



Heartwood Forest

Environmental Statement, Non-Technical Summary

August 2009

1. Introduction

The Woodland Trust (WT) is now the only organisation in the UK dedicated to the protection and conservation of our native woodland heritage. On the 30th September 2008 the Trust purchased 345 hectares of arable land to the north of Sandridge in Hertfordshire to create a significant new native woodland close to high populations to maximise both wildlife potential, and to inspire and involve many people, to increase enjoyment of woodland and to increase people's understanding of woodland and its importance.

2. The project objectives

A ten-year phasing is planned for the tree planting. After this time approximately 600,000 trees will have been planted across three quarters of the land area. As part of the habitat creation plans, the Trust will also include significant areas of open space in the form of grassland and wild flower meadows. The main habitat areas to be created are shown below, and are compared to the existing wildlife habitat.

Habitat	Existing (do nothing scenario)	Proposed	Net change
Ancient woodland	17.8ha	17.8ha	0
New native woodland	0.1ha	247ha	+ 246.9ha
Scrub	1ha (approx)	10ha	+ 9ha
Grassland and meadows	4.4ha	79ha	+ 74.6ha
Hedgerows	16885m	17385	+ 500
Arable	312 (2007 area)	0	- 312ha

The protection of all existing Ancient Woodland within the project is of prime importance due to its antiquity resulting in its unique and irreplaceable habitat quality and importance.

Heartwood Forest will become, over a number of years, a well-visited site both in terms of physical visits and through creative communication via web-based activity and educational resources. The number of people visiting the forest is expected to increase steadily over the first ten years, through a variety of available access and transport links, and for various quiet recreational activities. Within 5km, the population is 109,000 and as result of Heartwood Forest, an additional 60,000 people within St Albans District will have physical access to woodland in excess of 20ha.

3. Assessment process

The Woodland Trust has completed an initial consultation phase to assist in identifying potential impacts which should be addressed within the Environmental Statement (ES). External independent specialist consultants have been engaged where potential impacts are considered significant or required specific expertise. Impacts to be assessed were determined on their potential to have a significant impact, however no pre-assumption was made on their magnitude or type of impact.

4. Assessment and identification of impacts

The Environmental Impact Assessment identified and assessed three potential impact areas which were considered potentially highly significant (archaeology, landscape and visitor impact). The ES includes other impacts which were assessed but were not considered as significant, but may have mitigation or site-enhancement recommendations with them.

The summary below highlights the main impacts at implementation (years one to ten), establishment (years 11 – 40) and maturity (years 40 +)

Project implementation

The options for the implementation phase were assessed, including options for longer-term management. No significant long-term impacts were identified, however the following implementation methods will be adopted.

Planting will not utilise plastic tree tubes due to landfill and short-term landscape impact. Deer fencing will be avoided where possible to prevent access obstruction to both visitors and other mammals, and may also be perceived as negative impact on internal aesthetic appeal.

Soils inversion techniques for establishing wild flowers would have potentially a significant impact on archaeology, requiring further mitigation.

Archaeology

The archaeological investigations to date have identified a number of significant buried remains. Significance is based on sensitivity of archaeology, the potential of finding archaeology within areas of the site, and the damage potential the various project elements.

The process of planting trees and creating meadows is not considered a significant impact on either scattered finds, buried remains and buried artefacts. However, root growth, whilst little evidence exists on the actual impacts, are considered to potentially have an increasing significant impact on archaeology underground, particularly when natural regeneration or direct seeding is proposed due to high density of plants in the early stages. Soil inversion techniques for ground preparation, either for tree planting or meadow creation will be potentially significant, negative and permanent, and require further mitigation if used.

Long-term damage from visitor and vehicle pressure is identified as potentially significant due to top soil erosion.

Mitigation is generally through further investigations in risk areas, leaving areas as open space, and reducing planting density or using shallow rooting shrubs in required areas.

Landscape

The impacts on landscape can be considered somewhat subjective depending on the individual's perception and values placed on the landscape. The project will, however, significantly change an area of the landscape on a permanent basis from a predominantly arable one, to a wooded one. The assessment set out to identify sensitivities in the landscape character, and in the way it is visualised by people.

A dry valley area to the north-west was identified as being of landscape importance. A dry valley area to the NW was identified as being of landscape importance. It is within a landscape conservation area, is sensitive to landscape change and will be left mainly open.

Internal views, previously unavailable due to access restrictions, and views over Sandridge village from higher positions within the site, were identified as important. These will be protected by clump planting and the use of lower-growing species in sensitive areas.

The impact locally is predicted to be significant because woodland close to the roads could create a vastly different character to the area as viewed by people living in, and passing through the landscape. Shrubs and open space will be included along road edges to reduce excessive shading and retain a sense of openness.

Flora and Fauna

The surveys, consultation and advice received did not raise any significant negative impacts on flora and fauna either on-site, adjacent or within the local area. The largest impacts are identified as being generally positive and positive. Short-term impacts through the implementation phase tended to be neutral due to the young age of the habitat not having developed structure, or were identified as negative impacts of low significance.

The level of impact significance was based on the value of the conservation feature involved in terms of designations, protection, size and rarity; the magnitude based on the amount of habitat gain or loss and the potential to support protected or rare species. Some low or moderate negative impacts were identified, however the majority were of higher significance and with positive impacts.

A small loss of mature hedgerow is likely if car parking and entrance proposals go ahead. Potential total loss is approx. 0.9% of the site resource and considered of low significance, as was the impact of visitors regarding disturbance to breeding birds. Approximately 700m of new hedgerow will be planted as a result of the project and paths diverted away from sensitive areas. Visitors will be asked to keep dogs under control during sensitive periods.

Pressure from visitor numbers on sensitive areas of flora, particularly within the ancient woodland is considered a potential impact, possibly requiring mitigation measures should it become an issue.

A loss of open ground area was identified as being of moderate significance for open ground species, particularly some specialist birds and butterflies, although habitat creation proposals are significant and overall biodiversity value is predicted to rapidly increase.

Population and Access

The main impact identified which was potentially significant was the impact of visitors to the local environment. The other negative impacts requiring mitigation came out either at a village level or with homes adjacent to the boundary. Positive impacts were largely associated with increased access to open access land, education and assistance with known existing localised issues.

Visitor arrival by car is potentially the largest impact at the implementation stage. Annual visitor numbers expected are in the order of 120,000 per year, largely from within the district. Whilst impact on the road from additional cars is not considered as potentially of high significance, there are a number which influenced the assessment concluding with a potentially high and negative significance overall. The potential impact on local parking spaces and the impact of this on village congestion and the daily life of the local population was therefore significant in the overall assessment. A car park and a safe, well-positioned entrance point will be provided as a result of local desire to have this additional facility. Other potential impacts of importance included:

The potential increase in crime locally – Likely to be linked to car parking areas and the impact to residential properties adjacent from a feeling of enclosure, light availability, visitors and associated potential increase in anti-social behaviour, crime and privacy. Location of car park, paths and interpretation will be important in controlling this as well as a closable car park.

Soil, Air and Water

No significant impacts were identified for any of the project stages, however there is potential that some localised flooding may receive a limited positive impact, and local air quality may be improved in places.