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1. INTRODUCING THE STRATEGY

Aim

To protect, manage and enhance Solihull's woodlands for the benefit of Solihull residents, recreation, nature conservation and visual amenity.

The Measures

The strategy will cover the following areas:-

- Protection of the natural environment by preserving the most valuable woodlands, or parts of woodland, and managing them in the interest of wildlife.
- Creation of new woodland habitat by enhancing existing woodlands and utilising opportunities presented by new development.
- Provision of access for people to experience wildlife locally, alongside the protection of woodland habitat and species.
- Promotion of the benefits of woodlands for the education of the community and publicising examples of beneficial management or practice.
- Engaging the community in woodlands by forging partnerships to attract resources and encouraging involvement.

Purpose

The purpose of the strategy is:-

- To ensure that the importance of woodlands within Solihull's natural and built environment is recognised, developed and sustained.
- To encourage partnerships with local communities, businesses and voluntary organisations in accordance with the aims of Local Agenda 21.

The Benefits

The strategy will deliver the following benefits for Solihull:-

- Positive management of the woodlands.
- Access to wildlife and recreation opportunities.
- Increased public awareness of the value of woodlands.
- Provision of an attractive environment and a sense of local identity and well-being.
- Safeguarding of plants and animals and the woodlands in which they live.
- Improving environmental conditions.

2. CONTEXT

Solihull's Woodlands

Within Solihull there are 61 woodland Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINCs), 1 Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and 4 Local Nature Reserves (LNRs). The Council runs a Woodland Management Programme which actively manages 21 woodlands (Appendix __) with the vital help of local conservation volunteer groups.

Today there are two main types of woodland in Solihull, “ancient/semi-natural” and “secondary”. Ancient woodlands can be dated back to 1600 or earlier, and dominant trees were normally Oak and Birch or Small-leaved Lime. Typical ancient woodland ground flora includes Wood Anemone, Yellow Archangel and Dogs Mercury. Good examples can be seen at Millison’s Wood and Smith’s Wood. The more recent secondary woodlands, mostly planted in the 19th century, have names such as “spinney”, “covert” and “gorse”. These often consist of a mixture of Oaks, Birches, Beech, Sycamore and Ash, for example Nappin’s Covert in Barston.

The area to the north-west of Warwickshire has for many centuries been colloquially referred to as the Forest of Arden. The word “forest” being used to describe “an historic region of former wood pasture and heath, characterised by a dispersed settlement pattern, ancient woodlands and mature hedgerow oaks”.

Woodland Management

A neglected woodland is usually unattractive, inaccessible, underproductive and supports fewer species of plants and animals. Therefore, it is important to have management to maintain biodiversity and ensure their long-term future.

Woodland management in Solihull will be related to four main issues:-

- Recreation and public access - maintain or improve access where appropriate.
- Wildlife conservation - maintain and wherever suitable restore natural ecological diversity.
- Public safety - ensure public safety is not neglected.
- Landscape enhancement - maintain and where appropriate improve aesthetic value.
- Sustainable management of woodlands - taking opportunities to produce utilisable wood.

These issues are not mutually exclusive, and a management activity may satisfy more than one issue.

Policy Background

National Level

The national planning policy framework provides considerable encouragement to local authorities involved in promoting initiatives such as the Forest of Arden. And English Nature's Natural Areas Programme provides guidance on what is important in terms of existing nature conservation value, and how present and future woodlands can fit in with it.

Since the Rio Summit of 1992, and Agenda 21 which was one of its outcomes, "sustainable development" has become a key objective in the policy and work of both national and local government in the UK. In the case of woodlands it suggests that a sustainable framework is one that aims to:

"encourage local authorities to develop long-term strategies for the management and care of trees in their ownership. These strategies should plan for the eventual replacement of old trees; enable authorities to take advantage of new opportunities for tree planting provided by other urban improvement measures.....and integrate awareness of the contribution which trees can make to the quality of life in urban areas into the full range of local authorities activities."

A second key output from Rio was the “Convention on Biological Diversity”. This places particular emphasis on the need to conserve the diversity of habitats and species. The sustainability of Solihull’s woodlands should be judged against the guidance given in the “UK Strategy” and parallel documents “Biodiversity-the UK Action Plan” and “Sustainable Forestry - The UK Programme”.

Local Level

As well as a firm mandate from national policy guidance there is strong policy support in statutory development plans. The majority of woodlands in Solihull are SINCs and are therefore locally important wildlife sites, and receive some degree of protection through Unitary Development Plans (UDPs) and the planning process.

The Solihull UDP gives protection both to important sites and the wider natural environment. This strategy will promote additional policies for inclusion in the UDP during the review, protecting species and wildlife corridors, and encouraging woodland creation in areas of scarcity. The UDP also states :

“The Council supports the proposal to restore the former Forest of Arden with a mixture of new woodland, open countryside and farmland in Warwickshire and the West Midlands....the Council intends to identify land in the countryside which would be suitable for new woodland planting.”

3 ABOUT THE STRATEGY

This strategy aims to consolidate woodland management work carried out in Solihull's woodlands by defining principles and guidelines to be used in the future. This is not a detailed guide but a mechanism for achieving a positive approach to woodland management operating at both a national and local level.

This woodland strategy is based on the belief that an increased commitment to trees and woodlands will improve the local environment. The strategy intends to establish a framework which is matched to local needs, and to provide the basis for future action.

4. THE STRATEGY

Protection

The Council will protect Solihull's important woodlands and ensure that it's diverse associated features are maintained.

A mixture of development plans, strategies and designations are being used to help protect woodlands (Appendix_).

Statutory Protection

Designated sites, such as SSSIs, LNRs and SINCs have protection in law and the UDP because of their contribution to nature conservation. Local authorities have a statutory duty to conserve nature and one way of doing this is to declare and manage LNRs.

Protected species have some protection through the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (As amended). This controls the disturbance, killing and removal of various plants and animals.

Non-statutory Protection

There are many areas of woodland cover or newly planted areas that fall outside statutory protection. Anyone intending to fell growing trees, with certain exceptions, needs to apply for a licence from the Forestry Commission. One exception is where a planning permission includes consent to fell trees, and this has sometimes meant loss or damage to ancient semi-natural woodland. However, the Forestry Commission has now been added to the list of non-statutory consultees. This means local planning authorities are asked to consult the Forestry Commission on all development proposals affecting woodlands recorded in English Nature's Provisional Inventory of Ancient Woodland (Appendix_).

Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) are designed to protect trees that may be at risk, but not where a high level of husbandry has been maintained and no change in ownership is likely. TPOs do not include blanket protection over large areas, but such protection may be afforded by a Covenant or Agreement (Which does protect all trees) covering land handed over to the Council from other sources. The Hedgerow Regulations (1997) offer some protection to hedgerows, which are important associated features to many woodlands.

Early negotiation between developers and the Council is important to ensure longevity of a site for establishment of new trees. And in the wider countryside it will be important to identify natural corridors and stepping stones in urban areas to allow plants and animals to survive.

Other measures to protect woodlands include the use of physical barriers (Such as fences) to prevent vehicular access. Also the use of “buffer zones” between trees and development pressures would prevent problems in the future such as objections to overhanging branches, shade, leaf litter and may reduce dumping by residents.

What The Council Will Do

- Pursue designation of all woodlands into SSSIs, LNRs and SINCs.
- Identify new woodland planting sites that are secure and do not impose on any housing or built developments.
- Forge better relationships internally within the Council.
- Propose new UDP policies relating to woodlands during the review.
- Incorporate woodland cover into natural corridors and stepping stones.
- Identify woodland habitats and species which could benefit Local Biodiversity Action Plans, and agree a programme for implementation through the Habitat Biodiversity Audit Partnership.
- Make use of tools such as Covenants or Schedule 106 Agreements to afford protection to woodland outside designations.

Creation And Enhancement

The Council will encourage new woodland creation and the management of neglected or declining woodlands to maximise their potential.

Some areas of Solihull are more densely populated and have less woodland cover than others. Creation and enhancement will be important to make wildlife accessible for people in these areas. Woodland creation can be used to enhance the links between wildlife sites, along the lines in the Nature Conservation Strategy. The Council recognises the role woodland creation can play in establishing a green network connecting sites in the urban areas to the countryside.

The planting of new woodlands, hedgerow trees and hedges will be encouraged. This planting should be sympathetic to the character of the landscape in which it is situated, and to existing nature conservation or archaeological value.

Planting within, adjacent to, or near to ancient semi-natural woodland should be carried out with care to avoid introducing non-native aggressive species and genetic material not of local origin. Opportunities for planting new hedgerows and hedgerow trees will be actively sought since in many areas these play a role greater than woodlands in contributing to landscape character. One initiative that currently exists is the Solihull Woodland Fringe. This aims to enhance tree cover and provide a continuous green corridor around the urban area.

What The Council Will Do

- Allow woodlands to regenerate naturally where possible, and create new woodlands and hedges by planting in accordance with Forestry Authority advice and the Forest of Arden Guidelines.
- Identify area of woodland scarcity and examine the potential for woodland creation.
- Encourage landowners to create and enhance woodlands and hedges.
- Promote woodlands through the planning system. Incorporate woodland creation into preparation of development plans (UDPs).
- Consider opportunities of future built development to be enhanced by the incorporation of woodland, and how to encourage such development through planning guidance.
- Consider more recent practices in the use of trees where appropriate in social, economic and nature conservation terms.

Management

The Council recognises the need for sympathetic management of woodlands to increase their value both for people and wildlife.

A key objective will be to promote woodland management within all existing woodlands. Where these woodlands are ancient or semi-natural management should ensure that their ecological and historical character is maintained and enhanced.

To manage each woodland it is necessary to know its value. An audit shall be carried out on all public woodlands including a visual assessment, ecological information, details of access and availability of people using the woodland, any management history and an assessment of commercial potential. From this audit it will be possible to identify management requirements. (Appendix__)

A management plan will be prepared for each woodland or group of woodlands, or updated if one currently exists. These have detailed information on particular aspects of the woodland and set out management tasks over a five year period. If the objectives for a woodland conflict it will be necessary to prioritise these objectives, and also put limits on activities that may damage the main purpose of that particular woodland. Ideally management operations should make provision for activities which are measurable.

Solihull's Woodland Management Programme covers 21 public woodlands undergoing some degree of management. Work such as tree thinning, footpath and access provision are undertaken by contractors and voluntary groups in line with management plans that exist for each woodland. The Programme receives the support of the Forestry Commission, English Nature, the Countryside Agency and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

Solihull also has a number of woodlands that are managed by private landowners or tenants. Some of these are SSSIs and have management recommendations provided by English Nature (For example, Clowes Wood and Shadowbrook Meadows managed by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust). Many others may need encouragement and assistance to manage their land. The Council will promote initiatives encouraging sensitive woodland management and provide advice and assistance to landowners or tenants.

What The Council Will Do

- Work and liaise with English Nature, Forestry Authority, Wildlife Trusts and other recognised sources of advice on woodland management issues.
- Identify and carry out an audit of all public woodlands in Solihull, using sources of information such as the Habitat Biodiversity Audit.
- Write management plans to help raise awareness of the various needs and pressures on woodlands.
- Inform, involve and consult local people and other interested parties.
- Manage characteristic Arden landscape features that are relevant to woodlands.
- Prepare woodland management guidelines for landowners.
- Encourage landowners to manage woodland sites sensitively.
- Promote the use of Countryside Stewardship and Woodland Grant Schemes by landowners.
- Monitor woodlands to assess suitability of management, using ecological surveys and the public's response.
- Produce Local Biodiversity Action Plans where appropriate.

Impact Of Development

The Council will ensure that all new development proposals take full account of the value of woodlands.

Habitats such as woodlands have taken many years to be created and so mitigation or compensatory measures should only be used if there is no alternative to impacting on the nature conservation interest. In those cases where development takes priority over nature conservation, it shall be guided to locations which avoid the most valued woodland sites.

What The Council Will Do

- Undertake environmental assessment of the policies and proposals in the UDP during the review.
- Take full account of the value of woodlands in determining all planning applications.
- Ensure environmental assessment statements reflect the importance of the woodlands and associated features.
- Seek opportunities to enhance existing / and create new woodland habitats associated with new development proposals.

Access

The Council will ensure that woodlands are available throughout Solihull to encourage regular contact between people and wildlife.

Woodlands are for the enjoyment of people as well as wildlife, and access to the woods for appropriate recreation should be encouraged. Activities will include walking and informal recreation such as birdwatching and education activities.

Some woodlands have tarmac or surfaced paths, while others are demarked using woodchip or simply by regular use. Each woodland will be evaluated individually with the aim to allow people to undertake a circular walk. There is the question of balancing the need for public access against the needs of protecting wildlife, and the natural feel of the woodland should not be compromised.

Large numbers of dogs are walked daily in woodlands. Dogs off their leash can disturb wildlife and also people seeking peace and quiet. Unleashed dogs can be intimidating to adults as well as to children. Dog faeces are an unpleasant feature, particularly on the first part of a woodland walk. Fouling of main footpaths maybe dangerous to children and it may be possible to encourage dog walkers to go where the least offence is caused. The problem will need monitoring to assess if a dog-free zone or waste bins are needed.

Keeping vehicles out is important to reduce damage and litter, but this has previously meant problems for wheelchair and pushchair access. Type of access is important for health and safety, maintenance and any commercial potential of woodlands. Poor access will greatly increase management and extraction costs, if access is necessary then Council-approved tree protection measures should be adhered to in order to prevent damage to existing trees.

What The Council Will Do

- Identify woodlands with poor access or access-related problems and explore the potential for increasing access and improvement.
- Improve access for wheelchair and pushchair users.
- Publish and make available information on where woodlands can be found.
- Increase the number of Local Nature Reserves.

Promotion And Education

The Council will encourage people to care for and enjoy woodlands by raising awareness and understanding of their benefits.

Promotion

The Forest of Arden Initiative and Project Kingfisher are examples of how the profile of Solihull's woodlands can be raised. The Council publicises activities at various woodlands during Solihull Environment Week. It is proposed to increase awareness of the woodlands and also the importance of good management in order to protect and enhance them. This will be done by using signs, promotional leaflets, a seasonal magazine informing people of the progress in woodlands (Fitting in with other nature conservation issues), as well as organising and publicising local events and talks in the woodlands (Making use of national initiatives such as Tree Week).

Education

Woodlands make a first rate location in which to enjoy learning about the environment, it is an attractive alternative to the classroom. With recent emphasis on environmental education there are likely to be increased requests for outdoor classrooms, and the types of resources they require. In many cases the involvement amounts merely to providing the woodland as a resource.

Children can also help with the growing, planting and caring for trees, raising the benefits of trees amongst older generations (Work which is currently undertaken by the Council's Green Scheme). School grounds and other educational landscapes can provide prime sites for further woodland cover, and the practical involvement of young people may help reduce the risk of vandalism.

What The Council Will Do

- Provide information and interpretation at woodlands.
- Publish interpretation leaflets and material explaining and promoting woodland management practices.
- Carry out a programme of events and education talks in the woodlands and wider environment, expanding involvement in environmental education.
- Play a full and active role in partnerships with the Tree Council, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and others.
- Provide facilities in woodlands to encourage use by schools and other organisations (For example pond-dipping platforms).

Partnerships And The Community

The Council recognises that other organisations have a major role in the implementation of this Strategy.

Existing Partnerships

Project Kingfisher, which includes York's Wood LNR, involves the city of Birmingham, Environment Agency, English Nature, Countryside Agency, local Wildlife Trusts and the local community. Local conservation volunteers and the Forestry Authority also help with the management of public woodlands. Such partnerships show that the Council is already involved with other organisations.

Engaging The Community

When active management can be seen by local people of a woodland on their doorstep, a strong sense of ownership develops. By sharing problems such as vandalism and dumping of waste with the local community, and encouraging local children to look after vandal-prone areas (Planting trees and cleaning up), such incidents will decrease. Local people also have local knowledge of woodlands, it's wildlife and past management.

Liaison with other groups will include parish councils, local clubs and societies, churches and groups of landowners and local businesses. These groups may own land that could be planted and may wish to involve the community. Some may be prepared to offer financial support or help-in-kind to local communities for projects elsewhere.

Common Ground are a national charity which provides a lead to local communities in appreciating and celebrating their environment. Such events can raise awareness, appreciation and celebration of the woodland environment. Events such as guided walks may be focused on historical, ecological or cultural themes.

More people are likely to use the woodlands if they feel safe, and encouraging more users will help this (As will the presence of working volunteers or schools). The ideal situation would be the presence of an official ranger who would effectively police the woods, reporting and dealing with any problems quickly, and could also provide educational services for schools and community groups (As at Project Kingfisher).

What The Council Will Do

- Continue to play an active role in partnerships such as Project Kingfisher.
- Encourage and support involvement of the community in woodlands through Local Agenda 21 initiatives.
- Continue to support volunteers involved in woodland management work.
- Liase with community groups through special events and activities.
- Celebrate trees and woodlands through the arts and special events.
- Monitor the use of woodlands and any problems that are evident.

Resources

The Council will provide resources and support towards managing and enhancing woodlands in Solihull, and will seek support from a variety of sources and partners.

The Council is committed to following through with this Strategy and will provide funding and staff resources to enable progress. Existing budgets for the enhancements of woodlands is insufficient and the Council will maximise it's resources by seeking external funding from various sources.

What The Council Will Do

- Maximise opportunities for grant-aiding from English Nature, Forestry Authority and Countryside Agency, and funding from any other sources.
- Allocate funding and staff annually towards woodland management and enhancement.
- Encourage and support community and individual initiatives through Local Agenda 21.
- Encourage developers and landowners to adopt a positive attitude towards woodlands.
- Investigate sale of woodland products, in line with sustainable management practices (Appendix__).

5. THE WAY FORWARD

The Government has demonstrated its support for woodland initiatives through its Community Forests Programme, and by supporting a wide range of other projects. Solihull MBC has a responsibility to manage its woodland resource in such a way that is sustainable, cost-effective and to benefit nature conservation and recreation.

Monitoring the different objectives of this Strategy and implementing desired activities is very important. The best designed schemes can fail due to inadequate implementation or lack-lustre management. The pattern of visitors, other attractions in the area, nature of the woodland, requirements of the visitors and new demands on the woodland may change with time. When they do, the Council must be aware of the nature and extent of changes and act accordingly.

Monitoring woodlands for their recreational use and nature conservation interest is very important.

Management plans should be updated and reviewed as necessary, and any latest research initiatives incorporated into them (As should any relevant information from Local Biodiversity Action Plans).

If demand for more formal contact is required it may be feasible to employ a ranger service. Such a position is skilled and it is important to employ well qualified people to support in-service training. The costs of operating such a service may be eligible for grant aid from the Countryside Agency (Appendix__).

The contribution of individual projects to the overall aim of this Strategy will be monitored by agreed indicators, such as management tasks agreed upon by the Forestry Authority (In the relevant Management Plans for each woodland).

The success of Local Habitat or Species Action Plans can also be monitored by loss or gain of habitat or species type over time.

This Strategy may be used as supplementary planning guidance and will assist the review of woodland protection policies in the UDP. And it will be reviewed every five years.