

The Heart of the Forest Forum Access and Connectivity Working Group

Revised Strategy

April 2015

Context

The Heart of the Forest is an area of 10 square miles in the coalfield area of South Derbyshire and North West Leicestershire. Its exceptional story is one of rapid change from 19th century extractive industries to a 21st century sustainable landscape led by the creation of The National Forest.

Two industries dominated the landscape here for many decades, those of coal and clay extraction together with their associated subsidiaries such as the potteries and the brickyards.

Following the decline of the coal industry in the early nineties the area was chosen to be regenerated with a flagship project, the creation of The National Forest.

This has transformed the area and created a new green landscape. Rightly so, the focus of regeneration has been on major change, transforming derelict industrial sites, creating a range of new habitats and the infrastructure for people to enjoy this with a basic network of paths and a number of visitor facilities.

As a result of this the Heart of the Forest has undergone massive landscape change over the last 15 years; woodland cover has expanded from a mere 1% to 27%.

Partners brought together through the regeneration of the area have recognised the changing emphasis required from major capital regeneration projects to an approach that makes the most of the regeneration work that has been achieved.

With these factors in mind a range of partners formed the Heart of the Forest Forum to make the most of the new landscape being created. This covers the multiple objectives to bring about the best benefits for biodiversity, access and recreation, community engagement, landscape aesthetics, the industrial heritage, tourism and climate change mitigation.

The Forum encourages a partnership approach looking to manage the area more collaboratively, thus bringing about joint working and thinking which delivers best results across the multiple objectives looking to be achieved.

Since the Forum was established in February 2011 it has undertaken substantial consultation work. It has identified priorities and set up working groups to achieve these. These groups have devised action plans to make the most of the area's assets. They strive to enhance both the industrial and natural heritage of the area, increase access to this heritage and support people to engage with this process.

The Forum's Aims:

1. provide a framework for a co-ordinated, planned approach to regeneration and continued improvement to quality of life for residents of, and visitors to, the Heart of the Forest;
2. co-ordinate public engagement and participation in the development and implementation of the relevant strategies;
3. pursue appropriate resourcing opportunities;
4. to generally promote environmental, social and economic wellbeing in the Heart of the Forest area;
5. The Forum will complement rather than duplicate the work of neighbourhood groups, local partnerships and Community Fora and will not seek decision making powers in areas such as planning, housing, highways, policing, education, or social care.

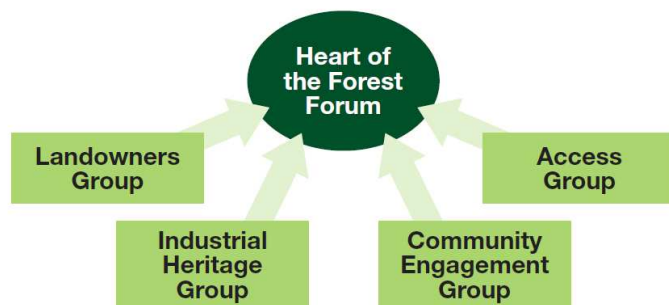


Fig 2. The ACWG is one of four working groups which support the aims of the HOFF

The Access and Connectivity Working Group (ACWG)

The Access and Connectivity Working Group (ACWG) was established in May 2011 as an open group consisting of landowners, users of the Heart of the Forest trails and local authorities. The group enables people to work together to make the most out of the access and recreation opportunities that exist within the Heart of the Forest. (Heart of the Forest area map Appendix A)

The group is well supported with wide representation from user groups such as Sustrans, the Ramblers and the British Horse Society, attractions such as Moira Furnace, the Local Access Forum, local residents, Local Authorities, Parish / Town Councils and landowners. The Group is chaired by Leicestershire County Council.

Aims

The overarching aim of the Access and Connectivity Working Group (ACWG) is to assist in the development and promotion of the access network within the Heart of the Forest area.

Achievements to date

When established in May 2011 the group agreed on 'the network' of routes to be prioritised for investment and promotion (Appendix B). The network was prioritised using the following criteria:

The network will:

- Link strategic routes
- Link villages to points of interest locally
- Make the most of the Cycle Centre
- Make the most of existing investment
- Link to existing amenities
- Establish routes that also provide utilitarian access

The group identified the following strategic linkages to be promoted for development in the long-term:

- To the north to Worthington
- To the south to Measham and the Ashby Canal
- To the west to Yoxall and the National Memorial Arboretum and Rosliston Forestry Centre
- To the East to Ashby and Coalville.

Following reaching agreement on the network, the group identified the following short term priorities to be progressed:

Priority A	Hicks Lodge to Ashby Woulds Heritage Trail Link
Priority B	Hicks Lodge into Ashby link
Priority C	Willesley to Ashby Woulds Heritage Trail Link
Priority D	Conkers to Rosliston Link
Priority E	Maybury to New Albion Link
Priority F	A42 Crossing link

The Access Connectivity Priorities map is attached as Appendix B.

The group's ability to bring project partners together, represent local views, influence the planning system and raise funds under the banner of an agreed prioritised strategy has resulted in substantial progress being made on many of these priorities.

In addition the group has worked together to develop an Orientation and Interpretation Masterplan for the area. As part of this process, volunteers from the group committed in

excess of 300 hours to survey the network to assess signage needs. The survey work was completed during the summer 2014 with the masterplan document being completed in November 2014. In March 2015 funding was secured from the Heritage Lottery Fund for circa £200k to implement the proposals of the masterplan.

The funding will enable the following will be delivered:

- A range of new orientation signage
- A new leaflet / map
- Interpretation hubs
- An app with an augmented reality experience
- A website

The Project Reports in appendix C detail the projects that the group is involved with and the progress made to date.

Working Group Priorities 2015 - 2016

It is proposed that the group continues to support the development and promotion of the access network within the Heart of the Forest area under the following terms of reference:

Terms of Reference

- To represent local people enabling a wide range of local access issues to be expressed
- To offer advice and support to land owning organisations and local authorities with regards improvements to public access within the Heart of the Forest
- To liaise with the Local Access Forums and other groups or agencies on matters of public access and connectivity within the Heart of the Forest.
- To provide input, and comment on relevant Strategies and Plans relating to access and connectivity matters.

Membership

The group is an open Forum attracting in the region of 20 people to each meeting. Current membership represents a balanced range of views from user groups, local landowners, Parish Councils, Local Authorities and local residents.

It is proposed that the open group system is maintained for 2015/16. This will be reviewed by the group should numbers increase to the extent that it becomes difficult to operate or that representation of interests becomes unbalanced. At such a point a system of proportional representation would need to be considered.

Proposing Projects

As many of our initial project ideas have either been delivered or reached a point where no further progress is imminent or can be influenced further by the group we need a system for bringing new project ideas to the meeting.

It is proposed that we use the attached spread sheet to record projects. The group's project spreadsheet will be used to record all current, achieved and proposed projects (Appendix C).

All members are encouraged to suggest to the group potential work streams. All suggestions will be recorded on the "Project Proposals" spreadsheet and discussed at the Working Group meetings to ascertain whether the group considers the proposal a priority and if there is the capacity to progress the project.

It is suggested that we record a proposer for the project, the person who knows the detail and originally voices the idea, and then we look for the project team who will support the project idea.

Criteria for assessing projects:

- Landowners and/or local authority approval
- Fit with the network
- Deliverability
- Impact / benefit
- Financial

Projects which are agreed to be progressed will be allocated a Project Lead, usually the proposer, and a Project Team to support development of the project. The Project Team will usually include a representative from the landowning body affected by the proposal or/and a Local Authority representative.

Project proposals which are progressed will be recorded on the "Live Projects" spreadsheet and progress will be updated at each Working Group Meeting. Projects which are not considered priority to progress will remain on the "Project Proposals" spreadsheet.

The spreadsheet will be shared with the other three working groups so opportunities for joint working can be developed.

Priority projects for 2015/16

The suggested priority projects for 2015-2016 will be:

- Progressing and implementing the strategic network linkages. Specifically:
 - Hicks Lodge to Ashby Woulds Heritage Trail
 - Hicks Lodge to Ashby Link
 - Willesley to Ashby Woulds Heritage Trail
 - Maybury to New Albion Link
- Progressing the Network Link to Rosliston Forestry Centre (Working Group set up by Jenny Southwell)
- Implementing the Heart of the Forest Interpretation and Orientation Masterplan
 - A range of new orientation signage
 - A new leaflet / map
 - Interpretation hubs
 - An app with an augmented reality experience
 - A website
- Investigating and establishing further funding streams to deliver projects identified by the group.

Review

It is proposed that the group reviews its priorities on an on-going basis through the project spreadsheet and that an annual review is undertaken with regard to priorities for strategic linkages within the network.

The Chair of the group will report back to the Heart of the Forest Forum at their regular meetings. A short annual review will be prepared for the Forum. This will help share information about the group's activities with the other working groups to encourage collaborative working.

Appendix List:

- Appendix A Heart of the Forest area map
- Appendix B Network Maps
- Appendix C Project spreadsheet