Bill Wadsworth, from Chris Blandford Associates, highlights some lessons about environmental impact assessment from the National Wildlife Conservation Park project.

The National Wildlife Conservation Park (NWCP) is a project being developed by the Bristol, Clifton and West of England Zoological Society.

The project is intended to set new standards for zoo developments internationally.

The NWCP, which will be complementary to the Society’s existing zoo at Clifton in Bristol, is being developed within the Hollywood Tower Estate, a locally important 19th century parkland landscape on the outskirts of Bristol.

The vision for the scheme is to be “...an iconic, world-class visitor attraction that combines an exciting and fun experience with the more serious messages of conservation and environmental sustainability. It will be a conservation-led wildlife park of international quality that will champion and support national and international conservation, demonstrate and encourage widespread sustainability and actively engage visitors in a wide range of animal and plant conservation projects.

An EIA was submitted in support of a successful planning permission and initial development of the NWCP has commenced, with the first visitor attractions opening in July 2013.

The NWCP project presented a particular challenge to ensure that the sustainability commitments set out in the scheme’s vision could be adhered to through the development and operation of a large visitor attraction, within the context of the Estate’s intrinsic heritage, landscape and ecological value.

The Hollywood Tower Estate has evolved over the last 200 years, with connections to Britain’s colonial past in Hong Kong and the early beginnings of the aviation industry.

Established in 1820, successive owners have extended the Estate such that it now comprises a series of distinctive landscapes encompassing the historic core of the mansion and its associated buildings set within a 19th century designed landscape, a farmland mosaic of small fields enclosed by hedgerows, ancient semi-natural woodland and a range of constructed wetlands. This landscape supports a range of habitats and species of nature conservation value including: bats, amphibians, reptiles, invertebrate assemblages and a range of bird species.

An Integrated Conservation Management Plan (ICMP) was submitted as part of the Environmental Statement. The need for the ICMP evolved as the intimate relationship between the historic, landscape and ecological value of the Estate revealed itself through the EIA process.

The strategic aim of the ICMP is to provide an overarching framework for the integrated conservation management of the site’s landscape infrastructure as an integral and sustainable part of the NWCP. In effect, the landscape infrastructure is the overall ‘exhibit’ within which all the other exhibits sit.

The ICMP strikes a balance between the conservation of the Estate’s assets (including the integrity of the ancient woodland and other habitats, respecting the setting of the house, tower and historic parkland within the wider landscape), whilst maximising the visitor experience, access and educational opportunities within the developing Wildlife Park.

To achieve this, the Estate was divided into a series of distinct landscape character zones to enable both broad policies for the conservation of the whole site, or for specific character traits within each zone, to be identified. A series of corresponding objectives for the delivery of those policies were then developed.
The ICMP informs the management of the NWCP site prior to the start of construction, through the initial base case construction phase, through phased construction to completion.

It was not possible to define in detail all necessary management measures for such a long-term period that involves different phases of development. Necessarily, therefore, the ICMP is designed as an iterative document that is informed and responsive to on-going monitoring work through each of the development phases.

The ICMP represents a key document in the development of the plans for the NWCP, and reflects the Society's remit to promote environmental sustainability on a global and local scale. The ICMP also demonstrates the flexibility that can be found within the EIA process, in that it is a supporting document formulated in response to highly site specific requirements for the proposed development.

The ICMP document provides a tangible expression of the need to set out 'an effective description of measures designed to monitor and manage significant effects' in a long-term, sustainable manner as required by Commitment 5 of the IEMA EIA Quality Mark Scheme.

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