

# EIA Opinion for Initial Afforestation at Ashlawn Road Rugby

## Summary of Reasons

### 1 Purpose

This document provides a summary of the reasons for Forestry Commission's Opinion that the proposals to create a new woodland at Ashlawn Road, Rugby does not require our consent under the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) regulations that apply to forestry projects.

### 2 Background

The Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations 1999 (Statutory Instrument: 1999/2228) make the Forestry Commission (FC) the competent authority for assessing forestry projects. These are:

- **Initial afforestation:** creating new woods and forests by planting trees (on an area that has not had trees for many years). This category includes using direct seeding or natural regeneration, planting Christmas trees and short rotation coppice.
- **Deforestation:** removal of woodland to convert the land to another type of land use (e.g., heathland, farming).
- **Forest roads:** constructing forestry roads, including those within a forest and those leading to a forest.
- **Forest quarries:** quarrying to obtain material (rock, sand and gravel) for the formation, alteration or maintenance of forest roads.

FC must give an Opinion on whether such projects will have a significant impact on the environment. If the proposals will have a significant impact(s) they require FC's consent which may or may not be given after a thorough and objective assessment of the significant impacts has been made. In order to reach an Opinion FC "screen" the proposals to assess their impacts and whether they might be considered significant.

The regulations provide thresholds to help guide when a project may have a significant impact(s). However scale is not a single determining factor and the screening process must consider all of the proposals impacts and whether they are significant on a site-by-site basis. EIA "screening" does not consider alternatives to the proposals/alternative sites but looks objectively at the proposals and assess their impacts for significance.

Our current guidance on the EIA process can be found on our webpage:

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/inf-d-6dfkbc>. The EIA Regulations can be viewed on the web site for UK legislation: <http://www.hms.gov.uk/si/si1999/19992228.htm>.

## 3 The Proposal

In June 2012 Rugby Borough Council (RBC) applied to FC for grant aid (application reference 29272) to create a woodland comprising of pre-dominantly native tree species on 47 hectares of arable land centred at grid reference: SP520726. The woodland incorporates 40% open space which is designed to provide open space for recreation and would be managed to maximise bio-diversity and preserve views from the site across the Rainsbrook Valley. After the trees are established RBC intend to dedicate the land for public use. The proposal to create this new woodland is a separate proposal to the planning application for a crematorium and cemetery immediate to the north of the site, which is subject to its own EIA process.

The tree planting proposal is considered initial afforestation under the EIA Regulations and has been screened so that FC can provide an informed Opinion on whether the proposal would have significant impacts on the environment.

## 4 Impacts

Several impacts were identified through the Screening process and the consultation exercise the applicant undertook before submitting the application. A record of all the comments and evidence considered by FC in reaching the Opinion are set out in the 'Issues log' (Appendix 3). A summary of the key conclusions is set out in this document.

### 4.1 Landscape

The impact that the woodland would have on the views from the site across the Rainsbrook Valley was a concern raised during the EIA screening and the pre-application consultation undertaken by the applicant.

The site itself lies within the Dunsmore Plateau Fringe (DPF) which is defined in the Warwickshire Landscape Character Appraisal (2006). While the Warwickshire Landscape Guidelines (1993) predate this character appraisal they are still relevant as there has been no major change in the land use or landscape since that time. The guidelines indicate that the DPF would be enhanced by *'large scale woodland planting on rising ground – the siting and design of the new woods will need to be carefully planned, however, and the aim should be to try and frame views rather than completely close them off. New planting should be targeted where possible, on hilltops and rising ground. Particular care should be taken to shape the lower margin of the new woods in very gentle curves'*.

While this tree planting is not on a hill top the site is on rising ground where tree planting would be consistent with the guidelines.

The design of the woodland incorporates 40% of managed open space this has been sited in the woodland (see Appendix 2) to retain views out from the site. The location of the open space has been subject to a landscape impact assessment which has considered the landscape context and the impact in the views on to and out of the site. This assessment along with constraint to maximise bio-diversity (e.g. by

buffering the Ashlawn Cutting Nature Reserve) has informed the woodland design and the location of the open space.

The site lies within a rolling valley dominated by arable land use (see Appendix 2). The predominant land use will remain arable while the rolling landscape with its established hedgerows and trees mean the woodland will not be appear as an incongruous feature in the landscape. Woodland is a natural feature and one which will take time to develop and so will not have the same immediate and more permanent impact as an urban development.

We have also gathered the views of Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) and Natural England (NE) on the proposal's impacts on the landscape and no concerns have been raised.

Finally, while access to the site is currently tolerated by the tenant farmer there is no formal right of access for people to enter the land. Views over the valley from the north (Ashlawn Road) and the east (Onley lane) are cut off by the existing tree and hedge lines. Opening the site to the public will enable more people to visit the site and its views – which will be preserved through the use of open areas in the woodland's design.

After considering all these points – especially the use of managed open ground within the woodland to preserve the views out from the site – we have concluded the woodland's impact on landscape will not be significant.

## 4.2 Food security

Another common concern is that impact the proposal– converting grade II arable land to woodland - will have on food security. We recognise food security as important issue and that the removal of this land from agriculture will have an impact but do not consider the impact will be significant when the following points are considered:

- The woodland would remove 47 hectares of grade II land from productive agriculture. This is 1% of the grade II land in the Rugby Borough and 0.2% from Warwickshire as a whole.
- The creation of woodland at this site is also not irreversible. The creation of the woodland at the site would not compromise the ability to revert the land back to arable production if food production from this land were to be considered by the land owner as more important.

## 4.3 Farmland birds and bio-diversity

Concerns have been raised that the loss of arable land will have a detrimental impact on bio-diversity, especially farmland birds. While the proposals will have some impact we cannot conclude the impact will be significant and that all of the impact will necessarily be negative.

The site lies within a predominantly arable landscape (see appendix 1) which will continue to provide habitat for farmland wildlife, where the land is managed

appropriately. In this context and area of woodland should serve to increase the area's bio-diversity overall.

A change to woodland will reduce chemical inputs into the land, reducing chemical drift on to the neighbouring nature reserve and the established hedgerows. The woodland design itself seeks to maximise bio-diversity in several ways:

- Incorporating open, scrub and edge habitats within or adjacent to the woodland to maximise bio-diversity.
- Managed open space to create a diversity of habitats within the woodland
- Buffering the Ashlawn Cutting Nature Reserve with open areas
- The scrapes in the open areas by the Rainsbrook to create wetland habitat
- The use of a mixture of native tree species to provide a diverse woodland more robust to climate change and pests and diseases.

RSPB, WWT and Butterfly Conservation have concluded that the proposal to create a native woodland would benefit local bio-diversity on the whole.

In conclusion when these factors are all considered, we have concluded that the proposal will not have a significant impact on bio-diversity and farmland birds.

## 4.4 Visitor safety

One of the hardest impacts to assess is that of safety for people visiting the site. Concerns have been raised that changing the land use from open arable farming to woodland create a more dangerous environment for people. In terms of an impact this could be expressed as: changing the land use to woodland will reduce the number of visitors to the site, especially lone women.

Firstly it should be noted that there is no formal right of access to the land. Access is tolerated by the current tenant farmer and therefore this proposal - to create a designated open access for the public to enjoy - should result in improved access to the site which will encourage more visitors. Nevertheless due to the established permissive access tolerated at the site we have considered this as an impact.

Countryside Commission Technical Report CCP457: *Growing Confidence: a research project into public perceptions of risk in woodlands in the urban fringe* (Professor Jacqui Burgess, 1995) found that perceptions of risk do have an impact on whether some people access woodland, especially women. The report also explained that actual risks are small: "what is perceived to be real is real in its effects". So while an impact is recognised an assessment of the impact's significance must be made. We have considered the following points:

Firstly, opening the site to permissive access across in its entirety in the first instance and then designating the site for public access should encourage greater use of the site for recreation. This would be a positive impact and the more people, that visit the site the more people will feel safe to visit the site.

A seminar organised by Forest Research in 2004 considered the accessibility of woodlands and natural spaces. One of the conclusions from the workshop was that: "The more that spaces are used by responsible citizens, the safer they become." This proposal will create a designated open space we believe if anything it should encourage more visits by responsible citizens which will increase the feeling of safety.

A further point we have considered is that people do enjoy taking recreation in woodland and may choose to visit the site because of its woodland features. The Annual Report from the 2011-12 survey to monitor engagement with the natural environment (MENE) (<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/file/1755933>) shows that 358 million visits were made to woodland/forest sites (13% of visits) compared to 241 million visits to farmland (9%). This is clear indication that people enjoy walking and recreating in woodland so this proposal has every chance of encouraging visitors rather than discouraging them.

Secondly, we have noted that the woodland's design seeks to ensure visitors feel as safe as possible by retaining a large proportion of the site as open space (40%) so that people can see well ahead of them.

Another conclusion from the Forest Research seminar was that "Those who become involved in decisions about particular spaces should be more likely to visit them regularly, and to bring their families, neighbours and others." We understand that in due course (it will take some time for the woodland to develop) the applicant as the local authority managing land for public access will look to manage the site with stakeholder input (including the woodland users) this could involve the reconfiguration of the open space.

In light of all these considerations we have concluded that while creation of the woodland may have an impact on some individual's choice to visit the site this impact is not significant given the:

- Aim to encourage public access to the site.
- The number of people who choose to visit woodlands for recreation.
- The mitigation that the use designed open space in the woodland provides.

## 4.5 Historic environment

The existing historic environment record information referred to in the desk-based assessment for the crematorium to the north of the site does not record any significant heritage assets in the proposed woodland area. While the assessment work connected with the development to the north of the proposed woodland has added to the knowledge about the archaeology of the area, the work to date (more may happen) does not indicate the presence of significant features which the tree planting would have a major impact upon.

The use of the land for arable farming over its recent history has not revealed any features of archaeological interest while the management of the land for arable production has the potential to damage archaeological remains (see for example English Heritage's document: "[Ripping Up History](#)"). It is reasonable to conclude that

tree planting will have no more an impact than the current method of farming the land.

There is an area of historic environment interest in the centre of the site – the location of an old farm house. The woodland's design accounts for this with the area being left unplanted to safeguard against any harm to any likely feature of archaeological interest. RBC have also committed to making the site available to a local archaeological group to walk over the site after sub-soiling so that any features of interest that can be identified after sub-soiling the site can be recorded prior to tree planting taking place.

In conclusion, because there is no information to indicate the presence of important archaeological features within the proposed area and given the current arable farming on the land, the impact on archaeology of creating a woodland at this location is not considered to be significant.

#### 4.6 Noise arising from woodland management

The impact of noise pollution from chainsaws and other forestry machinery working in the woodland was identified as an impact through RBC's pre-application consultation. However we do not consider this to be a significant impact. The current management of the land for arable crops will require the use of machinery on a far more frequent basis than management of the woodland. Consequently changing the land use to woodland should reduce the noise associated with the management of the site.

#### 4.7 Maintenance of the woodland

Concerns were raised during the screening that the woodland would not be maintained and would either fail or become a dark and dense overgrown mass of trees and shrubs. This is not an impact of the project as such (though it relates to the use of the site and perceptions of safety while visiting the woodland) but has been considered during the screening process.

The applicant has produced a management plan for the woodland for its first five years (appendix 4). This plan outlines appropriate steps that should ensure the establishment of the woodland and delivery of the environmental benefits it seeks to provide. This plan therefore provides assurance that the woodland will become established.

Beyond this it would be unreasonable to take a decision that speculates that the woodland will not be managed. Especially when we have received a clear indication from the applicant that the site will be designated as a public open space and we therefore have no reason to think the site will not be subject to future management.

If the proposal secures grant support management of the trees will be a requirement of the grant agreement for the next 30 years. While this point it is not relevant to the EIA Opinion is may provide some reassurance that, if grant aid is provided, it will require maintenance of the woodland.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion while a project of this scale will have impacts on the environment we have concluded from the information available to us that the proposal will not have a significant impact that warrants our consent.

Overall we consider that this proposal will be of benefit to the local environment and residents.

- The proposal is in an appropriate location and will not significantly undermine the landscape's predominantly arable character.
- Through careful design and maximum use of open space the proposal seeks to retain views out from the site enjoyed by visitors ensuring its impact on landscape is not significant.
- Diversifying the habitats in the locality without significantly compromising habitats provided by the wider arable land use across the valley or the Ashlawn Cutting Nature Reserve.
- Improving public access to the site by permitting and encouraging access across the entire area.

Forestry Commission England  
29<sup>th</sup> October 2012

## Supporting documents

**Appendix A** – Log of Issues raised at EIA screening and RBC's consultation.

**Appendix B** – Aerial photo of the Rainsbrook Valley.

**Appendix C** – Rugby Diamond Wood Country Park – Management Plan. This includes:

- Appendix 1 – Indicative woodland plan
- Appendix 2 – Summary of RBC's Consultation\*
- Appendix 3 – Landscape Statement\*
- Appendix 4 – Visual Impact Assessment\*

**Appendix D** – Forestry Commission review of RBC's Consultation

\* Due to their file size these appendices have not been attached to this message. If you would like copies please contact [alec.rhodes@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:alec.rhodes@forestry.gsi.gov.uk).