

Charnwood Forest Regional Park

Topic Paper 1 : Origins and Objectives

Origins of the Charnwood Forest Regional Park

Planning reports and policies recognising Charnwood Forest as a distinctive and special area date back to the 1930s when the *Leicestershire Regional Planning Report* of 1932 proposed Charnwood Forest as a National Park.

The 1945 *Dower Report* on National Parks in England and Wales included Charnwood Forest in the category of 'Other Amenity Areas' not suggested as National Parks but as areas of landscape beauty, which merited some form of national level protection in the future. The 1947 *Hobhouse Report* of the National Parks Committee also included Charnwood Forest as an area potentially worthy of national level protection.

After completion of the National Parks Designation Programme in 1957, the National Parks Commission turned its attention to the designation of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), using as an initial guide, the Hobhouse list. The threat posed to Charnwood Forest by the proposed M1 motorway brought forward consideration of the area as an AONB by the Commission. During 1958/59 it received three reports with differing views on its suitability. After reviewing these reports the Commission determined in 1960 that, in the light of the decision of the Ministry of Transport to build the M1 through the area, it should be deleted from the list of areas for consideration as AONBs.

By the early 1970s the programme of AONB designations was well on the way to completion. During 1971-73 the Countryside Commission established a review process for those Hobhouse listed areas that remained undesignated. The 1960 decision on Charnwood Forest was briefly reviewed and confirmed as part of this process.

Further investigations into the possibility of AONB status were made by the County Council in the late 1990s/early 2000s. However the Countryside Agency had advised the Government in 1998 that there should be a reluctance to designate any further AONBs and the indications were that any attempt to seek designation would be lengthy, expensive and have no guarantee of success.

In the absence of a protective designation, planning policies were put in place, through the county *Structure Plan* and the several *Local Plans* for the area, to help reduce development pressures on the Charnwood Forest area. Until 2005 the *Structure Plan* contained a policy, which recognised parts of

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the county, including the whole of Charnwood Forest, as Areas of Particularly Attractive Countryside (APACs). This local level designation was also picked up in *Local Plan* policies. From 2005 onwards the *Structure Plan*, in line with Government guidance, adopted a policy which took a landscape character based approach.

With the loss of the *Structure Plan* in 2008 and the requirement for local planning authorities to prepare *Local Development Frameworks*, planning policy in relation to Charnwood Forest entered a new phase.

The continuing importance of Charnwood Forest at a strategic level was recognised in the *Draft East Midlands Regional Plan* in 2006 and the subsequent final version of the *East Midlands Regional Plan* in March 2009. The latter stated in the supporting text to Policy 31 (Priorities for the Management and Enhancement of the Region's Landscape) that there are a number of areas in the region, in particular Sherwood, Charnwood and Rockingham Forests, where the distinctive landscape character and the scale of ecological, historic and woodland interest combine to create areas that are special to the people of the East Midlands.

Policy 31 proposed the protection and enhancement of the region's landscapes through measures including the promotion of initiatives to protect and enhance the particular character of Charnwood Forest. Policy Three Cities SRS 5 (Green Infrastructure and the National Forest) established the Charnwood Forest Regional Park as a strategic priority for green infrastructure in the sub-region.

The abolition of the Regional Plan by the Coalition Government in 2010 means the loss of these policies, although the evidence base upon which they were founded still stands.

The *6Cs Strategic Green Infrastructure Strategy and Action Plan* (May 2010) has identified Charnwood Forest as a strategic Green Infrastructure asset within the sub-region.

Topic Paper 2 looks in more detail at the planning process in relation to Charnwood Forest Regional Park.

Regional Parks

The concept of regional open spaces was pioneered by Abercrombie's *Greater London Plan* of 1944 and has been supported since that time throughout the country in regional and sub-regional policy. Regional parks are also well established entities in other parts of Europe.

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However, there is no defined template or set of criteria for a Regional Park. Regional Parks are spatial entities based on a set of aims and objectives, which will vary from park to park. Regional Parks are not statutory designations and therefore they do not have the same level of prominence or protection as National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Proposed development within regional parks is subject to the usual planning procedures.

By their nature the reasons for establishing Regional Parks are diverse, with an equally diverse range of objectives and visions. Common elements of Regional Park visions include:

- Working with partners to promote connectivity and co-operation
- Capitalising on a unique sense of place
- Consistency in approach across the an area
- Interconnectivity
- Enhancing the visitor economy
- Improving branding and identity
- Improving quality of life and sense of purpose for residents and visitors,
- Regeneration and economic development
- Increasing economic competitiveness.

The vision and objectives of a regional park can be achieved through a number of mechanisms which may include:

- Contributions through the spatial planning process (eg. promoting and controlling development to that which is consistent with the objectives and vision);
- Positive land management including working with private landowners, promoting (and funding?) Environmental Stewardship Programmes and working with voluntary organisations such as wildlife trusts
- Influencing the activities, including funding programmes, of other public sector organisations such as the County Council, Natural England and DEFRA

The River Nene Regional Park was been established in Northamptonshire in 2004. Like the areas around Leicester, Nottingham and Derby (the 6Cs), the Northampton area is allocated as a Growth Point and the RNRP proposal grew out of the need to balance the demands of development with the needs of conservation. The core themes of the RNRP are :

- Project enabling
- Placemaking
- Being a centre of excellence for environmental initiatives and innovation
- Being a champion for green infrastructure (GI) across the region
- Enabling carbon offsetting and addressing climate change

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A Sherwood Forest Regional Park in Nottinghamshire is at a similar stage of development to Charnwood Forest Regional Park.

The flexible nature of the regional park concept provides an opportunity to tailor the objectives and delivery of Charnwood Forest Regional Park to the area's unique qualities and pressures.

Rationale for a Charnwood Forest Regional Park

As discussed above, the *East Midlands Regional Plan (2009)* included a proposed Charnwood Forest Regional Park as a strategic priority. The plan described Charnwood Forest, along with other sub-regional natural and cultural assets, as an area in need of protection and enhancement to further develop the distinctiveness of the sub-region and to provide public benefit in terms of improved quality of life, increased biodiversity and support for the sub-regional economy.

The County Council's adopted *Minerals Development Framework* and *Waste Development Framework* each contain a specific policy for Charnwood Forest. The adopted *Hinckley & Bosworth Core Strategy* (December 2009) contains a specific policy (Policy 22) for Charnwood Forest.

The *6Cs Green Infrastructure (GI) Strategy* (July 2010) identifies Charnwood Forest as a key strategic GI asset at the sub-regional level and supports its future role as a regional park.

In all of the above documents the rationale for a Charnwood Forest Regional Park is linked to the levels of growth anticipated for the region over the next 15-20 years. In Leicestershire a considerable proportion of this growth will be around Leicester, Loughborough and Coalville, all on the fringes of Charnwood Forest.

In October 2008 the *Charnwood Forest Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment* was published. This study was commissioned by Leicestershire County Council from TEP environmental consultants in order to provide a robust landscape character based foundation to inform the development of plans and policies for Charnwood Forest.

The study included a critical examination of the range of Charnwood Forest boundaries in existence and the recommendation of a preferred boundary for a Regional Park. It also identified the special and distinctive qualities of Charnwood Forest which might be used to shape the objectives of a Regional Park ie :

- High biodiversity value
- Highly distinctive landscape
- Large surrounding population

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- Need for landscape management

These were reflected in the vision and objectives subsequently developed for the Park.

Establishment of a Charnwood Forest Regional Park

In June 2007, in the light of the regional park proposal in the *Draft East Midlands Regional Plan*, the County Council organised a conference to seek the views of organisations with interests in Charnwood Forest on possible options for the future of the area. Conference attendees were encouraged to register for a stakeholder database which has been used to organise subsequent follow-up events, consultations and mailings.

Immediately following the conference, an officer level steering group was established and held its first meeting in July 2007. The background to the meeting was the approaching loss of the *Structure Plan* and the need for the three district local authorities, and the County Council through its *Minerals and Waste Development Frameworks*, to develop consistent policies for Charnwood Forest.

To date this has been the main, although not sole, purpose of this group. The membership of the group currently comprises representatives of :

- Leicestershire County Council
- North West Leicestershire District Council
- Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council
- Charnwood Borough Council
- National Forest Company
- Natural England
- Government Office East Midlands (GOEM)
- English Heritage

The East Midlands Regional Assembly (emra) and its successor East Midlands Councils was also represented until the loss of the latter's Regional Planning Team in June 2010.

A *Draft Vision Statement* for the regional park was prepared by the officer steering group and was open for stakeholder consultation between 28th November 2008 and 14th February 2009. Stakeholder responses informed the preparation of a *Revised Vision Statement* which has been endorsed by all four local authorities covering the area.

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Vision and Objectives

The endorsed *Vision Statement* sets out the following Vision and Objectives for the Regional Park :

Vision

The unique natural and cultural heritage features of Charnwood Forest will be managed and promoted through the Charnwood Forest Regional Park. The Regional Park will be recognised as an essential part of the growing communities in the Derby, Leicester and Nottingham area, now and in the future.

Objectives

- ***To manage and promote landscape and settlement character, including biodiversity, geodiversity and cultural and industrial heritage features.***
- ***To promote sustainable leisure and tourism.***
- ***To support agricultural diversification and woodland and rural economy uses which respect local character.***

Next steps

The *Vision Statement* recognises that the establishment and development of a Charnwood Forest Regional Park will be a long term project which will involve large and small scale schemes, public and private landowners, and existing and new projects. It will require the preparation of a Regional Park Strategy and Action Plan to provide the framework for the long term development of the actions proposed to achieve the vision for the Park.

Topic Paper 1 is the first of a series of papers which together will summarise the current position and map out the future direction for the Charnwood Forest Regional Park.

¹ Policy 31: Priorities for the management and enhancement of the Region's Landscape

² Policy Three Cities SRS 5: Green infrastructure and the national forest

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