

WARDS: All

AGENDA ITEM NO. 9

DUDLEY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

BRIERLEY HILL AREA COMMITTEE – 5th APRIL 2005

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

DECLARATION OF BARROW HILL LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

1.0. PURPOSE

- 1.1. To seek the Committee's support for the declaration of Barrow Hill as a Local Nature Reserve (LNR).

2.0. BACKGROUND

Local Nature Reserves

- 2.1. The purpose of Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) is to preserve wildlife and geology of special interest and to provide people with opportunities to come into contact with and study nature. LNRs have an important role to play in biodiversity conservation and earth science, the quality of the local environment and encouraging community involvement in their local area.
- 2.2. English Nature has set local authorities a target of designating 1ha of LNR for every 1,000 of their population. This target has been adopted in the Council Plan 2003/07 Operational Action Plan, under Environmental Matters: Green Spaces - Better Places. Declaring Barrow Hill as an LNR will bring the Borough's LNR total to 0.9ha per 1,000 of population, significant progress towards this target.
- 2.3. Declaring LNRs allows the Council to enforce special byelaws to protect wildlife and public amenity and provides better opportunities for obtaining grant aid from such sources as English Nature and the New Opportunities Fund. The Council has a good record of LNR management, having won an English Nature award in 2001 for the management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest within its LNRs.

Barrow Hill proposed LNR

- 2.4. Barrow Hill, part of the designated Green Belt, represents one of the most significant and well-loved areas of greenspace in the Borough. Most of the area is designated as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation within the Dudley Revised Deposit Unitary Development Plan (UDP). The green wedge supports the largest and most ecologically rich area of grassland in the Borough, ancient woodland, ponds supporting populations of Great Crested Newt, and other important habitats and species – many of these are included in the Biodiversity Action Plan for Birmingham and the Black Country. Barrow Hill, Dudley's volcano, is also of very high geological

importance, appearing in the Geological Conservation Review, which lists the most important sites in the country.

- 2.5. Much of the green wedge is designated as a Landscape Heritage Area within the UDP. The area is also of high recreational and amenity value for local people in its own right, and is linked to both the Fens Pools area and the Staffordshire countryside via the Pensnett Railway Walk. Public consultation carried out during the preparation of a Management Plan for the area revealed strong local support for protection of this area of greenspace for nature conservation and associated informal recreation.
- 2.6. It has been Council policy to declare Barrow Hill as an LNR for a number of years. The area is proposed as an LNR in the Action Plan for Nature Conservation in Dudley (approved 1995). The Revised Deposit UDP includes Coopers Bank in the proposal. Grazing fields at Coopers Bank are, however, now subject to a long-term lease with an option to purchase and the lessees have confirmed that they do not wish the land to become part of a Nature Reserve. Statutory requirements mean that the Council therefore cannot at present include these fields within the proposed LNR.
- 2.7. A Management Plan for Barrow Hill & Coopers Bank was prepared in 2001. This recommended that the site be put forward for LNR declaration. At the July 2001 meeting, which approved the Management Plan, this Committee also supported the proposal that Barrow Hill be considered for declaration as an LNR.
- 2.8. Public consultation on LNR declaration took place through the Revised Deposit UDP Review 2000-2004 and consultation on the Management Plan in 2001. On both occasions there were no objections to proposed LNR declaration with strong support being shown by local residents and interest groups. Following English Nature guidance on LNR declaration, a public consultation period will follow LNR declaration, confirmation of the declaration and full LNR status only taking place once responses have been taken into account.
- 2.9. The proposal for declaration of the LNR takes into account Council policy on improvement of transport links to the western side of the Borough.

The Wildspace! Grant Scheme

- 2.10. The New Opportunities Fund allocated £125 million to its Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities programme, to help urban and rural communities to understand, improve and care for their natural and living environment. In partnership with English Nature, it is working to deliver £6 million under 'Wildspace! – a grant scheme for LNRs. As Barrow Hill is without a dedicated site presence (though the Fens Pools Wardens do carry out patrols and limited management work there), it was included, along with Cotwall End Valley and Bumble Hole LNRs, in Dudley's successful application for Wildspace! funding.
- 2.11. In 2002 Dudley MBC was awarded a total of £76,000 over three years towards the management of the three sites. A Wildspace Officer was appointed in April 2002 and has since been succeeded by two part-time officers. The post is largely concerned with promoting access to green spaces, improving their management, raising awareness and encouraging communities to get actively involved in looking after their Local Nature Reserves. The project runs until September 2005. The Wildspace Officers have been highly successful in improving the physical and natural

environment of Cotwall End and Bumble Hole LNRs, addressing problems of anti-social behaviour, involving the public as volunteers and producing attractive interpretative materials. They supported the formation of a Friends of Cotwall End Group which now carries out management work and addresses site issues.

- 2.12. It is an aim of the Wildspace! project to declare Barrow Hill as an LNR so that this important site can also benefit. This will allow grant funding to be spent on the site to improve access arrangements and habitat management and provide interpretative materials such as signboards and leaflets. It is intended to issue interpretation material and install LNR signs on site following LNR declaration. The project has already resulted in partnership working with other organisations to improve Barrow Hill and its community value. The Wildspace Officers are working with Action Heart at Russells Hall Hospital to develop a health walk for heart patients. A joint project with the Black Country Geological Society, funded by English Nature, will provide interpretation material about the geology and history of the quarry and help to improve public access.

3.0 PROPOSAL

- 3.1. That the Area Committee supports the declaration of Barrow Hill LNR.
- 3.2. That the Area Committee supports further efforts to secure external funding for LNR management and enhancement.

4.0 FINANCE

- 4.1. There will be no further financial implications in declaring Barrow Hill as an LNR over and above current management requirements, which are met from existing budgets.
- 4.2. LNR status will give enhanced opportunities to apply for further grant-aid that may be available from English Nature and other external sources.
- 4.3. English Nature funds the Wildspace! Project. A condition of the grant is that Barrow Hill be declared LNR by mid 2005.

5.0 LAW

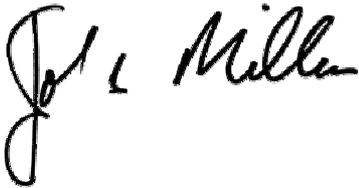
- 5.1. Sections 19 and 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949) (as amended) enable a local authority to declare nature reserves.
- 5.2. Section 11 of the Countryside Act (1968) requires that the Council, in the exercise of its functions, have regard for the desirability of conserving the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside. This extends to both urban and rural areas.
- 5.3. Section 111 of the Local Government Act (1972) authorises the Council to do anything which is calculated to facilitate, is conducive to, or is incidental to, the discharge of any of its functions.
- 5.4. Land within the proposed LNR boundary has been appropriated to the Directorate of The Urban Environment. No legal covenants or restrictions are in place that would be compromised by LNR declaration.

6.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

- 6.1. This report and the management of Barrow Hill takes into account the Council's policy on Equal Opportunities. Access improvements would be undertaken with regard to the needs of people with disabilities.

7.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1. That the proposals set out in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.2 of this report be supported.

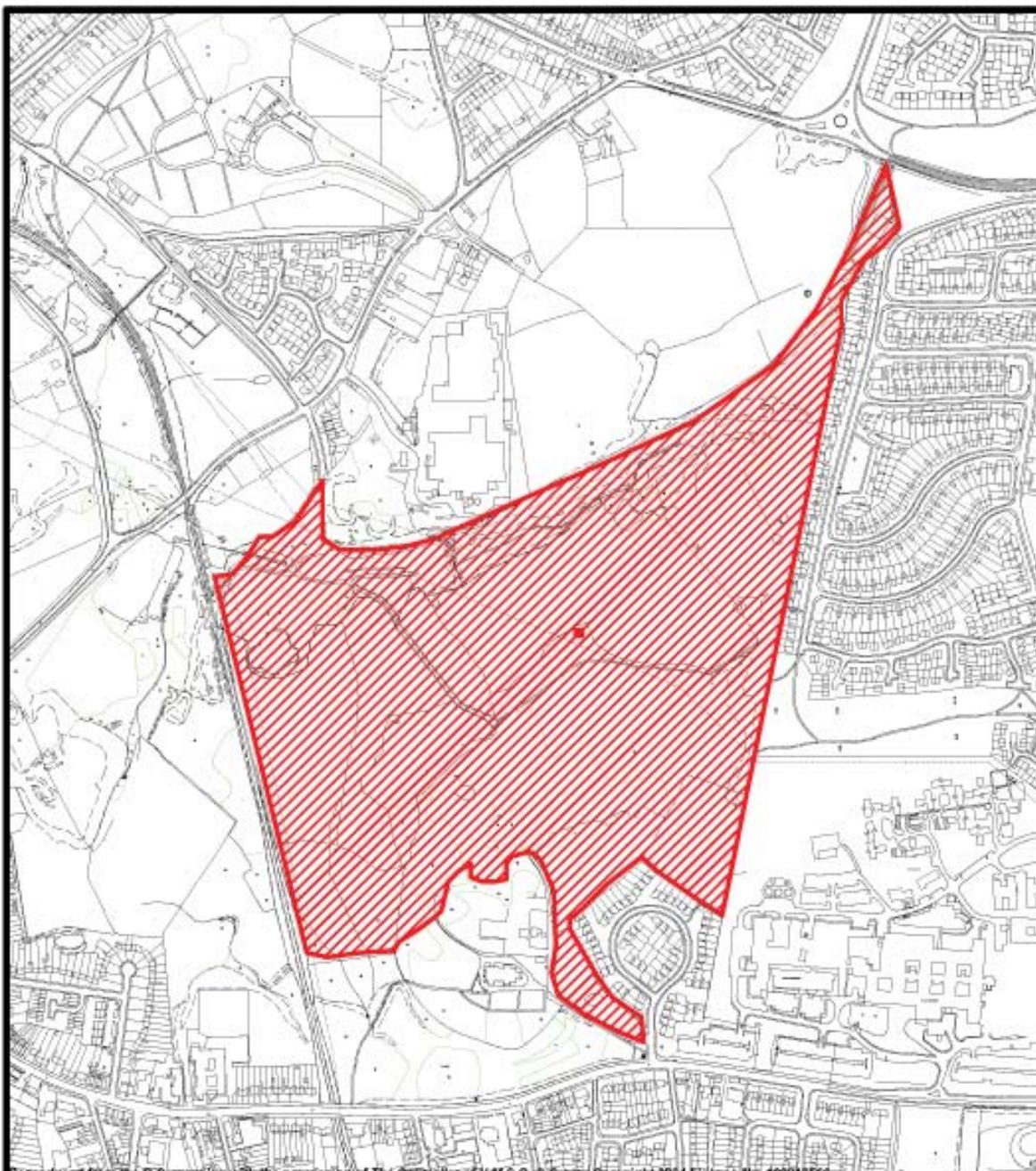


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Background documents used in the preparation of this report:-

Action Plan for Nature Conservation in Dudley 1995
Revised Deposit Unitary Development Plan 2002
Barrow Hill Management Plan 2001-2011



TITLE:

PROPOSED NATURE RESERVE
 BARROW HILL
 PENSNETT

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