

# Taunton Deane Borough Council

## Full Council – 10 April 2018

### Acquisition of land near Nerrols Farm, Taunton as a Country Park

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Roger Habgood

**Report Author: Nick Bryant, Planning Policy Manager (to be presented by Councillor Norman Cavill – West Monkton Councillor and Project Champion)**

#### **1 Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report**

- 1.1 The establishment of a country park near Nerrols Farm has been an aspiration of the Council for some time having been included as part of the adopted Core Strategy in 2012. The proposed site is currently owned by the Crown Estate and leased to a local farmer.
- 1.2 West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine Parish Councils have recently produced a joint Neighbourhood plan which includes an aspiration to oversee the establishment and management of the Country Park. This plan will go to referendum shortly.
- 1.3 The establishment of a country park forms an important component of the Council's Garden Town status and adopted Green Infrastructure Strategy. The finished project would consist of a Community woodland/Country Park which could be utilised as an asset for new community forest school being established as part of the wider Monkton Heathfield development. The location of the park is important in the continuing development of Monkton Heathfield as it provides links east to west to the development currently being developed at Nerrols Farm and the allocated development site to the west of Greenway.
- 1.4 Once built the Western Relief Road and re-alignment of the A3259 will provide much safer crossing points and allow easier pedestrian links north and south. A Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) link could follow along the southern boundary of the site. This could also make provision for a cycle lane.
- 1.5 Members of the Council's Community Scrutiny Committee voted to support the purchase of the land and development of the Country Park in October 2017. A planning application (08/17/0044) was made by Taunton Deane Borough Council and approved for the change of use of the land from agricultural to recreational uses on 11 January 2018.
- 1.6 Since this meeting officers, the Project Champion, and our retained consultant have been working with the Valuation Office Agency, other stakeholders and the Crown to take forward proposals, including negotiating a purchase price for the land. The Parish Councils of West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine have indicated a willingness to

assume maintenance responsibility for the completed project.

- 1.7 Funding of the project would need to come from a variety of sources. The majority of the funding is likely to come from New Homes Bonus. West Monkton Parish Council have agreed in-principle to a contribution towards the project costs, the remaining cost could be met from a combination of grant funding although Taunton Deane would need to underwrite the funding gap in the event these bids were unsuccessful.
- 1.8 Subject to Full Council approval; the Council's consultant will continue to lead on project delivery with input from the Planning Policy, colleagues in Finance, Asset Management, Legal Services provided through Shape, and Leisure and Recreation. Councillor Cavill as a local member and key stakeholder has agreed to act as member champion for the project. An important aspect of the project is that local community are involved from an early stage. The community engagement will be undertaken through a 'planning for real' type approach with input from landscape and biodiversity specialists. Negotiations with the Crown will be progressed with a view to planting being carried out in 2019.

## 2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- 2.1.1 Approve the purchase of land near Nerrols Farm (subject to the total cost of the land acquisition not exceeding the anticipated amount as outlined in confidential Appendix C).
- 2.1.2 Agree in principle to passing on responsibility for ongoing maintenance of the Country Park on completion to West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine Parish Councils.

## 3 Risk Assessment (if appropriate)

### Risk Matrix

Description	Likelihood	Impact	Overall
That the capital costs for the project cannot be at least in part recovered.	3	4	12
Mitigation: Retained consultants to prepare and submit for Heritage Lottery funding. Country Stewardship fund/or Viridor and any other opportunities.	1	4	4

### Risk Scoring Matrix

Likelihood	5	Almost Certain	Low (5)	Medium (10)	High (15)	Very High (20)	Very High (25)
	4	Likely	Low (4)	Medium (8)	Medium (12)	High (16)	Very High (20)

	3	Possible	Low (3)	Low (6)	Medium (9)	Medium (12)	High (15)
	2	Unlikely	Low (2)	Low (4)	Low (6)	Medium (8)	Medium (10)
	1	Rare	Low (1)	Low (2)	Low (3)	Low (4)	Low (5)
			1	2	3	4	5
			Negligible	Minor	Moderate	Major	Catastrophic
<b>Impact</b>							

Likelihood of risk occurring	Indicator	Description (chance of occurrence)
1. Very Unlikely	May occur in exceptional circumstances	< 10%
2. Slight	Is unlikely to, but could occur at some time	10 – 25%
3. Feasible	Fairly likely to occur at same time	25 – 50%
4. Likely	Likely to occur within the next 1-2 years, or occurs occasionally	50 – 75%
5. Very Likely	Regular occurrence (daily / weekly / monthly)	> 75%

## 4 Background and Full details of the Report

- 4.1 The establishment of a country park near Nerrols Farm has been an aspiration of the Council for some time having been included as part of the adopted Core Strategy in 2012 (Policy SS1). Location map of the country park and a map showing the area in the wider context are included at Appendix A. The country park forms an important part of a wider development at Monkton Heathfield. It will add a key link to the 'Green Necklace' of landscape and public open space being developed as part of the major development at Monkton Heathfield.
- 4.2 The country park will be a key component of promoting the Borough's Garden Town status and updated Green Infrastructure Strategy. It will provide important green links from the planned garden community to the east (Monkton Heathfield) and west (Nerrols) as well as a north/south route improving connections with Hestercombe House and the Quantock Hills AONB and the Taunton urban area. It will be linked via footpaths and cycleways and encourage greater use of pedestrian and cycle routes. Located in proximity to the town's water ways, and linking the town to the countryside, it will play a critical role as an ecological corridor and could also be designed to contribute to natural flood management. The project was highlighted as a priority in our new Green Infrastructure Strategy. (Please find extract in Appendix 2 of this report).
- 4.3 Members of the Council's Community Scrutiny Committee were asked to consider supporting this project in principle in October 2017. They unanimously recommended the project to be taken forward. The remainder of this report outlines what happens next and how the Council can deliver the Country Park with partners.
- 4.4 West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine Parish Councils have recently produced a joint Neighbourhood Plan which will go forward to referendum shortly, if successful the plan is likely to be adopted as part of the statutory development plan for the area. The

Neighbourhood Plan includes an aspiration to oversee the establishment and management of the Country Park.

- 4.5 A number of key stakeholders have been identified and are committed to the success of the project. These include: West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine Parish Councils who, as their role as the parish representatives, have good connections with local schools and community groups, Taunton Deane BC who have promoted the idea of a strategic country park through the Local Plan and Monkton Heathfield Development Plan. Somerset County Council who are responsible for highways and the potential Bus Rapid Transport service and the promotion of cycle and safe ways to school. Somerset Wildlife Trust have been supportive of the importance of the Country Park and GI Strategy and its potential link to wildlife and local communities. Major house builders in the area; Monkton Heathfield Consortium which includes Persimmon Homes and Redrow Homes are supportive in principle.
- 4.6 A key to the long term success of the project will be that the local community are involved from an early stage in the master planning of the design and implementation of the project. It is, therefore, proposed that the community engagement is undertaken through a 'planning for real' type approach with input from landscape and biodiversity specialists.
- 4.7 Planning for Real is a nationally recognised community planning process based on a 3D model. The process allows participants to register their views on a range of issues, to work together to identify priorities, and in partnership with local agencies to go on to develop an action plan for change. There will, also, be opportunities for school and community involvement in tree and shrub planting. The overall project will be overseen by the landscape contractor and landscape designer.
- 4.8 The finished project would consist of a community woodland/country park which could be utilised as an asset for new community forest school being established as part of the wider Monkton Heathfield development. The location of the site is important in the continuing development of the Monkton Heathfield extension as it provides links to the recent Nerrols development and the future west of Greenway development. There is a scope for close working with the Conquest Riding School who are hoping to establish a riding school on the land to the north of the Country Park.
- 4.9 The Country Park links east to west to the site currently being developed by David Wilson homes at Nerrols Farm and the allocated development site to the west of Greenway. Once built the Western Relief Road and re-alignment of the A3259 will provide much safer crossing points and allow easier pedestrian links north and south. There is also potential public transport improvements along the A3258 to provide better links between Monkton Heathfield and Taunton Town Centre. Irrespective, the southern edge of the park will provide an ideal location for a footpath and cycle routes linking the two communities across the Green Wedge providing safe routes to school as well as linking the site within the wider GI network for the area.
- 4.10 The land proposed for creation of a strategic country park is owned by the Crown Estate and leased to a local farmer. Discussions have taken place with the Crown Estate who have confirmed that they would be willing to sell to the Council subject to

agreeing terms. The Council have commissioned a land agent to negotiate the purchase of the land on behalf of the Council. The Valuation Office Agency is negotiating with the Crown to agree a price for the purchase of the land which will also include a compensation payment to the farmer for termination of his tenancy. A breakdown of anticipated project costs is included at Appendix C.

- 4.11 To release the tenancy there must be a change of land use from agriculture to amenity which will have to be prepared as part of any new agreement. A decision of conditional approval (08/17/0044) was made by Taunton Deane Borough Council in January 2018 for the change use of the land from agricultural to recreational uses. The Council has three years to implement the proposed change of use.
- 4.12 The tenant will need to be compensated for any losses incurred. The Crown will agree this with the tenant so that the land can be sold as a vacant possession. Officers are currently seeking advice from Legal and Asset Management on any legal and asset management implications of the acquisition of the land as part of the land acquisition negotiations.
- 4.13 On-going programme of maintenance will be critical to the site's success as a country park/community woodland. The aspiration is that the land is leased to the Parish Councils of West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine who have indicated a willingness to assume maintenance responsibility for the completed project. In order to ensure on-going commitment to the success of the project, it is proposed that the Council would take up ownership of the land and a lease agreement to be produced by the Council and agreed with the Parish Councils. WM&CF parish councils have agreed in principle to cover the cost of on-going maintenance and management costs.
- 4.14 Funding of the project would need to come from a variety of sources. Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine Parish Councils have agreed in principle to contribute towards the purchase of the land and its ongoing maintenance. West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine Parish Councils have agreed in-principle to a contribution towards the project from their own CIL receipts.
- 4.15 The remaining cost could be met from a combination of Homes Bonus and grant funding although Taunton Deane would need to underwrite any funding gap in the event these bids were unsuccessful. Any funding gap may, subject to agreement, be available via New Homes Bonus contributions. Other potential sources of funding include grants such as Heritage Lottery and Countryside Stewardship. A 'project enquiry form' has been submitted to Heritage Lottery. If they are happy to consider an application this could provide up to £120,000 towards land purchase costs. Grant funding from Countryside Stewardship could provide approx. £70,000 towards tree planting, fencing and gates. A one off payment of £6,800/hectare is available to cover the cost of tree planting and establishment. In case the Heritage Lottery funding proves unsuccessful other sources of grant funding include Viridor which funds local landscape and biodiversity projects up to £50-£100,000 within specific catchment areas. Somerset County Council has a small improvement schemes which provides funds of up to £10,000 towards local projects.
- 4.16 The purchase and establishment of the country park/community woodland is already well underway and a number of key stakeholders have been identified and are

committed to the success of the project. Subject to Full Council approval; the Council's consultant will continue to lead on project delivery with input from the Planning Policy, colleagues in Finance, Asset Management, legal services provided through Shape and Leisure and Recreation. Negotiations with the Crown will be progressed with a view to planting being carried out in 2019.

## **5 Links to Corporate Aims / Priorities**

- 5.1 The establishment of a country park near Nerrols Farm has been an aspiration of the Council via the Local Plan since 2012 and emerged as an important component of the 'Green Necklace' as illustrated in the work undertaken on behalf of the Council by Urban Initiatives.

## **6 Finance / Resource Implications**

- 6.1 Funding may, subject to agreement, be available via New Homes Bonus contributions. West Monkton Parish Council have agreed in-principle to a contribution from their own CIL receipts. (This figure is included in Appendix C). The remaining cost could be met from a combination of grant funding although Taunton Deane would need to underwrite the funding gap in the event these bids were unsuccessful. The funding gap would need to come from New Homes Bonus contributions.
- 6.2 Potential grant funding: Heritage Lottery – grants of over £100,000 are available to non for profit charities including Local Authorities towards wildlife and landscape projects. Potential funding if application proves successful is likely to be approx. £120,000. Countryside Stewardship: A one off payment of £6,800/hectare is available to cover the cost of tree planting and establishment. This would potentially cover £70,000 towards tree planting, fencing and gates. In case the Heritage Lottery funding proves unsuccessful other sources of grant funding include Viridor which funds local landscape and biodiversity projects up to £50-£100,000 within specific catchment areas. Somerset County Council has a small improvement schemes which provides funds of up to £10,000 towards local projects.
- 6.3 Other grants – other sources of funding are available for community projects once the woodland is established via local community groups. WM&CF parish councils have agreed in principle to cover the cost of on-going maintenance and management costs. (The anticipated maintenance costs are included in Appendix C).

## **7 Legal Implications (if any)**

- 7.1 Advice is being sought from Legal Services on any legal implications of the acquisition of the land as part of the land acquisition negotiations.

## **8 Environmental Impact Implications (if any)**

- 8.1 The proposed planting and management of the land will be tailored to increase environmental benefits, such as, creating habitat for the Lesser Horseshoe Bats, resident at Hestercombe, which is likely to use the area for foraging and potentially to

create a 'leaky dam' in liaison with the EA who are keen to see water slowed as it runs-off the Quantock Hills.

## **9 Safeguarding and/or Community Safety Implications (if any)**

- 9.1 Regular assessments will be undertaken as to the safeguarding and community safety implications of the use of the land as an area of public open space. The design of the planting and pathways will consider this as one of the key criteria.

## **10 Equality and Diversity Implications (if any)**

- 10.1 The site will be promoted to the wider community via schools and the Councils websites. The surfacing and gateways where possible will be designed for all ability user access.

## **11 Social Value Implications (if any)**

- 11.1 The creation of the open space will add a key link to the 'Green Necklace' of open space being developed as part of the major development at Monkton Heathfield. It will be linked via footpaths and cycleways and open for use by local schools.

## **12 Partnership Implications (if any)**

- 12.1 West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine PCs have agreed in-principle to the managing and maintaining of the site given the importance of the site as expressed in their Neighbourhood Plan. The PCs have good links to local schools and the wider community.

## **13 Health and Wellbeing Implications (if any)**

- 13.1 The creation of the open space will add a key link to the 'Green Necklace' of open space being developed as part of the major development at Monkton Heathfield. It will be linked via footpaths and cycleways and encourage greater use of pedestrian and cycle routes linked to the Council's Green Infrastructure Strategy.

## **14 Asset Management Implications (if any)**

- 14.1 The acquisition of the land will add to the Council's asset portfolio. Asset Management colleagues will be involved in the acquisition of the site.

## **15. Consultation Implications (if any)**

- 15.1 Promotion of the site as a country park has been consulted upon through the Local Plan process. There will be further consultation opportunities for the local community and key stakeholders, potentially through a 'Planning for Real' exercise to inform the detailed design of the scheme.

## **16. Scrutiny Comments / Recommendation(s)**

- 16.1 This matter was considered in-principle by the Council's Community Scrutiny

Committee on 17 October 2017. Member supported the recommendation that:-

...the purchase of the land near to Nerrols Farm is supported subject to:

- The terms of the sale can be agreed.
- The agreed sale price can be found from within Council resources.
- That establishment costs can be, at least, partially grant funded.
- That the on-going maintenance costs are, at least, partially underwritten by the local community under the supervision of the local parish councils.
- Planning permission for the change of use has been achieved.

#### Democratic Path:

- **Scrutiny / Corporate Governance or Audit Committees / No** (delete as appropriate)
- **Cabinet/Executive –/ No** (delete as appropriate)
- **Full Council – Yes /** (delete as appropriate)

Reporting Frequency :  **Once only**    **Ad-hoc**    **Quarterly**

**Twice-yearly**    **Annually**

#### List of Appendices (delete if not applicable)

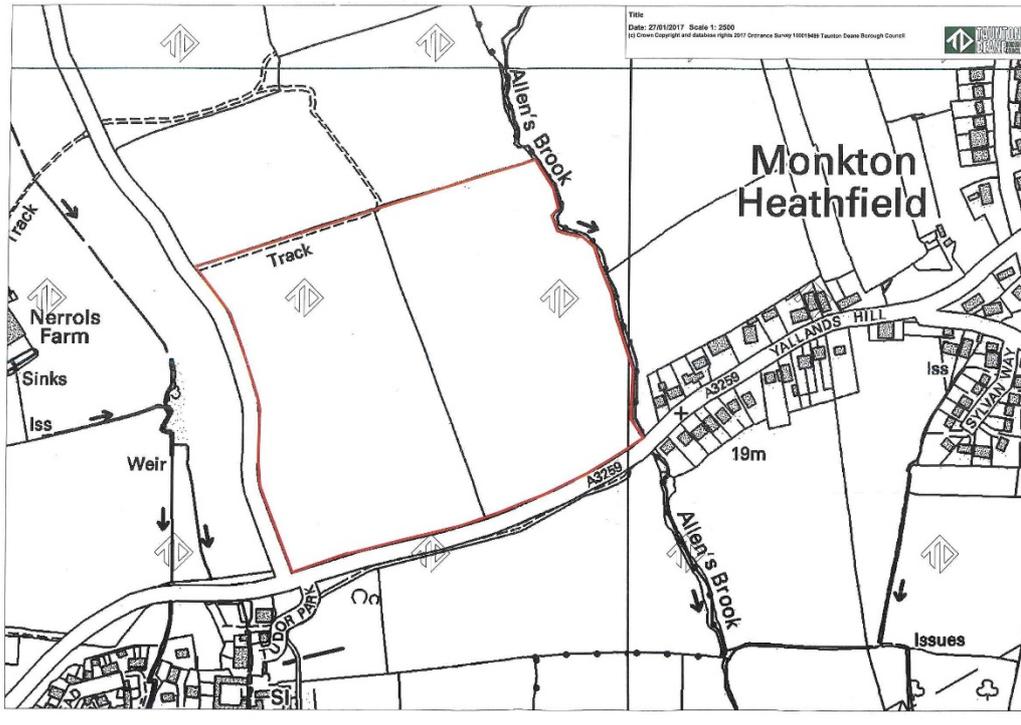
Appendix A	Map 1: Red line boundary of Country Park. Map 2: Country park in the wider context.
Appendix B	Country Park Project: Extract from GI Strategy
Appendix C	Breakdown of anticipated project costs - Confidential

#### Contact Officers

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## Appendix A

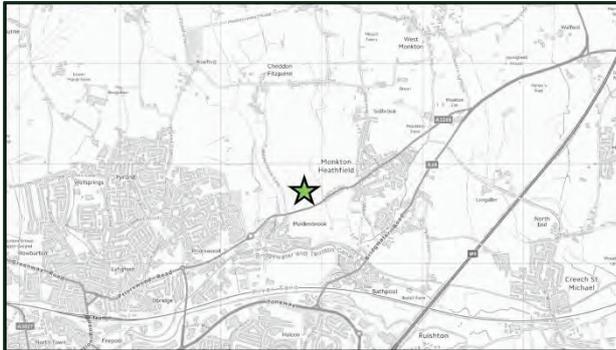


Map 1: Red line boundary of Country Park



Map 2: Country Park (circled in red) shown in the wider context

## 4. Monkton Heathfield Country Park



Looking south east from Cheddon Fitzpaine over land allocated for Monkton Heathfield Country Park.

### Project Overview

Monkton Heathfield Country Park will deliver a new strategic, informal green space to the east of the town centre within the existing Green Wedge. It will provide important green links from the planned garden community to the east (Monkton Heathfield) and west (Nerrols) as well as a north/south route improving connections with Hestercombe House and the Quantock Hills AONB and the Taunton urban area. Located in proximity to the town's water ways, and linking the town to the countryside, it will play a critical role as an ecological corridor and could also be designed to contribute to natural flood management.

### Influence of Garden Town Status

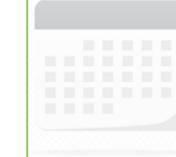
Monkton Heathfield Country Park should be a headline project, essential to the successful delivery of Taunton Garden Town. It is located in proximity to communities where health and living environment is poorer than the rest of the town, and will help reduce inequality and healthier communities, as well as a range of environmental objectives. Monkton Heathfield n Country Park is proposed adjacent to Monkton Heathfield, to serve the existing community, as well as the residents of the new urban extension. If delivered, it will help to alleviate the existing deficiency in access to a strategic recreation asset on this side of Taunton. Garden Town status should be utilised to prioritise this site for investment, from developer contributions, local businesses, and external funding sources.

### Contribution to Themes

							
Landscape	Cultural Heritage	Biodiversity	Water Resources	Active Transport	Local Awareness	Recreation & Play	Health, Wellbeing and Equality

## Potential Challenges and Risks

- Securing the significant funding needed for this project will be a challenge, however the council has sought to deliver this for many years, and securing funding via the Garden Town status and local development should be a priority.
- With permission already granted and development underway at Monkton Heathfield/Nerrols, funding through development would be dependent on further housing in this part of Taunton.
- Identification of landowners and land acquisition, plus associated legal agreements.

Timescale			Potential Costs				
			£	£	£	£	£
Quick win (next 5 years)	<b>Medium term (5-10 years)</b>	Longer term (10-20 years)	<£10,000	£10,000 to £50,000	£50,000 to £200,000	£200,000 to £500,000	<b>£500,000</b> +

Potential Partners and Funding Streams	Community and Stakeholder Engagement Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Somerset Wildlife Trust</li> <li>• Environment Agency</li> <li>• Private Developers</li> <li>• National Lottery</li> <li>• DCLG</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canals and Rivers Trust</li> <li>• Sustrans</li> <li>• Quantock Hills AONB</li> <li>• Taunton Ramblers Association</li> <li>• Parish Councils</li> <li>• Taunton Area Cycling Campaign</li> <li>• Somerset Wildlife Trust</li> <li>• Cycle Somerset</li> </ul>