

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 15 July 2021

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director-Enterprise, Community & Resources

PORTFOLIO: Environment & Urban Renewal

SUBJECT: Masterplan for improvements at Arley Drive Playing Fields and land on the north of Bankfield Road, Widnes.

WARDS: Hough Green, Bankfield

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To seek approval on the proposed Arley Woodland and Bankfield Green Park Masterplan for a comprehensive set of improvements to the existing playing fields and open space at Arley Drive and land north of Bankfield Road and to seek approval to deliver the project in line with the Masterplan, including making any suitable grant applications that may be required.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

- 1) the Board approves the Masterplan; and**
- 2) the Board gives delegated authority to the Strategic Director for Enterprise, Community & Resources, in consultation with the Executive Member for the Physical Environment, to progress the Arley Woodland Park project and prepare all necessary information for suitable grant applications.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 Arley Drive Playing Fields and the open space at Bankfield Road is a valuable area of green space and a key component of the infrastructure of the Hough Green and Bankfield Wards. The site has the potential to be developed as a high quality contemporary landscape park serving many of the recreational, sustainable transport and environmental needs of these neighbourhoods. Apart from the introduction of the railway and Hough Green Junction in the 1870s, the site mainly comprised agricultural fields up until the post war period. As part of the housing developments from the 1960s and 1970s approximately nine hectares of land north of the railway line was reserved for sports pitches and public open space. At this time the site was characterised by large, rather featureless, areas of amenity grassland with few paths other than those providing access to Hough Green Station and, later, a footbridge link

across the railway to Bankfield Road. In the 1990s the area benefitted from tree planting schemes which, now in semi maturity, provide a pleasant parkland character of woodland and grassland mosaic across undulating landform. The site's northern boundary forms an important green transport link as part of the Borough's Cycle Network and the existing footpaths provide key linkages between neighbourhoods and to Hough Green Station. However, access and facilities within the site have not been developed to their full potential over time and there are currently no internal pathways despite the site appearing to be well used for both formal sports (junior football) and casual recreation.

- 3.2 Current facilities include provision for three junior football pitches, a Multi Use Games Area (MUGA), aforementioned Cycle Route along the northern boundary, footpath connection from Arley Drive to Hough Green Station and a pedestrian link across the railway to Bankfield Road as well as attractive open meadow, grassland and woodland areas. (See Appendix 1 for map of extent of Arley Drive Playing Fields and Appendix 2 for images of current condition).
- 3.3 Access within the site is however poor as there are no internal paths which makes it difficult for all but the most able bodied to use the site fully. There are also very few site features and no furniture, again inhibiting access by less mobile users as well as discouraging use for formal activities or for visitors to simply linger and enjoy the landscape. Much of the existing infrastructure is in poor condition creating an uncared for and drab appearance which further discourages use whilst encouraging anti-social behaviour such as fly-tipping and un-authorised access by motor vehicles.
- 3.4 The Arley Woodland Park Masterplan (See Appendix 3 for master-plan and precedent images) aims to retain and develop the existing mature landscape mosaic of grassland, meadow and woodland plantation whilst introducing a sensitive and subtle layer of new infrastructure. The proposals are designed to facilitate a more diverse range of uses and transform the site from 'playing field' to 'Park' with its own identity and character and providing a high quality landscape setting to accommodate the leisure and recreational needs and aspirations of all residents.
- 3.5 The existing parkland character, typified by open grass sward and plantation woodland, will be developed with key views being enhanced and landscape quality improved. A site wide infrastructure of new paths will blend into the landscape and provide extensive recreation routes through and around the parkland setting. An re-design of existing surfacing, lighting and signage, along with an upgrade of sports facilities, will be accompanied by the placing of contemporary furniture and feature structures throughout which will uplift and enliven the park further and create opportunities for imaginative play, rest and relaxation as well as helping to create a unique landscape character and true 'sense of place'.

3.6 There are five key elements to the Masterplan proposals which are summarised as follows.

3.6.1 Cycleway and Access - The existing cycleway along the northern boundary will be widened from 3.0m to 5.0m and will function as both a green transport route and a recreational element of the park. This shared pedestrian and cycle route will include seating and links to neighbouring streets and greenspace. Adjacent spaces will be improved to help 'green' the route further and car parking will be provided for sports pitch users to address congestion in residential car parking areas on match and training days.

3.6.2 Landscape Character – The existing character areas of grassland, meadow and woodland will be developed to create a high quality parkland landscape setting for recreational users as well as increasing biodiversity and habitat quality. The open grassland areas will be retained and enhanced as a mosaic of varied grass and wildflower sward. Filtered views between these areas will be created through careful management of the edges of the existing woodland blocks. The woodlands themselves will be sensitively managed to improve structure and composition for native species and a new network of generous paths laid out across the site interspersed with shaded 'groves' of specimen trees to encourage users to linger and enjoy the open space.

3.6.3 Furniture and Features – Alongside a review of existing access controls, signage and street lighting, the park landscape will be subtly enlivened by the placing of contemporary furniture and feature structures. Monolithic in style and utilising playful shapes and designs, the features will bring added interest to the landscape experience whilst providing a practical and robust suite of both furniture and imaginative play opportunities for users across the site. These structures in the wider landscape also relate to the concept of natural play which is fully realised in the proposed 'Natural Play Hub'.

3.6.4 Sport, Recreation and Natural Play – The Park will retain its original important function as a venue for organised sports with improvements to access, parking and grass pitches. In order to diversify recreational and sports use further the new path infrastructure will provide loops to encourage use of the site by walkers and runners. The upgrade of existing facilities such as the MUGA and the development of new facilities, as funding allows, will provide increased opportunities for exercise for a wide range of potential users. In addition, the concept of 'Natural Play' will be developed through low key and subtle interventions across the site alongside the development of a 'Natural Play Hub' comprising landform, tree planting and inspiring natural play features.

3.6.5 Sustainable Construction – The Arley Woodland and Bankfield Green Park Masterplan project will be underpinned by a commitment to economic, environmental and social sustainability objectives through the

efficient use of resources, protection of the environment in terms of materials, pollution control and construction methods and taking into consideration the needs of all those affected by the project. Management will take account of these objectives during the design, delivery and in-use stages of the project to ensure that it is in compliance with current Sustainable Construction standards throughout.

- 3.7 Proposals have been discussed with the Planning Dept., Highway Development Manager and Sport and Recreation Manager and are in accordance with the principles set out in Halton's Core Strategy, for the enhancement of Green Infrastructure.
- 3.8 It is proposed that these park improvements are carried out over a 4-5 year period as funding becomes available. Although different in character, this investment will raise the overall standard of the park in line with that of Halton's other major open spaces such as Victoria Park, Town Park and Runcorn Hill Park and ensure that any future additional features and facilities are in keeping with the nature and character set out in this Masterplan.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The proposals are in keeping with policy CS15 - Sustainable Transport which aims to increase the proportion of passenger journeys made by sustainable modes of travel including walking, cycling and public transport. Development of the existing pedestrian and cycle route and its widening from 3.0m to 5.0m will encourage use by pedestrians and cyclists both traversing the neighbourhood and accessing Hough Green Station.
- 4.2 The proposals are in keeping with policy CS18 – High Quality Design, and will provide a well-designed and attractive landscape setting providing safe access for all, promote healthy lifestyles and contributing significantly to 'sense of place'.
- 4.3 The proposals are in accordance with policy CS21 - Green Infrastructure, supporting the delivery of programmes and strategies to protect, enhance and expand green infrastructure across the Borough.
- 4.4 The proposals are in keeping with policy CS22 – Health and Wellbeing, supporting opportunities to support the Borough's cultural, sport, recreation and leisure offer.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Much of the current infrastructure dates back to the original laying out of the open space at Arley Drive and Bankfield Road, which at the time comprised mainly of football pitches and amenity grass areas with a limited number of footpaths providing links to Hough Green Station and,

at a later date, between Arley Drive and Bankfield Road. The Masterplan seeks to rationalise, update and renew this infrastructure and will not only provide safe and effective routes within the site but will reduce ongoing management costs of old assets and allow more efficient management of the site in the future.

5.2 It is anticipated that improvements to the whole Park infrastructure in order to bring the Park up to standard will cost circa £770k. This can be phased over a 4-5 year period, which will help to avoid major disruption for park users, but still allow sufficient scope for a contract sum to benefit from economy of scale. This would be equate to circa £154k of capital expenditure per year over 5 yrs. Funding would be sought from a variety of external sources (see 5.4). Funding of £80k has been sourced in 2021 / 22 which will allow a first phase of boundary works to be completed. Should funding not be available in any particular year then the programme would simply be extended (to cover a 5-6 year period for example).

5.3 The following shows the estimated budget requirement for the scheme:

• New boundary treatment (northern boundary)	£75k
• Cycle route widening (northern boundary)	£60,752k
• Improved entrances and access points	£10k
• Footbridge improvements	£10k
• Car park (Arley Drive)	£44k
• Service Point	£5k
• Repaired, Improved paths (existing)	£81,654k
• New Paths (macadam) and associated works	£182,933k
• New Paths (woodland no-dig) and associated works	£31,350k
• Renewed and improved signage	£10k
• Replacement street lighting	£36k
• Site furniture / Features	£75k
• Natural Play features and Natural Play Hub	£35k
• Grass sports pitch improvement	£53,625k
• MUGA refurbishment / sports facilities	£40k
• Specimen tree planting	£15k
• Wetland creation / management	£5k

5.4 A typical annual funding package could be made up from the following possible sources: s106 monies, The Energy from Waste INEOS fund, external grants such as Landfill tax credit scheme (WREN/Veolia). There may also be opportunities through sustainable transport funding streams, sports facilities improvement schemes and nature conservation initiatives.

5.5 The Masterplan approach allows proposed infrastructure Improvements to the wider park area to be undertaken either separately or in combination with each other, with the minimum of disruption or abortive work as and when funds become available.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

Arley Woodland Park will provide a wide range of different habitats, recreational areas and play opportunities, which are well suited to a wide age range of young people to enjoy. Proposals will further enhance access to these opportunities.

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

Development of Arley Woodland Park will create opportunities for further development of events and activities on the site with the potential for pop-up enterprises associated with these. Proposals will also promote the availability of natural resources for educational opportunities for local schools and colleges.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

Improved facilities and access to footpaths, cycle routes and natural play elements will encourage more recreation and exercise in the area, helping to combat obesity, to encourage cardio vascular and muscular activity to promote mental well-being for local communities.

6.4 A Safer Halton

Access and gateway improvements, together with increased user numbers will help deter anti-social behaviour, reduce crime and encourage more use of the Park by a wider range of people. Proposals will include improved information boards as well direction signage to help people navigate the park.

6.5 Environment and Regeneration in Halton

Improvements to Halton's green infrastructure, cycle and pathway network will further improve the image of the borough and help retain and attract residents, businesses and visitors in to the borough.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

- 7.1 The current infrastructure is at a stage that requires major intervention in order to maintain safe routes and retain site boundaries, entrances, drainage etc., in a serviceable condition. In addition the site is currently underused and prone to fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour. Combining a comprehensive programme of refurbishment works with a development of the site infrastructure helps focus Council resources in the best locations for long term benefit and to counter the negative impact of under use and resultant misuse.

- 7.2 The proposals build on the recent work across the Borough to protect areas of open space from incursion by non-authorized vehicles. As sites are made secure those without boundary controls become more vulnerable. This scheme will ensure protection for the site in line with neighbouring sites such as Prescott Road Playing Fields.
- 7.3 The Masterplan proposals do not present any serious risk to the Council. The proposed new infrastructure will be managed and maintained within existing budgets.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

No significant Equality and Diversity implications have been identified.

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
Halton Core Strategy April 2013	Picow Farm Depot	Martin McCoy

10.0 LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1: L/344/B/001 Existing Site Plan

Appendix 2: L/344 Arley Drive Playing Fields Site Photographs

Appendix 3: L/344/B/002 Masterplan