

CHAPTER 5 - Community

Aims:

- **Ensure the participation of local people from all sectors of society, particularly those disadvantaged and excluded, in planning and developing and using the Forest.**
- **Develop the concept of primary environmental care as a means of ensuring the Forest is sustainable in the long term.**
- **Ensure equality of access and use of the Forest is promoted.**
- **Encourage and support local communities to adopt and manage land for people and wildlife.**
- **Ensure that the Forest is integrated into the delivery of Local Agenda 21.**

5.1 The key theme of the forest is 'community'. This term encompasses the fullest definition, including urban, rural, inner city, farming, business, minority ethnic, single-interest communities and so on. As many groups and individuals as possible need to be engaged in the Forest in some way, as owners, users, organisers, contributors or supporters. Groups and individuals should encompass as wide an age range as possible, and the first aim is to offer something 'from cradle to grave'. The Forest offers the means for individuals and communities to take an increasing interest in, and practical steps towards, the sustainability of the environment in which they live and work. By fulfilling a role of primary environmental care, realising the impact of their lives on the environment and taking action to minimise that impact, they can work towards more sustainable lifestyles. For the Forest to succeed and to become a true asset for the wider community, a strong community-centred approach will be needed, ensuring that those groups currently excluded from sharing and enjoying the Forest are targeted for assistance. Helping build and develop the capacity of communities to identify, implement and manage their own solutions will be a major role for partners.

5.2 Equality of access, particularly for the disabled and those who find obstacles such as stiles difficult to negotiate, will be important in ensuring that the Forest meets the needs of all sections of the community. Involving people with impaired mobility in designing and testing facilities will be instrumental in achieving this aim.

5.3 The Forest must develop local partnerships and encourage working together, whilst recognising that this cannot be a substitute for large-scale, professional resources. Communities should be involved in planning, designing, implementing and the after-care of their local Forest facilities, but not be relied upon as a cheap alternative simply because of resource difficulties. The relationship between communities and the Forest partners will be a true test of the partnership approach. Innovative techniques for supporting local communities will be developed and shared and a variety of opportunities will be created for people to contribute to the Forest's development through voluntary action.

5.4 A large proportion of the urban and town population does not make use of the countryside and the informal recreation opportunities already on offer in the Forest area. Tradition, a lack of awareness and poor facilities are all important contributory factors to this exclusion. Perhaps the most important reason is the degree of welcome and encouragement on offer. These factors are particularly acute in relation to inner city and minority ethnic groups and the Forest can play an important role in increasing the understanding and use of the countryside by people who currently have little or no experience of it. An incremental approach will be important to ensure that both rural and urban communities are reassured and involved in the process of education and understanding. City farms are well placed to act as links in this chain.

5.5 The use of the local Forest by local people will also be a key to its success. The existing resource should prove a useful indicator of future demand, but, increasingly, people are less confident than in the past in using the woodlands and open spaces that already exist. Recent research indicates that many people are reluctant to use woods and open spaces because of the risk of attack, robbery or sexual assault. Whilst this is perceived, rather than being borne out by hard information, it is nevertheless a real fear and the Forest partners face a major challenge in working with all sectors of the community to encourage the casual use and enjoyment of the outdoors for all. The design of facilities, particularly when close to urban areas, is important, as is the encouragement and support of fearful groups, aided by the presence of 'officials' and others working in the woods and open spaces. A countryside management/ranger service at specific sites could improve security at the same

CHAPTER 5 - Community

time as doing practical work, liaison with landowners and developing education and interpretation. Increased use by the community itself reduces feelings of vulnerability. The zoning of facilities will assist in providing security in some areas and a feeling of remoteness in others.

- 5.6** The relationship between the business community and the Forest will be an important partnership to forge over the coming years. The Forest can play its part in acting as a focus for continued links between the private and public sectors, helping create a more attractive setting for existing and permitted new development against stiff competition from other areas. It can also help by providing sponsorship and investment opportunities, at both Forest-wide and local levels, improving business and community links and the quality of life for all. The Forest will play an important role in providing opportunities for new small businesses and employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas, both related directly to the creation and management of the Forest. Directly, for example through tree nurseries and forest contractors, and indirectly through activities such as craft workshops, bed and breakfast facilities and cycle hire.

Proposals

- 5.7 The Forest partners will:**
- take a proactive and innovative approach to working with all segments of the community, particularly those disadvantaged and socially excluded, and encourage their involvement in its planning, creation, use and long-term care;
 - create the Forest in ways enabling local people to develop their own part in it on both local and Forest-wide bases;
 - encourage landowners, tenants, local people and communities to share in the planning and decision-making process involved in the provision of new woodland facilities;
 - consider the creation of countryside management/ranger services for parts of the Forest;
 - ensure that facilities are designed, promoted and managed to encourage safe and enjoyable use by all sectors of the public;



Planning for Real, Lawrence Weston (Photo: Forest of Avon)

- work sensitively alongside existing initiatives, encouraging them to become involved in the Forest vision though respecting their autonomy;
- work closely with the business community and employment initiatives;
- ensure a close relationship with the city farm movement and work to find effective ways of linking urban communities to the Forest, through the farms;
- involve as many local groups and voluntary organisations as possible.