

**Forest Town Nature Conservation Group (FTNCG)**  
**Chair's Rushpool Report – 12<sup>th</sup> November 2012**

Issues of disagreement between FTNCG and Mansfield District Council (MDC) Parks Department

For FTNCG, adherence to the Nottinghamshire County Council (NCC) Sherwood Habitat approved hedge mix (as circulated at the 26<sup>th</sup> September FTNCG meeting) is the correct decision for the site in order to regenerate biodiversity in harmony with features associated with the Sherwood Landscape Character Area. We find the arguments advanced by MDC in opposition to this position unconvincing. We are also unimpressed with the scorn poured upon the validity of the NCC-approved Sherwood Habitat Species List, and upon FTNCG's adoption of this list as a valid template to guide best practice in relation to both heritage and nature conservation interests.

The lack of concern as expressed by MDC regarding the impact of using machines to cut through the heart of the site, and the intention to use routine chemical spraying to manage the site with no risk assessment in respect of the potential damage to existing habitat seems to FTNCG to be irresponsible, and irreconcilable with the Group's understanding of nature conservation.

In relation to discussions about biodiversity and the hedgerows along the fencing between the back of two or three Rushpool Close properties and the site's 'meadow area', FTNCG cannot agree with MDC that it is right to plant a hedge immediately abutting the fence, rather than at the accepted distance from the fence to allow vigorous growth of the hedge as well as maintenance of both the hedge and the fences. Added to this, the removal of the diversity of the hedge and MDC's insistence on a hawthorn-dominated diversity-poor mix renders the whole exercise pointless for achieving nature conservation, biodiversity and visual amenity objectives.

FTNCG has spent many months of consultation and discussion regarding the meadow area of the site. Various conservation options, including the development of heather scrapes and traditional butterfly meadow, were fully explored. Ultimately we came to the conclusion that:

1. The heather scrapes would be an unsustainable and expensive exercise that would be fatally compromised by dog mess and community leisure usage;
2. Despite the attractiveness of a butterfly meadow, again use by dog walkers would mean it would be difficult to keep the site clean of dog mess and difficult to encourage and enforce collection of dog mess in long grass.
3. In accepting these limitations to our conservation ambitions, FTNCG decided to genuinely embrace the needs and experience of dog walkers as legitimate beneficiaries of the site as an amenity.

Therefore our site management strategy was to enhance the meadow with wild flowers that would provide a colourful show in the early spring, offering invertebrates a food source (especially bees) and that would thrive despite the dog mess, i.e. daisies, buttercups, cowslips. We had also intended to ask MDC to include the meadow in its fortnightly municipal mowing regime from May through to the end of August, so that dog walkers could use the area and could be expected to clean up after their dogs (once arrangements for bins, signs and publicity, that had already been agreed, were enacted).

Also, in keeping the meadow mowed, dogs would not be at risk of grass seeds and tics being picked up in the long grass and causing health problems.

MDC had no sympathy or interest in our plans or the reasoning that supported our plans, and instead MDC imposed a different plan on the site.

With regard to the Sandlands end of the site, eventually money was spent removing “the paths to nowhere” and I was present at the site visit with the contractor to arrange this. It was the plan that sand would be laid down over the area where the paths had been. This was the beginning of a process to seed heather scrapes in cooperation with the Sherwood Forest Trust and Oaktree SAFE. Sadly, the wrong sand mix was used on the site, and its nutrient-rich composition has set back rather than advanced the heather scrape project.

The chicane and interpretation board encouraging people to walk the “paths to nowhere” were removed as agreed, but neither MDC nor FTNCG thought hard enough or shared communications sufficient to avoid a flawed decision regarding what should replace the chicane.

A fixed barrier was used, but this immediately threw up problems for the future management of the site, not least because the barrier hampered emergency vehicle access to the site, e.g. should another fire occur, and it stopped access to a chipper on the site, which we felt we needed when coppicing gorse on that side of the site.

The main conservation value of the site lies at the centre of the south-facing slope, at present protected and surrounded by gorse. Our plan was to use carefully choreographed breaches into this area restricting our work to manual not machinery. Also, to bring in expert ecological advice on what was present in this hotspot and how best to conserve and improve that biodiversity. This was why we had asked MDC to consider investing some Section 106 money in creating a keyed barrier and hard standing on the Sandlands entrance to the site. Without this we could not see how we could do the hard manual work on the site with minimum disruption to the conservation interests.

MDC rejected this out of hand, and insisted that the whole site would be managed from the ASDA site entrance by using machines to cut through from one side of the site to the other. It was suggested by FTNCG to MDC that this was exactly the thinking that had led to the original uproar, before our Group was involved. MDC staff were cavalier in their attitude, asserting that they get complaints all the time, and that this is what they are paid for. I did point out that those disgruntled residents would include members of FTNCG and that I did not have the luxury of just provoking and then ignoring their views. No agreement was reached on this central issue. We were left to accept the limitations of the MDC plan.

FTNCG entirely rejects an ‘us and them’ mindset in relation to the site’s nearest neighbours, and we have dedicated our efforts to bringing about the best possible outcome for all concerned.

Our carefully formulated plans to enhance the success of the site from the perspective of neighbours and users of the site were not given a fair hearing. Replacement plans offered by MDC do not appear to us to satisfy any stakeholders other than MDC Parks Department.

MDC seems dismissive of the potential reoccurrence of anti-social behaviour on the site, the same anti-social behaviour that was previously exacerbated by MDC’s clearing of areas that then allowed for partying close to residents’ bedroom windows (due to the elevation of the site).

FTNCG has dedicated considerable resources towards resolving the original dispute between MDC and Rushpool residents, and has inched forwards with a plan that offered all stakeholders something, if not everything, that they wanted. The most recent site meeting and response to our plans and efforts have taken us back two years and have undone trust that had been built between stakeholders during those two years.

I gave my personal assurance to Rushpool residents that FTNCG was working with MDC and Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust for the best outcomes for Rushpool residents and nature conservation. I gave my word that if MDC failed to act in good faith I, and the group, would not continue to support MDC and that we would be obliged to withdraw and to pass the dispute back to Rushpool residents to take on with the support of their elected representatives. After reflecting upon the words and actions of MDC before, during and since the site meeting of 5<sup>th</sup> October 2012, I am of the opinion that for me the point of disillusionment and disengagement with MDC has arrived. MDC has, in my opinion, reneged on the consensus agreed in relation to community engagement, and has, through its rejection of the advice of the Wildlife Trust on conservation issues, brought about a situation where conservation volunteers are being expected to put in a lot of work to achieve less than excellent conservation outcomes.

FTNCG's Management committee has come to a unanimous decision that we do not have faith in the process, neither do we have the resources as a Group to go around again.

We would urge MDC Parks Department to avail themselves of independent ecological advice through a robust survey of the site before moving forward with any of the plans offered to us instead of our plans. If it is to be a legitimate local conservation area, then everyone's interests are best served by the earliest application of agreed and recognisable conservation science.

- Lorraine Downen, FTNCG Chair