

ROSLISTON FORESTRY CENTRE

A STRATEGIC VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Introduction

The Rosliston Forestry Centre (RFC) is a successful partnership providing visitors with a wide range of rural experiences and activities. The principal partners (South Derbyshire District Council, Forest Enterprise and The National Forest Company) acquired the site in 1993 and have supported development of the site since that time. A wide range of features and activities has now been established and the site is well used by regular and occasional visitors. Aurora's presence on-site, in recent years, has ensured that the site operates smoothly and consistently and has enabled the successful introduction of a number of significant new features and attractions. Additionally, a special relationship has developed between the principal partners and Rolls Royce PLC. Rolls Royce PLC has provided ongoing financial support for environmental education carried out on-site and has sponsored the development of a lake and fixed outdoor activity equipment.

With visitor numbers and income growing steadily, the primary partners (ie. the principal partners plus Aurora) now wish to establish a forward strategy that will ensure that the site continues to be successful in the future. A long-term strategy will guide future developments and assist in prioritisation and in short-term decision-making. This will put the long-term stability and viability of the site on a surer footing, matching increasing expectations from visitors to an already successful National Forest and responding to competition from other sites. The partners recognise the developing opportunity provided by the maturing landscape of the site and wish to maximise the potential to attract further funding and sponsorship, eg. to improve the quality and functionality of buildings.

This paper provides a summary of key observations and strategic recommendations for the future development of the site and its uses. The material has been collected via discussions with partners and users of the site and from visits to other, forestry-related, sites within the UK (see Appendix 1).

Summary

The Rosliston Forestry Centre is slowly but surely maturing into a significant visitor attraction within The National Forest, the South Derbyshire district and the West Midlands forestry district. A simple analysis of the site shows that value is delivered to visitors via 2 primary means;

- Features (ie. value is inherent in the physical features of the site) and
- Activities (ie. value is provided by special interest groups for whom the site is an appropriate setting for their activities).

The primary partners have declared their strategic aims for the site. A number of themes have emerged consistent with National Forest principles of: -

- Sustainable development
- Environmental improvement
- Leisure and recreation
- Rural economy

The primary partners also share a number of key values, ie: -

- Quality
- Integration
- Partnership
- Public support

The site is relatively small and is still physically maturing but it has considerable potential. However, other sites are emerging nearby and will eventually take potential and actual visitors away from RFC if the site is not continuously improved.

A programme of work is necessary to ensure that long-term viability of the site is maintained and, indeed, improved so that the site becomes and remains self-sustaining. Improvement should be focussed on the major themes and values expressed by the partners.

Analysis

The RFC site covers 62 hectares and includes the land, buildings, features and activities contained within the physical boundaries of land owned by the partners. The site consists of 58 hectares of woodland and meadow and includes a variety of trails and conservation features (eg. lake, ponds, hedges, flower meadow, etc). Another 4 hectares provides a car park, site buildings for visitors and equipment, a bungalow, a leisure/play area, café/restaurant and retail/craft shops. Local visitors enter the site, on foot and free of charge, via a number of access points positioned around the site. Other visitors enter the site via the car park for which there is a nominal charge or on a local bus that stops on-site. There is no overnight accommodation on-site other than a bungalow for the private use of Aurora.

There are many physical features of the site that can be accessed by the casual visitor at no cost (other than a bus ticket or car-parking fee). However, the site provides an excellent setting for other specific activities and events organised by special interest groups. These normally involve additional charges to visitors and are usually supervised by members of the special interest group.

Care must be taken to ensure that features and activities on-site are optimised in the contribution they make, are sustainable and do not conflict with those provided at other sites nearby. Additionally and in particular, features should take due account of vulnerable people with special needs. Likewise, activities should encourage participation and working partnership.

Strengths

- The RFC site is well situated within a scenic valley and is close to the resources of Rosliston village and the nearby towns of Swadlincote and Burton-on-Trent.
- The partnership is a source of considerable expertise and resource.
- The site has developed a good reputation for environmental education, out-of-school activities, inclusive access and all-ability trails and complements other visitor sites nearby.
- Visitors feel safe on-site and say that the environment and wildlife is interesting and varied.
- The site is also well known as a venue for a diverse range of outdoor and indoor activities and functions for people of differing ages, abilities and interests.
- Visitor numbers have gradually increased in recent years, except during the Foot and Mouth epidemic. Income has been increasing steadily.
- The site is currently served by local public transport.

Weaknesses

1. Poor quality information about the site, it's raison d'être, it's context and it's relationship with The National Forest.
2. Lack of focussed marketing/advertising.
3. Poor quality approach through the main entrance, driveway and car park.
4. Inappropriate appearance/design of buildings.
5. Lack of diversity in woodland/forestry features and vistas (within and from the site).
6. Inconsistency in the type and quality of features and activities across the site.
7. Inadequate income to cover site operating costs.
8. Lack of an agreed strategy for development of the site.

Threats

1. Lack of improvement to the site could lead to a reduction in visitor numbers and income.
2. Lack in understanding of the visitor market could adversely affect visitor numbers.
3. Inadequately researched or implemented improvements could become a potential drain on operating costs.
4. Independent development of nearby attractions (eg. Conkers, Beehive Farm and Chapman's garden centre) could adversely affect visitor numbers.
5. The relatively small size of the site might limit potential for improvement.

Opportunities

1. Capital and revenue funding for appropriate purposes is potentially available from a number of sources.
2. The nearby village of Rosliston could provide a good supply of volunteers to support RFC operations.
3. Themes should be developed that are of direct interest to established environmental groups or local heritage groups.
4. Availability of on-site accommodation would allow expansion of on-site activities (eg. Education).
5. Through improvement and maturity, the site could become a gateway to The National Forest.
6. Local housing developments at Branston and Drakelow (should they occur) could provide a boost to visitor numbers.

Partner Strategic Aims

Each of the primary partners has clear strategic aims for the site. The challenge is to find a way of meeting these consistently. They are: -

- NFC** To promote itself as part of The National Forest and a demonstration of the objectives and themes of The National Forest.
To demonstrate the social, economic and environmental benefits of multi-purpose forestry.
To provide a high quality visitor attraction, noted for its customer care, that is a credit to The National Forest as a tourism experience.
To continue to be innovative in meeting current social needs and political priorities.
To balance meeting social needs with maximising income opportunities with the aim of operating, at least, at break-even.
To build on the RFC's excellent reputation for environmental education on site and develop its potential as an exemplar project for elsewhere in The National Forest and beyond, through IT and other means.
- SDDC** To support the development of The National Forest by providing one of The National Forest's principle rural visitor centres in South Derbyshire.
To create a leisure facility that provides high quality experiences and opportunities for local people and visitors alike.
To provide opportunities for improvement in the quality of life of people through promotion of health and environmental activities.
To balance meeting community needs with maximising income potential with the aim of achieving sustainable financial operation.
- FE** To provide a community woodland with high quality access and diverse recreation facilities to suit all abilities.
To engage communities and visitors and, through education, raise awareness of environmental issues.
To further develop woodland diversity and the conservation potential within the site, especially in hedgerows, flower meadows and ponds.
To work with partners to increase the social value of the community forest through the delivery of government objectives such as improved health and inclusion
- AUR** To provide creative opportunities, on-site, that empower vulnerable groups and individuals to improve their health and learning.
To ensure that income generated is adequate to cover expenditure including acceptable levels of pay and the potential exists to make a profit
To develop the site in line with the wishes and strategies of the Partners, whilst having their support and input.
To ensure that the ethos of the site exemplifies leisure, education, forestry, community and high quality delivery.

Rolls Royce PLC has also expressed a strong interest in the future development of RFC and has asked that the company's community strategic aims be born in mind:-

- R-R To deliver the Company's Community Investment priorities, particularly in the area of education and the environment and to be able to deliver reportable outputs and demonstrate a good 'return on investment'
- To deliver the Company's Education Policy – by helping to raise standards; promoting science and technology; raising the profile of Rolls-Royce with schools in the area
- To provide opportunities to develop Company employees by working with a community partner
- To support the development of an environmental community facility/resource
- To support the development of new environmental habitats, to be used as an educational resource

Themes

RFC can already be distinguished from other nearby sites by the extent to which visitors interact with other people on-site (via spontaneous or organised activities and events) and directly with the site itself. An overarching theme of changing peoples' lives emerges strongly from the strategic aims of the partners. A number of other generic themes are also apparent. These are important to the scope, ethos and atmosphere of the site, ie.

- Access
- Sustainability
- People
- Activity
- Experience
- Challenge
- Opportunity.

A number of specific themes should feature strongly in the features and activities of the site, ie.

- The National Forest
- Forestry
- Diverse woodlands and habitats
- Environmental education
- Environmental conservation
- Tourism
- Visitor attraction
- Health and learning
- Leisure and life-style
- Recreation
- Social inclusion and opportunity

The site's features and activities currently address many of these themes well but for some, e.g. National Forest, Visitor attraction and Tourism, there is need and scope for further development.

Values

The principal partners consistently express a number of values that will determine the ethos of the site. These are: -

Quality

Quality is the ability to meet partner and user expectations. The overall quality of the site is determined by the quality of the physical features of the site, of the organised visitor activities and of the management and customer service provided. Visitors particularly like to be where the environment is

safe and meets their expectations and where a consistently high standard of customer service is provided.

Integration

Continuity and integration across, for example, vistas, habitats and recreation can enhance the value of RFC to its visitors. Individual features and activities appear to be broader and more interesting when their characteristics blend with neighbouring/associated features and activities. Further benefit can be achieved by extending integration beyond the boundaries of RFC into other sites within the Mease Lowlands and into The National Forest as a whole.

Partnership

Efficient and effective use of scarce human resources is achieved by applying expertise according to need. As a multi-functional site, a wide range of skills and knowledge, available across a number of discrete organisations, are deployed in support of RFC. To ensure that appropriate skills and knowledge continue to be deployed in a timely and effective manner, organisations associated with RFC agree and commit to basic principles of collaboration and purpose at various levels. This ensures that good linkage between policy, strategy and action exists.

Public Support

In order to develop public interest in and support for the benefits of a well-managed National Forest, public confidence is developed through personal interaction, awareness, education and experience.

Strategic Priorities

Partners feel strongly that a number of key site issues should be addressed.

1. The character of RFC should reflect and blend with The National Forest and its objectives and, in particular, be sympathetic with the Mease Lowland of which it is part. This relationship should be apparent in the physical features of the site, in the demonstrations afforded by the site, in the displays, education and opportunities available on site and in the connectivity with landscape and trails nearby.
2. The site should be a setting for community activities, providing interaction via leisure and recreation opportunities for a wide range of cultures, abilities and via a range of other special interest group activities. There should be sufficient and unique amenities and features to attract a large number of visitors, at all times of the year and in all weathers, to spend several hours on site (it may be necessary to provide shelter and suitable clothing to achieve this). The site should be zoned, each with visible purpose and management and each supported by high quality, forestry style signage. All-ability opportunity should be a key feature of the design process used for site features. There should be "something new or renewed every year" to attract return visits.
3. A marketing strategy is needed that reflects partner aims and promotes, both locally and nationally, enjoyment of and attractions at the site. RFC should feature along-side similar sites in National Forest and Forest Enterprise literature, brochures and websites.
4. The initial vehicular approach to the car park should visually reflect the values and themes of the site and should capture the imagination and interest of visitors. Car parking charges should be varied with highest charges for occasional tourists spending a long time on-site but charge concessions for regular visitors, those already contributing resources to the site or those needing a short stay only.
5. Buildings should be of high quality, should have high timber content in their construction and internal and external appearance and their style should complement the forest environment. Heat and power should be based on wood-fuel, where possible. Buildings should be used effectively, maximising visitor numbers and revenue. On-site maintenance equipment should be invisible to visitors except when in use.
6. A highly integrated and diverse outdoors environment, including developing and mature woodland, varied wildlife and multiple conservation interests, should dominate the site and should provide visitors with appropriate experiences and vistas. Advantage should be taken of the visual attributes over the valley on which the site is situated.
7. Environmental education, health and well-being should feature strongly on site to ensure that the nearby urban population can learn about, as well as experience, benefits of the rural environment.

8. Special interest groups should be encouraged to use appropriate settings within the site for their activities (and be charged accordingly). Commercial/retail activities should relate strongly to the partner themes identified above.
9. Accommodation would encourage extended stays in the area enabling visitors to enjoy other attractions nearby and further afield within The National Forest. The feasibility of providing timber cabins on-site should be demonstrated and an appropriate operational/financial model developed.

Specifically, the following should be included:-

1. A vehicular approach to the site through an attractive woodland setting.
2. A striking, all-weather visitor centre with facility for indoor features and an attraction in its own right. A building or container for housing maintenance equipment and for material storage.
3. A restaurant with indoor and outdoors catering for families and groups, providing opportunity for a range of high quality natural foods and featuring themed days and events.
4. Activity displaying/demonstrating: -
 - a. Partner aims for the RFC site, of The National Forest and its objectives and of modern forestry.
 - b. Best practice forestry, including woodland management and woodland product use, eg. Wood-fuel and charcoal burning.
 - c. The intrinsic practical and artistic value of timber and its products.
 - d. The dependence of the rural economy on forestry.
5. A demonstration of developing woodland, including: -
 - a. Attractive and useful species at differing stages within their life cycle,
 - b. Wetlands and other habitats and specific conservation features (e.g. ponds, hedges and flower meadow).
 - c. Themed glades, avenues and rest areas that are attractive and provide unique interest,
 - d. Settings and novel features of forestry unique, within 1 hour travelling distance, to RFC (e.g. woodland colours; treetop trails; birds-of-prey; linear arboretum; etc).
6. Linear trails of sufficient length and linking interesting features to keep visitors on-site for a number of hours and in all weathers. Shelter, facilities and equipment (including clothing) hire to enable cycling and walking in all weathers on-site and to/from the site.
7. All-weather facilities suitable for appropriate on-site education, retail, corporate, craft and related ventures (eg. childcare, play, special interest clubs, etc) and including: -
 - a. An outdoors display area suitable for outdoors events.
 - b. A waterproof, accurate and up-to-date site map should be available, consistent with high quality, forestry-style signage around the site.
8. Site development activity should be visible to visitors and should stimulate interest.

Specific Site Activities

To meet strategic aims, activities on the site must:-

- Contribute, in a balanced way, to the themes identified above,
- Encourage people from a wide range of social and ethnic groups to visit the site,
- Attract visitors throughout the year,
- Encourage visitors to remain on-site for several hours.
- Provide services on the basis of no net cost to partners.

Due consideration must be given to the changes that will occur at RFC over time. The woodland will gradually mature, urban development will occur nearby (eg. at Drakelow and Branston) and social and political priorities will move on. As such, the balance of activities will need to change in sympathy. Care should be taken to ensure that change is managed effectively and continuously, if gradually. In particular, it is important that RFC should continue to introduce urban communities to the rural environment, providing awareness and education and developing public confidence in the value of The National Forest.

Activities are normally organised and supervised by any one of a number of groups with specific and common interest and who choose to use facilities and features of the site as an appropriate setting. Such groups may need specific facilities or features to be provided locally within the site. Activities might

include education, exhibitions, catering, retailing, crafts, concerts, drama and special interest clubs. There may be an additional site charge to organising groups who may then pass on costs (with an appropriate mark-up) to end-users.

Appendix 2 shows lists of current and potential activities. Each item on these lists must be assessed, by the management team, in terms of contribution to one or more of the identified themes and likely financial return to the site and should be prioritised accordingly. From this process, it will be possible to assess where changes to existing activities are required and where new activities are necessary.

Other Considerations

It is recommended that a study be carried out of the existing and potential artistic value of the site and the benefits that can be attributed to this. The study should also consider the value to the site of artistic products, features and exhibitions, particularly associated with The National Forest, the on-site woodland and wood products.

Consideration should be given to setting up a "Visitor/tourism forum" (eg. Rosliston could become a 'show village' for The National Forest). This would provide an opportunity and incentive for the villagers and local rural businesses (eg. Beehive and Chapman's) to get together and plan a compatible way forward.

Partnership and Management

One of the key values that the principal partners aim to promote is partnership. It is, therefore, important that the management structure continues to support this. Expertise and resources of all organisations should continue to be brought to bear appropriately on the operational and improvement tasks in hand. The management structure is illustrated in Appendix 3 and should include: -

1. An Executive Group made up of representatives of the principal partners that can access resources and internal/external funds and led by the most appropriate representative.
2. An up-to-date, written strategy for the future of the site agreed and supported by the Executive Group.
3. A Management Group made up of representatives of the primary partners and led by the most appropriate partner representative.
4. An Site Users Group consisting of representatives of on-site businesses, Rosliston village and special interest groups.
5. Regular (but not necessarily often) meetings of the Management and Site Users Groups to communicate progress and to resolve outstanding issues.
6. Resourced schedules of ongoing management, maintenance and visitor activities.
7. A business plan for the site and a costed master programme showing key milestones for agreed improvement activities and progress in achieving such milestones.
8. An on-site management presence to facilitate the above and to resolve day-to-day operational problems.

Consultation

This report proposes an approach to the ongoing improvement of the RFC site and its activities. It is important that other organisations that might have overlapping strategies or that might provide funding for changes at RFC should have a chance to influence the forward strategy for the site. Similarly, there are many individuals and organisations that might be affected directly or indirectly by changes to the site that may wish to influence how that strategy is implemented. As such, a two-pronged approach will be taken to public consultation, i.e.

1. A half-day event will be arranged to enable appropriate organisations to discuss the strategy.
2. Current planned events on-site will be modified to provide users with opportunities to share specific ideas and concerns.

A further issue of this report may be released after this consultation process.

APPENDIX 1 – SITES VISITED

Moors Valley, Dorset: - A 600 hectare site of very high quality and mature woodland (450 hectares) and parkland (150 hectares) complemented by a superb, timbered main visitor building. The approach to the site is by main road and a long drive and is complemented by mature woodland both outside and inside the main gate. Visitors include people on-holiday in and around the New Forest, locals and a relatively large number that travel a considerable distance. Outdoor activities, of very high quality, are provided although these are small in number. However, the site is developing a reputation for providing a new feature every year. An adjacent golf course helps to maintain a break-even income of around £1m per year. There are about 15 permanent staff. The main "problem" for the site stems from its success, ie. visitors are often turned away. As with RFC, the District Council and Forest Enterprise, who suffer from the lack of a long-term strategy, jointly own the site.

Westonbirt National Arboretum, Gloucestershire: - A 250-hectare site with a wealth of interesting and mature trees of all kinds and with clear zoning. The approach is primarily via a main road and surrounding grassland and trees superbly enhance a long drive. There is a garden centre on site and the main, extensively timbered visitor buildings are superb, with the more recent featuring under-floor heating. It is expensive to enter the site but this doesn't seem to stop the visitors from streaming in. Major events are organised on-site, each attracting 1000's of people. Visitor numbers of 250,000 tend to peak in spring and autumn. The site is wholly owned and operated by Forest Enterprise together with a very active "Friends" organisation in support.

Two small forestry centres in North Wales:- High quality centres but with very limited facilities. However, they have direct access to high quality and mature woodland. Each has a major and unique theme.

Birches Valley, Cannock Chase:- Head quarters of the West Midlands region of Forest Enterprise who manage large areas of woodland on the chase. This is a small but pleasant site naturally promoting high quality and professional forestry.

Heart of the Country Visitor Centre, Staffordshire:- A site, developed from farm buildings, providing high quality catering and retail (predominantly country/craft related) outlets.

Kingsbury Water Park:- A large collection of lakes providing numbers purposes including walking/cycling, a wide variety of water sports, catering, conservation sites and caravan/camping.

Wyre Forest Visitor Centre, Worcestershire:- to be arranged.

APPENDIX 2 - ACTIVITIES

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

Archery club
Art - drawing and water colours
Art - drawing/painting/cartooning
Art - kids
Astronomy club
Barbecues
Basketball
Bears & dolls
Bird club
Birds of prey displays
Butterflies
Carriage rides
Catering
Children's parties
Conkers
Craft club
Crazy golf
Cycling/cycle hire
Dolls houses
Environmental education
Functions and receptions
Kids craft
Models and hobbies
Out-of-school child care
Picnics
Pond dipping
Rubber stamps
Seed gathering
Soft crafts
Soft play
Tree planting
Walk - bats
Walk - birds
Walk - guided
Walk - Halloween
Walk - Xmas
Walking the way to health
Wheel-chair hire
Wildlife talk
Wood crafts
Work opportunities - New Deal
Xmas tree sales

POTENTIAL ACTIVITIES

Accommodation
Bonsai
Botany
Caring for pets
Conservation methods
Festivals - themed
Fishing
Forest fairs
Forestry and wood use education
High quality food outlet
Life-long learning
Music concerts - themed
Orienteering
Outdoor clothing (buy/hire)
Outdoor pursuits eg tree walking
Photography
Pyrography
Sculpture
Site improvement projects
Story-telling
Themed cultural events
Wood craft
Woodland management

APPENDIX 3 – MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

