

NORTH DUDLEY AREA COMMITTEE – 24TH JUNE 2009

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

REPORT ON RIPPLES THROUGH TIME – WREN'S NEST NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE, HERITAGE LOTTERY FUND

Purpose of Report

1. To update the Committee on progress of Ripples through Time and provide details the proposals for enhanced access, education and interpretation within the Wren's Nest National Nature Reserve (NNR).

Background

2. Wren's Nest NNR, a mile from Dudley town centre, is a hidden asset of international significance, entwined with the rise of Dudley and the Black Country as the 'workshop' of the world. It was the first urban national nature reserve for geology in the UK and in 2004, along with Castle Hill was declared a Scheduled Monument for its Limestone workings.
3. The NNR is a premier educational site for all ages, teaching the principles of stratigraphy and palaeontology. In essence the site bridges the natural history and industrial heritage disciplines, linked by the people who worked in the mines from within the communities of the Black Country. It is also an extremely important 'green lung' within a densely populated urban area.
4. Members will recall the Black Country Urban Park came second in the Big Lottery Funds £50m Peoples Millions TV Competition held in December 2007. *Ripples through Time* is the first phase of realising the long-term vision for the Wren's Nest NNR and also supporting the renaissance of Dudley town centre as detailed in the Regional Spatial Strategy.
5. The long-term vision for the NNR is :

"To realise the diverse potential of Wren's Nest for natural and cultural heritage and conserve its features of international, national and local importance for future generations."
6. The overall project objectives are to:
 - Conserve and enhance Wren's Nest NNR, its canal links, geology, natural history, unique mining features and infrastructure and allow safe access to them

- Raise awareness of the natural and cultural heritage of Wren's Nest NNR and its role in the development of the Black Country
- Create a visitor experience that acts as a catalyst for the regeneration of the Black Country, its visitor economy and the local area
- Increase local resident's appreciation and use of the Wren's Nest area

Heritage Lottery Fund Proposals

7. In September 2008, the Council received a Stage 1 pass from the Heritage Lottery Fund for nearly £800,000 for the *Ripples through Time* project, which includes a development grant of £88,500. The overall project cost of the five year project is approximately £1.1million.
8. A 'Stage 1 Pass' means that money has been earmarked by HLF for the project, and while a Stage One Pass does not guarantee funding, it is an indication of positive support, and that the money for the scheme is set aside by HLF. This therefore means that Dudley MBC is able to progress to Stage Two and submit a further, fully developed application to secure the full grant, which we hope to do in June 2009.
9. *Ripples through Time* will contribute to the key objectives in paragraph 6 through three main areas of work – improving the physical access to and around the NNR; enhancing the interpretation of the NNR and developing a creative learning programme, including the employment of a Learning & Community Development Officer to encourage additional visits, both formal and informal; and engaging with volunteers and visitors in a series of walks, events and training programmes.

Access enhancements

10. The project proposes a series of access enhancements around the site – including key entrance points. A series of walks will be defined and way-markers will be installed to enable visitors to follow pre-defined routes, based on their particular interest –
 - the easy Access highlights walk – to key features such as the Ripple Beds, Quarry and Fossil Trench and Seven Sisters Mine
 - Abraham Darby Walk– archaeological heritage
 - Murchison's Walk – geological heritage
 - Wardens Walk – a walk of the whole NNR
11. Paths around the NNR will be given an 'access' grading with appropriate physical improvements made to access points, gradients of paths and rebuilding of step flights. The designations are
 - Level 1 – accessible to all
 - Level 2 – suitable for mobility scooters and pushchairs
 - Level 3 – easy walking
 - Level 4 – some level of difficulty

12. In total, over the four year programme it is planned that;

- approximately 350 steps will be replaced
- 140m of handrails installed
- 8 entrances improved
- resurfacing of 1000m of paths and
- replacement of 750m of fencing.

Seven Sisters Mine

13. The Seven Sisters mine is one of the key features on the site, and when consulting on the proposals for the first time, was the one area that visitors requested unrestricted access to.

14. Therefore, the proposals will enable visitors to gain unrestricted access to the Seven Sisters viewing area. The existing level of the viewing area will be re-graded with the addition of two new viewing platforms at the southern and northern ends of the mine. The fencing currently restricting access to the Seven Sisters will be removed, although some safety fencing around sensitive areas will remain in place.

Interpretation & Learning

15. Interpretation of the NNR will be significantly enhanced through the provision of integrated, site-wide interpretation. Eight new welcome boards will be erected at key entrances, with a series of smaller interpretation installations around the site at key locations

16. The plans include the development of learning resources including on-site and outreach programmes, a dedicated website and downloadable learning packages (including podcasts) while expanded guided walks, talks and special events will also be developed, providing opportunities for visitors to learn more about the site.

17. A key element of the proposals is to engage more effectively with the local community, volunteers and education groups.

18. The project proposes the appointment of a Learning & Community Development Officer. In addition to delivering the education programme, the officer will encourage the development of volunteers and a forum where interested groups and individuals can become more involved in the development of the site.

19. The Learning & Community Development Officer will also develop a programme to train outreach workers to enhance the capacity for delivering new walks and talks for visitors or groups, while a training programme will be established, working with individuals, local community groups and the friends of Wren's Nest NNR on a range of subject areas such as environmental management, hedge-laying and step/fence installation.

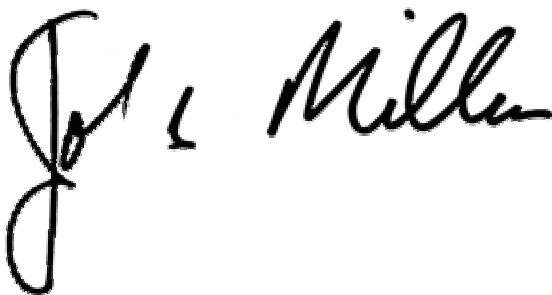
Conclusion and Next Steps

20. Consultation on the revised design proposals are being held between May and June 2009, with a planned submission to HLF late June 2009. A Stage 2 approval from HLF is expected in September 2009, with work beginning on site in March 2010.
21. A small exhibition detailing the proposals will be held at the Area Committee meeting, enabling members and the public to view the proposals and make any comments. Additional consultation events will be held with interest groups and members of the public over May and June 2009.
22. *Ripples through Time* provides a fantastic opportunity to combine an environmental regeneration project with education and community engagement, enabling us to celebrate the unique stories of the geology, archaeology and heritage of Dudley and the Black Country. The involvement of individuals and organisations is paramount in the success of the project and we urge the whole community to get involved in the project.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Area Committee :-

- Records its support for the Ripples through Time project and recommends that the Cabinet Member for Environment and Culture makes arrangements for the submission of the Stage 2 Heritage Lottery Fund application.
- Actively promotes the project to local communities to engage in the activities, events and learning opportunities the Ripples through Time project will bring to the National Nature Reserve.



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