

NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – THURSDAY, 13
JULY 2023



Title of Report	HERMITAGE RECREATION GROUND ECOPARK	
Presented by	Paul Sanders Head of Community Services	
Background Papers	Cabinet Minutes 20 September 2022 Stakeholder Engagement Feedback Overview November 2019 – October 2021 Stakeholder Engagement Feedback Overview June – August 2022	Public Report: Yes
Financial Implications	<p>The Council has directly secured £182,860 of funding and has used this to leverage in a further £100,000 of investment to be delivered by third party partners to create a £282,860 scheme.</p> <p>The financial implications are set out in Section 5 of the report and are subject to the additional funding being approved by Cabinet and/or Council in line with the Financial Regulations.</p>	
	Signed off by the Section 151 Officer: Yes	
Legal Implications	<p>Various legal agreements will need to be entered into to deliver the project. Legal Services are supporting the project.</p>	
	Signed off by the Deputy Monitoring Officer: Yes	
Staffing and Corporate Implications	None.	
	Signed off by the Head of Paid Service: Yes	
Reason Agenda Item Submitted to Scrutiny Committee	Community Scrutiny views are invited on the proposals highlighted within this report in advance of Cabinet's consideration at its meeting on 25 July.	
Recommendations	COMMUNITY SCRUTINY IS ASKED TO COMMENT ON THE PROPOSALS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ECOPARK AT HERMITAGE RECREATION GROUND THAT ARE BEING CONSIDERED BY CABINET AT ITS MEETING ON 25 JULY 2023	

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In 2019, the Council entered into a formal partnership with its leisure partner, Everyone Active (EA), for the management of Hermitage Leisure Centre (HLC) and Ashby Leisure Centre and Lido, and for the design, construction, operation and maintenance of the new Whitwick and Coalville Leisure Centre (WCLC).
- 1.2 The new WCLC opened to the public on 14 February 2022, five months ahead of schedule, at which point HLC was taken back by the Council as a void property.
- 1.3 As part of the building of the WCLC, the Council Delivery Plan for 2021-23 identified the commitment to develop a framework of opportunities for the land adjacent to the new leisure centre, the Hermitage Recreation Ground (HRG) and the now demolished HLC Building, the intention being to create a destination site that retains and enhances the green and open space but also finds the best future use of the footprint of the HLC building and site.
- 1.4 Between November 2019 and August 2021, extensive stakeholder engagement took place to understand views on how the HLC building, site and HRG could be used and/or enhanced.
- 1.5 In June 2021, V4 Services was engaged by the Council to support an appraisal of the options available. Fundamental to this work was ensuring that the results from the stakeholder engagement were fully reflected within proposals made, and these were reflected in an Options Paper that was developed.
- 1.6 On 20 September 2022, a report was presented to Cabinet by the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Property and Customer Services on the future direction of the Hermitage Leisure Centre (HLC) building (see Background Papers). At the meeting Cabinet agreed to demolish the building and noted that it would, at future dates, receive business cases for the proposed improvements to the HRG. The final proposals in these business cases would be in line with the direction of travel outlined in section 3.26 of the Cabinet report and would be based on the Options Paper developed by V4 Services, shaped by the community engagement. Various other decisions were made in regard to the HLC footprint site which are not the topic of this report.
- 1.7 Section 3.26 of the Cabinet report highlighted the following two areas within the masterplan for further development;

Ecological Park Zone (Ecopark)

This area of the site is seen as one that could receive a positive regenerative boost to its environmental credentials whilst increasing biodiversity, with enhancements to improve the ecology and biodiversity of the lake and woodland area, including indigenous tree planting, defined footpaths, boardwalks, activity nodes, perimeter fencing with gated access and lakeside reed and iris planting.

Active Community Zone

Proposals for this area continue the focus on encouraging more people to become active in the outdoor environment building on the paths used in the Ecological Park Zone. It would provide a destination for the community with a series of features that promote activity, including a community and visitor centre including a small food and beverage operation, a flexible exhibition/event space, and controlled access to a pier feature accessing the lake, children's active play facilities, a community orchard and wildflower planting and an improved landscape. The concept retains the synthetic

training pitch (3G pitch), the miniature railway, the grass pitches, the car park and existing footpaths in their current configuration.

- 1.8 The report also noted that the future developments at HRG could be financially supported through the release of funds to the Council's general fund through the appropriation of the HLC site to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). As such the business case for the Active Community Zone will not be brought forward until there is a defined Council housing design for the old leisure centre site as it is only then that the potential funds could be identified for a future scheme to create the proposed Active Community Zone. This work is progressing and will be the subject of further engagement at a later date.

2. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- 2.1 Consultation took place with stakeholders between November 2019 and October 2021 to understand views on how the HLC site could be best used, and what improvements could be made to HRG to create more of a visitor destination. This took the form of an open session at HLC, an open to all online consultation, engagement with all schools in the district, and engagement with the local charity Coalville CAN.
- 2.2 In total, over 1,100 residents took part in the consultation, and whilst responses came from the entire district, over 50% came from the Whitwick and Coalville areas. In summary, the community appear to be very supportive of outdoor sports/leisure facilities, walking, cycling and running spaces, an area where friends and family can have fun, and the creation of a more biodiverse area, with increased tree planting and wildlife areas and nature trails.
- 2.3 Further engagement was undertaken between June and August 2022 on the proposals in the options paper developed by V4 Services to which over 1,000 residents responded. The results showed that over 80% of the respondents were supportive of the development of an Ecopark.
- 2.4 An overview of the feedback received from both engagements can be seen in the Background Papers

3. ECOPARK DESIGN OPTIONS

- 3.1 In June 2021, V4 Services and LA Architects were appointed by the Council to help develop a conceptual design and proposed direction of travel that could benefit the local community and the visitor economy, as well as responding to the comments and ideas that were gleaned from the various stages of community engagement.
- 3.2 Within the HRG site, two key zones within the overall masterplan were identified as potential focuses for future investment and improvement:
 - Ecological Park and Lake
 - Active Community Zone
- 3.3 Whilst the Active Community Zone development will be dependant upon funding released to the Council's general fund through the appropriation of the HLC site to the HRA, potential external funding streams are available that mean that elements of an Ecopark scheme on the HRG site could be delivered within 2023/24.

- 3.4 Based on the existing ecology of the area and the consultation feedback, V4 Services developed a proposed design option for the Ecopark which can be seen at **Appendix 1**.
- 3.5 The V4 Services design created a link from the new WCLC through the Ecopark to the Active Community Zone and the former HLC site, creating a biodiverse area that would serve as an attractive visitor destination for families. The proposal included;
- Additional tree planting
 - Additional footpaths
 - Activity nodes for children and families
 - An observation platform for the lake
 - Improved security and accessibility
- 3.6 It should be noted that whilst shown on **Appendix 1**, the proposed Visitor/Community Centre, the car park, and the Community Orchard were all included as part of the Active Community Zone design proposal and not the Ecopark. In addition, the land directly outside the WCLC, whilst linked to the Ecopark, was not included as part of it, and neither was the Trim Trail which was to be delivered by the Council's leisure partner, EA, as part of the contract for the building of the new WCLC.
- 3.7 The anticipated capital cost of delivering the proposed Ecopark was estimated by V4 Services to be £602,250.
- 3.8 Through funding secured from the National Forest to cover their costs, Leicestershire County Council (LCC) has been working closely with NWLDC officers and other partners to refine the proposed Ecopark scheme and to identify funding sources to be able to deliver the different elements.
- 3.9 The concept retains many of the features proposed by V4 Services, but has the following fundamental changes;
- Including the land directly outside WCLC so the leisure centre grounds are incorporated seamlessly as part of the Ecopark
 - Extending the Adventure Trim Trail from the new leisure centre grounds further into the Ecopark to reinforce the integration of the leisure centre grounds as part of the Ecopark and to enhance the offer within the park itself
 - The addition of a footbridge to enhance links between the WCLC site and the Ecopark
 - The addition of a Tiny Forest
 - Increased biodiversity enhancements
 - Removal of the observation platform for the lake due to capital, safety concerns and ongoing revenue costs
 - Removal of external fencing due to installation and ongoing revenue costs.
- 3.10 **Appendix 2** gives an overview of the proposed Ecopark design

4. ECOPARK DESIGN FEATURES

- 4.1 As highlighted in **Appendix 2**, the key features of the proposed Ecopark are;

Tiny Forest

- 4.2 A Tiny Forest is a dense fast-growing native woodland that brings the benefits of a forest into cities and urban spaces.

- 4.3 The intention is that local communities and volunteers maintain and monitor their forest over time, and that the area reconnects people with nature, enhances wellbeing, helps mitigate the impacts of climate change and provides nature-rich habitat patches to support urban wildlife.
- 4.4 Environmental and social data is collected for every forest planted, to help assess the benefits they provide over time and between different forests.
- 4.5 This element of the project would be delivered in partnership with Earthwatch who are responsible for the delivery of Tiny Forests.

Tree Planting

- 4.6 As part of the proposed design, an additional 3,500 trees will be planted in the Ecopark to complement the existing woodland on site.

Footpath Creation

- 4.7 It is proposed that in addition to retaining the existing footpaths, an additional five footpaths are created to improve accessibility and connectivity. These will be a mixture of grass mown and surfaced paths.

Adventure Trim Trail

- 4.8 This was included as part of the Council's masterplan for the site of the new leisure centre. Whilst initially proposed to be directly adjacent to the WCLC, it is proposed that the Adventure Trim Trail is extended into the Ecopark. It will consist of approximately 25 pieces of outdoor equipment that will create an obstacle course primarily for children of ages 3 to 18, encouraging them to be physically active. Examples of the type of equipment this could include can be seen at **Appendix 3**.

Interactive Nodes

- 4.9 At various locations along the footpaths it is proposed that the park will include minor punctuations. This might only be, as an example, a log or a boulder for a young child to balance and walk along or an interactive information board. The type and exact number of interactions are still to be determined and will be dependant upon the cost and budget available.

Footbridge Creation

- 4.10 It is proposed that a footbridge link between the WCLC site and the Ecopark is created in order to help improve accessibility and connectivity within the overall open space provision.

Accessibility/Security Improvements

- 4.11 It is proposed that access points are made more secure in order to prevent unauthorised vehicular access.

Enhanced Biodiversity Improvements

- 4.12 Biodiversity improvements within the proposed design include significant grassland improvements, meadow land with reduced grass cutting, wildflower planting, and the creation of scrubland to complement the existing site features. As there is no funding

currently available to deliver this element the proposal is that it would be delivered as a later phase once funding streams become available.

5. FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The financial implications for the Council are set out below. In summary the Council has directly secured £182,860 of funding and has used this to leverage in a further £100,000 of investment to be delivered by third party partners to create a £282,860 scheme.
- 5.2 The additional trees planted will be managed as part of the Council's current tree stock by the Parks and Open Spaces team. This work will be underpinned by the developing North West Leicestershire District Council Tree Management Strategy and will include frequent visual inspections, recorded Tree Surveys being undertaken periodically, and any subsequent identified works then being delivered. In order to maintain a biodiverse and natural woodland nature area, it is anticipated that maintenance works required will be minimal and will be restricted to health and safety issues and disease. Consequently, the cost of these works will be offset by the savings made from the extensive grass cutting currently being undertaken on the site, most of which will no longer be required or will be reduced due to the area covered by the new tree planting, the development of grassland and meadow areas.
- 5.3 An element of the external funding received to undertake the tree planting is a revenue maintenance contribution of £20,600. Officers will seek approval from Cabinet/Council, in line with the Council's Constitution/Financial Regulations, to add this to the budget as an external contribution, and for an earmarked reserve to be created that will allow an additional annual maintenance contingency contribution of £1,000 per annum to be drawn down into the revenue budget for a period of almost 21 years, which will create additional support for any unforeseen maintenance costs.
- 5.4 The management, monitoring and maintenance of the Adventure Trim Trail equipment will be the responsibility of the Council's leisure partner, Everyone Active. They will also retain responsibility for maintaining elements of the Ecopark that fall within the boundary of the contract/lease. There will be no financial impact on the Council as these elements are included as part of the leisure contract between the Council and EA.
- 5.5 The cost of delivering the project is anticipated to be £262,260, although this doesn't include any biodiversity improvements or creations other than reduced grass cutting and meadow creation of existing areas. This will be delivered through the following funding streams;

Funding Source	Funding Amount	To Deliver	Funding Management
National Forest Changing Landscapes Scheme	£52,860	Tree planting and footpath creation	Funding to be issued to and managed by NWLDC, £32,260 as a capital project with approval for this being sought from the July meeting of the Capital Strategy Group prior to approval being sought from Cabinet and Full Council to add to the

			2023/24 Capital Programme. LCC to deliver this element as a capital project. £20,600, to be added to the revenue budget as an external contribution, an earmarked reserve to be created and then drawn down at £1000 per year.
Forestry Commission Local Authority Treescapes Fund	£23,000	Tiny Forest	Funding to be issued to and managed by LCC. LCC to deliver this element of the project
Everyone Active	£70,000	Adventure Trim Trail	Funding held by Everyone Active. LCC and Everyone Active to deliver this element of the project
UK Shared Prosperity Fund	£130,000	Interactive nodes, bridge creation, accessibility/security improvements	Funding held by NWLDC. NWLDC to deliver this element as a capital project with approval for this being sought from the July meeting of the Capital Strategy Group along with all other UKSPF projects prior to approval being sought from Cabinet and Full Council to add to the 2023/24 Capital Programme
NWLDC Parks and Open Spaces	£7,000	Tiny Forest	These works will be directly delivered by the NWLDC Parks and Open Spaces team
TBC	TBC	Grassland improvements, scrub land creation, and other biodiversity improvements	TBC
TOTAL	£282,860		

- 5.6 LCC colleagues have been liaising with the National Forest and the Forestry Commission regarding potential funding and both have agreed to in principle funding support. The Forestry Commission funding will go directly to LCC who will then be given formal approval by the Council to deliver the Tiny Forest works on NWLDC land. The National Forest funding will come to NWLDC who will then contract with LCC to deliver these elements of the project as a joint discharge of functions between the Council and LCC.
- 5.7 The NWLDC £7,000 contribution is a match funding requirement of the Local Authority Treescapes Fund. This is an in-kind contribution to clear the area required

for the Tiny Forest, and this work will be delivered directly by the Grounds Maintenance team as part of their maintenance of the area in 2023/24.

- 5.8 The total amount of funding available is potentially £282,860 against a potential project cost of £262,260. Whilst it's anticipated that the project will create no additional maintenance requirements due to the nature of the improvements, and ongoing maintenance can therefore be covered from existing revenue budgets, the Changing Landscapes Scheme funding does allow for a maintenance of £20,600. which will be allocated as a revenue contribution from LCC to NWLDC after the works have been completed and which will be utilised as per 5.3.
- 5.9 Although it will need minimal maintenance due to the nature of it, Earthwatch do require that the Tiny Forest is maintained by community groups and volunteers. The trees will be managed as part of the Council's current tree stock by the Parks and Open Spaces team to ensure the area is kept safe. This work will be underpinned by the developing North West Leicestershire District Council Tree Management Strategy and will include frequent visual inspections and recorded Tree Surveys being undertaken periodically. Maintenance works will be undertaken by the community groups and volunteers with the Council supporting on more significant works.
- 5.10 Whilst factored into the proposed design, costs and funding streams for the wider enhanced biodiversity improvements have not yet been identified. It is proposed that these elements are delivered as a separate strand to the project once funding has been identified and secured. It is also proposed that a further report is presented to Cabinet once funding has been identified and secured, highlighting the detail of the proposed scheme, the funding streams supporting its delivery, and seeking approval to progress this element of the project.
- 5.11 All costs associated to external project management and landscape design support will be covered through the external funding streams.
- 5.12 Officers will be seeking approval that, in line with the Council's Constitution, Cabinet/ Full Council approve the £130,000 from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and £52,860 of funding from the National Forest be incorporated into the Council's Capital Programme or Revenue Budget for 2023/24. Both projects will be submitted to the July meeting of the Capital Strategy Group meeting for consideration and subject to sign off will then be reported to Cabinet and, if required, Full Council for approval and adding to the Capital Programme for 2023/24.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 In order for the project to be delivered, there will be a requirement for the Council to enter into a number of legal agreements. It is anticipated these will be;

Agreement With	Reason
Leicestershire County Council	Approval to deliver the Tiny Forest works on NWLDC owned land. The joint discharge of functions between NWLDC and LCC to deliver the National Forest funded improvements.
National Forest	Acceptance of the funding award to deliver improvements.
Earthwatch	Provision and maintenance of the Tiny Forest.

Everyone Active	Maintenance of all the Adventure Trim Trail equipment and elements of the Ecopark that fall within their boundary
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6.2 Legal Services is engaged in the project and will continue to provide support.

7. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

7.1 The project will be delivered in line with the Council's Project Management Framework.

7.2 The Project Team will consist of;

Project Team Member
NWLDC Head of Community Services
NWLDC Leisure Services Team Manager
NWLDC Parks and Open Spaces Team
NWLDC Finance Team
NWLDC Legal Team
NWLDC Communications Team
NWLDC Community Focus Team
LCC Operational Property Team
Exi Group
Earthwatch
Everyone Active

7.3 It is proposed the project be split into three separate strands, as per the table below, that can be delivered independently;

Strand	To Include	Funding Source
1	Tree planting, footpath creation, Adventure Trim Trail, Interactive Nodes, bridge creation, accessibility/security improvements	National Forest Everyone Active UK Shared Prosperity Fund
2	Tiny Forest	Forestry Commission
3	Grassland improvements, scrub creation, and other enhanced biodiversity improvements	TBC

7.4 Timescales for delivery of the project are;

Task	Timescale
Community Scrutiny Engagement	July 2023
Cabinet Decision	July 2023
Full Council Approval to add to 2023/24 Capital Programme	September 2023
Tree Planting and Footpath Creation	September 2023-February 2024
Trim Trail / Footbridge / Accessibility Improvements	August 2023-March 2024
Tiny Forest	November 2023-March 2024
Enhanced Biodiversity Improvements	TBC

8. FURTHER STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

8.1 Further stakeholder engagement on the proposed Ecopark design took place between 3 April and 15 May 2023 to seek views on the proposals. This engagement included;

- Writing to Whitwick Parish Council and attending their meeting on 16 March
- Writing to residents who live adjacent to the Hermitage Recreation Ground
- Contacting organised groups that use the Hermitage Recreation Ground
- Notices throughout Hermitage Recreation Ground for users of the area
- Displays in Whitwick and Coalville Leisure Centre and Whitwick Market Place
- Notification through social media, a press release, and the website

8.2 Stakeholders were invited to feedback views either in writing or via an online portal to help ascertain if they felt the proposed design reflected their idea of an Ecopark, and whether the designs would encourage people to use the area and help improve the health and wellbeing of residents.

8.3 An overview of the feedback received is attached as **Appendix 4**.

8.4 Whitwick Parish Council had no comments to make, and no responses were received from any user groups associated to the site.

8.5 The following results were returned from the online and paper surveys completed;

Statement	Agree or Strongly Agree	Disagree or Strongly Disagree
The plans reflect your idea of an Ecopark?	73%	17%
The plans will encourage people and families to visit the Ecopark?	73%	17%
The plans support the health and wellbeing of residents in the area?	74%	18%

8.6 The majority of the feedback was supportive of the proposed design with neutral and negative comments focussing predominantly on elements outside of the Ecopark that will be considered as part of the future use of the Hermitage Leisure Centre site and the Active Community Zone strands of the project.

8.7 Consequently, there is no intention to refine or change the proposed design at this stage.

8.8 Community Scrutiny is asked to feedback comments on the proposals.

9. Risks

9.1 There are number of risks associated with the delivery of the project which are summarised in the table below, along with the mitigations to help manage these;

Risk	Mitigation
Funding for the enhanced biodiversity improvements may not be identified	- No delivery of this element until funding has been identified and secured
Funding streams may not be forthcoming	- Liaison between LCC and the National Forest and Forestry Commission to mitigate against this

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investigate alternative funding opportunities if required - Value engineer the project down if required - Develop proposals to meet the budget available
Inability to engage community groups or volunteers to support the Tiny Forest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Obtain commitment prior to progressing
Design proposals may not meet stakeholder expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aligned to feedback from initial consultation - Further engagement supportive of proposals - Designs can be refined further

Policies and other considerations, as appropriate	
Council Priorities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supporting Coalville to be a more vibrant, family-friendly town - Our communities are safe, healthy and connected - Developing a clean and green district
Policy Considerations:	Supporting delivery of the NWL Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the NWL Zero Carbon Policy and Roadmap.
Safeguarding:	None.
Equalities/Diversity:	Providing activities, facilities, and open spaces that all members of the community can access
Customer Impact:	Ensuring residents have access to high quality and affordable activities, facilities and open spaces. Engaging and supporting local community groups.
Economic and Social Impact:	Helping supporting the health and wellbeing of residents through encouraging increased levels of physical activity and creating spaces that help support mental health. Engaging local community groups to help support elements of the project.
Environment and Climate Change:	The creation of an Ecological Park will improve levels of biodiversity, and the planting of trees will support the Zero Carbon Policy and Roadmap.
Consultation/Community Engagement:	Undertaken with key stakeholders to understand their desires for the area, followed by further consultation on specific options as set out in the report.
Risks:	As highlighted in section 9.
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