

Visitor Centre Development Opportunities
Report by Director of Operations

Summary: This report identifies potential opportunities for the development of Visitor Centres at How Hill and Whitlingham Country Park and describes the actions which have been taken to date. Members' views are sought on the relative merits of the projects, and to endorse further development activity, to produce fully consented project options prior to making a final selection for external funding bids.

Recommendation: That the Authority

- (i) agrees in principle to the use of general reserves to develop these projects through the feasibility stage.
- (ii) provides guidance as to the priority project.

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 remain 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 approved the appointment of a Project Officer to help support and develop this work.
- 1.2 These priority areas included Enjoyment and Education via development of a visitor centre at Whitlingham, nature conservation focussing on lake restoration, heritage implementation of the Mills Strategy, and public access via delivery of Integrated Access Strategy Actions and Landscape – an integrated approach could be furthered through the development of a Heritage Lottery Funding Landscape Partnership Bid.

2 Whitlingham Country Park

- 2.1 As part of the 2011 restructure, it was agreed that the Authority would consolidate its tourist information activity and established three visitor 'hubs' which provided 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.

- 2.2 Whitlingham was 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.
- 2.3 Since then, strong synergies have been identified between the partners, which 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 BA member working group and also been signed off by Whitlingham Charitable Trust (Appendix 1).
- 2.4 The primary objective is centred around 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.
- 2.5 The project outputs therefore would be to expand the Visitor Centre, provide better public facilities including toilets and cafe, provide a flexible learning space and to include low cost accommodation to extend the outreach of the Park.
- 2.6 The next steps are to work with the landowners and partners to develop an outline business case and review feasibility, prior to developing detailed specifications and instructing architects.

3 How Hill

- 3.1 How Hill is a key site for visitors to the Broads, offering access to an environment which many people believe to encapsulate the true 'essence' of the Broads as well as featuring a small museum in Toad Hole Cottage conveying an impression of the life of a 19th century marshman. The cottage is visited by around 25,000 visitors in most years, and in some years the total has exceeded 30,000. It is also accessible by river, and the 'Electric Eel' water trail operates in the adjacent marsh dykes.
- 3.2 The Information Centre Review of 2007 recommended that a design/feasibility study should be undertaken into the possibility of a linked extension or a new structure at How Hill to alleviate the present difficulties at the site, which include physical constraints which restrict the service that can be provided to visitors and facilities for staff. The new space(s) will provide accommodation that will allow it to operate more effectively as a Broads information centre, with adequate space for appropriate retail activity and interpretative displays. There should also be improved staff facilities and storage.

- 3.3 Resources have not previously been available to carry out this work, but became available through the STEP Interreg programme, and a study has recently been completed by architects Wilkinson King. The study brief is attached at Appendix 2. A presentation on this work will be given at the meeting.
- 3.4 This project would equally contribute towards the Broads Plan objective PE2.1 *'Maintain effective network of visitor information centres serving the Broads and revise provision of on-site BA visitor information points.'*

4 Conclusion

- 4.1 Members are invited to note the development of these projects. There is some way to go to produce a finished scheme on both projects with further work necessary to consult with local communities, adjacent landowners and secure planning permission which may require further consultants reports etc.
- 4.2 It is suggested that this development work be completed and funded by the general reserves currently available. However, it is recognised that for either of these schemes to move forward to construction, external as well as match funding will be required which may put these schemes into competition with each other. Members' views are therefore sought as to the relative merits of each proposal and to endorse this approach.

Background papers:	Broads Authority Financial Strategy, Sept 2012
Author:	Trudi Wakelin/ Bruce Hanson
Date of report:	25 June 2013
Broads Plan Objectives:	PE2.1
Appendices	APPENDIX 1 - Whitlingham Development; Draft Vision Statement APPENDIX 2 - Toad Hole Architects brief

Whitlingham Development Draft Vision Statement

‘A Lifelong journey of discovery’

The Whitlingham Park - Broads Gateway development will lead the region in promoting year round access to high quality and exciting outdoor opportunities which promote discovery and personal development through:

Inspire

- Inspiring users to discover and experience the natural, cultural and landscape heritage environment (the heritage) of the Broads
- Promote enjoyment and understanding of the Broads experience through events and self guided activities better interpreting and explaining
- Improve the condition and management of the wildlife spectacle and cultural and landscape environment at the hub to create more opportunity for up close and memorable experiences inspiring a desire to discover more in the wider Broads
- Harbour a deeper understanding of the heritage of the Broads through ‘layered’ experiences of the hub – ‘read, see, do’ and learn with “a sense of place” mirroring the wider broads experience
- Motivate return visits
- Encourage changed behaviours through varied messages – care for the environment, promote sustainability in daily life, opportunities for further exploration of the Broads nurturing a sense of shared responsibility for the management and protection of the environment and heritage of the Broads etc
- Building community links with regular visitors
- Create an accommodation base inclusive to all visitors at the hub and provide sustainable access from the Park to the wider Broads by water and cycle, to encourage informed and enhanced exploration of this unique landscape.

Through

Play

- Informal recreation/ play space
- Interactive, interpretative, adventure and nature play
- Sport/ activities – casual and organised
- Provide opportunities for real as well as virtual experience
- Building confidence and ability to experience activity in the wider Broads
- Experience the rich natural cultural and landscape heritage of the Broads

Learn

- Broads Interpretation – visitor centre, exhibitions then experience
- Outdoor adventure

- Environmental education – Forest Schools
- Learning outside the classroom
- Appreciate past human management, exploitation and the continued evolution of the Broads natural, landscape and cultural heritage
- Skills contributing to continuing management

Contribute

- ❖ Opportunities for more and wider involvement in management and improvement of the Broads heritage
- ❖ Develop opportunities for volunteering in the Park and wider Broads with the partners
- ❖ Promote the support and facilitation of volunteer leaders to set up Community volunteer schemes in their own communities
- ❖ Best practice training hub for volunteers and other stakeholders, to share resources and develop a centre of excellence
- ❖ Contribute to the economic and wider sustainability of existing uses and facilities on the site by creating an inclusive accommodation base within the hub
- ❖ A place for everyone

As a local hub, this will incorporate established uses of the Park by communities and user groups, but by developing the site as a Gateway to the Broads it will allow orientation to and signposting of the Broads, provide a greater level of external focus and the incorporation of accommodation on site will provide a bigger reach for attracting new audiences from within and outside of the region and provide a unique opportunity for experiencing the Park. This will be facilitated and supported by the development of 80 bed youth hostel accommodation (and possible alternative accommodation options) offering activity packages, and a flexible learning space alongside an improved visitor centre and public facilities. The local economy will also benefit from the increased exploration and consequent visitor spend in the Broads.

The Park environment will be enhanced to showcase Broads' habitats and species, cultural and landscape heritage to provide greater opportunity for up close experiences with wildlife/ nature/heritage maintained to a high standard. Providing an opportunity to experience activities relating to the Broads environment will help to inspire visitors to explore the wider Broads, better appreciate them and contribute to their maintenance

It is the aim of the partnership to ensure that all visitors to the park receive an inspiring and enriching experience, and to use the site for orientation to and as a springboard from which to dive into the Broads. To support the integration of uses in the Park, it is proposed that from a central focal point a zoning approach is adopted and incorporated into the Master Plan for the site, which will identify an intensity gradient in the Park showing areas of busy, quiet, remote or wild characters. Moving around the Park will be supported by way markers, encouraging access away from the honey pot but also maintaining a sense of discovery in the hidden areas off the beaten track.

The project represents an opportunity to provide inclusive for all accommodation within the Whitlingham hub. The wide range of activities currently available at

Whitlingham and the potential of the hub in terms offering a visitor experience in addition to visitor information in a sustainable and easily accessible location give rise to a unique opportunity. It is an opportunity, through experience, to be inspired by, play with, learn about and contribute to the special qualities of the Broads.

Principles

Partners agree that the development should adopt the following principles in regard to the design and operation of the proposed development:

- i. Promotes a vision which not only promotes the aims of the partners but also benefits the wider local economy and community and fulfils the full potential of the existing site and wider broads.
- ii. Environmentally responsible, high quality design and construction, and customer service standards.
- iii. Provide a sense of arrival and orientation for the Park and all the possibilities it offers.
- iv. To incorporate the Flint Barn into the development to ensure a viable use is maintained.
- v. Promotes learning in innovative and exciting ways so that the fabric of the development encourages and supports learning opportunities.
- vi. Accessible and inclusive to all, providing equality of opportunity.
- vii. Promotes wellbeing and health and facilitating “quiet enjoyment” through zoned development and use of the Park.
- viii. Promotes sustainability in building design and capacity of use of the park.
- ix. Improves, interprets and gives an experience of the natural, cultural and landscape heritage features of the Park and through this helps promote and enhance the wider Broads environment and visitor experience.
- x. Promotes and strengthens the economic viability of the existing service providers through cooperation and collaboration between the partners, and clusters the main hub together to enable sharing and more efficient use of existing resources.
- xi. Secondary activities such as conference uses will be encouraged where this is required to support the economic viability of the park, as well as an opportunity to reach another audience.



Design/Feasibility Study for Toad Hole Cottage, How Hill

CONSULTANTS BRIEF

I. Introduction

Toad Hole Cottage is owned by the Broads Authority and it is open to the public as a small museum and information centre. It lies at the heart of the How Hill estate, which many people consider to exemplify the true essence of the Broads – a much-loved and special place in the most sensitive of locations. Popularity rarely comes without problems, however, and the cottage struggles to accommodate its many visitors, and to provide the services that they require. A design/feasibility study is therefore required to explore the potential for an extension or new building that will provide improved facilities for the information centre function of Toad Hole Cottage.

The study will be funded by the STEP programme, in which the Broads Authority is a partner. STEP (Sustainable Tourism in Estuary Parks) is an Interreg IVA 'Two Seas' programme, which is a strand of the European Regional Development Fund. The Broads Authority is working in partnership with the Biesbosch, a national park in the Netherlands, and the Polders of Kruibeke, a new flood control area under development beside the River Schelde in Flanders. The partners are implementing a range of initiatives which are intended to promote and develop sustainable tourism in their respective areas, and learning from each other's experiences is an important part of this process.

2. The Broads and the Broads Authority

The Broads is Britain's largest protected wetland, with status equivalent to a national park. A complex system of rivers and broads (small lakes), it is also the third-largest inland navigation authority. It is promoted as a holiday destination with the brand of "Britain's Magical Waterland", and there was an estimated 7.4 million visitors in 2011.

The Broads Authority was set up in 1989 as a statutory body and its general duty is to manage the Broads for the purposes of:

- (a) conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the Broads;
- (b) promoting opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the Broads by the public; and
- (c) protecting the interests of navigation.

The Authority must also consider the needs of agriculture and forestry, as well as the economic and social interests of those who live or work in the Broads, and it works closely with the local tourism industry.

3. How Hill Estate

The How Hill estate lies alongside the River Ant, near Ludham Bridge. It extends to 141 hectares, 130 ha of which are designated as a National Nature Reserve. Very popular with visitors, How Hill is thought by many people to demonstrate the true essence and spirit of the Broads.

Road access to How Hill is poor, along very narrow lanes, but there are extensive 24 hour moorings on the river so the visitor profile is an interesting mix of water-borne and land-based visitors. Key features are Toad Hole Cottage (a former marshman's home now functioning as a very small visitor centre and museum), three historic drainage mills (or more accurately 'wind pumps'), a nature trail around the reserve and a large area of mown grassland on a hill with one of the best prospects in the Broads. This is very popular with families simply sitting out in the beautiful surroundings and admiring the view. There is also a water-borne nature trail accessed by a small electric boat called "Electric Eel", and there is wild-life in abundance. The site is famous as one of the best places to see the Swallowtail Butterfly, a species unique to the Broads (in the UK), and the largest in Britain.

How Hill House is worthy of mention as a splendidly-situated mansion in the Arts and Crafts style, but it is not open to the public, being used as a residential field studies centre for school groups etc.

4. Toad Hole Cottage

Toad Hole Cottage is owned by the Broads Authority and operates as one of three visitor 'hubs' maintained by the Authority around the Broads area. It is open to the public from Easter to the end of October as a small museum conveying an impression of the life of a 19th Century marshman. It also acts as a Broads information centre, and it sells tickets for the 'Electric Eel' water trail, as well as an alternative walk around the National Nature Reserve.

The cottage is visited by around 25,000 visitors in most years, and in some years the total has exceeded 30,000. The overwhelming majority are enchanted by the unique atmosphere of this former marshman's home, as the visitors' book clearly testifies, and it is essential that this special experience is maintained.

Unfortunately the service that can be provided to visitors is severely restricted by the physical constraints of the building. Space for interpretation and general visitor information is minimal, and there is no room for the retail activity that is needed to subsidise the running of the centre in the challenging economic climate of today. Storage space and mess and toilet facilities for staff are non-existent. The cottage is unable, therefore, to properly carry out its function as a hub which delivers key elements of the Authority's Communications Strategy (attached)

5. The Task

The Broads Authority requires a feasibility study and practical design proposals for an extension and/or a new building at Toad Hole Cottage. The new space(s) will provide accommodation that will allow it to operate more effectively as a Broads information centre, with adequate space for appropriate retail activity and interpretative displays. There should also be improved staff facilities, and storage etc., and it will be important to consult with staff in considering these requirements.

It is expected that consideration will be given to the presentation of the cottage museum, and appropriate recommendations will be made for improvements, both to the display and to the interpretation of the building. The current operation of the cottage enables staff to control access and monitor the security of the interior, and these practical aspects must be addressed in the proposals.

Catering is not envisaged as part of the development, as the How Hill Trust already operates a small café nearby during the busier parts of the season. The consultants are invited, however, to consider the feasibility of a limited offer at the cottage that might benefit visitors without competing with the Trust's activities, and particularly to provide a service when the Trust's facilities are not available. It is essential that the Trust's Director is consulted to ensure that good relations are maintained.

Mains electricity is connected to the cottage, but there is no water supply at present. A stand-pipe is situated in the garden just a few yards away, and its suitability as a supply – or some alternative source – will require investigation. It is also expected that proposals will be made for a suitable eco-friendly sewage system.

It should go without saying that new construction will meet the highest environmental and design standards, and innovative proposals will be particularly welcome for this sensitive, beautiful and iconic location.

Key outputs will include the following:

- A report describing the proposals, and the rationale behind them. This will also detail the role of the cottage/information centre in the context of its relationship with the wider estate
- Plans and illustrative drawings of the proposals. These will also show the relationship of the cottage with its surroundings
- Details of the environmental/sustainability elements contained within the proposals
- Recommendations for the museum display
- Estimated costs for the implementation of the proposals

6. Constraints and Considerations

Toad Hole Cottage is a Grade II listed building, and any alterations to it externally or internally affecting its character and appearance will require the benefit of Listed Building Consent. It is an iconic structure loved by many thousands of visitors to the Broads, and the whole estate has been cherished for generations. With a location immediately adjacent to a National Nature Reserve, in an area with status equivalent to a National Park, potential development sites don't come much more sensitive than this. How Hill House is also listed, along with two of the wind pumps on the estate.

Having said that, the purpose of the legislation is not to prevent any changes to the building but to ensure that changes are appropriate and do not adversely affect a building's architectural or historic importance. With this in mind, internal re-ordering that does not affect primary fabric or important elements of the structure, or in fact the provision of additional space by extending the property, will not necessarily be unacceptable.

Again the key test when making these judgements is does the proposal adversely impact on or affect the building's special character? If not, then the works will generally be acceptable.

Extensions to the building will require planning permission as well as listed building consent. Liaison with the planning authority (which is the Broads Authority) is essential and must be on-going so that design work is not progressed on a proposal which stands no chance of receiving consent. It is a key requirement that the proposals will be acceptable to the relevant authorities, and are likely to receive the necessary permissions.

In terms of what might be acceptable in this instance given the setting and the relatively modest accommodation which exists, it is thought that a modest extension might be acceptable. Also the development need not be traditional in form, as contemporary solutions can be used to great effect in even the most sensitive of locations.

More accommodation could be achieved in an outbuilding type arrangement which could be but does not have to be linked to the cottage. This could be in addition to or instead of an extension.

Another option might be a detached (possibly linked) building which subject to its siting and its relationship to the cottage could be of equal or possibly even greater size to the cottage itself, particularly if built into the adjacent rising ground. Again, this could be in addition to or instead of the other options.

The planning authority, along with English Heritage, would have to be convinced in any of the scenarios that the special character of the cottage is not compromised.

7. Reporting/Project Management

The consultant's first point of contact will be the STEP Project Manager (Bruce Hanson), but s/he will be expected to liaise with other specialist staff as necessary, and some of these individuals will form a steering group for the project.

8. Time-schedule

It is expected that the consultant will be able to start work within two weeks of appointment, or sooner if possible. Key milestones will be agreed at the project inception meeting, and the job must be completed by 31st May 2013.

9. Payment Terms

A schedule of payments of fees and expenses will be agreed with the consultant at the inception meeting. Bids should include a proposal for staged payments, if needed. A total price is required, as well as an indication of the daily rate and a break-down of the price.

10. Weighting

Proposals will be assessed as follows:

Price	50%
Quality of References	10%
Experience (example of previous work)	20%
Ability to meet timescale	20%

11. Ownership/ Copyright

Any information developed as part of this project will be the sole property of the Broads Authority and no other party will be entitled to use any information contained in the project for any purpose without first obtaining the written consent of the Broads Authority.

12. Confidentiality

The successful consultants will need to take all reasonable precautions in dealing with information collected or given to them so as to prevent any unauthorized person from having access to it.

13. Liability

The Broads Authority, their servants, agents, or employees shall not be under any liability for any claims arising or referable to the consultant's actions to those of any person engaged by the consultant in relation to carrying out this commission. The consultants shall provide full indemnity against such claims.

14. Insurance

Public liability, employee liability and professional indemnity insurance of £5M is required

15. Return of Proposalss

Proposals/quotations should be submitted by 13.00 hrs on Friday 12th April 2013

Any offers of inducement or other consideration intended to influence the Authority to award the contract will render the proposal immediately invalid.

16. CONTACT DETAILS

The lead officer at the Broads Authority will be Bruce Hanson.
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