

Troopers Hill Stepping Forward

Project Description from Stage 2 Application

Introduction

The aim of the project is to give a better quality experience to all visitors to Troopers Hill Local Nature Reserve (LNR) while maintaining the appearance and feel of a wild oasis in the urban environment of east Bristol and protecting this important wildlife habitat.

The project will include:

- Improvement works to flights of steps on the LNR;
- Waymarking to woodland paths to be designed by a community artist at workshops;
- Improvements to the most used access route and road crossings;
- Installation of an information sign and bench to wheelchair access path;
- Installation of an interpretation board;
- Woodland path improvements using volunteers and offenders on the community payback scheme;
- A launch event to involve as many members of the community as possible.

Background – Troopers Hill, *a unique and special place*

The majority of Troopers Hill Local Nature Reserve is on a very steep south facing hillside. Some steps were installed on paths on the hillside over 20 years ago by Bristol Development Corporation. This body ceased to exist soon afterwards and the steps were not maintained. The timber is now rotting and erosion has meant that some of the steps are very high (up to 18 inches). People are now avoiding using the steps and this is causing increased trampling on adjacent areas, this is damaging an important wildlife habitat which is listed as a priority habitat in the Bristol Biodiversity Action Plan. It is also dissuading visitors from exploring parts of the site and fully experiencing all that Troopers Hill has to offer.

Troopers Hill LNR is surrounded by inner city, high density housing and is enjoyed throughout the year by people from the local community and other areas in Bristol. The site has been shaped by the action of man over the past centuries, particularly quarrying, mining and copper smelting. In the last hundred years or so nature has taken over and the site is now an area of acid heathland and grassland surrounded by scrub and woodland. It is one of the most important sites for invertebrates in the region, including several 'Red Data Book' species. Twenty one different species of butterfly have been recorded and in summer the hill is alive with the sound of grasshoppers and crickets. In 1995 Troopers Hill was designated as a Local Nature Reserve in recognition of its importance for both wildlife and people.

The poor soil on the site and the polluting effects of past industry in the area have prevented the natural progression to scrub and trees. At the same time the steep slopes and in recent years the recognition of its ecological importance have prevented development. The result is a unique site where people living in the area can enjoy an open and natural heathland island within one of Britain's larger cities

The site also contains evidence of its past industrial history with a listed chimney (dating from copper smelting in the 1700s) at the top forming a landmark that is visible from a large part of east Bristol.

The appearance of Troopers Hill is therefore not only important for visitors to the site, who can admire the views over the centre of Bristol and to the Mendips beyond, but also for residents in the surrounding area, who have a view looking towards it.

Development of the Project

In developing this project Friends of Troopers Hill wanted to enable as many people as possible to enjoy this

unique environment while protecting the ecology and the wild and natural feel of the site. We are not aiming to significantly increase the overall number of visitors but are aiming to enable as many as possible to experience all that the site has to offer and to walk through the areas of heather and broom, and woodland, without destroying the important biodiversity of the area.

We would however like to see an increase in use of the site by certain target groups who currently find accessing the site difficult. We are particularly aiming at those with more limited mobility, older people and also those with restricted vision who could visit the site with a guide. Improvement to the steps will also benefit other users, particularly families with younger children.

The Ecological report commissioned with the Development Grant made clear that the paths should follow their existing routes to avoid damage to sensitive habitats. The ecologist was asked to consider whether removing the steps and allowing people to create their own desire lines was a more sound approach for the ecological wellbeing of the Hill. The report was clear. Steps and paths encourage people to stay on those routes, thus allowing only light trampling on the Hill as a whole. Light trampling is useful and desirable. Without the steps and paths there would be over-trampling and the creation of many more desire lines destroying wildlife habitats. In the medium to long-term doing nothing would have the same detrimental effect as the existing routes become unusable.

Access for Wheelchair Users

A previous project opened up the top of the hill for wheelchair users utilising the relatively level entrance across an adjoining recreation area (Troopers Hill Field) from a residential road. This path allows wheelchair users to admire the views from the top of the hill. The very steep nature of the rest of the site prevents wheelchair access. Installation of ramped and wider paths would have a huge negative impact on the biodiversity of the site (as confirmed by the ecological report) and would destroy its visual appearance. We have consulted with the Bristol Physical Access Chain who advise on access issues in Bristol and have concluded that provision of any further wheelchair access is not possible.

The wheelchair accessible path reaches the top of the hill via Troopers Hill Field, where some on street parking is available. As part of the project a sign will be installed at the gate to this path describing the route as requested by the Bristol Physical Access Chain.

Following the suggestion of a wheelchair user we will also install an additional bench part way along this path at a viewpoint, to allow those pushing chairs to rest. An existing sign at the entrance to the LNR will also be relocated and lowered making it easier for wheelchair users to read. This will also benefit children who tell us that the sign is currently too high.

Improving Access for the less mobile and visually impaired

The major part of the work is to improve the steps on the existing paths across Troopers Hill Local Nature Reserve. There is a large degree of local support for these improvements, as demonstrated by the public consultation funded by the Development Grant. The paths connect residential areas at the top and bottom of the hill and form a circular route around the site. They also form important links in walking routes that include the nearby River Avon Trail and connect to local bus stops. Use of these paths allows people to have a close view of the unique heathland and grassland and the wildlife that it supports.

We have carefully considered the design of the steps and in particular the provision of handrails. We have consulted with the 'Bristol Physical Access Chain' (BPAC) who advise on access for disabled people. Their view was that the provision of handrails would bring few benefits since even with them installed those who require handrails were unlikely to be able to cope with the extent of the climbs on the paths.

The public consultation showed that people wanted to retain the wild nature of the site. Avon Wildlife Trust also raised concerns about the introduction of 'urban features'. To have any benefit handrails would be installed on over 200m of steps and also on some steeper slopes. This would have a significant, negative visual impact on the site and, given the access difficulties for construction, the cost would be prohibitive and far exceed the

sums that would be reasonable to spend given the limited benefit.

For these reasons we have decided to follow the Bristol Physical Access Chain advice to achieve a 'near to best' design by improving the steps without changing the existing route or path width and without providing handrails.

The project is to rebuild the steps on the paths with the aim that the maximum riser should be 200mm. A minimum width of 1.2m will be used where this is possible but pinch points will be accepted where this width would impact on important ecological areas or require extensive works.

The work will be carried out following the recommendations in the ecological report, and it is essential that it is monitored by the ecologist.

The surface of the steps will be a fine to dust stone to give a firm surface, the aggregate used will have a colour that blends as far as possible with the colours of the rock outcrops on the hill. The edges of the steps will be of timber to give a natural appearance. The design is such that rain water will drain to the side, with large rocks placed where necessary to prevent erosion from the run off. At the top of one of the flights of steps where significant storm water runoff collects a cross drain will be installed to take water away from the path and prevent erosion, this will be formed as a channel between two sleepers. A plinth will also be constructed around an existing seat where erosion has left the seat too high for comfortable use.

In accordance with the ecological report no topsoil will be imported and no areas on the LNR will be seeded, any areas disturbed will be allowed to regenerate naturally.

Waymarking – Troopers Hill Woodland

While the open nature of the heathland and grassland, the topography and the clear focal point of the chimney make it easy for visitors to find their way around the main part of the nature reserve without a fear of becoming lost, this is not so for the paths through the woodland on the western flank of the hill. The paths through the woodland give a very different experience to the open heathland and allow visitors to see a different aspect of nature.

The consultation has shown that many local people, although they visit the site regularly and live close by, don't use them because they don't know where they go and are not aware of the potential for circular walks.

Another part of the project is therefore to provide waymarking to the woodland paths to encourage their use. We will involve local people in the design of this waymarking, particularly children. It is also an opportunity to introduce an element of art work to the site.

In accordance with the views expressed in the consultation we aim to give the waymarkers a natural appearance by using timber. The project will therefore include an art based project with a series of workshops, led by a community artist, involving local children and adults in the design and production of the waymarkers. The actual installation will then be undertaken by volunteers. The waymarkers will mark a circular route.

Our aim in this part of the project is to give people confidence to use the woodland paths and this will encourage visitors to the site to enjoy natural woodlands as well as open heathland in the midst of a very urban, inner city setting. Again the aim is to do this without impacting significantly on the natural feel of the site.

Improving Woodland Paths

We will also be working with BTCV to use volunteers to construct a flight of steps on another path through the woods. This route will not be waymarked thus providing an alternative for those who stated in the consultation that they wished to find their own routes. This path is currently a well used 'desire line' but has steep slopes that are very slippery when wet. Some steps were installed on this path a few years ago by students on a Duke of Edinburgh scheme but these are now rotting. The use of BTCV will allow us to keep

volunteer 'ownership' of this path.

Working with the City Council we will be using offenders on the 'Community Payback' scheme to carry out a deep clean in the woodland; to clear some areas of scrub to make the entrances more inviting and to clear an area for the installation of the additional seat next to the wheelchair path. The Community Payback team will also be given the opportunity to carry out some habitat management work on the LNR, thus providing an element of education as to the ecological importance of the site. We will be using offenders doing their community payback at weekends as this will allow volunteers from Friends of Troopers Hill to meet with the group and to explain the importance of the site. We hope that some of the offenders will become volunteers in the future giving a long-term benefit to both them and the site.

Improving Access – Troopers Hill Field

The access used for the wheelchair path is not the most convenient for most local residents. Instead the most used route is diagonally across the adjacent Troopers Hill Field. This is also the route used to get to the hill from local bus stops, schools etc. The Field is a flat grassed area, in the summer some wheelchair users also use this route.

Part of the Field becomes very muddy in the autumn and winter and this forms a barrier to access to the nature reserve. The consultation confirmed that dealing with this muddy area is a priority for many local people. In putting together the design of the project it has been confirmed that installation of land-drains will resolve the problem. Removing this barrier will particularly help with our ongoing work with local schools, since it is important given the time limitations of the school timetable that the shortest route between the school and the hill can be used. We will also install 'grasslock' matting at the entrances to stop these becoming muddy in winter.

Improving Access – New Interpretation Board

A new interpretation board will be introduced at the most used entrance to the Field with a map showing the new waymarked routes in the woodland and how the Field links to the LNR and the woodland. The design will also include an area to display posters about events planned by Friends of Troopers Hill and other local information.

Improving Access – Road Crossings

Where the paths across the LNR join the roads at the bottom of the hill, there are no drop kerbs on the opposite pavement (there are no pavements on the hill side of the road so users have to cross). To highlight where people should be crossing and to make these crossing points easier to use we intend to install drop kerbs at these two locations, this will also discourage cars from parking at the crossing points. The need for these dropped kerbs has particularly been raised by parents with buggies and young children who wish to be able to cross the road easily and quickly. This will also benefit those with limited mobility and restricted vision. There is no funding available from the Local Authority for this work since it is not a priority in road safety terms.

Engaging with Dog Owners

One of the largest groups of users of the hill are dog walkers. The presence of dog mess is also the largest source of complaint from other users. We have been working with the City Council over the past few years to try and address this problem and for example have installed five additional dog waste bins on the site.

While this project does not directly address this problem we believe that the improved access to the site and the fact that it will have a more 'cared for' appearance will help in getting the 'clean up after your dog' message across.

We also intend to hold an event especially aimed at dog walkers as part of our *Troopers Community Spaces Celebration Month* which will launch the project.

Summary

The project overall will benefit people of all ages and abilities and will also help protect a valuable habitat which is listed as a priority in the Bristol Biodiversity Action Plan. It will make Troopers Hill a more enjoyable place to visit and will encourage more visits from the less able and more return visits. The volunteering opportunities will encourage more involvement from local people and increase the sense of ownership.

Posters on the hill and our website will be used to give information and keep local residents up to date as work progresses.

'Troopers Community Spaces Celebration'

We intend to launch the project with a series of events over a one month celebration period rather than one large event which would be at risk from the weather. The work on site will be complete in early summer 2012, but we would like the new works to bed in and vegetation to re-establish in disturbed areas before we publicise the completion, we also want to work with schools and therefore avoid school holidays. In addition the London Olympics and related events are likely to impact on attendance at any events in the summer. We will therefore plan the events for October 2012.

We will include

The events increase the appreciation of the wildlife and plants on the site in addition to introducing or re-introducing people to its beauties and new level of accessibility.

- a 'walking story telling' session for children to include craft activities in gazebos on the hill;
- school visits to learn about the ecology on the site.
- 'Walking the Hill' - we will invite walking for health and other walking groups to include Troopers Hill in their events programme for the month, with the aim of getting as many groups (and especially those with less able members) to use the hill as possible during the month – as an incentive will hold a prize draw in which all walkers and groups will be entered. There will be vouchers for an outdoor shop for individuals and a contribution to transport or accommodation for groups. Photographs of groups will be added to our website to show the range of people using the hill.
- 'Troopers Treasure Doggy Trail' on the hill and in the woodland aimed at dog owners as part of an afternoon event aimed at all the family.
- A guided walk describing the nature importance of the site.

All these events will be publicised through our own website as well as via the Bristol City Council website, the Bristol Parks Forum and press releases to local media and our contacts at Radio Bristol and at the local paper. We particularly expect the 'Walking the Hill' event to attract a high level of publicity.

We will hold meetings to plan these events and their publicity in a local church hall with the aim of involving as many volunteers as possible in the planning and publicity.