

RWFF Implementation Plan workshop – Ashton Court, 21st April 2009

Quality of Life theme

Chair: Jon Clark, RWFF Delivery Group member/Forest of Avon
Scribe: Rob Spence, FC

Morning group

Participants: Mark Minkley, B&NES, John Flannigan, North Somerset Council; Claire Mitchell, SSW; Jonathan Wilshaw, Great Western Community Forest; Matt Hamilton, Avon Biodiversity Partnership; Michele Kerry, Silvanus Trust; Deborah Elton, FC (observing)

Points made:

1. Woodlands need to be an integrated part of new development – not a bolt-on afterwards. Green infrastructure (GI) relates to all RWFF themes. The RWFF needs to address the growth agenda (it does not currently) – it needs a rethink to be embedded fully in eg Regional Spatial Strategy.
2. There is a lack of resources to manage woodlands and associated planning constraints. A Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) for North Somerset will include standards for green space – there are no nationally recognised standards. A roof tax is being considered in Bath & North East Somerset.
3. Section 106 money is very difficult to secure for existing sites e.g. Weston Woods in relation to new development around Weston super Mare. The new planning arrangements and Community Infrastructure Levy may help solve this issue.
4. Natural England is pushing ANGSt (Accessible National Greenspace Standards) and the Woodland Trust has its Woodland Access Standard. The quality of life standards are clear – perhaps they should be embedded within the RWFF.
5. Community Forest plans still offer a strong brand, but it is most unlikely there are resources to review them (the Forest of Avon plan was last reviewed in 2002).
6. Community forestry should emphasise the urban environment - street trees, parks and gardens – usually called urban forestry. Could eWGS cover street trees? 90% of the population live in towns. The benefits of tree-lined streets are as great as woodland for quality of life, although the habitat is very different. The Forestry Act needs to include the urban environment – forestry and arboriculture are essentially the same.
7. People need to be encouraged to have local governance of woodland. Most people like trees but the ones who don't make more noise. Community engagement costs money to set up and manage. Why are we engaging communities? – definitely to unlock the benefits of woodlands to those communities rather than to forestall problems from possible future misuse.
8. Lack of resources is an issue in communications – DCLG employs just one arborist.
9. The champions on the RWFF Delivery Group need to reflect the different themes – this relationship may need to be strengthened to reflect the new agenda.

10. Education deserves to be highlighted as a separate item. An enormous amount of good work has been done by FEI/Forest schools/Woodschool. In south Wales a teacher in every school is being trained.

11. Accessibility to woodland - there is a need to encourage landowners to open their woodlands to the public. The different users of woodland need to be managed to prevent some abusing their position e.g. mountain bikers on footpaths. However, specialist users need to be catered for.

12. Children & play. There has been a generational shift in the way woodlands are used by children. It is perceived they are not using them enough. There are examples of community groups managing woods objecting to activities of children such as rough camping and camp fires. Concerns about childhood obesity are relevant here.

13. In general the objectives within the RWFF are function based, not outcome based. Under communication, the word "trees" should be included with "woods" and "forests".

14. The key issue is what trees and woodlands offer to quality of life.

Five suggested actions:

1. Urban Forestry

Increase canopy cover in the urban area – gardens included. (Baseline data needs to be compiled first).

2. Education/Play

This links all the roles woodlands have and is relevant to the health agenda, promoting healthy lifestyles. Promote woodlands as play space. Celebrate the work already done by Woodschool and others.

3. Green infrastructure

Recognise the special role trees and woodlands have, in GI planning. Build woodland provision into LDFs. No other space can be as multi-functional.

4. Specific need to engage people

Run active focussed programmes to bring the greatest benefit of trees and woodlands to all sections of the community.

5. Guidance on woodland in the Planning system

Target action and funding on growth points, but also to areas where change requires it. Guidelines to show how woodlands can be included as key component of GI plans and LDFs.

Summary

The objectives in the RWFF need to be revised. A lot has happened in the last four years and the growth agenda and thinking on GI has changed perspectives.

Afternoon group

Participants: Phil Harding, GOSW; Phil Stone, Somerset County Council; Angela Pollard, Small Woods Association; Norman Healey, Deer Initiative; Nigel Howe, Chelvey Designer

Makers/FoA Trust; Matthew Woodcock, FC; Stephen Green, Regen SW; Tony Phillips, Costwolds AONB

Points made:

1. Raise the profile of trees and woodlands. Use the term “Community Woodlands” rather than “Community Forestry”. (Most people are not close to forests).
2. Accessibility is more important than ownership. Community involvement is important for woodland creation and management. Community “forestry” should be promoted throughout the region. Promote the other benefits of woodland in the urban environment. Woods should be managed for the benefit of local communities e.g. for fuel and benefits to health. Small woods are very inexpensive to maintain when compared to urban parks.
3. The first three objectives under “More people enjoying use of woodland” are very similar. Existing accessible woodland is often not known about by local people.
4. Woods are sometimes perceived as unsafe places to visit. Perhaps inclusion of new uses such as allotments and community theatres could increase numbers of users and perception of safety. Zoning may be needed – total accessibility can conflict with biodiversity.
5. Orchards, new or existing, create defined areas very suitable for parents with young children – a community asset. Create more play opportunities for children. Work with NHS to promote physical and mental health benefits of trees and woodlands.
6. GI – do we need a regional guide for planners on trees and woodlands – to inform local authority GI strategies? Where development takes place, existing trees should be incorporated in public space, not private gardens – there are many examples of trees left within gardens falling victim to insurance claims. The value of shade needs emphasising.
7. Look at work done in London on trees.
8. Planning and woodlands – the planning process is not the best way to get more woodland. Public sector woodlands are fine, but there is little incentive for the private woodland owner. There are issues around public liability and the incentives for owners to open up their woodlands need to be looked at, especially where there are commercial alternatives such as shooting. We need to give planners the information to resist the efforts of developers to cram houses in, leaving inadequate room for GI. Consider educational tours for planners.
9. Education across the board needs expanding in the RWFF. The cost of transport is a major barrier for school groups to visit woodlands. This is tied up with the curriculum and the policies of schools not charging parents to cover the cost. We should promote the educational benefits of woodlands and how they can be tied in with the curriculum. Teaching many topics can be beneficial, such as tree identification and forest economics. The move to a theme-based curriculum will offer opportunities. We can work with teachers to prepare them for woodland visits.

Five suggested actions:

- 6. Education**
- 7. Design for safety – best practice guide, address access issues for private landowners**
- 8. Community woodlands approach to be extended with involvement of private sector**
- 9. Guidance for planners on trees, woodlands within GI and LDF**

10. Community engagement in local woods – more access and healthy lifestyles agenda