

Covid-19 Memorial Woodland within New 48 Hectare Parkland at former South Leeds Golf Course

Date: 23rd June 2021

Report of: Director of Communities, Housing and Environment

Report to: Executive Board

Will the decision be open for call in? Yes No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? Yes No

What is this report about?

Including how it contributes to the city's and council's ambitions

- This report outlines a proposal to create a new 48 hectare park incorporating a Covid-19 memorial woodland on the site of the former South Leeds golf course.
- The memorial woodland would be created in partnership with Leeds Hospitals Charity and dedicated to the memory of those who died during the pandemic and for the appreciation of front line and key workers.
- The new park if approved will provide a place for reflection as well as recreation. The woodland creation supports the council's pledge to combat the climate emergency by planting 5.8 million trees over the next 25 years. The local population will also benefit from the economic, biodiversity and health benefits of good quality green space.
- The project will include a launch event for the memorial woodland after which information will be provided for people who want to either commemorate a loved one, get involved or wish to donate.
- The proposals in this report support the Vision for Leeds 2011 to 2030 and Best Council Plan aspiration for accessible, better quality green spaces. They also contribute to the council commitment to make Leeds carbon neutral by 2030.

Recommendations

Executive Board is requested to approve the following:

- a) To establish a formal partnership agreement between the Council and Leeds Hospitals Charity to create a Covid-19 memorial woodland.
- b) To commence consultation on establishing up to 48 hectares of new parkland incorporating a Covid-19 memorial woodland and other recreational features which will then form part of Middleton Park.
- c) To inject £700k into the capital programme to enable works to commence on establishing the Covid-19 memorial woodland and delegate authority to spend approval of the full scheme to the Director of Communities, Housing and Environment. To note the £30k annual revenue budget provision required to maintain the new parkland.
- d) To note that the Chief Officer Parks and Countryside will be responsible for implementing these recommendations according to the timetable outlined in paragraph 31 of this report.

Why is the proposal being put forward?

- 1 South Leeds Golf Club ceased trading in November 2019 and an administrator was subsequently appointed in December 2019. The golf club leased the land from the Council and following a delegated decision (D50642), the lease was surrendered by the administrator to the Council in March 2020 with the aspiration of expanding Middleton Park as a significant recreation amenity in south Leeds.
- 2 Unrelated to this, the Council were approached last year by the Leeds Hospitals Charity (formerly known as the 'Leeds Cares' charity) expressing their wish to work in partnership and fund the development of a Covid-19 memorial woodland. This would provide an opportunity for the city to remember those lost to Covid-19 during the pandemic and to be one of the first cities to develop a memorial woodland of this nature.
- 3 The land at the former golf course provides a unique opportunity to commemorate those who have tragically died during the pandemic, in addition to creating up to 48 hectares of new public parkland comprising of a network of paths, naturalistic woodland, grassland habitats, picnic areas and educational information. The image below indicates the current extent of the former South Leeds golf course (in red) with the proposed location of the memorial woodland (in blue) which is 4.5 hectares.

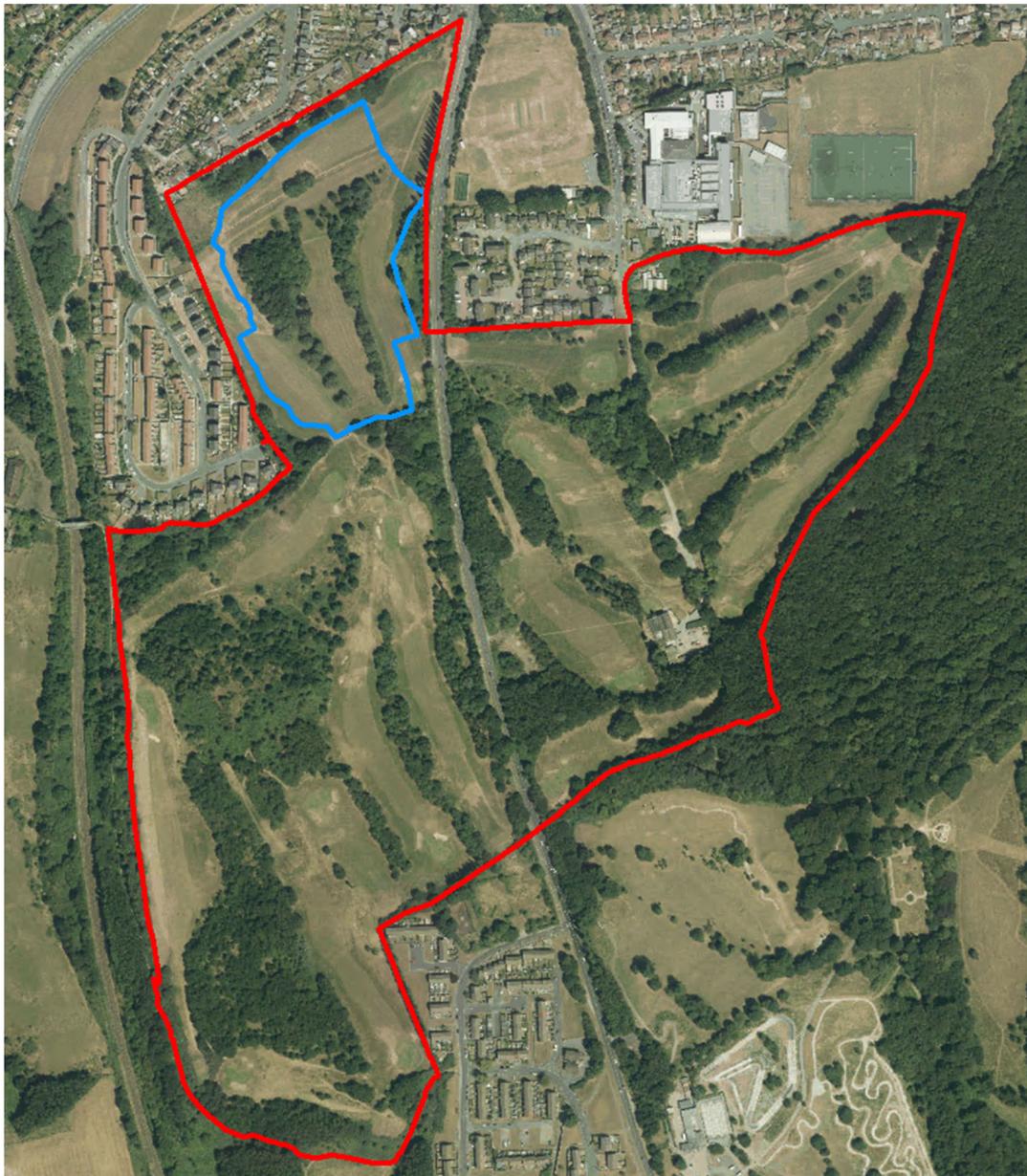


Image 1: Former golf course area is shown in red with proposed Covid-19 memorial woodland in blue.

- 4 It should be noted that the new parkland will be contained in the former golf course area which may also be used to accommodate sports facilities for Cockburn School. In autumn 2020 the opportunity to lease the clubhouse was advertised by the Council and a preferred bidder has been selected which may also have an impact on some adjacent land surrounding this building.
- 5 The site is currently not being managed and maintained regularly, which therefore increases the likelihood of activities such as fly-tipping and illegal occupation taking place. Creating a memorial woodland and public park in this area will dissuade such activity and provide the local community with all the economic, health and biodiversity benefits resulting from good quality green space.
- 6 Furthermore, the creation of a memorial woodland fits well with the aspiration to develop the former golf course into naturalistic parkland which will secure the future of the site and enable it to be integrated with the wider Middleton Park estate. The majority of the memorial area will be planted with woodland and contribute to the target of creating 50 hectares of woodland each year on Council land in response to the climate emergency.

What impact will this proposal have?

Wards affected: Beeston and Holbeck, Middleton Park

Have ward members been consulted?

Yes

No

- 7 An additional 48 hectares of good quality green space would provide economic, health, wellbeing, biodiversity benefits, the results of which can already be seen by the high volume of visitors at Middleton Park. Planting of trees on the former South Leeds Golf Course site will provide a valuable addition to the 81 hectares of existing woodland at Middleton Park. Developing this site will add around 5 km of new walking routes within the newly developed parkland, adjacent to the already popular park with scope for the development of new cycle trails.
- 8 There is scope for extensive community participation such as volunteering to support tree planting as well as other conservation activities. Although planting trees proposed for the area is a major part of the development of the site, areas of open space are also an integral part of the plans to enhance the natural value of the site. On the site of the memorial woodland, there will be a variety of habitats, including 9,000 trees, a wildflower meadow and wetland habitat. Additionally, rewilding practices such as reduced mowing will form part of the management plan.



Image 2: Example of a shaded wetland habitat similar to what is envisaged for the memorial woodland site.



Image 3: Harvest mice are one of the species that could potentially benefit from increased woodland cover and more natural land management practices.



Image 4: *Volunteer tree planting.*

- 9 It is anticipated that naturally occurring wildflowers will flourish in these areas, providing a valuable source of food for pollinators. The natural grassland habitat also allows small mammals to diffuse across areas they previously may not have been able to, improving food sources for predators such as owls and birds of prey already seen on site. Open glades will be incorporated into the woodland design providing an opportunity for a variety of ground flora to grow, in addition to potential picnicking spots, with picnic benches located at preserved viewpoints and vistas.



Image 5: *A natural unmown wildflower meadow and picnic area in woodland glade.*

- 10 The proposed memorial woodland would create an area of natural tranquillity and reflection, providing a destination for the residents of Leeds to visit to remember their loved ones, or appreciate the work of front line and key workers. The proposed site is in an area of increased deprivation compared to some other areas of the city and therefore locating the memorial woodland here would have added poignancy given the associated increase in mortality from Covid-19 in such areas. Leeds Hospitals Charity have suggested that in future years, the addition of a statue or artwork in the woodland may be possible. There is the potential to develop a focal point as some form of memorialisation to celebrate those who have contributed to fundraising for the site, which will be located at a southerly spot on the site, looking out towards the construction of the new Leeds Infirmary expansion.
- 11 The project will include a launch event for the memorial woodland after which information will be provided for people who want to either commemorate a loved one, get involved or wish to donate.



Image 6: This viewpoint from the proposed Covid-10 Memorial Woodland looks out across the city.

Image 7: Signage describing the species of trees present similar to the example above, will be on site to educate visitors about their surroundings. Additional interpretation for the memorial woodland will also be erected.

12 An equality, diversity, community cohesion and integration screening has been conducted to assess the impact of this proposal.

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

13 A number of local stakeholders have been engaged, in the form of virtual and on-site meetings. Ward members from the Beeston and Middleton Park wards, have expressed support for the plans in this area of the golf course, subject to public consultation. Representatives from the local Friends of Middleton Park were also present during the virtual meeting, with all parties being in broad agreement of the proposed plans. Wade's Charity and Leeds Hospital Charity also supported the location of the proposed woodland creation across the site.

- 14 Subject to approval of the recommendations in this report, it is proposed that public consultation will commence as soon as possible. The consultation exercise would consider both the memorial woodland as well as other plans for the rest of the site as follows:
- Letter drops to residents whose homes are adjacent or overlook this section of the golf course, enclosing the plans and inviting them to comment through an email or letter.
 - The potential opportunity to discuss proposals on site in more detail with representatives from both Parks and Countryside service and Leeds Hospitals Charity.
 - An open consultation to the general public, who would be given opportunity to fill in an online form or provide comments in writing.
 - A webinar whereby the proposals for the whole of the South Leeds Golf Course site would be discussed including the memorial woodland.

What are the resource implications?

- 15 The Leeds Hospitals Charity wish to meet costs associated with the creation and development of the memorial woodland (indicated in the blue box in Image 1 above).
- 16 There are costs associated with the development of this site, such as providing suitable recreation features, establishing a path network throughout the area with appropriate signage, car parking as well as securing the site from illegal vehicle access. The minimum capital cost to develop the site to achieve the significant potential as an accessible, biodiverse greenspace in a deprived community is £700k in addition to costs associated with the creation and development of the memorial woodland alluded to above with £30k revenue to support ongoing maintenance for recreation.
- 17 A report to Executive Board on 8th June 2021 outlined information about the Levelling Up Fund with the opportunity to bid for significant capital investment that includes cultural assets in the city. Reference was made to a potential Leeds Park City themed project to bring forward a cross-constituency proposal that delivers investment in new and improved parks and green spaces. Specific reference was also made to the proposals in this report for which if a bid was successful then the costs could be met via the Levelling Up Fund. However, it is not currently proposed for Round 1 submission and it could take some time before the outcome of any bid is known. Therefore, whilst the Leeds Hospitals Charity are funding the Covid-19 memorial woodland, £100k is required to enable works to commence. In the event that a bid proves unsuccessful, the Council would also need to underwrite a minimum of a further £600k to meet capital costs.

What are the legal implications?

- 18 There are no issues with access to information. The report is a key decision and subject to call in.
- 19 A partnership agreement with Leeds Hospitals Charity will be drawn up to clarify the responsibility of the land, and to ensure that all works are carried out in line with appropriate standards.
- 20 The car park will be subject to a planning application in due course.

What are the key risks and how are they being managed?

- 21 This proposal presents a unique and timely opportunity to establish up to 48 hectares of good quality greenspace and capture the economic, health, wellbeing and biodiversity benefits that creating new woodlands can provide. There is also the opportunity to work with a well-established local charity to create a memorial woodland, in addition to securing the future of this site as a publicly accessible recreation space.
- 22 A decision not to proceed with this proposal could put at jeopardy the willingness of the charity to proceed with a partnership arrangement to create a memorial woodland. A

decision to not develop the land for recreation and conservation as described is likely to increase the level of illegal occupation and fly-tipping in the heart of an urban community.

Does this proposal support the council's three Key Pillars?

- Inclusive Growth Health and Wellbeing Climate Emergency

- 23 Inclusive growth is supported by expanding the Green Flag award winning Middleton Park to encompass the former golf course area. Studies have shown that improving the quality of parks and green space makes a place more desirable to live and for businesses to invest. Volunteering opportunities would help people in the local area to gain confidence and skills to enable them to seek employment.
- 24 The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on mental health has been widely reported and studied. A Covid-19 memorial woodland would provide a place for reflection in a natural environment with the known associated benefits is connecting with nature. There are also benefits to health from increased physical activity associated with accessing recreation parkland.
- 25 There are opportunities to support cleaner air by promoting the use of public transport through the bus links adjacent to the site as well as adjacent cycle routes to access the site.
- 26 This proposal supports the response to the climate emergency by contributing to the aim of planting 50 hectares of woodland in 2021/22 and each year thereafter. The benefits to planting trees can be summarised by referring to the following image.

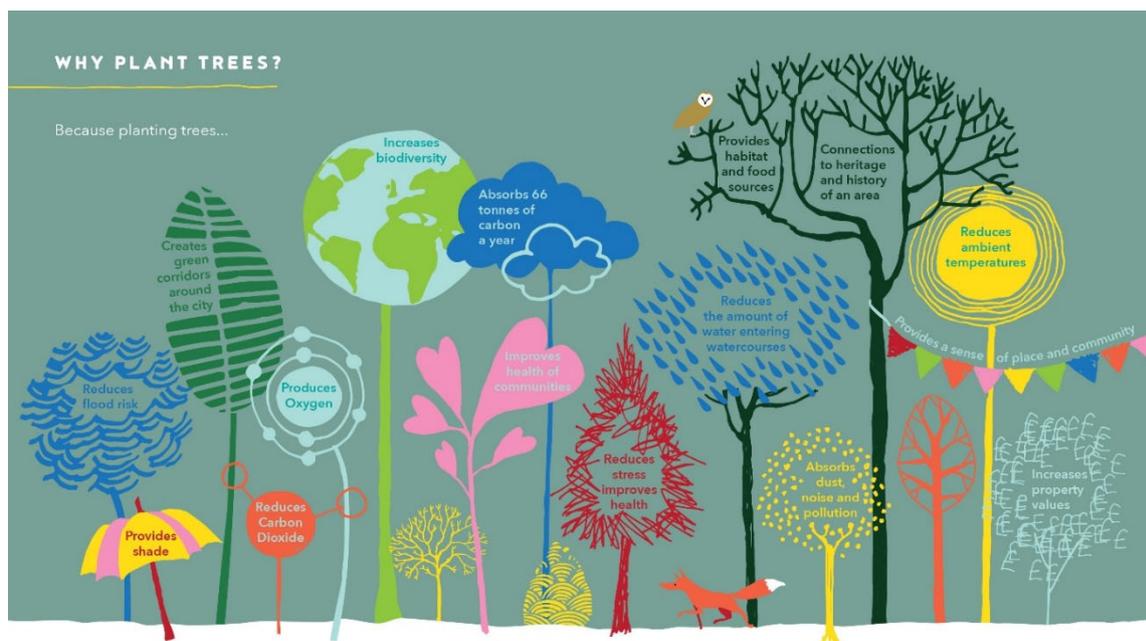


Image 8: Benefits of Planting Trees

- 27 Leeds Hospitals Charity hope in future years to use the site for a number of activities, including trips for patients of the paediatric hospital at Leeds General Infirmary. This will provide those in critical care with an opportunity to experience nature in a relaxed environment, despite the constraints of their treatment.

Options, timescales and measuring success

a) What other options were considered?

- 28 This proposal arises out of a unique circumstances following the closure of South Leeds Golf Club and approach by Leeds Hospitals Charity. No alternative options have therefore been considered.

b) How will success be measured?

- 29 Success will be measured by observing the increased use and accessibility of the area by members of the public. Frequent use and attendance of the site will show that the aim to increase access to recreational space was successful, in addition to improving the health and wellbeing of those who visit.
- 30 There are known benefits to the environment in creating natural woodland habitats and subsequent surveys should demonstrate the range of species supported.

c) What is the timetable for implementation?

31 The timetable for implementation is summarised as follows:

- June 2021: Executive board approval and launch of partnership with Leeds Hospitals Charity
- June / July 2021: Public consultation
- August 2021: Develop final plans
- Autumn 2021: Planning approval
- Winter 2021: Site development and woodland planting
- February 2022: Opening

Appendices

32 Equality, diversity, cohesion and integration screening.

Background papers

33 None.