



Land Acquisition and Disposal Policy

Introduction

To provide a statement of principles upon which proposals for land acquisition and disposal will be prepared and upon which decision-making for land acquisition and disposal will be made by Trustees.

1. Objectives and Principles

Key land acquisition objectives are:

- To contribute to providing a connected and resilient landscape where wildlife can thrive, focusing on areas where the greatest impact can be made such as our Living Landscapes.
- To contribute to the protection of Worcestershire's most threatened habitats and species.
- To contribute towards UK and local Biodiversity Action Plan targets for species protection, and habitat protection, restoration and creation.
- To provide nature reserves for people's enjoyment and education.
- To create habitats that will provide net sequestering of carbon.

Broad principles for why we acquire land are:

The loss and damage to habitats and the decline in populations of many species outside, and even within, protected areas since the middle of the last century provides compelling evidence for the need to continue to expand land acquisition.

Threats to biodiversity and nature's recovery, including the predicted impacts of climate change, the ability to adapt to climate change, ever-increasing targets for economic development, uncertainty over land use, fluctuating markets for agricultural commodities, uncertainty over land management grant funding, the impacts of leaving the European Union, all add pressure to already fragile ecosystems and strengthen the case for land acquisition for conservation purposes and for use as places where good ecological practice can be demonstrated to others.

It is no longer possible to only consider areas of existing wildlife value as sufficient to provide for and sustain viable populations, but consideration must be given to the opportunity and ability to acquire land where habitats can be restored or re-created. To reverse the decline in biodiversity, the focus for the Trust's land acquisition strategy must increasingly be on re-creation and expansion with the aim of creating larger, ecologically functional areas of habitats that can also provide broader social and economic benefits and contribute towards quality of life.

The Trust's reserves provide a valuable background to educational activities. At present these tend to be of a fairly specialist nature but enhancing the reserve holding with sites selected on social, educational and community use criteria could provide the opportunity for major expansion of this area of our work.

The Trust has a policy and strategy on Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Reduction. This aims to reduce the Trust's operational GHG footprint to zero by 2030, through a combination of reducing emissions to an operational minimum and then sequestering the remainder through land management projects to create new wildlife habitats, primarily woodland.

Where carbon sequestration is a primary or significant consideration for land acquisition the aim of these criteria would be to prioritise potential sequestration projects to a limited number of areas/sites.

2. Strategic Target and Living Landscape Priority Areas

The Trust has defined a number of priority areas which meet The Wildlife Trust's Living Landscape objectives. Priority will be given to acquisitions in these areas:

Forest of Feckenham
Malvern Chase
Severn and Avon Vales
Stour Valley
Teme Valley
Wyre Forest Heaths
Bredon Hill

Under certain circumstances acquisitions may be made outside these areas where there are particularly strong reasons for doing so and the acquisition criteria are met.

3. Acquisition Criteria

There are five main sets of overlapping criteria to evaluate specific site acquisition criteria.

1. Existing ecological value

- i. Ecological status
- ii. Size
- iii. Rarity value – species and habitats
- iv. Threat
- v. Strategic location/ecological context
- vi. Management

2. Potential for restoration/creation

- i. Strategic location/ecological context in the wider landscape
- ii. Scope for ecological improvement
- iii. Ability to provide sustainable management

3. Social, educational and community engagement

- i. Closeness to population
- ii. Physical barriers – little or no physical barriers or potential to provide access with minimal or no physical barriers
- iii. Facilities – existing or potential

- iv. Attractive and interesting features and educational value
- v. Resilience to visitor impact
- vi. Existing community interest and potential to develop further
- vii. Demonstration value of the site

4. *Greenhouse Gas emissions and/or sequestration*

- i. Impact on Trust's operational GHG footprint
- ii. A minimum area predominantly for sequestration of 30 acres (12 hectares)
- iii. Adjacent to substantial existing holdings of similar habitat of at least the equivalent size
- iv. Significant additional value for public access/demonstration etc.
- v. Will contribute to the Nature Recovery Network

5. *Financial & Legal Criteria*

- i. Initial feasibility and acquisition costs and incomes
- ii. Future revenue costs and incomes
- iii. Future capital costs and incomes
- iv. Ability to provide sustainable finances
- v. Tenure
- vi. Legal liabilities associated with the site
- vii. Financial and legal structure for management by third party – e.g., Conservation Covenant, land management agreement, Farm Business Tenancy, Leasehold, rent

4. **The Role of Other Organisations**

There are a number of other organisations that are able to purchase land for the purpose of conserving it. The Trust should not seek to duplicate the role of these other organisations especially where they express an interest in purchasing land of interest to us and where we are sure that they have the capability to manage it adequately.

5. **Gifts of Land**

Even land that is donated to the Trust has implications for budgeting and staff and volunteer time. The criteria within the strategy do not therefore differentiate between land gifted to the Trust and land which the Trust seeks to purchase. In both cases the land to be acquired must be assessed favourably on balance against the criteria in section three of the strategy.

6. **Disposal Criteria**

A Trust nature reserve may be disposed of under the following conditions:

- If legal or other restrictions arise or significant external and physical change occurs that prohibit the Trust from managing the reserve in the way it sees fit
- If adequate resources are not available to undertake the necessary long term management
- If the site is of low priority following an assessment against the acquisition criteria

7. **Procedure**

There are four scenarios where this policy is likely to be applied:

- When notification is received that land is for sale or is likely to be for sale

- When the Trust wishes to pro-actively pursue the potential acquisition of land
- When an offer of a gift of land to the Trust is made
- When the Trust is reviewing its land holdings

In all cases, decisions on land acquisition and disposal are solely in the power of the Trust's Council. All decisions should be based on a written proposal which evaluates a site against the requirements set out in this policy with, wherever possible, arrangements made for any Council member who so wishes to make a site visit.

The sheer number of parcels of land that become available mean that it is impractical and undesirable for every parcel to be reported or evaluated in full so the Director has discretion over which parcels should be reported and/or evaluated, and when site visits are appropriate.

Any pro-active approaches should be approved, in advance by Council, either as individual parcels or as part of an agreed acquisition strategy.

In some cases where land becomes available at very short notice it may not be possible to compile reports based on comprehensive knowledge or information as set out in this policy in which case any evaluation proposals be based on the best available knowledge/advice and should highlight these shortcomings. Where timescales dictate, a fast-track process can be used which would involve special meetings of Council and/or decision-making by email/telephone at the discretion of the Chair of Council.

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