

**CORPORATE LEADERSHIP TEAM'S  
REPORT TO CABINET**

**18<sup>th</sup> MARCH 2025**

**Report Title:** Proposed Creation of Lyme Park Countryside Park

**Submitted by:** Service Director Sustainable Environment

**Portfolios:** Sustainable Environment / Strategic Planning

**Ward(s) affected:** Keele / Silverdale

<b><u>Purpose of the Report</u></b>	<b><u>Key Decision</u></b> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
To outline the opportunity to create a Countryside Park on land at Keele for the benefit of residents and visitors to the Borough.	
<b><u>Recommendation</u></b>	
That Cabinet: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Approves the development of a Countryside Park on land at Keele,</li><li>• Implement the action detailed in the report to progress the project.</li><li>• Delegates to the Portfolio holder for Sustainable Environment to work with Officers on those action and report back to Cabinet.</li></ul>	
<b><u>Reasons</u></b>	
The opportunity to create a new Countryside Park for the Boroughs residents is an exciting piece of work and will help in protecting the Boroughs green spaces and biodiversity infrastructure.	

**1. Background**

**1.1** The former golf course at Keele closed in 2012, and since then has been left to effectively grow 'wild'. Some light touch maintenance work has been undertaken by the Council, and a licence has been granted to a local farmer to cut grass for silage a couple of times a year.

**1.2** This low intervention management of the site has benefitted its biodiversity value and it remains in good overall condition, being popular with residents for walking and enjoying access to nature. Regular inspections take place for the well established mature trees and woodlands on the site, and remediation works are undertaken on any which pose a risk to safety. There have been some localised issues with drainage which caused some local flooding, which might require some further investigation, but the water bodies on site provide an additional habitat and increase its biodiversity.

**1.3** In the creation of the Council's draft Local Plan, the former golf course site has been allocated in part for housing, a school, and a medical facility with the

remaining land, some 66% of the original golf course, to be retained as a countryside park. The two Parish Councils, Keele and Silverdale are broadly supportive of this approach. The Local Plan has now been submitted to the Secretary of State with an independent Planning Inspector appointed to undertake an examination of its contents this year. In formulating ideas about the nature of the countryside park, it will be important to understand and take account of the potential relationship with adjoining existing and proposed new development.

- 1.4 In celebration of the 850 years since the borough received its Royal Charter in 1173, 850 lime trees were planted on the north boundary of the site in 2023, creating a Lyme Forest. A further 1800 native broadleaf trees were also planted to enhance biodiversity, add to the woodland cover and increase the carbon capture capability of the site.
- 1.5 The Council is now developing proposals for creating a Countryside Park on the land not allocated for built development in the draft Local Plan, utilising the undeveloped open space and woodland areas. A working group has been set up chaired by the Portfolio Holder including relevant officers to undertake this work.
- 1.6 Formal accreditation as a country park requires the following essential criteria to be met:
  - Be at least 10 hectares in size.
  - Has a clearly defined boundary, which is marked on map, whether it is open or fenced in
  - Is accessible, less than 10 miles from a residential area.
  - Is free to enter.
  - Is inclusive and accessible and would meet equality and disability needs.
  - Needs to be predominantly natural or semi natural landscape, for example woodland, grassland, wetland, heathland, or parkland, with no more than 5% of the area built upon (excluding car parks)
  - Is signposted and is easy to navigate, needs to show visitors where they can go, what they can do, and direct them along footpaths, bridleways and cycle routes.
  - Needs to be visibly staffed to carry out tasks such as litter collection and maintenance.
  - Needs to be available for public or educational events.
  - Needs to be near public toilets, either on site or a 2-minute walk away
  - Needs to be informed by the local community, the public should have some influence over the management and development of the site.

Although this site may not meet all such requirements to the threshold for formal designation as a Country Park, it is intended to apply the above principles wherever possible, to create a community asset for Borough residents and visitors to enjoy.

## 2. Issues

- 2.1 There are several actions the working group will progress. Firstly, a review of the requirements to formally designate an area as a Country Park, through

analysis of guidance provided by UK Government ([Get accreditation for country park you manage in England – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)) Work also needs to be undertaken to establish initial improvement costs, ongoing management and maintenance models and costs, and integration with the existing and proposed residential development.

- 2.2** Exploration of the potential appetite and role for community and/or VCSE sector organisations to be involved and engaged in developing plans and scoping future management and maintenance arrangements will be considered. The feasibility of working with the respective Parish Councils, Groundwork Trust and Staffordshire Wildlife Trust (SWT) will also be scoped.
- 2.3** Establish the basis for funding the development of the country park and its ongoing maintenance. As part of this it will be important to understand the relationship between the park and land may be sold to facilitate the housing and associated community infrastructure as proposed in the draft Local Plan.
- 2.4** In addition to Council funding and/or via routes linked to land sales/the planning process, external funding to support the countryside park may be possible from the National Lottery scheme / National Trust /Natural England, who are working together to provide funding for local authorities to increase the number of accessible green spaces for citizens. Further funding could be provided by Woodland Trust schemes. As plans develop there may be costs associated with the need to employ an ecologist to help with, ecological surveys and a subsequent management plan to ensure the site maximises biodiversity value.
- 2.5** Initial set up costs for the park could be relatively low, as it already contains clearings, paths, copses, hedges, and grassland areas. These would be further enhanced over time and align with the Councils Grassland and Tree Management strategies. As detailed proposals are refined, costings can be developed for any features which are required to ensure that the site reaches the standard required for a Country Park, whether or not it is formally designated.
- 2.6** In summary, the vision is to create a community asset which is accessible to Borough residents and visitors and free at the point of entry. It will be a countryside park, where the existing, well-developed semi-natural green space sits alongside areas of residential development which are designed to integrate with the landscape and mature tree cover, and which are interconnected via the existing footpath network on the site. Further tree planting and grassland enhancement will be undertaken to increase the carbon capture capacity of the park, and a management plan will be developed to maximise biodiversity value. A range of bespoke signage will be designed and installed to create a brand for the site, including links to web and social media pages to help promote it to the public. Access improvements will be undertaken at the key public access points, both pedestrian and vehicle, and other appropriate facilities such as car parking will be provided. Maintenance will be designed to remain light touch and to encourage a varied and biodiverse landscape, whilst controlling invasive species and ensuring public safety. Opportunities for public involvement in the site will be developed, including activities such as wildlife surveys, pond dipping, environmental craft (hedge laying, meadow scything etc) and wildlife/tree trails.

### 3. **Recommendation**

That Cabinet:

- Approves the development of a Countryside Park on land at Keele,
- Implement the action detailed in the report to progress the project.
- Delegates to the Portfolio holder for Sustainable Environment to work with Officers on those action and report back to Cabinet.

### 4. **Reasons**

- 4.1 The opportunity to create a new Countryside Park for the Boroughs residents is an exciting piece of work and will help in protecting the Boroughs green spaces and biodiversity infrastructure.

### 5. **Options Considered**

- 5.1 Development of a countryside park for the benefit of residents and visitors and adhering to the principles of the formal designation.

### 6. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

- 6.1 There are no legal and statutory implications at this stage of the project however as the project moves forward implications around planning and formal accreditation will pay heed to appropriate legislation and guidance.

### 7. **Equality Impact Assessment**

- 7.1 There are no equality issues identified as part of this initial report. However, in developing detailed proposals for a Countryside Park, a full equality impact assessment will be required.

### 8. **Financial and Resource Implications**

- 8.1 There are no financial implications with this report at this stage. There are resource implications in officer time with the working group, and any research and development emanating from the workstreams the group agree on.
- 8.2 As the project develops financial and further resource implications will evolve and will be reported through the usual channels.

### 9. **Major Risks & Mitigation**

- 9.1 No major risks have been identified at this stage.

### 10. **UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG)**

The protection of this area of open space and potential development of a Country Park supports the Councils Sustainable Environment Strategy, and associated Biodiversity and Adaptation plans.



## 11. One Council

Please confirm that consideration has been given to the following programmes of work:

One Commercial Council

*We will make investment to diversify our income and think entrepreneurially*

One Digital Council

*We will deliver on our commitments to a net zero future and make all decisions with sustainability as a driving principle*

One Green Council

*We will develop and implement a digital approach which makes it easy for all residents and businesses to engage with the Council, with our customers at the heart of every interaction.*

The creation of a Countryside Park on the former Keele Golf course contributes positively to the Councils open space and green infrastructure strategies, and the ongoing development of the Council's Sustainable Environment Strategy.

## 12. Key Decision Information

12.1 This is not a key decision at this stage.

## 13. Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions

13.1 None

## 14. List of Appendices

14.1 Appendix 1 – Lyme Park – Proposed site plan

## 15. Background Papers

15.1 None

# Appendix 1

Masterplan Strategic Plan

