

## **-REPORT TO EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE & PLANNING MEMBER WORKING GROUP**

**Date of Meeting: 24<sup>th</sup> November 2015 (PMWG) & 9<sup>th</sup> February 2016 (ExCo)**

**Report of: Assistant Director City Development and Assistant Director Public Realm**

**Title: Master Plan for Riverside & Ludwell Valley Parks 2016-2026**

### **Is this a Key Decision?**

Yes

### **Is this an Executive or Council Function?**

Executive

### **1. What is the report about?**

This report summarises the main projects and recommendations from a draft Master Plan for the Riverside & Ludwell Valley Parks for the period 2016-2026. A copy of the draft Master Plan is available in the Members' Room. The production of the Master Plan has been managed by Simon Bates, Green Infrastructure Project Manager for the Growth Point Team, and championed by Cllr Keith Owen through a multi-agency Task & Finish Group.

The main goal of the Master Plan is to set out a 10 year investment plan for these two Parks, to be funded principally from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). The investment plan needs to be endorsed by Executive Committee and the Joint Habitats Committee before funding, collected via developer contributions, can be allocated.

Fundamentally, the Master Plan sets out where new areas of public recreational space can be created, and where improvements to existing space can be made, for example through planting orchards or providing shelter. The plan also addresses other aspects, such as the quality of 'gateways' into the Parks, interpretation of heritage and wildlife, navigation, notice of Park events, and the use of art to increase socialising in under utilised spaces. The projects have a set of priorities and indicative budgets which are set out at Appendix A.

### **2. Recommendations:**

That Executive Committee approves:

- 2.1 The draft Master Plan;
- 2.2 The prioritisation and indicative budget for the purposes of allocating money collected via CIL for Habitats Regulations mitigation (as set out at Appendix A).

### **3. Reasons for the recommendation:**

The need for this plan is driven largely by housing growth. The resulting increase in population has an indirect impact on the Exe Estuary, which is a protected European wildlife site. This impact has to be mitigated in order for the Core Strategy and Development Plan Documents to be compliant with the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 (The Habitats Regulations).

One of the elements of the mitigation strategy is the enhancement of 'Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace' (SANGS). The Council has identified the Riverside and Ludwell Valley

Parks for this purpose. We need to make the Parks more attractive for people, particularly those walking dogs, thus taking pressure off the estuary and its wild bird populations.

The potential of the two Parks to function as SANGS was identified in the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy (June 2014). Policy DD31 in the Development Delivery Development Plan Document (DPD, Publication Version July 2015) protects European wildlife sites from adverse impact and states that “development will, where relevant, be required to contribute towards measures to mitigate against adverse impacts”. In the supporting text to policy DD31 (section 8.14), the DPD states that SANGS will be shown on the Proposals Map. This gives the Council flexibility to demonstrate, through the master plan and the associated visitor surveys, that the two Parks can provide the necessary new and enhanced public open space. Further automated visitor counts, to be undertaken between February and July 2016, will confirm the ability of the Parks to absorb more visitors. However, should there be a shortfall in space, the Council has also identified Mincinglake Valley Park as a potential SANGS.

The master plan lists projects that will meet the requirements of a SANGS, ranging from purchase of land for new publically accessible open space, to provision of information on where people can walk. The projects have an indicative budget (Appendix A), and are prioritised. Once the master plan has been approved by Executive Committee, it will need to be approved by the Habitat Regulations Joint Committee in early 2016 before funding can be allocated. At that stage, detailed project design can proceed.

For more information on the Council's approach to European site mitigation, members should refer to the report to Executive Committee from 7<sup>th</sup> October 2014 (Item 14: Strategy and Governance for European Site Development Impact Mitigation).

Members should also note the content of the report entitled 'South East Devon Joint Habitats Mitigation Executive Committee' which sets out the composition and remit of the Joint Habitats Committee. Members will note that this report is also on the Executive Agenda for determination on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2016.

Whilst the priority of the master plan is to deliver new and enhanced public access, there are additional objectives for raising the quality of both Parks. It is hoped that money flowing from the Habitats Regulations budget can be matched with grant e.g. from Heritage Lottery Fund, to deliver these broader objectives.

#### **4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources**

Project funding will flow from the Community Infrastructure Levy. Approximately 8% of CIL receipts are to be spent mitigating the recreational impacts arising from new development on European protected sites. This is approximately £2 million in total, of which approximately £1 million is for delivering SANGS in the Riverside & Ludwell Valley Parks. The remainder is for delivering mitigation on the European wildlife sites. However, the Council also intends to spend CIL money on public realm enhancements, unless alternative contributions can be found. Some of the projects set out in the master plan fit into this category.

Members should note that this money will not be available immediately, but will slowly build up over the next 10 years as development CIL receipts are collected.

Whilst the detailed project design can be managed by the Growth Point Team, the input of the Public Realm and City Development teams in the Council will be essential. Furthermore, specific projects will need to be delivered by officers from both teams. Whilst some projects are about park management, others will require planning permission. The input of

communications staff will be desirable to achieve high quality digital and published information about the Parks, and on-site interpretation.

## 5. Section 151 Officer comments

The funds from CIL, which are to be set aside for habitat mitigation, will be held in a separate account on the Council's Balance Sheet. There are no specific requests for additional resources arising from this report.

## 6. What are the legal aspects?

It is a statutory requirement under the provisions of the Habitats Regulations 2010 for the Council to mitigate the impact of new development on protected sites as set out in (3) above.

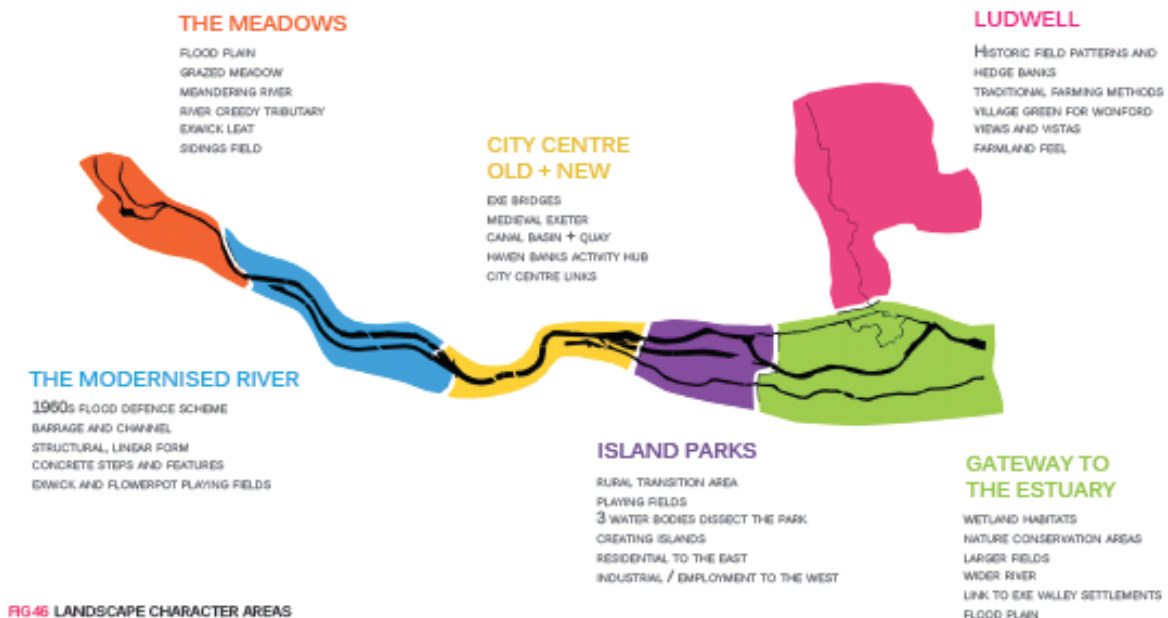
## 7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

This report raises no issues for the Monitoring Officer

## 8. Report details:

The Master Plan is attached to the agenda on the Committee pages of the web site.

A summary of the highest priority projects and estimated costs are listed below. Headings refer to the six character zones identified in Fig 46 of the master plan – see below.



## **THE MEADOWS**

### NEW CYCLE CONNECTION

This is a key part of a much larger project to improve the recreational and commuter cycle connection between Exeter and Tiverton/Crediton. It is anticipated that this project would be eligible for Habitats Regulations CIL funding, since this would be a shared use trail, and would create new public access to the north of the city, taking people away from the sensitive European wildlife sites.

£285k-£350k

## **THE MODERNISED RIVER**

### EXE RIVER ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS

The Exe River is currently poorly accessed in The Modernised River section of the site. Many people walk along the flood defence scheme but do not visit the upper bank, which has some pleasant views to woodland across the river by the railway line and gives a chance for rest and contemplation. This proposal suggests improving the walkway through the wooded area, and creating some stopping platforms that enable people to experience the natural River Exe, in contrast to the flood relief channel. Careful tree planting and species selection can also improve the space for wildlife.

It is anticipated that this project would be eligible for Habitats Regulations CIL funding.

£12k – £15k

## **OLD + NEW CITY CENTRE**

There are no high priority projects in this section but substantial changes will result from the second phase of the flood defence scheme.

## **ISLAND PARKS**

### BROMHAM FARM HUB

The 'Bromham Farm Hub' is envisaged as the primary entrance to the parks from the south west. This hub would connect with the Marsh Barton proposed train station, providing sustainable transport access to the parks, for users such as school groups or tourists from the primary Exeter stations. It may also encourage regular commuters to enjoy the park. Improved facilities at the Bromham Farm changing rooms could provide toilets and refreshments, bike and canoe hire, education classroom, as well as the opportunity for rentable spaces for exhibitions or exercise classes. Car parking will be brought to the western side of the canal to alleviate pressure on the Clapperbrook Swing Bridge and create a quieter entry.

It is expected that the cost of improvements to car parking would be eligible for Habitat Regulation CIL funds, but the remainder would have to be sourced elsewhere.

£48k-£123k

## **GATEWAY TO THE ESTUARY**

### FORMAL ACCESS TO ALPHINBROOK, INCLUDING HABITAT CREATION

20 hectares of the Alphinbrook is currently owned and managed by the Environment Agency for flood control, but new access could be provided. It is envisaged that the key access will be through the back of Grace Field, so as to provide a sustainable transport connection from the new Marsh Barton Railway Station. Further foot access can be provided across Double Locks and from Bridge Road, although these will be secondary access points. By enhancing the wetland meadow habitat, providing information, signage and screening, this area can be enhanced for wildlife and for dog walkers. It is anticipated that this project would be eligible for Habitats Regulations CIL funding.

£200k – £300k

### NORTHBROOK HUB

The master plan seeks to improve accessibility to the Parks, and this is not only via sustainable means such as foot, rail and cycle connections, but also via car. Northbrook Golf Course Club House is currently underused, and only open in summer. This Exeter City Council resource is currently let to a private leisure provider, but we should try to enhance this as a key landing pad for both the Riverside Park and Ludwell, through negotiation.

£21k – £60k

### NORTHBROOK CONNECTION + PROMENADE

The Northbrook Hub scheme would be complemented by an improved access route along the North Brook, to enhance the connection between Ludwell and Riverside. This route would be suitable for cyclists and pedestrians. If public access and conservation of the Paper Mill can be achieved, it could be a destination at the other end of this route. This project would also consider the crossing of Topsham Road, as Topsham Road is a key barrier between the two green spaces. It is anticipated that this project would be eligible for Habitats Regulations CIL funding.

£62k – £71k

## **LUDWELL**

### NEW HUB AT PYNES HILL AND WONFORD

By supporting the growth of a community hub at Wonford, and renovating and enhancing the existing facilities, the centre can act as a launch pad for visitors to Ludwell Valley. Improved signage for car parking, information about history, routes and wildlife interest will invite people into the Valley Park and act as a facilities base with toilets, parking and shelter. At Pynes Hill, a new 50 space car park, designed to be low impact, with orchard tree planting, wildflowers and pop-up cafe, provides a new hub. It is anticipated that some of the costs of this project would be eligible for Habitats Regulations CIL funding. The Council has allocated £250,000 for the Wonford Inclusive Sports Hub from developer contributions.

£30k (Pynes Hill car park and signs only)

### NEW FOOTPATHS AND ASSOCIATED SIGNAGE, AND MAINTENANCE

This project will improve circulation around the Ludwell Valley, introducing people to under visited areas. Some muddy paths will be surfaced, and signage and navigation improved using both digital technology and conventional interventions. Looped walks that start and finish at access points and offer reasonable terrain for a variety of users to enjoy are proposed. Creating routes that follow contours will help to disperse people around the site. It is anticipated that this project would be eligible for Habitats Regulations CIL funding.

£200k – £300k

#### LAND PURCHASE

10 hectares of land at Ludwell are currently in private ownership, although two private fields are managed by Exeter City Council to improve biodiversity. If Exeter City Council were to purchase these fields and covenant them as public open space, this would guarantee public access in perpetuity. These fields are protected from development by policies LS1 and CP16. This project would be eligible for Habitats Regulations CIL funding.

£220k – £250k

### **9. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?**

By investing capital in new assets that can generate revenue, and focusing on low maintenance Park management, the plan addresses the corporate priority to reduce operating costs.

There are some recommendations on the provision of new car parks, which therefore have implications for the new Parking Strategy and Action Plan. Given that the river and canal forms the backbone of the Riverside Valley Park, the plan also contributes to the development of a new Waterways Partnership for Exeter to steer the future of Exeter's waterways.

### **10. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?**

The main risk is that the Council cannot demonstrate that there is capacity in the two Parks to absorb greater numbers of visitors without affecting the experience of existing visitors, which might cause them to visit the sensitive European wildlife sites as a replacement. This would have the perverse affect of negating the purpose and function of the two Parks as SANGS. Whilst new data on visitor numbers needs to be collected and analysed in the first half of 2016, our experts (Footprint Ecology) have advised that visitor capacity should not be a problem. This is because the master plan identifies new parcels of land for public access, as well as enhancing areas with existing access.

However, should the visitor analysis highlight a shortfall in visitor capacity, the Council would have to seek additional land for new, or enhanced public access. The main candidate would be Mincinglake Valley Park, which has potential as a SANGS identified in the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy. To reduce this risk, the Council's planning and public realm officers should start to draft a plan for Mincinglake Valley Park, and install visitor counters, in early 2016.

### **11. What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?**

The master plan has consulted young people and those from deprived areas of the city in formulating the proposals. At detailed project design stage, providing for equality and diversity will be a key element.

**12. Are there any other options?**

The Council needs to find SANGS, and there is existing capacity within the Valley Parks of Riverside, Ludwell and Mincinglake, combined. However, further housing need may require the Council to look for additional SANGS, which might be existing Valley Parks, or invest CIL in new SANGS proposed for the Clyst Valley Regional Park or SW Exeter.

**Assistant Director City Development**

**Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)**

**Background papers used in compiling this report:-**

None

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