

A Feasibility Study into Structural elements of a Visitor Strategy for The Wrekin Forest Living Landscape

Interim Notes

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Funded by Telford and Wrekin Council

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Introduction

At the close of 2007 Shropshire Wildlife Trust published a Landscape Conservation Plan for the Living Landscape area known as the Wrekin Forest. The 70 page report identifies a number of themes related to biodiversity and land management that are characteristic of the Wrekin Forest landscape area. Whilst work continues to record and enhance the future survival of the natural component of the landscape much concern centres on the growing impact of the visitor to the area.

In Section three of the Wrekin Forest Landscape Conservation Plan we aimed to work through a series of tasks aimed at 'providing a simple, appropriate visitor structure including toilet facilities, refreshments and visitor information for the benefit of all' [3:1]. With the financial support of Telford and Wrekin Council we can now devote time to looking and assessing how we might achieve those aims.

The Wrekin Forest is an area of open countryside which includes the Wrekin Hill and the Little Wenlock Plateau, bordered to the North by the town of Wellington and to the East and South by Lawley and the Severn Gorge.

The key to developing a visitor strategy must be to conserve the values of the location which draws the visitor there in the first place.

The purpose of this report is to review the current visitor provision and lay out the options for future measures to sustainably address the mounting visitor pressure experienced by the residents, landowners and land managers of the Wrekin Forest.

The report will focus on infrastructure concerns relating to car parking, fixed visitor facilities and visitor information in relation to the central axis around the junction of Wellington Lane and Erccall Lane. Separate projects are underway to focus on general countryside access issues such as mountain bike use and in the future will look at access networks across the whole Wrekin Forest landscape.

It is important to note that in the absence of an adequate Bridleway network and satisfactory access agreements for off road cycles and horses that the report when referring to the visitor is assuming that they are walkers. Concluding recommendations are based on this assumption that the Wrekin Forest in terms of visitors is attempting to manage and cater for walkers.

General Location

General Location Forest Glen - Wrekin Forest



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Scale: 1:28,036

Map 1

The Wrekin Forest consists of a number of designated and legally protected areas. The list below indicates the wealth of natural resources protected by law that lie either wholly or partially within the Living Landscape area of the Wrekin Forest. [See Map 2]

Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

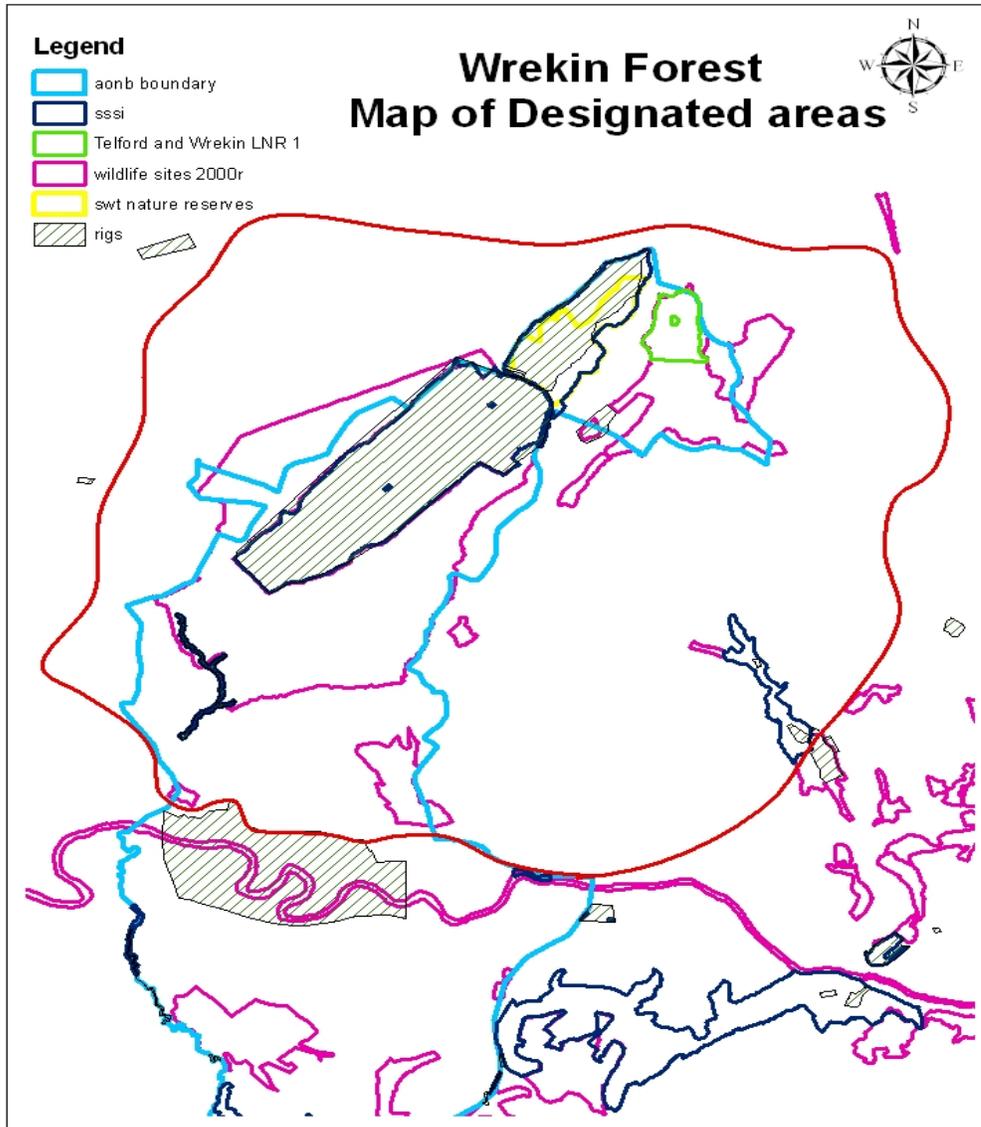
Sites of Special Scientific Interest – The Wrekin and the Ercall, Chermes Dingle, Lydebrook Dingle

Local Nature Reserves – The Ercall, Limekiln Wood

Regionally Important Geological Sites - The Wrekin and Ercall, Maddocks Quarry

Scheduled Ancient Monuments – The Wrekin Hillfort, New Works Wood, Little worth Bellpits

County Wildlife Sites [non-statutory though taken into account in Local Development Frameworks]



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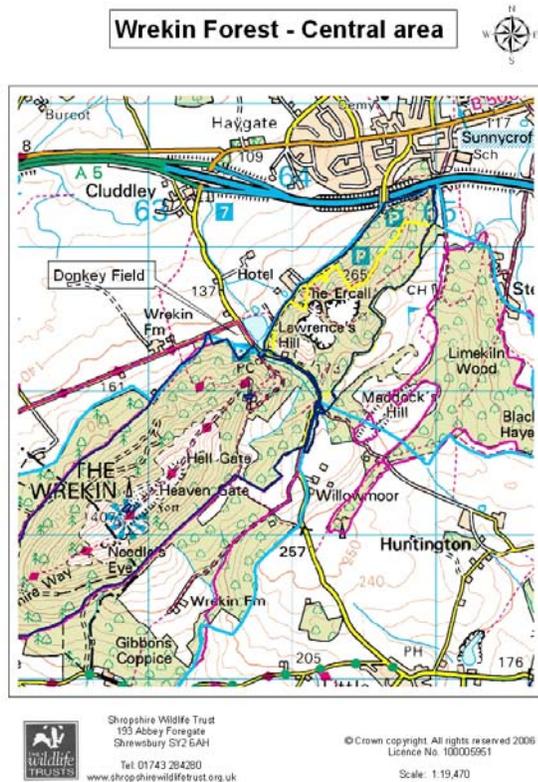
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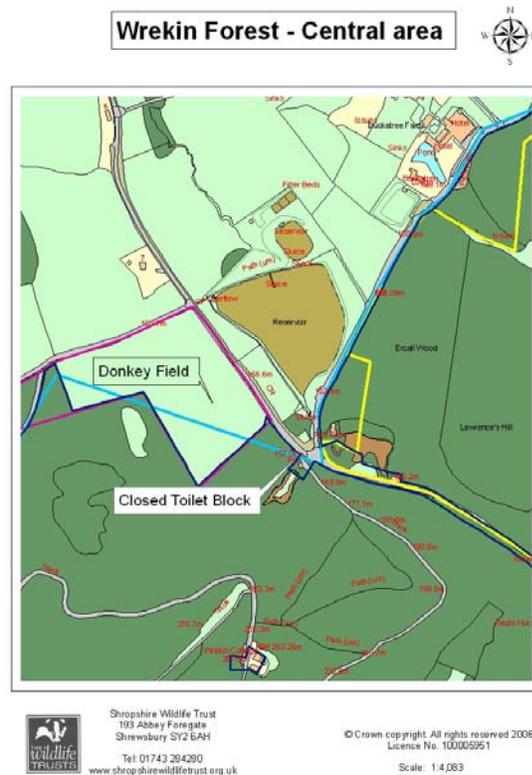
Map 2

In considering the location of any new development within the Wrekin Forest the wider context needs to be taken into consideration. Telford is a growth point for the West Midlands and expects to see further increments in population size and a steady increase in commercial development for the foreseeable future. The concept of a Green Network was embodied in the development of the New Town and though besieged in parts still remains a powerful idea to carry forward the wildlife interests of the region. Any new development within the bounds of the Wrekin Forest which is a critical part of the Green Network needs to have clear benefits for the biodiversity value of the immediate landscape and the integrity of the Green Network.

Specific Location maps [map 3 and 4]



3



4

A Visitor Centre

The mounting visitor numbers to the Wrekin Forest create a number of problems relating to car parking capacity, demand for facilities such as toilets/refreshments, user conflict, inadequate visitor information and loss of natural values such as quiet and wildness. It has been felt by some that the development of a visitor centre may provide a hub by which we can address all those problems.

To understand the character and operating structures of a visitor centre the Project Officer has visited numerous centres including those at Delamere Forest, Cannock Chase, Snowdonia, Carding Mill Valley, Bough Beech Reservoir in Kent; Minsmere, Suffolk; the Wyre Forest, Llandegla and Coed Y Brenin mountain bike centres; RSPB Lake Vyrnwy; the English Lake District and Ireland. The essential character of a visitor centre is to celebrate a location, provide the visitor information and also in many cases meet the welfare needs of the visitor through the provision of toilets and refreshments. Building designs are many, utilising local materials, vernacular styles or creating unique architectural statements. The information in many cases is presented in imaginative and exciting ways and can be the focal and pivotal point in making a trip to a new area much more rewarding. Visitor centres are good opportunities to tell the story of a local area and to keep any interpretation in one place. They can also be the meeting point for schools and colleges and other outdoor enthusiasts. Associated car parking in many cases can be well landscaped and the presence of staff deters anti-social behaviour and offer reassurance to visitors from afar.

In contemplating a visitor centre for the Wrekin Forest it was easy to imagine a timber built structure set in a wooded location retelling the Giant legend and celebrating the rich heritage of the Wrekin

Forest. But what is also clear from looking closely at the variety of the visitor centres around the country is all of them function as small businesses. The business model invariably includes a shop, café, charged car parking/toilet and in the case of some sites bike hire or some other income generating attraction.

The experience of many tourist attractions whether low key or larger scale is they have to regenerate each year to attract people. They have to offer a developing programme of new events, new displays or variations to existing services to retain regular customers and attract new. This regeneration principle means that a part of the surplus from the business has to go towards this constant process of renewal. Investment is not a one off function but an integral part of long term high quality provision.

The other characteristic all share is that for many in the age of the car the visitor centre becomes the destination so far from reducing numbers the addition of a visitor centre increases the intensity of use. Visitor centres also have unexpected impacts on the locations they celebrate, the Delamere Forest visitor centre has developed a complex and far from wild network of marked trails, inadvertently subduing the wildness that the visitor came to enjoy.

In considering the virtues or otherwise of a visitor centre we need to reflect on the following

- Is there sufficient market demand to support the operation of a small business catering for the visitor in the heart of the Wrekin Forest?
- What of the local competition? The Buckatree Hall Hotel, the Halfway House and the Huntsman Inn all provide hospitality for the visitor in the near vicinity and not forgetting the market town of Wellington less than 5 minutes drive away.
- What impact will the visitor centre have on the open countryside it provides information on?
- Is there any long term confidence in the future of a visitor centre to sustain itself?
- There is little local support for a visitor centre and a strong call for visitor facilities to be developed off-site so to speak – in Wellington for instance.

The Forest Glen

The Forest Glen car park was purchased early in 2006 by Shropshire Wildlife Trust and subsequently cleaned up. The purchase and clean up operation cost £110,000. The Forest Glen was the original location for the Forest Glen Pavilion which offered food and entertainments for nearly 100 years. The Forest Glen was dismantled in 1979 and re-erected at Blist Hill open air museum. The car park comprises a stone surface, with the roadside demarcated by large boulders. Visitor information boards are provided. The car park is used daily. The character of use is purely as a car park, a place to leave your car whilst you explore the surrounding countryside. At peak periods the car park is unable to cope and visitors park alongside the road verge. The car park though used by legitimate users is also used inappropriately for drug use, sexual activity, joy riding, graffiti and littering.

When considered as a location for a possible visitor facility whether a public convenience or even a mobile catering van the following considerations need to be made:

- The Forest Glen does not have the capacity to deal with current peak levels of visitors.
- Shropshire Wildlife Trust feels it is inappropriate in a location functioning as one of the gateways in to the Wrekin Forest that a visitor centre is located so centrally.
- The lack of extra parking capacity would mean that any proposed development in the Forest Glen would need to seek extra off-site car parking.
- Visitors would come to the Forest Glen as the destination in itself not as the starting point for a walk. The same applies if the location at the base of the Wrekin main track was considered as the location for a facility, the Forest Glen would become the destination.

- Visitors currently cross the road at a junction considered by some as dangerous and poorly laid out. Any developer would be expected to provide a financial contribution to the re-design of the junction.
- Shropshire Wildlife Trust has no confidence that even a modest visitor business in this location would be successful in the long term.

Public conveniences

In 1979 a public toilet was constructed and opened at the base of the main track to the summit of the Wrekin Hill. The land is leased by Telford and Wrekin Council from the Orleton Estate, the Council carry out basic maintenance to make sure the building is safe. The Toilets were closed in 2001 following an economic review of the then new Unitary Authority. We have no information on the cost of construction though in the last year of operation the annual running costs amounted to approximately £6,000 covering cleaning costs, water and repairs.

The following local examples will highlight some of the issues in contemplating re-opening the toilet block.

- In 2004 Wellington Town Council opened a public toilet block off Larkin Way in Tan Bank. It cost approximately £60,000 to build. The toilet is staffed and operated by a contractor. The Town Council sets aside £34,000 annually to budget for the provision of toilet. Customers are charged 0.20p a visit. Takings amount to between £300 to £400 per month, an upper annual income of £4,800. The toilets have experienced no vandalism which is felt to be due to its town centre location.
- Shrewsbury and Atcham Council opened a Public Toilet near Shrewsbury Abbey early in 2008. The high specification building is a public facility which includes a wheelchair ramp and RADAR key cubicle to comply with Disability Discrimination legislation to make it accessible to all. Car parking is provided for users to stop in close proximity to the toilet. The toilet is visited at least twice daily for cleaning and monitoring purposes. The toilet is clearly fulfilling its function as a public convenience as users come to the area specifically to use the toilet. The toilet has also been the focus of anti-social behaviour including drinking, inappropriate use of the building for shelter and drug use which has caused concern for legitimate users.

The location of the defunct toilets on the northern slopes of the Hill leads to reduced natural light levels and also proved unpopular with female visitors. The toilet was vandalised though as Environmental Maintenance managers at TWC comment the 'vandalism was not excessive and tended to happen in clusters'. Of more concern though 'there was also issues relating to inappropriate behaviour taking place in and around the toilets'. Anti-social behaviour such as graffiti, vandalism, joy riding, noise, public drug taking and inappropriate sexual activity are still occurring in the vicinity of the closed toilet block.

If the toilet was to be re-opened in the simplest terms we feel the following considerations need to be made

- The building would require substantial re-design
- It would need to comply with Disability Discrimination Act and therefore parking would need to be found in close proximity to the building – clearly some users may not be capable of ascending the Hill but they have a right to use any public facilities which are offered.
- Would attract more anti-social behaviour which we have no clear strategy to tackle
- The location is not ideal being on the northern slope
- Users would include those who solely came to use the toilet.
- The funding structure of a stand alone public convenience supported by Local Authority monies is not a convincing long term model – the building will always remain vulnerable to cost saving closure as was the fate of the existing structure.

- The location reinforces the problems with road safety and traffic management on the junction of Wellington Land and Ercall Lane.
- Any developer even the Local Authority itself would be required to address the car parking and road safety issues as part of the planning consent process.

In conclusion we feel the re-opening of the toilet block to be unwise and would merely exacerbate the problems and not contribute positively to a long term strategy to managing visitor pressure. We feel there are two options for the building either demolish the structure or convert to serve other purposes.

Car parking

The majority of visitors to the Wrekin Forest arrive or pass through the area around the base of the Wrekin Hill [see map 2] .Shropshire Wildlife Trust have a public car park at the junction of Ercall Lane and Wellington Road.. Informal car parking is found in a lay-by on the section of Wellington Lane which leads to the M54 and in numerous small pull-ins on the lanes within the wider Wrekin Forest. TWC also maintain a small off road car park at the Wellington end of Ercall Lane. This car park is in need of modest investment, much used as it is by mountain bikers and walkers.

At peak periods cars are parked on the road causing obstructions to the flow of traffic, in particular around the junction of Wellington Lane and Ercall Lane. At other times due to habitual patterns of regular visitors the informal lay-by usually fills before the main Forest Glen car park. It is rare to find the area without at least one vehicle even on the most inhospitable weather. Visitors invariably change in and out of their boots or coats next to their cars for those not safely parked in the Forest Glen car park this involves a certain level of personal risk. Nearly all visitors who use the car parking in the proximity of the road junction have to cross a road.

On regular occasions coaches arrive and use the lay-by on Wellington Lane, this is a very unsafe situation as large groups of visitors dismount at the roadside. Coaches find using the Forest Glen car park difficult due to its small area. Local schools and colleges use the Wrekin Forest area for a broad spectrum of learning opportunities.

Current Shropshire Wildlife Trust projects are attempting to reduce the incidence of walkers having to use the road by improving off-road footpaths off Wellington Lane and Ercall Lane. In the future further negotiations are planned with neighbouring landowners to improve the off-road linkage for walkers.

The car parking provision for visitors has developed organically without any central co-ordination; this coupled with the seasonal variation in users inevitably has resulted in a less than satisfactory situation. The car parking arrangements have raised concerns in regard to road safety and on a less urgent level the chaotic layout spoils an otherwise exciting approach. It has been proposed in the past to insert a roundabout at the junction. Recent discussions on site with TWC Traffic Management made clear that on a Unitary Authority wide perspective the junction is of a very low priority and TWC would expect significant investment from any developer to offset the cost of road junction improvements. A rough estimate of inserting a roundabout would be in the region of £200,000 and above.

In the last 18 months the Orleton Estate have offered to lease a field known as the Donkey Patch [see map 2]. The field is 3.8 hectares and lies directly adjacent to the main woodlands of the Wrekin Hill and is bordered by Wellington Land and the Wrekin Course. The Estate is very keen to see progress made on addressing the problems that come with being a popular visitor destination. If new car parking capacity could be developed in the field the visitor could in safety leave their vehicle and without crossing the lane enter the main Wrekin Hill woodlands by walking up the field. It has been

suggested also that even with a car park the field would still have space for a considerable number of new trees. Such new woodland planting can be done very effectively by volunteers.

To make a genuine impact on user habits the existing informal roadside parking will need to be closed and parking restrictions enforced. There will be resistance to change of the layout but we feel a well maintained, landscaped parking area will be preferable to the current haphazard arrangement.

Mention has been made of charging for car parking to fund the maintenance of the facilities. Examples elsewhere in the County have shown how this can be an effective revenue generating strategy. The National Trust at Carding Mill Valley levy a parking charge and the monies pay seasonal wardens to support the visitor. The Wrekin Forest has a different visitor profile in that the majority of visits are made by local people on a very regular repeat basis. We feel that parking charges will penalise the 'regulars' and quite simply people will attempt to park elsewhere undermining the whole parking strategy. We feel an alternative funding and management structure will need to be identified to support a parking strategy.

To summarise we feel that that the following points indicate a way forward to addressing the problems posed by the poor car parking layout

- The Donkey Patch offers an extremely promising location for a new parking area – in terms of location, potential for attractive design incorporating extensive new woodlands planting, possibly a pond and more significantly considerable improvements in visitor safety.
- Any new parking has to be accompanied by the closure or restriction of use of some current informal, dangerous or inappropriate parking locations
- Funding alternatives other than parking charges need to be found to meet running costs. Alternatives such as a permit system free to local people, voluntary contributions or some other system may prove feasible.
- Development of the Donkey Patch and closure of parking on and around the junction would make the junction safer and negate the need for an expensive roundabout.
- Consideration will still need to be made to traffic calming measures to reduce the average speed on the lanes within the Wrekin Forest. We would like to develop in partnership with others a broader project related to the concept of 'Quiet Lanes' pioneered successfully by rural parishes around the country.

Refreshments

The Huntsman Inn, Halfway House and the Buckatree Hall Hotel each provide very different kinds of hospitality. The Huntsman Inn is located in the middle of Little Wenlock village, providing high quality food and a traditional village pub atmosphere. The Halfway House is located on the main track up to the summit of the Wrekin Hill. It is a family run café business which generally opens only at weekends and peak periods; occasionally the owner will open at other times on special request. The Halfway House is perfectly adapted to the customer base, offering cheap fare to a core group of regulars. The Buckatree Hall Hotel is an established business offering conference, wedding and function catering. Guests to the Hotel take full advantage of the woodland footpaths on the doorstep.

Over the last 12 months we have been in discussion with the Buckatree Hall Hotel on Ercall Lane in regard to diversifying the business to include a walker's café. The Hotel General Manager Jason Petty has been very supportive and has approached the Hotel owners in terms of developing a part of the business to provide a venue offering an appropriate range of low cost high quality refreshments to cater for the needs of the outdoor enthusiast. Clearly the Hotel structure is sufficiently flexible to respond to seasonal fluctuations in visitor numbers and the weekend peaks in business.

The envisaged changes to the Buckatree Hall Hotel are modest and easily achievable in a short space of time. Also diversification can be achieved with no new building but small changes to an existing room of the Hotel. Appropriate additions to the existing Hotel signs on Ercall Lane are envisaged to promote the walkers café.

The customer numbers for the hospitality venues in the Wrekin Forest varies wildly according to season and weather. A combination of the Huntsman Inn, Halfway House and a diversified Buckatree Hall Hotel each being flexible and established weaken any business case for a fourth venue in the Wrekin Forest . A mobile catering van has been suggested to meet this fluctuating demand but is also felt out of keeping with the nature of the Wrekin Forest as a bastion of wilderness.

Visitor information

Visitor information comes in many different forms. Leaflets, information boards, Parish Notice boards, Internet, local museums, Tourist Information Centres are just a few of the more obvious ways to reach the visitor to enhance their experience. The Wrekin Forest can also list some excellent books which entertainingly describe the landscape for the casual visitor. The Buckatree Hall Hotel, Huntsman Inn and the Halfway House provide information and Shropshire Wildlife Trust have also installed interpretation panels at the Forest Glen car park , Wrekin Hillfort and in the Ercall Local Nature Reserve. A visitor centre can go much further than simple site information but in the case of the Wrekin Forest it is felt that a visitor centre would not be located centrally in fact this role is already taken by the Halfway House. Possible enhancements to the two other hospitality businesses would be useful and certainly programmes of other regular walks and talks could be promoted in a more co-ordinated way. But we need to be careful that over -interpretation or excessive way marking can very quickly erode the perceived wilderness value of the open countryside.

In the last 12 months two groups have been launched, firstly the Wellington Museum Partnership and the Wellington History Group. The intention of the first group is to campaign for a museum of the Wrekin to be established in Wellington. It seems sensible at this point to support their efforts and not dilute their campaign by investing in unsustainable large scale visitor interpretation projects within the Wrekin Forest. A feature of many of the visitor centres we have visited such as Loggerheads in the Clwydian Hills AONB is that they are effectively off-site. It seems a good principle to adopt for the Wrekin Forest looking for an arrangement that avoids further built development in favour of a solution based either within existing locations or a short drive or walk down the road in Wellington.

Conclusions

The preceding review of the structural elements of a visitor strategy for the Wrekin Forest has steadily made clear the key components of the next stage of development. Below we have listed our view on how we feel the strategy should be carried forward.

- We consider a new build visitor centre to be an unfeasible solution to the visitor pressure experienced in the Wrekin Forest. We remain unconvinced that a visitor centre would have a secure long term future.
- Buckatree Hotel to develop Walkers Café providing low cost refreshments, visitor information and customer toilets.
- Existing closed toilet block to be demolished.
- New car parking to be developed in Donkey Patch field to be accompanied by closure of dangerous and inappropriate parking area, supported by enforcement measures
- Traffic calming measures to be encompassed in a Quiet Lanes scheme for the Wrekin Forest.
- Visitor information strategy to investigate development of main Wrekin interpretation off-site in Wellington and a limited set of on-site fixed interpretation.
- Continued work to improve road safety for walkers and other leisure users.

We would like to thank all the respondents to the online Blog hosted by Little Wenlock Parish Council and to the summary of recent debate hosted by the All Friends Round the Wrekin group. The report has been based on innumerable discussions with a very broad range of individuals and groups, and is also a distillation of the findings of a series of reports commissioned by SWT over the last two years. Our intention is to help carry forward the debate regarding visitor provision for the Wrekin Forest and hope that we can be part of the resolution of the difficulties faced by the demands our love of the countryside has on the object of our affection.

PWL 17/12/08
SWT