

DUDLEY LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

Ripples Through Time – Wren’s Nest National Nature Reserve Heritage Lottery Fund

Purpose of Report

1. To update the Forum on progress of the Wren’s Nest HLF project and provide details the proposals for enhanced access, education and interpretation within the 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 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 social foundation of the communities of the Black Country. It is also an extremely important ‘green lung’ within a densely populated urban area.
4. *Ripples through Time* is the first phase of realising the long-term vision for Wren’s Nest NNR, which is;
5. "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. The overall project cost is approximately £1.1million.
8. *Ripples through Time* will contribute 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

9. 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
10. 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
11. 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

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

14. 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
15. The development of learning resources including on-site and outreach programmes, website, downloadable learning packages (including podcast) and expanded guided walks, talks and special events will also be developed, providing opportunities for visitors to learn more about the site.
16. A key element of the proposals is to engage more effectively with the local community, volunteers and education groups.
17. 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.
18. 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

19. Consultation on the proposals will be held between May and June 2009, with a planned submission to HLF late June 2009. A decision from HLF is expected in September 2009, with work beginning on site in March 2010.
20. Ripples through Time provides a unique opportunity to combine a unique environmental site with education and interpretation of the stories 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, including the Local Access Forum get involved in the project.
21. The Discover Dudley weekend is being held over the weekend of the 6th and 7th June 2009. As part of this weekend, the Friends of Wren's Nest NNR are holding an Open Day at Wren's Nest on the Saturday, 10.30am – 2.30pm. The security gates for the Seven Sisters mines will be opened for those wishing to find out more about the project. For further information visit the website – www.discoverdudley.org.uk

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