
Appendix 1: Northbrook Approach and Riverside and the Ludwell Valley Parks

Joint proposal for the Future

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Northbrook Approach Golf Course July 2019

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1. Background

Early in 2019 Exeter City Council considered proposals to dispose of the Northbrook Approach Golf Course. There was a groundswell of support for the Northbrook site to remain as an accessible greenspace and as a result the Council decided that the site would not be sold. The golf course (formerly operated by Legacy Leisure) has now been closed, but no plans have yet been made for the future of the site.

Devon Wildlife Trust and Exeter City Council (ECC) and other partners have worked closely since 2008 to deliver the Exeter Wild City programme. Notable achievements include establishing 40 community wildflower meadows around the city since 2012; installing a swift tower at the Paris Street roundabout in 2015; several tree-planting projects including the Big Tree Plant (more than 3.5k trees involving 2.5k people) and wins for wildlife incorporated into the award winning Residential Design Guide.

In May 2019, Devon wildlife Trust (DWT) took on the management of the six Valley Parks totalling more than 140 hectares in Exeter, under a 30 year lease from the Council, and we are now working in partnership to ensure these greenspaces are enhanced, enjoyed and valued by communities. The largest and best known of the Valley Parks are Ludwell and Riverside, together totalling nearly 100 hectares. DWT aims to increase people's engagement with these greenspaces by attracting new sources of funding, skills and resources to unlock their potential for more people to have an outstanding experience, in a diverse variety of ways. With greater support from people and communities, DWT will care for these special places and encourage wildlife to thrive with year round stunning natural scenes.

The Valley Parks are critical to help us to deliver on our joint vision of Exeter as a national leader in urban greenspace provision. Our vision is for a nature recovery network of thriving and connected green and blue spaces around the city – for people and wildlife.

The Northbrook Approach site occupies a crucial strategic location in the cultural and ecological landscape. It provides a green corridor between two of the city's most significant greenspaces, Ludwell and Riverside. The site's strategic role was identified in the 2016 Riverside and Ludwell Masterplan* as performing a critical function for the movement of wildlife. It also represents a potential natural infrastructure connection for people to move between parks and could provide traffic-free routes into the Quayside areas, Marsh Barton and the city centre beyond.

A wide range of organisations have indicated their interest in the future of the land. ECC and DWT will ensure that communities are placed at the heart of future decisions regarding this special, but contested, space. We propose working in partnership to build community support for the future of this land – one which maximises its natural infrastructure role.

**Riverside and Ludwell Masterplan 2016-2026, Footprint Ecology and Exterior Architecture, 2016*

We propose an approach which considers Northbrook’s critical position in the wider landscape. Extensive consultation and thinking has already been undertaken to develop a vision to unlock the potential of the city’s two major greenspaces, particularly within the Riverside and Ludwell Masterplan. We see this as an opportunity to assess current strategic factors influencing this area, and to develop plans, with the support of local communities, to deliver exceptional natural infrastructure and facilities that will put Exeter on the map as national leaders in this field.



Looking downstream (Northbrook) towards Riverside from Northbrook Approach, with Ludwell behind.

2. Our proposal for Northbrook Approach

The Northbrook countryside 'park' represents a tranquil, wildlife rich, greenspace. As a result of its former management it has a well-developed parkland aesthetic. Its gently undulating landform is dominated by grassland, interspersed with mature trees. The grasslands are bordered by well established fringing woodland and smaller clusters of trees.

Our proposal is for ECC and DWT to work in partnership to develop a vision for the Northbrook site which would secure support and engender pride from a wide range of stakeholders and attract potential sources of new funding from commercial sponsorship, grant making bodies, to charitable trusts.

Through initial discussions DWT has held with local communities there is overwhelming support for the area to be developed for quiet recreation in a wildlife rich setting. The land is also recognised for its role as a wildlife corridor between Riverside and Ludwell and there is significant potential to enhance this crucial function. DWT has taken time to visit the land and consider the features that can be enhanced.

Our initial proposal is to build on the fantastic range of features the site currently offers; our vision is for the Northbrook Approach site to develop as a:

- **'Wild arboretum'** – the tree studded parkland would be enriched with wildflowers and newly planted standard trees to inspire visitors to explore and experience wildlife up close and pause to appreciate the stunning landscape;
- **Community orchard** – orchard trees provide fruit for local communities to harvest. This helps communities to develop a greater sense of ownership and pride over the area – and is also a wonderful way of encouraging wildlife;
- **Wilding the Northbrook** – DWT would help catalyse natural processes by allowing the Northbrook room to break out of channel – new wetlands, ponds and pools would provide space for people to access the water's edge and observe the range of wildlife supported;
- **Linking greenspaces** – DWT would manage the site to enhance its critical role as a crucial green corridor between the Ludwell and Riverside Valley Parks, and as a pivotal link for people to enjoy these local greenspaces and to explore further afield.

Whilst DWT is keen to lead on this strong vision for the area it is imperative that communities are able to shape and hone these initial proposals:

- **Community involvement** – engaging and involving communities is a priority for us in the Valley Parks; at Northbrook Approach communities would be involved from the outset in thinking about the site and its role in progressing proposals for the wider landscape;

- **Hub for learning and communities** – the Riverside and Ludwell Masterplan identified the need for visitor hubs at both Riverside and Ludwell. DWT and ECC have begun to discuss options for siting a flagship visitor facility at Riverside, and this long-term aspiration can be discussed with communities alongside proposals for Northbrook Approach, as part of the local context. The Northbrook Approach site would provide an excellent base for local community activities, engagement and for education, which we can start to develop straight away in partnership with communities.



Winding path from the banks of the Northbrook at Northbrook Approach, towards Riverside



Valley Parks volunteer group, October 2019

3. Wild Arboretum and community orchard



Views of the former golf course

Without the constraints of a golf course there is an opportunity to bring the parkland to life as a stunning space for visitors to enjoy and to interact with wildlife. DWT proposes to create a high carrying capacity site where we would:

- Establish new all-weather pathways and trails to help people to explore the whole site
- Include benches and pause points where people can gather, play, or simply enjoy the scenery
- Provide wildlife interpretation to help people to explore and discover
- Introduce natural play features
- Establish strong gateways and routes into and out of the site to promote active travel and discovery of Riverside and Ludwell beyond.
- Establish wildflower meadows amongst the trees to provide stunning displays and to help many more insects and pollinators to thrive
- Plant and nurture new trees and orchards to support many more species for the long term, and encourage people to enjoy the blossom and pick the fruit
- Involve people in planning and making choices for the site, as well as in projects to establish new features, to plant and sow, and in ongoing care and organic development

4. Linking greenspaces and wilding the Northbrook

The site already provides an important corridor, connecting wildlife between the larger greenspaces of Riverside and Ludwell. Dippers nest along the Northbrook stream alongside the course, and beautiful demoiselles use the flow of the Northbrook and the vegetation of its banks. Otters and kingfishers are frequent sights alongside minnows and trout in the streams. A good streamside path provides a pleasant walk for visitors, although the quality of the path and access to and views of the stream are varied. Key opportunities include:

- Improve the path along the Northbrook to provide consistent access for pedestrians and cyclists, and excellent views of the stream
- Naturalise the Northbrook stream and its banks. By creating more space for water to flow out of channel we will restore habitats for a wealth of wildlife and help provide an inspiring streamside experience for all visitors
- Link this stretch of the stream to projects upstream (through Ludwell and up towards Mincinglake) and downstream to the River Exe and associated leats, to naturalise watercourses and their banks throughout the catchment
- Our plans ultimately will extend to the source of the Northbrook – by working with nature we will help restore the health of this waterbody
- Strengthen access and the connections at either end of the path (or corridor) to Riverside and Ludwell, to improve visitor access and active travel through these major greenspaces
- Explore the potential to provide a Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (or SANGS) for the city linking these major greenspaces
- Develop a balanced plan for facilities to serve local communities at the Northbrook Approach site, with the ambition for strong visitor offer in a Riverside location.



An example of a wild arboretum (Yorkshire)

5. People

Ludwell and Riverside Valley Parks extend to approximately 100 hectares of wildlife rich greenspace, hosting the majority of the estimated 500,000 annual visitors to the Valley Parks. Currently there is less than 300m separating Ludwell and Riverside, with the Northbrook Approach representing the critical connection. A visitor to Ludwell can follow the Northbrook stream through the park, across the Topsham Road, into Northbrook Approach and along a public path towards Riverside and the River Exe.

Currently few people take this route. Topsham Road represents a physical and psychological barrier. With new, well signed multi-use pathways people could safely cross Topsham Road at the pelican crossing (adjacent to the crematorium entrance), and descend through the former golf course

The link between these Valley Parks has great potential for visitors due to the different nature of the sites. Ludwell is characterised by hilly farmland, hedges, wooded areas and orchards, stunning views and cornflower meadows. Riverside by contrast sits long and flat along the River Exe and Canal, with diverse floodplain meadows and easy access to the Quayside, Haven Banks and Marsh Barton. Many visitors will always access these greenspaces individually, but connecting them would offer people a much richer variety of experience and also provide safe traffic free routes to work. For the more adventurous, connection can be made onto the Exe Valley Way (a 45 mile river valley walk). At around three hectares of greenspace, Northbrook Approach would form a pivotal part of that connection.

DWT's goal is to engage hundreds of thousands more people in greenspaces around the city including 30 volunteers, 900 children and 1,000 participants in various events, each year. The vision of a city with world class urban greenspace relies upon the connection between sites and upon ease of navigation between them. When this proposed connection is made Ludwell, Northbrook and Riverside would offer over 100 hectares of stunning greenspace in the heart of the city.

Riverside boasts a high profile, hundreds of thousands of annual visitors, and benefits from easy access from the city centre, Quayside and leisure offers at Haven Banks. DWT and ECC have identified this as the best location for establishing facilities to attract visitors from outside of the city. Although discussions about visitor facilities at Riverside are in the early stages this is an important part of our overall vision for the area. To complement this offer the Northbrook Approach site has the potential to provide a hub for local communities to access and enjoy both Ludwell and Riverside, and a strong link between these greenspaces.

6. Communities

When the Council announced proposals to dispose of the Northbrook Approach site there was a significant groundswell of support from local people to keep the site in public use and to retain the character of the area, including its value as a green corridor.

This site presents a tremendous opportunity for involving local people right from the outset – communities have already made their voices heard and they will be provided with meaningful engagement in developing the next chapter in the story of the future of the site.

Following the decision to close the golf course, local people have already started to discuss a variety of ideas for the site. We propose to work together to consider these ideas and to find common ground that will unite people in developing plans which have a firm foundation in community support. DWT will involve a diverse range of communities in supporting the Valley Parks and these initial proposals for the Northbrook Approach site are an ideal opportunity to involve people at every step in the process with ideas, decisions and the ongoing development of the site. Communities on the doorstep include:

- Residents in the Priory, St Loyes and Alphington wards (which includes several different residential communities)
- Millbrook Village (a brand new retirement community), right next to the site
- Five mainstream and two special schools in close proximity to the site
- Wonford residents and users of the Wonford Community and Learning Centre
- Volunteer groups such as Ludwell Life, Wonford Planters and the local Good Gym.

Opportunities to engage communities at Northbrook Approach include:

- A full programme of engagement and involvement in shaping plans for the site (and the wider landscape beyond). People would be invited to join us in sharing ideas, in workshops, walks, talks, focus groups and surveys to develop consensus around how people want to use the site and how it should be developed;
- A co-creative process throughout the development of the site, where people can get involved in digging, planting, sowing and making onsite;
- An ongoing volunteer programme to enhance the site, and to survey and monitor its biodiversity, as well as further opportunities within Riverside and Ludwell, further around the Valley Parks and wider city (see 7 below);
- The future site itself will be designed to be engaging, with opportunities to interact with wildlife, for example picking fruit, climbing a tree log, sitting amongst wildflowers listening to bees and birdsong, and stream and pond dipping;
- Build on the consultation already carried out to produce the Riverside and Ludwell Masterplan, and update this with input from communities considering the role of the Northbrook Approach site and wider landscape context today.



DWT talking to communities at Mincinglake in 2017

7. Visitor hub

The vision DWT shared with ECC early on for the Valley Parks incorporated an ambition to provide first class visitor facilities at Riverside, to enhance accessibility and visitor experience at Ludwell and to link these two incredible greenspaces. These aims are rooted in the 2016 Masterplan for Riverside and Ludwell, which considered potential connections between the two sites, and identified the need for visitor hubs at both Riverside and Ludwell.

Our organisations have been discussing the concept of visitor facilities at Riverside over the past couple of years. The key driver for this is the huge potential at Riverside to draw visitors from around the city as well as beyond, to connect with the nearby historic Quayside and activity hub at Haven Banks, and to open up the Riverside Valley Park as a flagship greenspace for natural activity and leisure. Refreshment facilities at Bromham's Farm Field would enable visitors to stay longer and do more in this special place, and we would provide trails, leisure facilities, natural play and opportunities for outdoor pursuits on and around an enhanced wetland site on the Exe River and Canal banks. We would aim for around 100,000 visitors each year. We are starting to work together with to tackle some of the constraints at the site and we need to start talking to stakeholders more widely to progress our ambitions into a set of plans for fundraising and delivery.

Nearby Ludwell, the largest of the Valley Parks now under DWT management, is also constrained by lack of parking space and facilities. We have considered options to alleviate this (including the potential to use some disused space at Pynes Hill Court which is currently under long lease from the Council to an insurance firm).



Existing infrastructure at Northbrook Approach

Northbrook Approach is an ideal site located between the major greenspaces to consult people, to develop activities and to test and trial approaches – involving communities every step of the way. By developing facilities and opportunities for people to enjoy and benefit at an early stage, we can establish a strong connection between the two parks to help us to develop plans for the site, as well as the wider landscape beyond including Riverside and Ludwell.

The building (c50m²) and built area includes toilets, basic catering facilities, space large enough for groups, parking for up to 40 cars and cycle racks. As it stands the building could provide a temporary **Ideas and Learning Hub** for the following:

- *Consultation and engagement* on plans for the site itself (with reference to Riverside, Ludwell and the other Valley Parks, including our proposals for visitor facilities at Ludwell and Riverside)
- *Activities, workshops and information* aimed at local people – for example a base for an Open Day event one day, a drop in space to provide information on ash-dieback on another, and a stopping point with maps and trails linking sites
- *Learning activities* to include a temporary ‘lab’ for schools and groups (in conjunction with a parks visit) and training and workshops for adults
- *Volunteering base* for volunteers to meet, to start activities and for training, as DWT develops a volunteer programme
- *Community use* – a programme suggested by community members and which may for example include a regular café.



Spaces for information, learning and community

8. Our proposal

The Northbrook Approach site presents a fantastic opportunity to establish, enhance and safeguard a crucial natural infrastructure corridor in the city. Northbrook Approach holds the key to unlocking the greatest potential of the two largest Valley Parks, Riverside and Ludwell. With these two greenspaces under DWT management and with discussions underway between ECC and DWT about proposals for visitor facilities at Riverside, this is a perfect opportunity to work together to develop a proposal for the future of this strategically crucial site.

In summary, we propose to work in partnership to engage a diverse range of communities and stakeholders in the local area about the potential for the site as a Wild Arboretum and a community space. We will consider the site in the context of wider opportunities and proposals for the Riverside and Ludwell area and our discussions will inform our ongoing plans in the wider area. We are keen to hear people's ideas, to start a meaningful dialogue that will go on shaping projects into the future, and to get people involved right from the outset.