

# The Hermitage Project

**Concept Design Report**

February 2022





# Document Control

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# The Project Team

**Client**

North West Leicestershire District Council

**Leisure Consultant**

V4 Services Ltd

**Architect**

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## The Project Team

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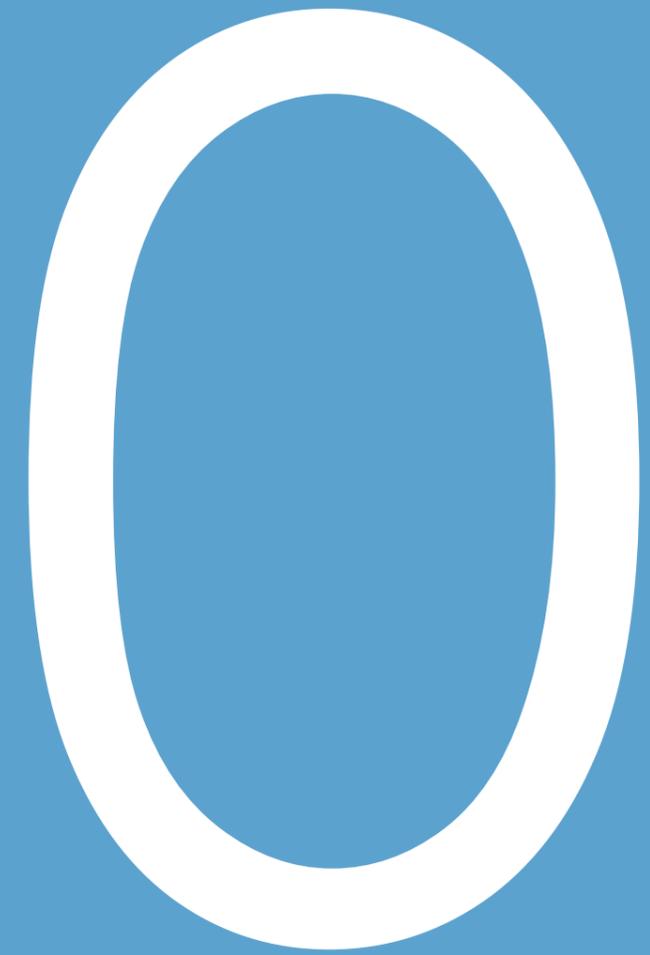
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# Introduction

## 0.01 Introduction

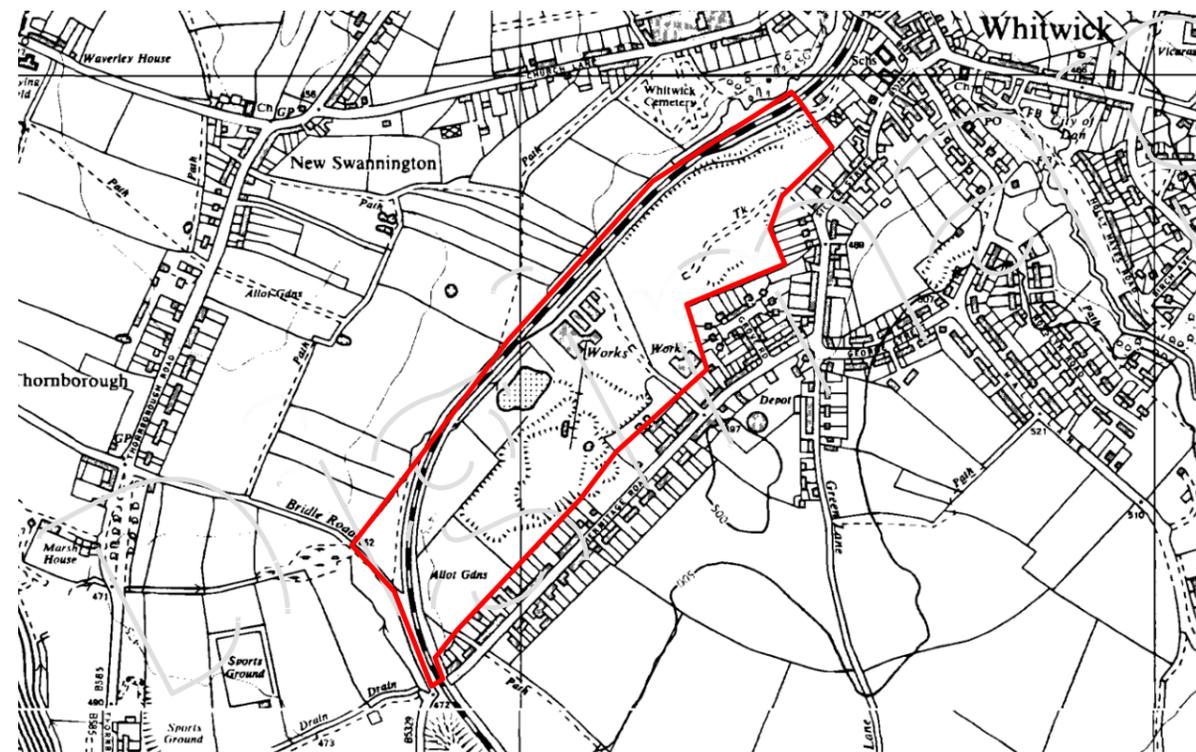
LA architects were commissioned through V4 Services to undertake a masterplanning feasibility study for the Hermitage and Recreation Ground and explore the repurposing potential of the existing Hermitage Leisure Centre site. The aim of the brief was to facilitate the councils objectives to develop complementary facilities within the recreation ground for the benefit of the local community

This concept design report provides an outline for the design journey undertaken to date, consultations that have taken place and includes suggestions for future steps.

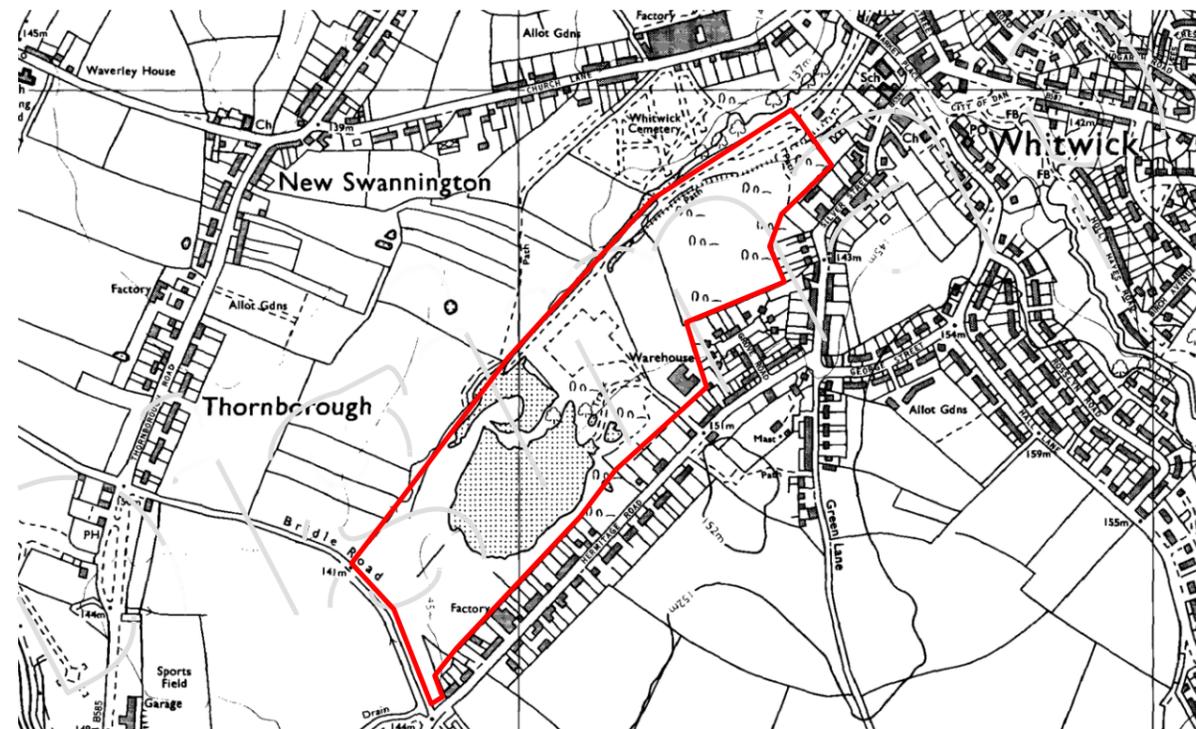
## 0.02 Background

Hermitage Recreation ground is located within the District Council of North West Leicestershire, between the town of Coalville to the south, and the village of Whitwick to the north. It is part of the National Forest, bordering the upland area of Charnwood Forest.

The site previously operated as a brickworks during the industrial revolution, with the existing lake formerly a clay extraction pit. Following the reshaping of the British railway network the adjacent railway track was removed, with the land repurposed for community use.



Hermitage Recreation Ground Site, Ca. 1960



Hermitage Recreation Ground Site, Ca. 1980

## 0.03 Location

Today, the site is bounded by residential development to the north and east, with farmland to the West. The southernmost boundary of the site is defined by the A511, Stephenson Way, and a band of commercial development.

The New Whitwick and Coalville Leisure Centre is being developed on the south west boundary of site, and is anticipated for completion in 2022. In addition to wet and dry leisure facilities this new facility will also include an external trim trail, and play equipment.

The site boasts good pedestrian and cycle links to Stephenson College and the wider area.



**Key:**

- Residential
- Light Industrial
- Commercial

1

# Site Analysis

# 1.00 Site Analysis

## 1.01 The Site

In order to better understand the existing condition of the site, a drone survey was undertaken. Site images shown here demonstrate that whilst the park has some maturity and is an existing destination, it is somewhat fractured in its layout and use.

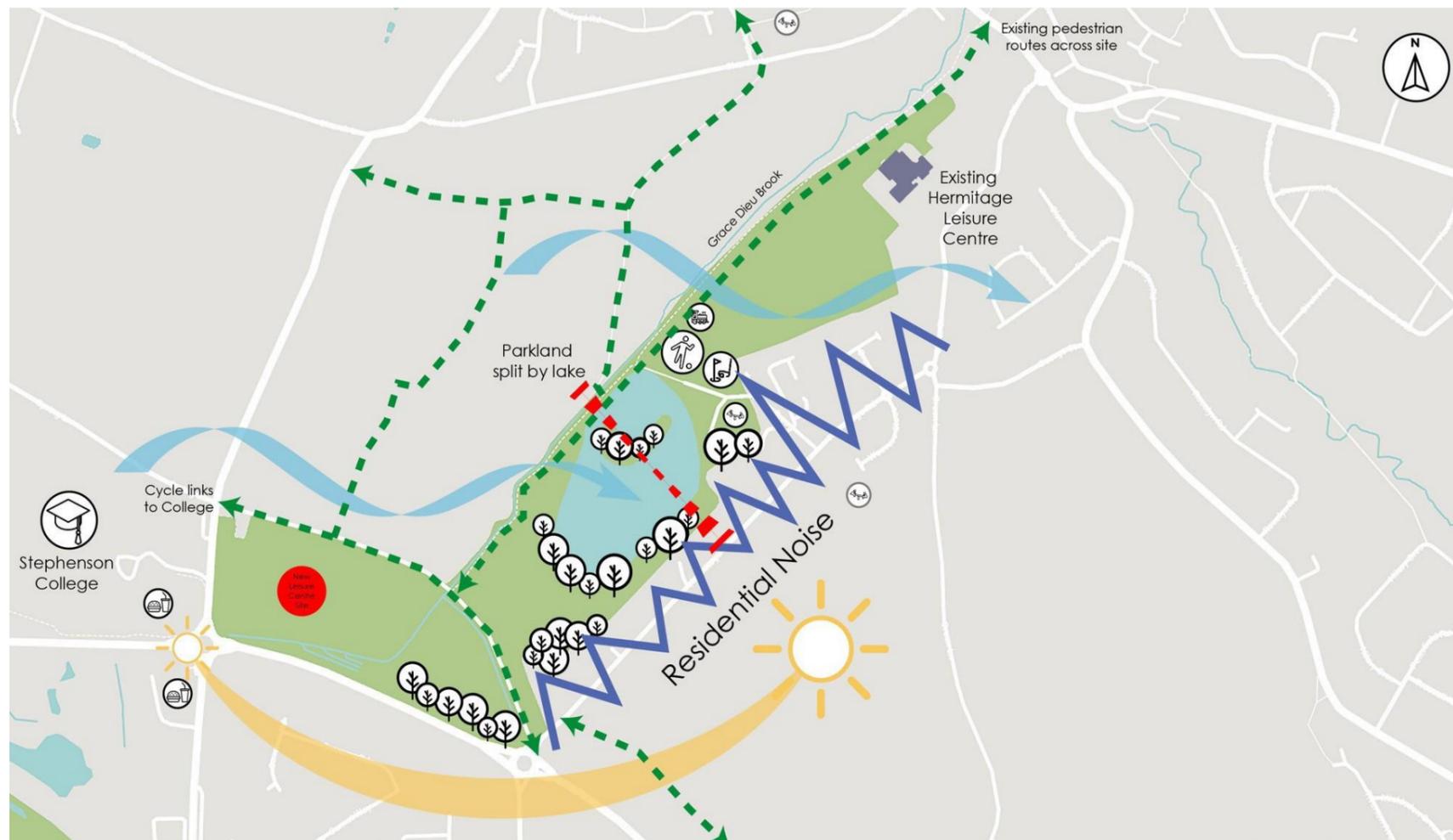
- The Synthetic Training Pitch (STP) dominates the main open area
- There are no communal facilities except a worn changing/toilet block
- The miniature railway is hidden by the STP
- The lake cuts this part of the site in half
- The existing Hermitage leisure centre could be considered as being disassociated with the lake and other community facilities



Drone Image looking south - over lake towards new leisure centre site.



Drone Image looking south - over miniature railway and synthetic training pitch



Opportunities Diagram

## 1.02 Opportunities

Following a process of desktop site analysis it became apparent that there are a number of opportunities for consideration:

- An established destination
- A semi-mature woodland with a good expanse of water
- Well established blue and green natural connections to the surrounding landscape
- Interconnecting footpaths and cycle routes
- Adjacencies to Stephenson College and the Whitwick and Coalville Leisure Centre.

### 1.03 Initial Diagram of Possibilities

In considering the possibilities of the existing site and buildings we also reviewed the results of the public consultation to understand the full extent of their concern along with any aspirations.

The matrix and diagram presented here takes that consultation, filters it through the opportunities of the site and proposes a possible approach that can provide an innovative, viable and deliverable long term solution.

Building upon existing uses it can be seen that a number of distinct but interrelated features can be brought together in a cohesive manner.

Central to this concept, is the opportunity for a lakeside community centre linking to the Synthetic Training Pitch (STP), Miniature Railway and other associated community facilities.

To the right is the existing Hermitage Leisure Centre, reused and re-energised and to the left a reconsidered park. It is a legacy of our time that we can provide a place for nature with enhanced biodiversity and ecology. Here we are suggesting that the existing park and lake provides just such an opportunity.

Possible Elements in The Scheme	Included within Proposals	Subject to further review	Not Included within Proposals	Notes
Indoor skatepark including special events, training and courses	●			Proposed within the repurposing of the existing Hermitage Leisure Centre Building
Martial arts & boxing including special events, training and courses			●	Conflict with Everyone Active facility provision – Not Provided.
Creche / Day care / Soft Play			●	Flexible nature of Visitor/Community Centre could accommodate creche/day care. However, such facilities tend to dominate operational model - dedicated facility to be considered subject to operator demand.
Video / Gaming / Board games area	●			Proposed within the repurposing of the existing Hermitage Leisure Centre Building.
Parkour including special events, training and courses	●			Proposed within the repurposing of the existing Hermitage Leisure Centre Building.
Dog Friendly Community Café space	●			Visitors/Community Centre to include café area. Dogs and responsible owners will be welcome.
Well being hub – with support	●			Proposed within the repurposing of the existing Hermitage Leisure Centre Building.
Safe place for LGBTQT & Neuro diverse groups	●			Gender neutral facilities to be provided in accordance with NWL guidance and Equality Act.
Flexible creative space for hiring – eg for dance, circus Skills, craft	●			Flexible Nature of Visitor/Community Centre can accommodate this use.
Music Studio & rehearsal Space	●			Proposed within the repurposing of the existing Hermitage Leisure Centre Building.
Enterprise Hub – with E commerce.		●		Not currently provided. Opportunity to considered for inclusion within existing reimagined Hermitage Leisure Centre building.
Retail Store		●		Not currently provided. Opportunity to considered for inclusion within existing reimagined Hermitage Leisure Centre building.
Mini Golf			●	Existing Mini golf not retained in current proposals. Alternative provision of Adventure golf to be considered within commercial leisure element.
Fishing Activities (on the lake)	●			Angling access to be retained. Enhancements in biodiversity will improve water quality. Perimeter landscaping may reduce areas of access.
Wild swimming (in the lake)		●		Opportunity To be considered. Enhancements in biodiversity will improve water quality. Possible use conflict with existing Angling Club lease.
Retention of the Mini Railway on site	●			Retained. The miniature railway is recognised as a major asset of the site.
Retention of the Synthetic Training Pitch (STP) 'caged' areas	●			Retained. Budget will not allow refurbishment. Relocation to northern end of site desirable to improve visibility of miniature railway and community activities.
Bike hire		●		Opportunity for cycle hire kiosk subject to further review.
Maintenance, repair & upcycle centre		●		Opportunity for cycle maintenance to be considered within cycle hire kiosk provided.

Public Consultation Feedback



Possibilities Diagram

2

# Proposed Strategy

## 2.00 The Proposed Strategy

### 2.01 Proposed Strategy

Progressing the initial concept diagram, led to the strategic design proposals shown here. Further specific details are provided later within this report.

The refined concept separates the plan into three significant areas:

#### **1. The 'Ecological Park'**

Enhancements to improve the ecology and biodiversity of the lake and woodland area, including:

- Indigenous tree planting
- Defined footpaths and boardwalks with activity nodes
- Perimeter fencing with gated access
- Lakeside Reed and Iris planting

#### **2. The Active Community Zone**

A community focused centre to the site promoting physical and social activities including:

- Miniature Railway
- Synthetic Training Pitch (STP)
- Community Centre
- Active Play
- Car Park
- Orchard and picnic area
- Grass Football pitches

#### **3. A reimagined Hermitage centre\*:**

Repurposing of the existing Hermitage Leisure Centre to become a mecca for street/urban activities, including:

- Skateboarding
- Parkour
- Street Dance
- Music Production
- One on One Basketball/Football

\* This element will have the options; with or without appropriately scaled residential units for independent elderly living or starter homes for the young.

The existing access and car parking have all been maintained.



- Key:**
- 1. Existing Hermitage Leisure Facility
  - 2. Existing Grass Pitches
  - 3. Miniature Railway
  - 4. Toilets/Changing Facilities
  - 5. Synthetic Training Pitch (STP)
  - 6. Car Park
  - 7. Pop-Up Food Stalls
  - 8. Visitor/Community Centre
  - 9. Active Play
  - 10. 100 Fruit Tree Orchard
  - 11. Activity Nodes
  - 12. Reedbed
  - 13. Lake
  - 14. Observation Platform
  - 15. Ecological Park
  - 16. Boundary Gate
  - 17. New Whitwick and Coalville Leisure Centre (By Others)
  - 18. Car Park (By Others)
  - 19. Trim Trail (By Others)
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  - 19. Trim Trail

3

# Ecological Park

## 3.00 Ecological Park

### 3.01 The 'Ecological Park'

As has been stated earlier, the site falls within the upland area of the ancient Charnwood Forest, and falls within an area identified for replanted and regeneration as part of the National Forest. The proposals to provide an ecological park on the recreation ground, align with the aspirations of the National Forest regeneration scheme, and the district councils green agenda.

Discussions with the Councils Parks department and Head of Conservation at the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust have assisted in formulation of a strategically deliverable and beneficial strategy.

By forming a regenerative solution around the existing attributes and by reducing the impact of people we will be able to create a park that enhances the ecological value and increases the biodiversity.

In its simplest form, it could mean allowing the grass and trees to grow. Introducing reeds and iris to the lake margins. Forming defined footpaths and boardwalks steer people into a route that they should follow rather than tread upon a landscape that is trying to recover.

We are suggesting a natural way forward but equally it should be controlled and managed. One critical aspect will be the possibility of fencing with controlled gates. These gates and fences will not restrict the use of the lake by the angling club but will protect some parts where wildlife can develop without disturbance.

We are recommending the planting of indigenous trees that will not only reinforce the increased biodiversity and ecological value but also improve the carbon reduction of any development on site. It is noted that a number of mature trees were removed during the construction of the new centre so this approach will assist in rebalancing the site. It is important that any planting is reflective of the Grace Dieu Site of Special Scientific Interest as indicators of the species mix (excluding ash species).

Constructed boardwalks and natural footpaths are proposed as routes but these could be punctuated with small points of interest or activity. These are marked 11 on the plan.

Ecological parks need not be large expanses. This proposal would be relatively small but if the ethos is embedded into the development of the whole site then this little enhancement can create a place of nature that will have a major impact upon the lives of its visitors.



### 3.02 Letting Nature Take Over

It is proposed that by simply managing a 'do less' conservation policy in terms of maintenance, a more natural environment can be created. These images illustrate that not only will that be more beneficial to wildlife but it can improve the health and wellbeing, including mental health of the visitors to the park.

In addition by working with the Wildlife Trust, Stakeholders and Universities/schools, it will be possible to utilise the park for educational as well as leisure pursuits.



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### 3.03 Active Natural Walk

At various locations along the footpaths it is proposed that the park should include minor punctuations. This might only be, as an example, a log for a young child to balance and walk along.

We illustrate here larger and explorative work within an inherently natural environment, it may for example be a point at which the children (and adults) can name the trees or bird watch or identify birds by their songs.



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4

Active

Community Zone

## 4.00 Active Community Zone

### 4.01 Active Community Scheme

It is known that most people do not stay active by regularly visiting a leisure centre. In particular the current Covid 19 pandemic, with its highly virulent variants, has made more people realise the pleasures of being active in the external environment. It has also sadly been revealed that the UK faces an obesity and mental health crisis. Of course exercise is only part of the solution; others being good diet, reduced calorific intake and other changes in lifestyle of all ages, cultures and genders.

In this manner we are proposing conceptually a part of the park that builds upon 'the walk' in the ecological park. At its heart and in response to the public consultation we have placed a community centre with an active children's play park adjacent to it. To the south and at one of the gates to the ecological park is an orchard planted by the Royal British Legion to mark their 100 year anniversary. This could contain picnic areas, beehives amongst a wildflower grassland.

It is important that any proposal is practical and economic, so we have conceptually proposed maintaining the four grass football pitches and the artificial surface but with a new changing/public facilities block located centrally.

This will provide a base for management and operation whilst creating with new fences added security for the Synthetic Training Pitch (STP). In order to make these proposals stakeholder meetings were held with the Leicestershire FA and the district councils parks management and operational team.

The plan here illustrates that the existing miniature railway with its buildings are maintained but a detailed landscape design should be undertaken to improve the visitor experience. This should include screen planting to the STP and creating close views from the trains.

The existing footpaths that follow the Grace Dieu Brook should be retained and reinforced as these provide important connectivity.

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## 4.02 A Destination For The Community

A key client driver for the site was to provide a destination for the community. This can simply be achieved by providing modest interventions that promote public activity. Inclusive design can provide places where families and friends come together. Whether viewing the lake, enjoying a picnic in the orchard or just walking and being in nature. It must be carefully designed to create a sense of place and developed with the Community, for the Community, so that they will identify with it.



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#### 4.03 The Community Centre

The desire to provide a focal point for the community led to the inclusion of a community centre. The design of this centre, should the Council decide to develop it, must create a building that is sustainable, flexible and unique to its environment. Being 'special' or even 'unique' will draw people to it.

In this illustration we are suggesting a simple timber biophilic design that provides a small food and beverage operation, controlled access to the everlasting pier, and a flexible event or exhibition space; all interconnected. The operation and management are to be considered in an Outline Business Case.



#### 4.04 Active Play

The proposal to include an active playground should not just cater for the very young by just providing standard swings, seesaws and merry-go-rounds, these have their place but more creative solutions will challenge all ages including adults.

They can be interconnected net climbing rigs, variable rigs and as shown adjustable height basketball hoops that can challenge yet assist in the development of skill. The Council should encourage designers to be expansive and creative utilising psychology and engaging with manufacturers in the development of a 'special' active play park.





#### 4.05 Nurturing Nature

The Park can be a legacy from one generation to the next. This is no better illustrated than in the creation of the British Legion orchard. Apple and pear trees planted to grow for another hundred years, in a natural landscape where the produce can be taken by the community. Where bees and people alike can enjoy the dappled shade and smell of blossom. It may also be considered that through expert advice the trees chosen can be from an array of native varieties rather than a single source such as cox or conference. The inherent need to create a rich landscape of biodiversity is critically important to the legacy of the park.



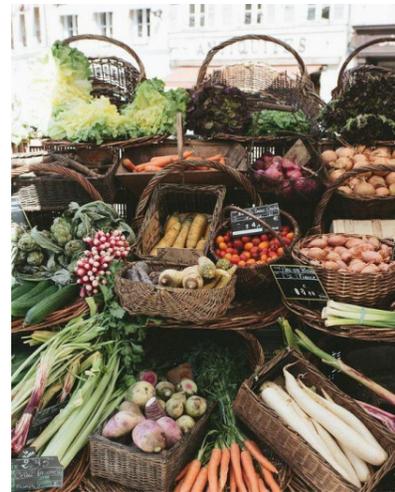
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#### 4.06 Community Spirit & Pop-up Food Stalls

A further enhancement for the sense of community that the concept is trying to generate is the inclusion of flexible space for 'pop-up' food stalls (marked 7 on the plan). It is hoped that these can provide an outlet for local allotment growers or small holders, start-ups or just a space for those who have a hobby worth sharing. Their inclusion must be qualitatively managed and directed but it will add to the sense of place and an event that again gives this part of the park a place in the community.



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5

Reimagining  
Hermitage

## 5.00 Reimagining Hermitage

### 5.01 Reimagining Hermitage

Statistics commissioned by Sport England and Swim England demonstrated that after the age of approximately 12 only 15% of people regularly use a standard leisure centre. To that effect 85% of the population will not regularly use that approach to exercise.

Further to that there appears to be a significant drop off in young people starting in their teenage years. Research and development conducted by the LOA fonden in Denmark considered that teenagers and young people need to be considered in a different way.

They do not wish to participate generally in competitive sporting activities. They are more socially inclined and if the activity does not encourage that then they are less likely to be involved. Girls are less likely to be involved when there is any form of comparison or over-viewing by boys and there are now a whole gamut of activities that the young engage in that do not require a leisure centre. The LOA and others such as Game, describe this as street activities. These would include skateboarding, biking, parkour, street dance, even street art and one-on-one basketball or football. The social aspect of this can only be described as 'hanging out.' It does not require leisure centre cafes or bars but simply a space that can be described as their own; significantly different.

In reimagining the Hermitage it is proposed that it may be wrong to demolish the existing building to build something new, it could be considered as more appropriate to reimagine the existing building to provide the range of facilities that the youth require.

The creation of a new kind of activity centre built upon the needs of a young community seeking different values is not new. It can be seen in Denmark to have been successfully delivered and operating through Game, a not for profit social enterprise who are building and managing large scale building regenerative projects based upon the needs of the youth and 'street' activity.



Drone Image of Hermitage Leisure Centre, looking north.



Drone Image of Hermitage Leisure Centre, looking west.

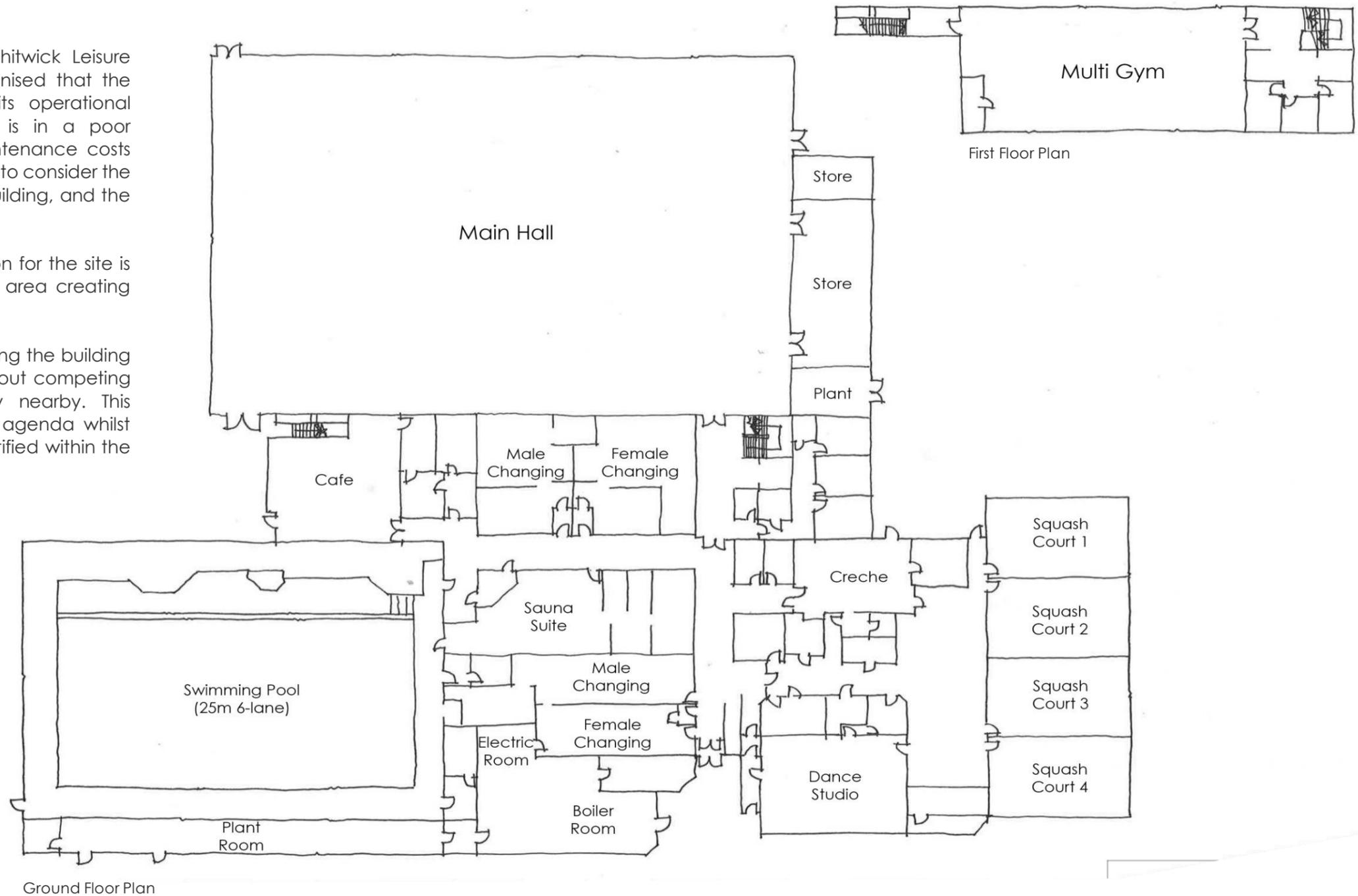
## 5.02 The Existing Hermitage

The existing Hermitage Leisure Centre was opened in its current form in 1981. The irregular sprawling layout highlights the fragmented addition of facilities to the original squash courts and bar area of the 1960s.

In commissioning the new Coalville and Whitwick Leisure Centre, North West Leicestershire has recognised that the existing hermitage building has exceeded its operational life expectancy. The ageing building fabric is in a poor state of repair with the operation and maintenance costs increasing each year. It is therefore necessary to consider the opportunities that exist for the future of the building, and the land that it sits on.

To avoid capital expenditure the base position for the site is to demolish the building and grass over the area creating additional public space.

However, for a modest capital cost, repurposing the building would allow it to maintain its leisure use, without competing with the operation of the new build facility nearby. This would align with the district councils green agenda whilst simultaneously addressing a social need identified within the local area.





Existing entrance



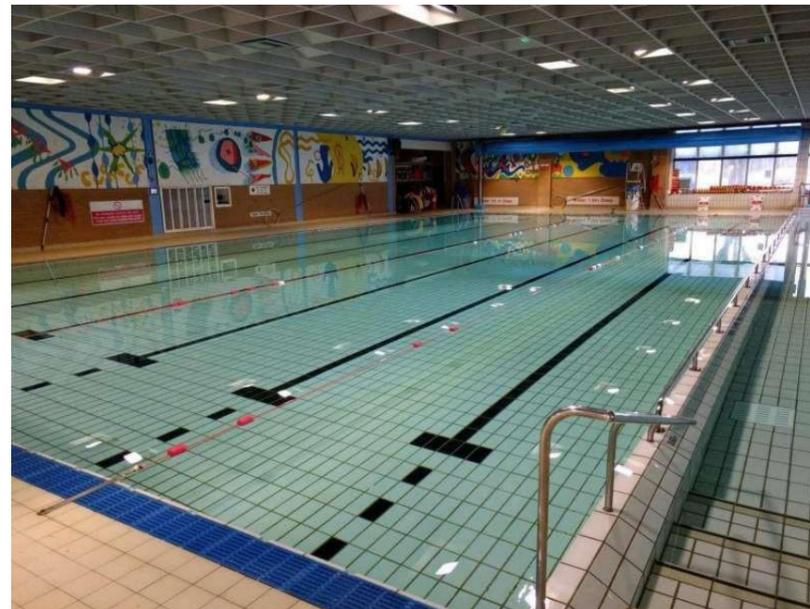
Roadside view to pool hall.



Squash courts, lounge and bar



Cafe



Pool Hall



Fitness Suite

### 5.03 Imagining the Possible

This plan reimagines the existing Hermitage. Few walls are constructed but much of the fabric can be stripped out to reveal a skeleton.

The pool tank is formed into two skate bowls, with Logs arranged around to form social decks or skateboard challenges.

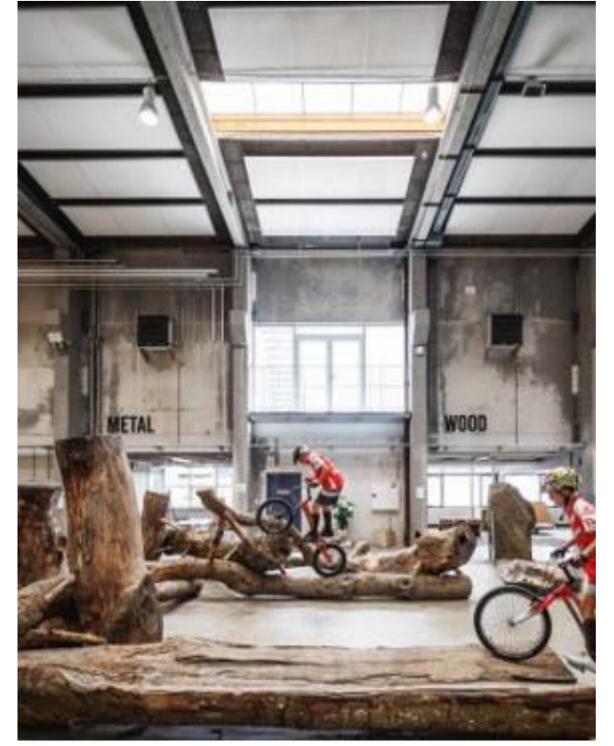
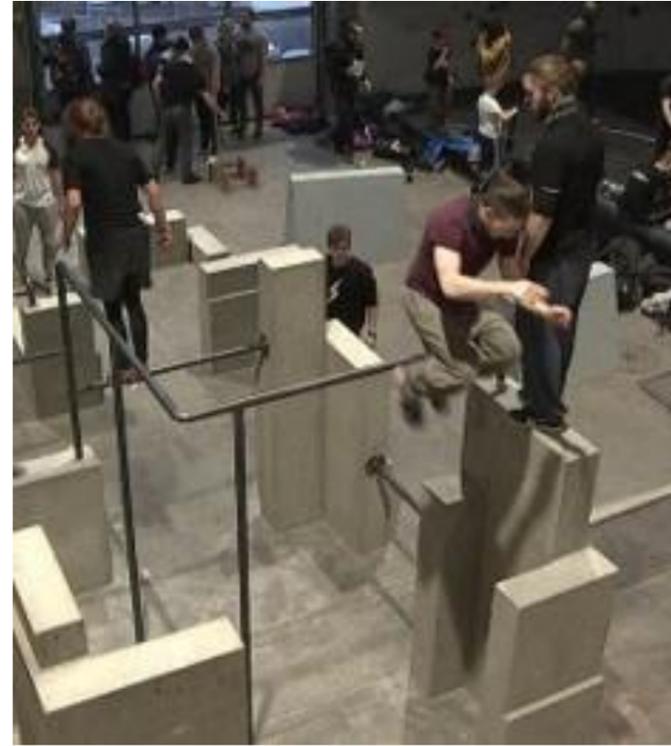
A central 'hang out space' contains a converted pick up truck to form a kitchen and servery for the youth with hangout circles. Books and games can be introduced. A good Wi-Fi signal is essential

Beyond this could be parkour, 'one on one' courts, bouldering and performance street dance decks with a recording facility and street art studios.

As in Danish examples, this may spill to the outside and would incorporate performance or even library and education rooms. In developing the designs further, the Council must engage fully with the young people and think differently in terms of development operation and funding.

The images here illustrate how the LOA fonden and Game have actively and effectively delivered similar facilities in Denmark. It would be advisable for the Council to visit these and consider what lessons could be applied to the hermitage,





5.04 The Skate Board in The Pool Tank





## 5.05 Connecting All Ages

The proposals for the re-imagined hermitage, are intended to provide an intergenerational link for the people of Whitwick and Coalville. A venue to enable the younger generation to participate in urban activities whilst learning social etiquette including respect, discipline and perseverance through a process of mentoring. It should be a place that allows freedom of expression, without fear of judgement or failure.

If successful the facility will bring all ages together, and instil values that spread into the wider community to build a sense of pride in the area.



6

Commercial

Leisure

Opportunities

## 6.00 Commercial Leisure Opportunities

### 6.01 Commercial Leisure

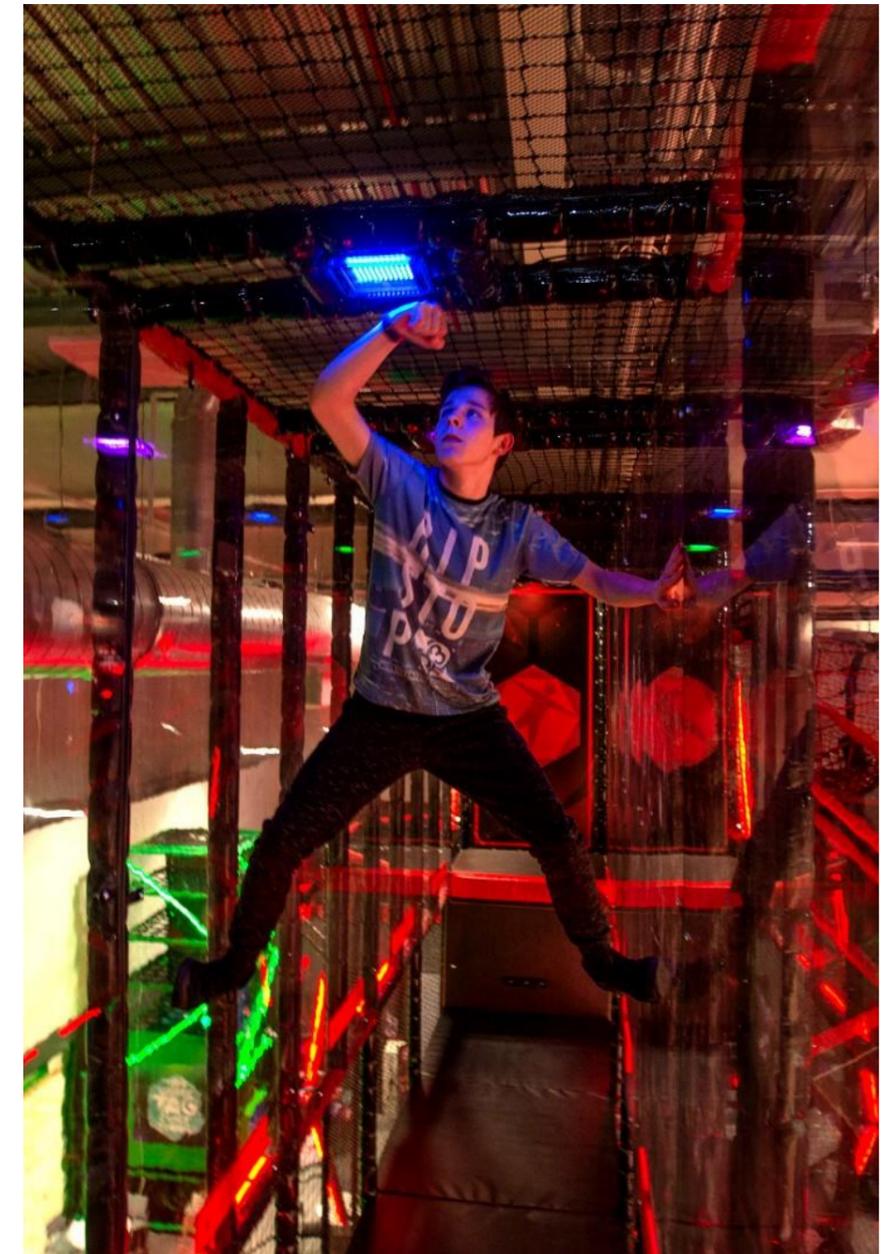
In order to supplement the social enterprise elements of the reimagined Hermitage, it will be necessary to include an element of commercial leisure.

The plan on page 37 contains a large section of the Hermitage building that is not needed for the social youth activity facilities. Whether new build or refurbished this could effectively be handed over to an active game use developed and managed by a commercial developer.

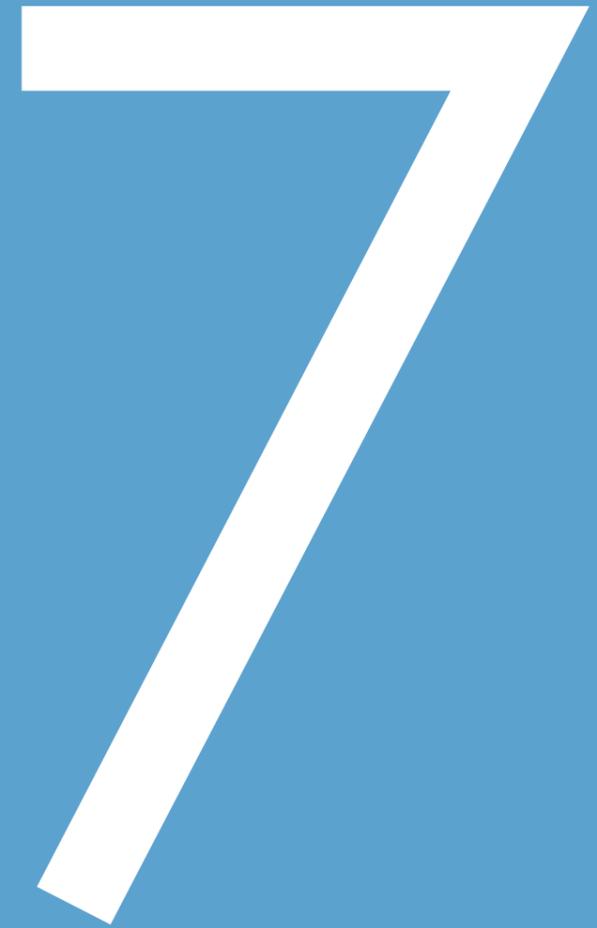
In line with recognised commercial leisure strategies, any franchise should be a destination substantial enough to draw visitors from outside of the district with a travel time of up to 60 minutes. Such attractions should encourage visitors to stay for several hours, promoting secondary spend. The success of this element, will be essential to ensure sufficient visitors to the recreation ground.

This strategy can be further explored in the Outline Business Case (OBC) and financial model so reference to the outline report is essential.

Here we illustrate just three of the opportunities identified at this stage, subject to considerable development and feasibility exploration.







# Residential Opportunity

## 7.00 Residential Opportunity

### 7.01 Independent Living Apartments for the Elderly - A Development Opportunity

Following early discussions with Council officers and based upon some current work by LA it would appear that some added financial value could be achieved by considering an appropriately scaled residential units of about 39 one- and two-bedroom apartments. These apartments could provide independent living units for the elderly, or market sale units for the young.

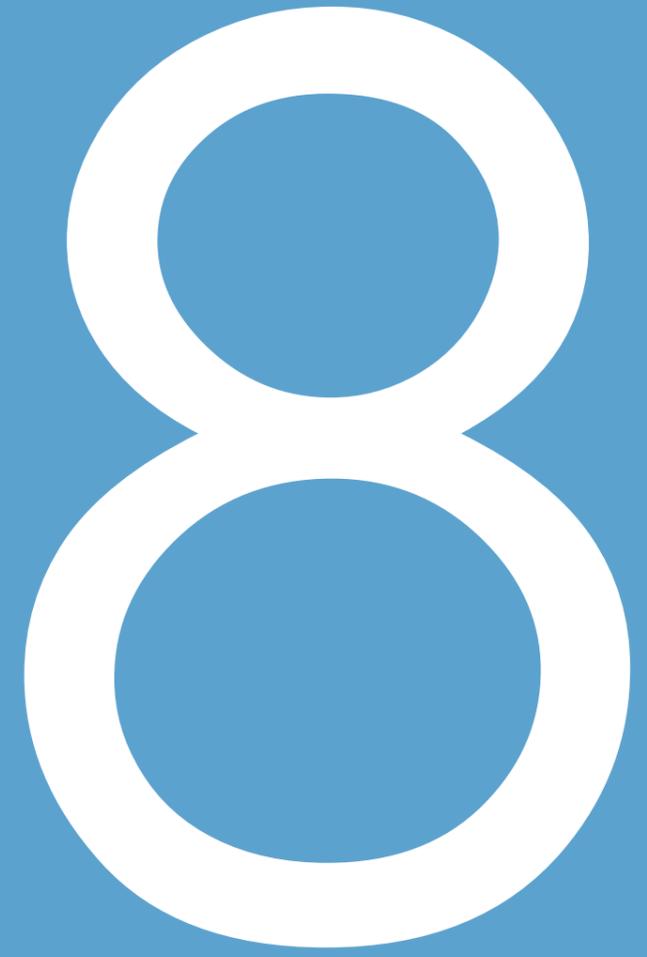
Here we illustrate the possible location whilst opposite we illustrate how the apartments form a street around mini squares. The roof in line with the biophilic approach contains allotments and greenhouses that provide winter gardens and common rooms/dining rooms/day lounges for the residents.

By commercially testing and developing a financial affordability model the OBC will be able to define whether the proposals are commercially viable. Early indications are that it will be, but this should be thoroughly explored in the next stage.



Visitor Parking & Ambulance Bay





# Implementation Plan

## 8.00 Implementation Plan

### 8.01 Strategy, Process, Action

The opportunities outlined within this document present an exciting community focused future for the Hermitage Recreation Ground. To ensure its success it will be necessary to prepare a strategic plan to outline the steps North West Leicestershire District Council will take to achieve the shared objective.

Any plan needs to be robust and include reference to budget, timeline and assign appropriately positioned personnel.

Element	Component	Operation model options/ recommendations
A - The Ecological Park	Trees and Community Orchard, with areas for people to enjoy the environment and learn about the natural world.	Essentially a care and maintenance requirement that can be delivered by the council, with a requirement for a level of interpretive media and signage
B - The active community scheme	Existing Grass Pitches	Licence granted to junior Football Club (incumbent), for predominant but non-exclusive use
	Synthetic Training Pitch(STP_	Maintenance and bookings via the council as at present or devolved to local team.
	Community Centre	Community Interest Company
	Active Play	Essentially a care and maintenance requirement that can be delivered by the Council;
	Car Park	Within the demise of the community centre, and including within the lease but with restrictions on charging and protection for local resident access
	The Train	Existing Operator
C - Re-imagined Hermitage LC	Orchard and Picnic area	Essentially a care and maintenance requirement that can be delivered by the Council
	Street activities including; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skateboarding</li> <li>• Biking</li> <li>• Parkour</li> <li>• Street dance</li> <li>• Street art</li> <li>• One on one Basketball or football</li> </ul>	Options appraisal/ technical paper provided separately as it contains commercially sensitive information.  Recommended is social enterprise procured through competition.

9

# Summary & Next Steps



## 9.00 Summary & Next Steps

### 9.01 Summary

It should be reinforced that this part of the report is an investigation into the opportunities within the Hermitage building and the park in which it sits.

It is in effect; Stage 0-1 of the RIBA work stages and identifies considered directions of travel.

- Whilst the next stage should include an OBC it is recommended that any future stages would benefit from full and detailed surveys topographic, asbestos, arboricultural, ecology, ground condition and structural etc.
- RIBA stage 1-2 should then be undertaken in line with the business model
- During this, local public engagement and stakeholder engagement should be undertaken. It is important to bend to strong and justifiable forces. The project shall contain stronger validity as a result.

### 9.02 Next Steps

It is recommended that the project is as shown considered and possible phased onto the three sections subject to funding and Council approvals.

1. The ecological park could commence almost immediately through dialogue with the parks department.
2. The active park could be developed in sections to create the greatest overall impact but it will need to be validated and effective cost programmed for success.
3. Reimagining the Hermitage will take the largest level of validation with operational management and business planning but it can be concurrent with the survey and building assessment permitting the design to be undertaken in alliance with an operational and business plan and funding assessment of commercial partnerships.

It is clear that there are considerable sequences of work that need to be undertaken but the holistic and considered approach to the design has been set out within this document.