

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 22 November 2018

SUBJECT: Bury Council/Forestry Commission partnership

REPORT FROM: Neil Long and Mike Bent

REPORT STATUS: FOR PUBLICATION

1.0 BACKGROUND

This report will give an update and overview of how Parks and Countryside are working positively with the Forestry Commission (FC) on the feasibility study which is looking at the extension of FC landholding from Waterdale through to the centre of Radcliffe to create the 1000 acre woodland.

The Parks and Countryside service has responsibility for the health and safety, management and development of all the Council's parks and countryside areas. The service manages land and buildings assets and facilitates the Asset Transfer Strategy, developing partnerships with local clubs and organisations to promote self-management of sports pitches, bowling greens, allotments and other land areas such as the Enterprise Centre at Kirklees.

The service encourages and facilitates local communities/organisations to be actively involved in parks and the countryside through volunteering, friends of the parks groups and self-management. The service looks to find innovative ways to manage our open spaces not only to reduce the financial burden on the Council but to protect land and open access for future generations to use and enjoy.

1.1 Introduction

Bury Council and the Forestry Commission (FC) have worked in partnership since 2011 as the Forestry Commission currently manages 73ha of woodland on behalf of Bury Council at Waterdale and Drinkwater Park. After being approached, Parks and Countryside and the Forestry Commission are now jointly considering the future management of some additional woodland areas within Bury and Radcliffe.

Feasibility work is underway to see if the Forestry Commission (FC) could manage additional land on behalf of the council including Philips Park, Outwood, Outwood trail and Prestwich Clough.

This feasibility work will look at the legal, environmental and economic aspects of the land and how it could be managed for the future. Community roadshows have taken place allowing people living and working in the area to see what this work is all about, there will be further roadshows once a decision has been made as to whether it is feasible for the FC to take this chunk of land on.

Bury is home to some fantastic forests and open spaces which makes this project an important opportunity to make sure they stay this way for future generations in the most efficient and cost effective way possible. And it's not only protecting a swathe of public accessible space, from Radcliffe Centre through to Prestwich; it could also bring potential investment to improve those sites involved.

This partnership work could contribute to wider initiatives, such as the City Forest Park project that the Forestry Commission is working on with City of Trees, and the Woodland Trust's vision of the Northern Forest as well as the Councils own Wellness initiatives and health benefits that Parks and open spaces bring. But the initial aim of both Bury Council and the Forestry Commission is safeguarding these sites for future generations by having well managed natural resources and sustainable income streams so that the benefits for local people and wildlife can be maximised, and to provide a positive contribution to the economy.

Below is a list of sites (with approximate Hectarage) to be included in the transfer

Phillips Park & Mere Clough	117ha	Prestwich Clough	13ha
Outwood Country Park & Outwood Trail	54ha	Gardner Mount	3.5ha

Draft site plan below on last page

In terms of managing our woodlands and forests at present, Chalara Fraxinea (ash dieback) is a real threat and could destroy 10% of our woodlands across the Borough, which the Council would find hard to cope with and manage, plus there are 17 other tree diseases and pests that could have a detrimental effect on our woodlands.

A scientific approach tells us we cannot currently eradicate Ash Die Back. The disease is spread by spores, so managing this issue is the only way forward but would be best tackled by the Forestry Commission who will have the skills and experience relating to these and other diseases.

2.0 The Feasibility Study

2.1 Work to date

- Laura Charles (FC) now has a desk in Parks and Countryside's Officer making communication regarding the feasibility study easier for both parties
- Plans have been drawn up as to which land is in the study, work to the fine detail is still yet to happen
- A joint statement between Bury Council and the FC has been published via a press release by both partners
- A FAQs sheet has been created and is attached
- 4 community roadshows have gone ahead to inform local people and stakeholders about the project and the feasibility study, what things are being looked at and timescales
- Meetings with existing voluntary groups have gone ahead to see what help they require
- The MOU has now been signed and published (August)
- A good number of site surveys have taken place and a lot of research on legal agreements, leases, freeholds/leaseholds, who the stakeholder are and boundaries.
- A structures and buildings list and plotting these on a map is being undertaken and is 90% complete

3.0 Bury Council Requirements from this Project

- Protected Park and open space, freely accessible by this and future generations
- Existing community groups and volunteers catered for, maintained and supported on the sites they carry out their activities and events now by the FC
- Increased community involvement across all sites
- Improved infrastructure, access, buildings and landscape
- A Sustainable woodland
- Additional facilities and increased partnerships if feasible
- Community roadshows to pass on information about the feasibility study (complete), the decision and then the next steps
- A partnership committee approach with members of the Council, FC and local community involvement
- Wellbeing and wellness at the heart of everything that happens on these sites

4.0 BENEFITS AND CONCLUSION

- Parks and countryside sites covers a significant area of the borough dealing with a wide range of issues managed by a small parks and countryside team
- In the past 5 years the budget has been cut by £1,347,800 (38% of the total budget)

- Asset transfer, self-management and partnership working will continue to be a key element of managing the service going forward
- This project, should it be deemed possible to transfer this land by the partnership to the FC will
 - See some investment to raise the quality and sustainability of these sites in terms of signage, access, tree coverage, wildlife habitats etc.
 - Potentially protect a swathe of public accessible space, from Radcliffe Centre through to Prestwich
 - Safeguard these sites for future generations by having well managed natural resources and sustainable income streams so that the benefits for local people and wildlife can be maximised, and to provide a positive contribution to the economy.
 - Reduce the financial responsibility to the Council for a large chunk of land and therefore any potential liability claims, health & Safety issues as well as maintenance issues.
 - Maintain open access for the community, the volunteers and volunteer groups who already work on these sites, as well as the events that already happen
- Potential for the rented properties on these sites to still be Council maintained giving an annual rental income

5.0 RISKS OF NOT COMPLETING THIS PROJECT

- Backlog of maintenance work will get larger due to the lack revenue expenditure
- Missed capital investment opportunities through the FC
- Asset deterioration such as Philips Park Grade II listed conservatory and associated buildings which has already seen a fire in 2016
- Increased risk to the Council due to potential liability claims because of the above
- Financial risk to the Council on unexpected issues such as potential landslips already experienced in Waterdale at Grundy Ave by the FC estimated costs around £1m
- Access for all will become more and more difficult to maintain
- Reputational risk to the Council of not completing this project with the FC, a similar environmentally minded partner

6.0 Next Steps

- Feasibility study by the FC estimated to be completed by April 2019
 - Although not discussed fully yet, it is envisaged that consultation with the public will take the form of a series of roadshows with stakeholders, park residents, friends and community groups and the general public
 - 2 business cases to be prepared
 - A business case to be prepared and submitted by the FC Project Manager to go the FC SLT confirming whether this project is feasible for them to proceed.
 - A business case to be prepared and submitted by the Parks & Countryside Manager/Assistant Director (Operations) to go to Bury Councils SLT/Cabinet that will confirm whether this is the right thing for the Council to proceed with should it also be feasible for the FC.
 - It could take 2 years to finalise the project with a lease drawn up should it be deemed feasible by the FC
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