubs across Charnwood; digital offers; audio guides; etc to make the story accessible – we will use a mixture of approaches to suite different audiences.

4: New housing developments are contra to neighbourhood plans and the forest is changing.

Sam L response: We acknowledge that this needs to be looked at carefully at Board level as partners include the planning authorities. The Board is looking at ways to make sure there are informed planning decisions but we can't get involved directly.

Jack response: Geopark is a badge of pride but it doesn't change the law. A landscape view of the region will be in our bid and the associated evaluation.

Presentation – Tourism Accommodation Provision

Martin Peters – Chief Executive of Leicestershire Promotions Ltd – described how our local tourism sector was decimated during the pandemic. Immediately prior to the first lockdown businesses were open but the public were not visiting; in March 2020 businesses had to close at short notice; and support mechanisms such as furlough were then introduced. At this stage the industry suffered from the rapidly changing guidance and restrictions and needed support. Leicestershire Promotions were able to produce regular industry digests with latest guidance, information and advice.

As restrictions have eased there is no ambition to return to how things were. Through a series of webinars and the recent Leicestershire Tourism Day businesses in the sector have confirmed that they will keep some of the operating practices during the pandemic in place such as pre-booking and capping capacity at a reduced level to give visitors a better experience. Business had wanted to introduce some of these measures but feared they would be unpalatable so have seized the opportunity to retain them and adapt their business operation accordingly. Sadly, some businesses have closed through choice or financial pressures.

There has not previously been data on the accommodation provision in Charnwood Forest and so through the Landscape Partnership Scheme we wanted to understand the offer better.

Martin shared slides mapping the different types of accommodation provision across Charnwood Forest Regional Park. There are a total of 43 accommodation providers made up of 14 larger hotels; 12 small hotel /B&B/guest houses; 9 caravan/campsites; and 8 self-catering.

There is a clear pattern of spread of all the different accommodation types which arches across the top of the region with some clustering along the Soar valley and a few campsites in the middle. If attractions are added there is some correlation of locations.

We now have a clear picture of the accommodation provision and there are clearly gaps of supply in some areas. What we need to better understand now is the gaps in unmet demand to identify what accommodation is needed. There are steps that we can take to encourage growth in target areas but it cannot be any accommodation at any cost – it needs to be the right type of accommodation which is quality, brand driven, sustainable accommodation which reflects the importance of the geology of the area.

The definition of tourism is a visit away from your normal residence or activity for more than 24 hours. Most of the pressures felt in terms of the number of cars in the area are caused by local or day visitors. Increasing tourism in the area could be the solution by attracting people to stay longer and therefore reducing the number of transit journeys into and out of the area.

Richard Drakeley – Tourism Development Manager at the National Forest Company – introduced the new investment being made across the National Forest in sustainable tourism with focus on creating a destination that is low carbon, high nature, and promotes positive wellbeing. The need is for more different accommodation such as B&Bs, e-bike itineraries moving on each day, and deconstructed hotels which have a central service building and unique accommodation such as cabins and shepherd's huts. There is certainly a market demand for sustainable tourism.

The National Forest Company has produced a Sustainable Tourism Guide (copies available). The guide shows what good design can look like to support the Forest's 25 year vision, brand values and distinctive Forest character. It will inspire change and show how tourism accommodation can contribute to a zero carbon future and will encourage innovation and create a sustainable destination.

The guide will support landowners to develop sustainable tourism accommodation where the local character has to take precedence in designing the accommodation. The guide is a resource for landowners, planners, architects, and communities to work together to create the right developments that are not detrimental to the area working with seven design principles. These principles are harmony with the Forest character; health and wellbeing; support Forest community and economy; build ethically and sustainably; promote carbon emission free holidays; integrate with nature; and manage water wisely.

Questions:

1: There are challenges because of different councils and different area characters to fit accommodation to a regional characteristic. It is easier for Airbnb providers to enter and exit the market so does the data need to be checked annually?

Response: The Sustainable Tourism Guide is an overarching document and the landscape character needs to be considered but the priority has to be the local character. There are annual stock takes of accommodation which are reported. There is also very little regulation across the guest accommodation sector apart from statutory requirements for planning, fire and food safety – all other ratings are voluntary.

Comment: There are three universities in the area with empty accommodation outside term time.

Presentation – Environmental Strategies

John Clarkson - Head of Conservation at Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust – talked about working to create a Living Landscape rich in wildlife, valued and enjoyed by all. There is a current ecological emergency but these are exciting times in terms of the amount of change that can be made.

Living Landscapes and Nature Recovery Networks are a requirement of the 25 year Environmental Plan and the Environment Act of 2021. The need is for restoration of landscapes, abundance of species and extension of habitats.

Developing Richer Landscapes for Nature focuses on sustainable food sufficiency strategy and nature-based solutions to climate change such as natural flood management and non-fossil fuel energy generation. Target that 30% of the land and sea should be managed for wildlife by 2030.

Developers now have to deliver extra biodiversity provision in new housing developments. SSSIs need to be better managed.

‘Lawton Mantra’ – more, bigger, better, more connected habitats.

Charnwood Forest Living Landscape has the following key habitats: woodland, grasslands, watery habitats, rocks and farmland and we need to enhance connectivity by creating corridors or stepping stones for ecology. We have the Biodiversity Audit and data to model where to connect habitats and create better landscapes working with other organisations on strategies for this. Examples of Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust work includes corridor clubs and farm clusters, quarries, golf clubs, local wildlife sites and natural flood management.

Lucie Hoelmer – Senior Environmental Partnership Officer at Leicestershire County Council – talked about how the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) will be delivered in local areas with the people who manage the land. The LNRS is embedded in statute to encourage society to deliver the Lawton Report ‘Bigger, Better and More Connected’ nature.

The Environment Act 2021 replaced voluntary biodiversity net gain at planning with a mandatory requirement for a 10% net gain in biodiversity in a building development not simply replacing what has been lost. There need to be spatial plans for nature recovery with local authorities demonstrating how the natural environment is enhanced not just conserved and supporting Environmental Land Management by linking development off-set with land being managed for nature through agricultural incentives.

Lots of pieces of work and projects joining together to improve nature and not destroy it, including looking at food production, reduced flooding, improvements to the environment such as air quality, also wellbeing and access to nature.

Progress so far on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Leicestershire County Council are responsible for the strategy across Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland – currently testing the science to check the data and agree what is possible in those locations. Working on pilots including at Markfield and Twycross which will feed into the Strategy along with national guidance.

Progress so far on Biodiversity Net Gain – Government biodiversity matrix to calculate net gain. Need to identify the species that will be indicators for net gain in discussion with planners and with targets which reflect national targets. Awaiting the format of reporting. There is currently no functioning Local Nature Partnership and new governance arrangements need to be in place for this.

At the break stakeholders had the opportunity to view displays about current project delivery of the Landscape Partnership Scheme including:

- neutral grasslands management
- wildlife recording training
- the spider survey
- community arts projects with Men and Women in Sheds, Safe Well Happy Group, and Young Carers
- community orchard planting and training
- activities being delivered into schools and grant offers for outdoor learning spaces and staff training
- sustainable travel

Presentation – Public Transport and Active Travel

Jessica Herbert from Leicestershire County Council explained that the objective of the Active Travel Team is to get people out of cars either by switching to car share, walking, cycling or public transport. They work with all communities to break down the barriers of those who don't think sustainable travel is possible.

There is a website, app and Jessica is happy to have conversations by email. The team have events, public transport information, journey planner, walking and cycling maps and all these can be used to encourage the people in Charnwood to travel differently.

The team works with businesses, schools, groups and individuals. For example with schools the pupils encourage their parents to take action and change habits. One initiative is Park and Stride where parents park at a local car park and then walk some of the journey to school with their children rather than dropping off at the school gate. The team also offer bike skills and competitions, badges, etc to encourage participation.

Leicestershire County Council are running an e-bike loan scheme. The bike is loaned for six weeks with full induction, loan of helmet and paniers on the condition that participants replace some regular car journeys with e-bike journeys.

There is also a Choose How You Move rewards challenge with Betterpoints rewards scheme for choosing sustainable travel over car journeys, the points being exchanged for vouchers to be used at local retailers.

Questions:

1: The footpath network has not been mentioned at the event and that increasing the connectivity of footpaths by adding more, making them accessible and keeping them well maintained would help.

2: Cycling on footpaths is not legal. What is happening about desire lines which are not indicated on the definitive map network. In terms of travel to school some tracks need

resurfacing to encourage non-motorised traffic. Electric vehicles which are silent are also a danger to non-motorised road users.

Responses: Jessica said she would take comments back to the road safety team, and all agreed the need to make non-car travel safe.

Matt Bradford of Charnwood Borough Council gave examples of planned improvements to the footpath network from Moat Road to Pocket Road Farm and off road along Deans Lane to Lower Beacon.

Film - Grant Scheme Launch

Julie Attard launched two grant schemes which will allow groups to extend the scope of the Landscape Partnership Scheme work.

Managing the Landscape Scheme with grants of between £1,000 and £10,000 and a total pot of £90,000.

Community Heritage Scheme with grants of between £500 and £5,000 and a total pot of £90,000.

The final deadline for grant applications is October 2024 but once the pot has gone it's gone so early application is advised.

Projects must be completed by March 2025 and a contribution of 10% of the project value is required but this can be in cash, in kind or a mix.

The first step in the process is to contact Julie on jattard@nationalforest.org to discuss your idea.

Questions and Answers

1: Nobody would know that there is a project happening – how do we get the message out there?

SL response: methods to include comms, website, village notice boards, talks to groups.

Questioner suggested banners e.g. for the Geopark.

JM response: UNESCO evaluators will be looking for things like this.

Carolyn Holmes response: for community engagement Carolyn has contacted every parish council and tree warden about the orchards project and to find details of community groups in the absence of local directories – please spread the word and get people to contact us.

RD response: villages have free magazines and papers – should we pursue this route?

We are using social media and partnership links but need to raise the profile in the general media.

2: Is there the potential for adding branding and 'you are entering' the geopark signage on all village signs?

Response: will need to refer to highways for permission.

3: There has been no mention of the Geopark in the Leicester Mercury or Loughborough Echo. Need to drip feed something every three months to keep the story alive and speak to some of the older part of the population who could potentially be volunteers.

Every household gets Leicestershire Matters – maybe we could get a spread in that.