

Whitlingham Visitor Centre Development
Report by Director of Operations, Historic Environment Manager
and Project Manager

Summary: This report identifies progress in the development of a potential partnership project to deliver an enhanced Visitor Centre at Whitlingham Country Park and describes the actions which have been taken to date. Members are asked to approve the next stage in the development of the project.

Recommendations:

- (i) That, subject to the outcome of the Project Board on 8 January and in consultation with the Member Working Group, the Chief Executive be authorised to submit a first round application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a Heritage Grant to fund the development stage of a project to enhance the public facilities at Whitlingham Country Park.
- (ii) In order to progress the development of the project through to the RIBA Stage 3 up to £50,000 be allocated from National Park General Reserves for spending by the Authority in 2013-4 and 2014-15, supported by partner contributions where available.
- (iii) The legal structure and governance arrangements for delivering the project are fundamental to its success and a further report will be brought to the March meeting covering these issues.

1 Background

1.1 At the Broads Authority meeting in September 2012 when considering the future financial strategy of the Authority, members agreed that, as the national park reserves were comfortably above the minimum recommended level, there would therefore be the opportunity to identify one off additional expenditure from the National Park Grant during 2013/14 and 2014/15. A number of key areas were identified spread across the National Park purposes from which a number of flagship projects could be worked up to feasibility stage, and the appointment of a Project Officer to help support and develop this work was approved.

1.2 These priority areas included:

- (i) Enjoyment and Education - development of a visitor centre at Whitlingham;

- (ii) Nature conservation - focussing on lake restoration;
 - (iii) Heritage - implementation of the Mills Strategy;
 - (iv) Public access - delivery of Integrated Access Strategy actions; and
 - (v) Landscape – the integrated approach could be furthered through the development of a Heritage Lottery Funding Landscape Partnership Bid.
- 1.3 The Authority has consolidated its tourist information activity, and established three visitor ‘hubs’ which provide access to information and experiences in the Broads. On the urban fringe of Norwich, Whitlingham is the largest of these hubs, with a footfall of over 200,000 people per year, offering access to the Country Park, a boat trip on Ra and is accessible by river.
- 1.4 Whitlingham was therefore included within the Strategic Objectives for 2013/14, with the project to ‘develop proposals to improve the public facilities at the Country Park in conjunction with the Whitlingham Charitable Trust’ identified and a Member Working Group to help steer this work was set up.
- 1.5 Since then, strong synergies have been identified between the partners, who include the Youth Hostel Association, RSPB, Norfolk County Council’s Outdoor Education centre and Future Projects, and a vision statement has been agreed. This vision has been endorsed by the Authority’s Member Working Group and also been signed off by Whitlingham Charitable Trust and the Broads Authority at its meeting on 12 July 2013.
- 1.6 The primary objective is centred on lifelong learning, providing opportunities for an excellent quality experience in the Park for visitors to be inspired, as well as providing an important gateway and signposting to the wider Broads area. Promoting health, well-being and sustainability are all key principles, as well as ensuring accessibility and inclusivity. A further consideration is also to foster the economic sustainability of partners and the local community.
- 1.7 The project outputs therefore would be to expand the Visitor Centre, provide better public facilities including toilets and café; provide a flexible learning space and to include low cost accommodation to extend the outreach of the Park.

2 Progress

- 2.1 Since July 2013 the Member Working Group has met three times, reviewed and agreed the architects design brief, considered design options presented by the architect, discussed funding options and provided feedback to the Chief Executive to represent the Broads Authority on the Project Board.
- 2.2 Key to the development, The Whitlingham Charitable Trust commissioned Hudson Architects to identify potential sites for development within the Country Park, to develop some general arrangement and massing drawings and to prepare an appraisal of these options based upon the design brief and their professional experience. This work has been funded jointly by the Broads Authority, Arminghall Trust and Whitlingham Charitable Trust.

- 2.3 Site visits to the RSPB visitor and education centre at Rye Meads and the new YHA South Downs hostel were carried out to help inform the architects' deliberations and refine the operational requirements.
- 2.4 Hudson Architects formally presented their design and appraisal work to the project partners on 4 December; partners were asked to prepare their own appraisal of the options presented and return them to their Project Board representative to inform further discussion.
- 2.5 The Project Board meeting on 8 January reviewed the architect's outputs and determined a shortlist of possible options, with a view to identifying a preferred option.

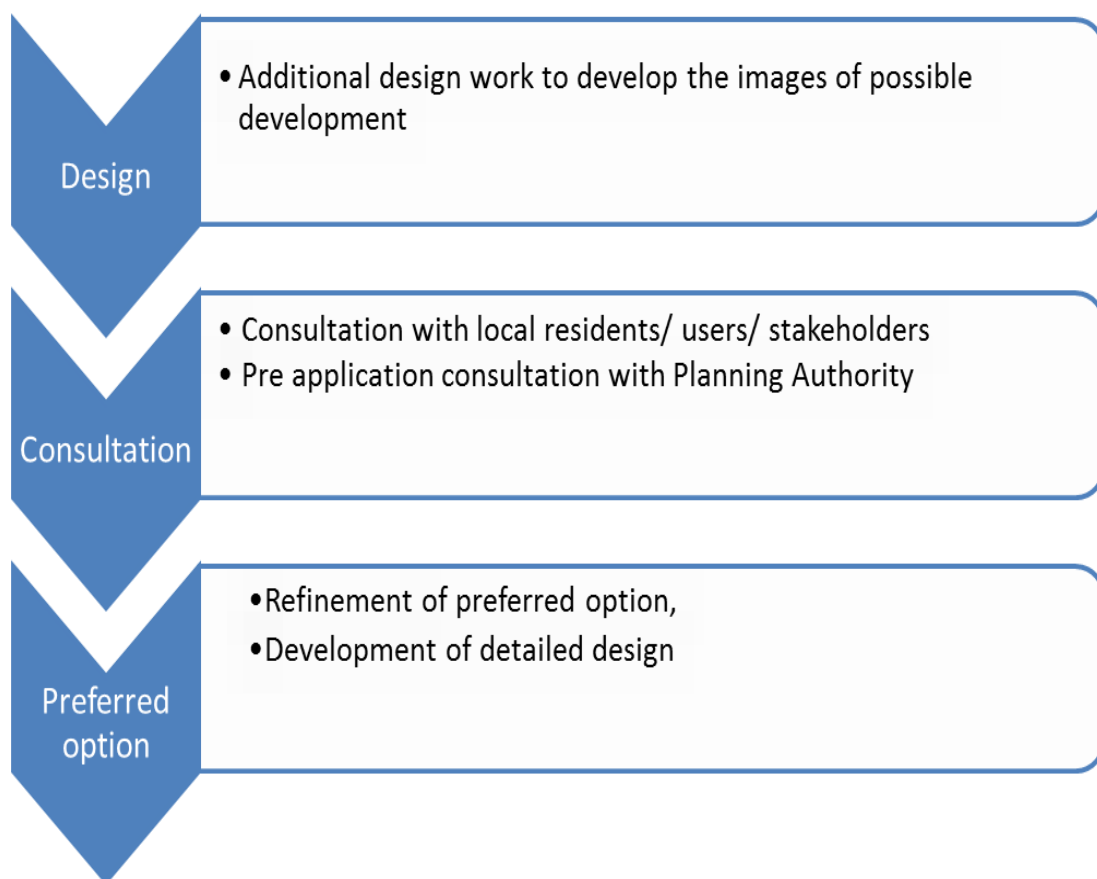
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Project Board</u> Chair: Martin Shaw (WCT) John Packman (BA) James Colman (WCT) Fiona Sarson / Nicole La Ronde (TAS) Jake Chalmers (YHA, key stakeholder)</p>
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A verbal update will be given at the meeting.

- 2.6 Additionally, The Broads Authority's Historic Environment Manager and Project Manager attended the "Rethinking Parks" workshop hosted by NESTA, The Heritage Lottery Fund and the Big Lottery Fund. The workshop aims to support parks innovators to develop and implement new approaches to sustaining and making the most of UK public parks. A verbal report will be given at the meeting.
- 2.7 A paper has also been presented to the Whitlingham Charitable Trust meeting held on the 15 January, and a further verbal update will be given to Broads Authority members.

3 Next Steps

- 3.1 Following the deliberations of the Project Board, a preferred option is anticipated to be selected, which will require further detailed work to be undertaken prior to the full feasibility assessment and consultation process.
- 3.2 Concurrently with the work detailed below, it is also proposed that the Authority authorises the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Member Working Group, to submit a first round application to the Heritage Lottery Fund, Heritage Grants programme, to provide match funding for the necessary work to develop the project to RIBA Stage 3 (Developed Design) where a second round application for the capital works can be submitted.



3.3 Proposed Project timeline

	January	February	March	April
HLF Project Enquiry	x			
Architect Design Work	x	x	x	
Quantity Surveyor			x	
Site Surveys		x	x	
Planning Consultation			x	
Highways Consultation		x	x	
Public Consultation			x	
HLF First Round Application				x

3.4 In order to complete this further work and provide the necessary matched funding it is proposed that the Authority authorise further expenditure of up to £50,000 from National Park General Reserves, matched where possible by partner contributions.

3.5 As identified in the diagram above, it will be necessary to undertake a public consultation exercise with local people and businesses to ensure the

partnership understands the views of those who may be affected by the new development, refine the proposed design and to strengthen the support for the project. It is proposed that a public exhibition will be held at the Flint Barn to seek input to the scheme.

- 3.6 Other funding opportunities will continue to be explored, to either contribute to the match funding requirement for the building, or to develop additional aspects of the project such as access or ecological improvements in the Park.
- 3.7 Officers are also investigating the financial and legal structure necessary to comply with the Heritage Lottery Funds requirements for receiving a grant. A detailed report will be presented at the next Broads Authority meeting.

4 Conclusion

- 4.1 Members are invited to note the progress in the development of this project, but it is recognised that there is still some way to go to produce a finished scheme. It is noted that this project remains a strategic priority in the public consultation draft for 2014/15 and members are asked to endorse the approach as set out in the paper.

Background papers:	Broads Authority Visitor Centre Development Report, July 2013
Author:	Trudi Wakelin/ Ben Hogg/ Will Burchnall and John Packman
Date of report:	10 December 2013
Broads Plan Objectives:	PE2.1, TR1, LC1, CC4
Appendices:	None