

SML Masterplan Implementation Stage: The Next Steps

Draft strategy paper for consultation with members of the St. Mary's Lands Working Party.



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1.0 Introduction

Our vision is a future for St. Mary's Lands where the natural and cultural heritage is protected and enhanced – where a vibrant range of community uses, economic regeneration and environmental enhancement thrive together in this inspiring natural setting.

This draft strategy paper looks at the next steps in delivering the vision for St. Mary's Lands.

1.1 The Objectives of the Masterplan:

- ❖ To manage, enhance and promote the landscape character of St. Mary's Lands, including increasing its biodiversity;
- ❖ To manage, enhance and promote St. Mary's Land as a green space distinctly different to the more formal parks and open spaces in Warwick, ensuring access is maintained and enhanced to a large area of more natural open space within walking distance of the town centre;
- ❖ To promote St. Mary's Lands as a visitor destination, where any such increase in visitor numbers is compatible with preserving and protecting the site's landscape quality, biodiversity and sense of place;
- ❖ To support the many organisations that contribute to the broader community needs or local economy, where such support does not lead to a loss of landscape quality, biodiversity or sense of place.

The proposals for SML have been developed by the long-term Working Party who have committed to 4-key themes, recognising that:

- ❖ **Protecting St. Mary's Lands for People and Nature:** will require careful future management and maintenance to balance the needs for community use and events whilst also protecting biodiversity, which may ultimately need to restrict access in some parts to prosper;
- ❖ **Improving Access and Enjoyment for All:** current signage, way finding and footpaths are in various conditions, from good to extremely poor. Few footpath routes are accessible to disabled users with physical barriers, lack of resting points and path surfaces restricting access. There is also a conflict over the leased areas of the space, where public access is restricted. The strategic location of the site, means that a system of cycle routes could greatly increase connectivity between Warwick Parkway Station and the town centre;

The second State of the UK Public Parks report shows that there is a growing deficit between the rising use of parks and the declining resources that are available to manage them. The report findings show that while parks are highly valued by the public and usage is increasing, park maintenance budgets and staffing levels are being cut.

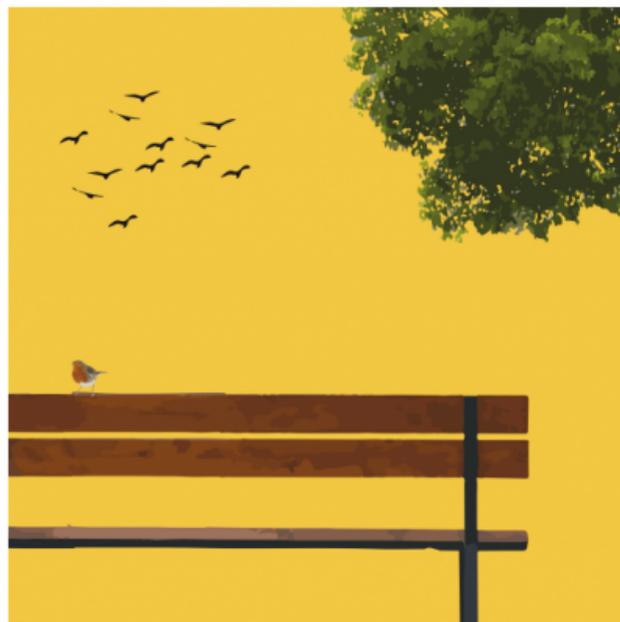
- ❖ **Supporting the Local Economy:** the Working Party recognises the need to protect the value of free to use recreational facilities alongside support for a range of business organisations that contribute to the local economy. These organisations offer a range of other services to residents and visitors and should not be seen as mutually exclusive of each other. The objective is to find an appropriate balance between public facilities and the financial contributions that the leaseholders make to the economy, both directly and indirectly, whilst ensuring that the synergy between all parties is maximised;
- ❖ **Investing for the Future:** the increasing use of SML's is putting greater pressure on the green space and its wildlife value. Investment is required to ensure that greater levels of use are not detrimental to the site's special qualities.

To achieve these objectives and strengthen the thematic priorities, a programme of improvements is envisaged over the next 5-years to consolidate the early wins already made. These improvements will require substantial financial investment that is beyond the ability of Warwick District Council to commit to and consequently, this strategy paper sets out what might be funded and how.

1.2 Theme 1: Protecting St. Mary's Lands for People and Nature

- ❖ Increase the area of fully accessible green space by re-modelling the size of the golf course;
- ❖ Adopt a biodiversity protection and enhancement strategy, ensuring that the balance between public access and wildlife diversity is well-managed;
- ❖ Set out an action plan to achieve Local Nature Reserve status;
- ❖ Relocate the Model Flyers to a less environmentally sensitive site on the Common;
- ❖ Implement a programme of interpretation, education and training to explain and promote wildlife interest and the history of the green space;
- ❖ Create opportunities for volunteering and a junior green warden programme.

THAT MOMENT OF PEACE



WHAT'S THAT WORTH TO YOU?



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1.3 Theme 2: Improving Access and Enjoyment for All

- ❖ Undertake footpath improvement works;
- ❖ Create a walking / cycle link between the town-centre and Warwick Parkway Station, including negotiating agreements with adjacent land owners;
- ❖ Improve access to toilet facilities, including accessible toilets and baby change facilities;
- ❖ Provide a refreshments kiosk and enhanced picnic facilities;
- ❖ Provide a natural play space and play trail;
- ❖ Investigate 'Forest School' and outdoor learning opportunities;
- ❖ Substantially increase 'intellectual' access alongside physical access improvements via interpretation and activity programmes;
- ❖ Enhance health and well-being benefits by providing free-to-use outdoor recreational opportunities.

1.4 Theme 3: Supporting the Local Economy

- ❖ Investing in the Golf Centre pavilion and diversifying its appeal to a wider range of users;
- ❖ Working with the Jockey Club to position Warwick Racecourse as a nationally important visitor destination and the best town-centre racing experience;
- ❖ Create new employment opportunities;
- ❖ Develop and deliver a multi-skills training programme.

1.5 Theme 4: Investing for the Future

- ❖ Green infrastructure investment linked to education and interpretation of climate change;
- ❖ Increase the area of recreation space fully accessible to the public;
- ❖ Improve the setting of the Conservation Area;
- ❖ Replace the Golf Centre building with a multi-purpose facility as a central hub with toilets, refreshments and outdoor seating linked to a natural play area;
- ❖ Improve the edge of town, long-stay car parking;
- ❖ Invest in sustainable travel options, including walking and cycling routes.

2.0 Potential Costs + Funding

Warwick District Council Green Space Team have produced the Green Space Strategy for Warwick District for the period 2012 – 2026. The Green Space Strategy vision is:

By 2026 there will be a well planned and managed network of integrated, accessible and diverse green spaces within Warwick district: creating a sustainable environment for the benefit of people, wildlife and our natural heritage.

2.1 Estimated Capital Costs

The outline costs of the improvements programme are estimated to be £4,050,000 and comprise the following broad elements:

- ❖ £600,000: replacement Golf Centre building with a multi-purpose hub with toilets and refreshments facility, equipment hire and small exhibition / heritage space (300m² @ £2000 per m²);
- ❖ £1,800,000: re-modelling of the golf course to achieve a circa 40% reduction in area, with the balance re-landscape for community access and re-locate the Model Flyers;
- ❖ £550,000: footpath and cycleway repairs and connections, (3000lm x 4m average width);
- ❖ £100,000: new play area and play trail;
- ❖ £100,000: other works including interpretation, signs and way finding, outdoor furniture and picnic area, and biodiversity enhancement projects;
- ❖ £900,000: inflation, preliminaries, contingencies and fees.

All figures are very preliminary and subject to development.

2.2 Funding Sources

The funding required is beyond what the District Council can commit to and is proposing to seek external funding to deliver the majority of the proposals. Consequently, the proposed investment is dependant upon securing the funding.

Three main funding sources have been identified:

- ❖ Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) contributions towards improving green infrastructure and sustainable transport. A preliminary CIL application, totalling £1,343,000 was submitted in December 2020, with the majority of the funds sought for the financial years 2024/25 and 2025/26;
- ❖ National Heritage Lottery Fund (NHLF) under the main grants programme (£250,000 - £5 million). The estimated grant request is circa £2.4 million;

NHLF Statement

We will be looking for projects with a particular emphasis on organisational resilience and inclusion. In the second phase, beginning 8 February 2021, we will resume accepting applications for grants from £100,000-£250,000 and £250,000-£5m. This will mark a return to our core business, but we won't be returning to pre-COVID-19 "business as usual" in our approach.

- ❖ Eco-credits, administered by Warwickshire County Council, where positive net biodiversity gain can be achieved. Based upon a preliminary assessment of biodiversity gain, approximately £80,000 of credits might be secured.

The total of all funding sources is £3,823,000 with the balance of £227,000 arising from section 106 contributions and the District Council.

2.3 NHLF Programme

The NHLF closed all its grant programmes to new applications last year in the light of the Covid-19 situation and the diversion of lottery funding to emergency causes. The organisation has stated that it will be re-opening its main grant's scheme from the 8th February this year. However, the grant priorities have changed and now place a much stronger focus on economic resilience within the heritage sector. NHLF states:

'Prioritising for positive change

As we build back, I want us to grasp the possibilities that this trying period offers for positive change across the heritage sector.

Our funding and expertise will support heritage organisations to adapt to fundamentally changed circumstances, to closely examine their existing business models and to develop new, creative and more resilient ways of operating. Now, more than ever, I believe that heritage has to demonstrate its economic contribution and value to our national life and support for the recovery of our local economies and communities.'

The core objectives of the re-opened funding are:

- ❖ boost the local economy;
- ❖ provide job creation and encourage skills development;
- ❖ support local health and wellbeing;



❖ encourage rebuilding community cohesion.

And critically, NHLF want all the project partners they work with to demonstrate that they are building long-term environmental sustainability and inclusion into their plans.

The potential partnership that exists within the membership of the Working Party: three tiers of local government, the Friends of SML combined with a range of business, community and heritage organisations, affords an opportunity to build a compelling grant application.

Additionally, the core heritage value of the site is high but poorly explained. The story of the medieval 'Common Lands and Rights' and Lammas lands covers an 800-hundred year history that is little understood. As we become increasingly disconnected from food production and food supply chains, it would be interesting to see if there are any exhibitions in the UK that explain the concept of Common Lands and how important these spaces were to everyday life. The racecourse is among the UK's oldest and its history relates back to the Great Fire of Warwick in 1694. Model flying at SML stems 100-years and some excellent early images exist. The site's natural heritage is also good with a potential for substantial improvement.

3.0 Key Next Steps

Step 1: Consult with the Working Party;

Step 2: Approach the NHLF with an Expression of Interest;

Step 3: Define the project outcomes with key stakeholders;

Step 4: Seek endorsement of the project objectives from the wider community.

3.1 NHLF Timescales

The NHLF is a 3-stage process, beginning with an initial Expression of Interest (EoI) to determine eligibility. If the NHLF agrees the project is eligible, it would move to a Round 1 bid (usually 18-months to develop and receive a decision) with a further 18-months to develop the Round 2 bid. Funding is competitive at each stage.

The recommendation is that a project synopsis is prepared and the EoI stage application submitted in mid-February when the programme re-opens. The reasoning for submitting scheme early is threefold:

- ❖ a positive response to the EoI would strengthen the ability to secure CIL and other funding;
- ❖ many organisations, including local authorities and heritage groups may not have the ability to commit the resources to project development over the first half of this year, reducing the level of competition for funding;
- ❖ the key partnership and project aims are well-developed and align with the funding criteria.

3.2 Golf Course Design

If the EoI is well-received, a key next step is to develop a more defined project scope, including how the golf course could be re-designed to offer a better quality Par3 facility within a smaller land area. This will require the preparation of design options and detailed costings over the summer period. Likewise, a detailed brief and business case for the new hub pavilion would also need to be developed, including the range of functions, flexibility and mode of operation. Its size, scale and massing will need to be assessed alongside the potential visual impact, requiring an assessment of materials and how the building would integrate with the surrounding landform and topography.

3.3 Defining the Project Outcomes

There will need to be a period of discussion with the key project stakeholders (principally the members of the Working Party), to ensure that the project is strategically aligned with each organisation's aims and future aspirations. We must ensure that there is synergy between the stakeholders and we maximise benefit to organisations, such as Hill Close Gardens, rather than be in competition for the same audience. It is envisaged that a series of workshops would investigate the NHLF's priorities of boosting the local economy, skills and employment, supports health and well-being, strengthens community cohesion, and environmental sustainability.

The input of the Friends of SML will be an important component to ensure that the benefits of the scheme, especially with regards access improvements, green space protection and community value, are responsive to local users needs. The outcome of this stage of project would then form the basis for a wider community consultation process to seek consensus around the ideas and proposals.

3.4 Consultation

The fourth key next step is building awareness and endorsement of the proposals. Whilst the scheme aims to deliver the objectives of the already consulted upon and adopted masterplan, there is considerable scope in this next stage of development of the detailed ideas that would benefit from a wider process of community consultation and stakeholder engagement beyond the membership of the Working Party. The primary aim of the consultation is not to seek a range of new ideas, but to ensure that the developed proposals are responding to specific community needs, especially in light of recent changes in use patterns and intensification of use.

The format of any consultation will need to reflect the Covid-19 situation at the time, but it is hoped that by the summer, the mass vaccination programme will have been progressed enough to allow for some face-to-face consultation.

3.5 Preliminary Timetable

Key timetable milestones are as follows:

1. Jan 2021: preliminary discussion with Working Party Members, response to draft strategy document by the end of January;
2. Mid-February: submission of EoI to the NHLF;
3. Mid-March: response to EoI known;
4. CIL outcome discussed by WDC;
5. Early April: feedback to Working Party on EoI & CILL outcomes and agree next steps;
6. April - June: stakeholder development of detailed project brief and golf course preliminary options;
7. July: report to Working Party and then Warwick District Council authorising public consultation;
8. August - October: project development and wider community / stakeholder engagement;
9. November: presentation to Working Party on consultation outcomes;
10. November - February; design development and preparation of Round 1 NHLF application;
11. March 2022: Submission of round 1 application to NHLF.

If the round 1 bid is successful, the round 2 submission and final decision would be likely in September 2024 with the majority of the construction works taking place during the 2025/26 financial year.