

Destination Management Strategy – The Dark Hedges	8th November 2016
To: The Leisure and Development Committee For Decision	

Linkage to Council Strategy (2015-19)	
Strategic Theme	Building Prosperity
Outcome	Secure the area as NI's premier tourist destination
Lead Officer	Head of Tourism and Recreation
Cost: (If applicable)	N/A at this stage

The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Members to progress the Dark Hedges Access project to stage 2 of the Capital Project 4 Stage Process.

Background

The Dark Hedges is located on Bregagh Road, Stranocum, a small link road connecting the Ballinlea Road to the Fivey Road (crossing the Ballykenver, Gracehill & Drones Roads). It was formerly a tree lined avenue leading to the Georgian Gracehill House. The beech trees in this rural setting have become twisted and knarled over the years developing a character and personality which has created a unique appearance.

In recent years The Dark Hedges Preservation Trust has been set up with the aim to protect the trees and promote them as an important natural asset.

The Dark Hedges' shape, form and visual appearance has attracted a number of film and television production companies, who have subsequently used the location for filming. As a result, the site has been broadcast into millions of homes across the world, the most notable being the HBO Game of Thrones series. The success of this series in particular has led to the site's growing popularity through film tourism. Known as the 'King's Road' in the series, this site now attracts visitors from across the globe on a year-round basis.

The tens of thousands of visitors to this location bring economic benefit to Northern Ireland and the Causeway Coast & Glens Area. There is a clear opportunity for businesses in the locality of the Dark Hedges to significantly increase their revenue from these visitor numbers.

At present however, this potential is not being realised, with much of the visiting traffic simply parking on the carriageway at Bregagh Road to the view the Dark Hedges and, consequently, little obvious benefit is being brought to the locality.

The large numbers of visitors and vehicles to the Bregagh Road, including coaches up to 10m in length, has had a detrimental impact on the local environment. Verge erosion, site degradation and potential damage to the root system of the trees has not only had an adverse

physical impact on the environment but has led to a diminished visitor experience for the many thousands of visitors coming to see and enjoy the Dark Hedges. Health & safety issues are also very apparent with conflict existing between pedestrians walking on the carriageway, stationary vehicles parked on the grass verges and through traffic.

Stakeholder Collaboration

Since Council Officers originally reported to the Leisure & Development Committee in November 2015, Council has been working closely with Transport NI, Tourism NI, the owners of the Dark Hedges Estate and local landowners to devise a solution to address the environmental, health & safety and visitor management issues at this location.

Proposed Interventions

Working with the statutory and private sector stakeholders, the following interventions are in the process of being developed:

- Transport NI have initiated a Roads Traffic Regulation Order for the Prohibition of Traffic on the C102 Bregagh Road from its junction with the Ballinlea Road to its junction with the Ballykenver Road. This will pedestrianise the Dark Hedges experience whilst allowing limited vehicular access to be maintained by owners or occupiers of land abutting the Dark Hedges / Bregagh Road and emergency service vehicles.
- The Dark Hedges Estate (owners of the Gracehill Golf Club & the Hedges Hotel) has agreed to work with the statutory bodies and provide parking facilities, comfort facilities and a themed attraction. A new pathway within the estate will facilitate visitor access to a safe crossing point on the Ballinlea Road (an agreement will be required with the land owners to ensure future tenure and security access).
- Council proposal to purchase 1566 sq metres of land adjacent to the north western end of the Dark Hedges/Bregagh Road, from a private landowner, to facilitate the creation of an orientation hub space for the Dark Hedges Experience, helping to ensure safer access from the Ballinlea Road and providing pedestrian access into the proposed vehicle free Dark Hedges/Bregagh Road (see Plan below). Also, installation of infrastructure on the Bregagh Road to restrict vehicular traffic and allow pedestrianisation to occur.



The above interventions would enable the pedestrianisation of the Dark Hedges/Bregagh Road, resulting in safer access and exclusion of vehicles from the desired visual and sensory experience and enabling a visitor orientation and distribution area on land at the corner of the Ballinlea / Bregagh Road junction.

Funding

Several funding sources are being considered including Tourism NI, The Rural Development Programme and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Site Management for 2017

To allow for a solution to the issues for the summer season of 2017, the closure of the Bregagh Road and a crossing access point from the Dark Hedges Estate is necessary. In the interim and in advance of an agreed longer term management solution for the wider 'Dark Hedges Experience' the following measures are proposed for 2017.

Transport NI, following the Prohibition of Traffic Order, will remain the statutory agency responsible for maintenance of the carriageway of the Bregagh Road when it is pedestrianised.

- The maintenance of the trees will continue to be the responsibility of the landowners and the Dark Hedges Preservation Trust.
- The Dark Hedges Estate will be managed by the owners who can accommodate parking for approximately 100 cars and 5 coaches.
- Council will maintain the proposed access / orientation hub space.

Future Site Management

Discussions have taken place between Council Officers and the Dark Hedges Preservation Trust, concerning future management of the site. The Trust have concerns around their group's capacity for longer term management and maintenance of the trees.

During the course of the coming months, Council Officers will be exploring with key stakeholders, options for a longer term sustainable approach to managing the site and will report back to Council with options and recommendations.

Members are asked to consider the Officers' proposal to purchase the 1566sq metres of agricultural land on the eastern side of the Bregagh Road at its junction with the Ballinlea Road. In addition, permission is sought to procure the services for design and project management, including procurement of the necessary construction/landscaping services needed to provide the orientation hub space for the Dark Hedges Experience. (It is anticipated any agreed interventions will be sympathetic to, and in harmony with, any design proposals developed by the Dark Hedges Estate for visitor flow and visitor management within their estate).

Recommendation

The Leisure & Development Committee is asked to approve the transition of the project to Stage 2 within Council's capital project management system. If approved, a tender report for the design, procurement and contractor services outlined above will be brought before Council for consideration to ensure the necessary infrastructure is in place to facilitate the pedestrianisation of the Bregagh Road prior to the summer season of 2017.