

Agenda Item No: 8
Report To: Cabinet
Date: 10th March 2016



Report Title: **Victoria Park & Watercress Fields Concept Masterplan and Heritage Lottery Bid (HLF)**

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Mrs Blanford – Culture and the Environment
Report Author: Chris Dixon, Arts & Cultural Industries Manager

Summary: Members prioritised the creation of a long term Management & Masterplan for Victoria Park & Watercress Fields at its' Cabinet meeting of 4th December 2014. This report updates Members of progress and presents a draft concept masterplan (refer Appendix A) with indicative ideas for site wide improvements that starts to a) respond to the pressure of housing growth; b) creates an attractive and improved destination that boosts local civic pride and promotes wellbeing, and c) celebrates the rich heritage of the site.

The report explains the benefits of adopting the concept masterplan to encourage future engagement and investment from a range of partners that could support activities, management and maintenance for the park in the longer term. One immediate partnership opportunity is with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) which is interested in receiving an Ashford bid for their March 2016 funding round, based on refurbishment of the Grade II listed Hubert Fountain.

This report asks Members to approve the draft concept masterplan to provide the Council with a much needed indicative framework for bringing forward future refurbishment plans and timely partnership opportunities. It asks Members to note the interest from HLF and the condition of the Hubert Fountain, endorsing an application to scope, create detailed site plans, conduct public consultation and small scale engagement projects that supports the notion of a 'Fountain Zone' (refer Appendix B for concept ideas).

Key Decision: YES

Affected Wards: VICTORIA (ASHFORD)

Recommendations: **The Cabinet be asked to:-**

- i. Adopt the Victoria Park & Watercress Fields Concept Masterplan as an indicative framework to support the future planning of new development, refurbishment and timely partnership working as opportunities arise;**
- ii. Endorse a first stage application to the Heritage**

Lottery Fund with a Council contribution of up to £10K and for a further report to come forward to consider the second stage application.

Policy Overview:	Corporate Plan: Priority 3: Active & Creative Ashford <i>“Planned improvement to key public space and parks – Victoria Park”</i> Priority 4: Attractive Ashford – Environment, Countryside, Tourism & Heritage <i>“To safeguard and conserve our local heritage and areas of outstanding landscape”</i> Local Plan & Green Corridor Action Plan.
Financial Implications:	<p>The Concept Masterplan provides an indicative framework for zoning Victoria Park and Watercress Fields and each will require more detailed planning and costing in the future. Appropriate developer contributions, partnership and external funding bids will be sought in the longer term (5 to 10 years).</p> <p>The first stage development stage of the HLF application requires a contribution from the Council of £10K (using previous allocated NHB) to enable £70K from the HLF in 2016. This helps work up the scheme which initial estimates suggest could be up to £1.6m (including refurbishment of the Hubert Fountain of circa £758K. A 10% contribution is required for the second stage HLF capital stage and officers believe that this contribution (circa £160K) could be sourced from S106 and other grants which will need to be secured by Autumn of 2017.</p>
Risk Assessment	A serious risk is the continued deterioration of the Hubert Fountain (a Grade II Listed Structure) which is in need of repair and restoration and thus a key driver for the HLF bid.
Other Material Implications:	Victoria Park and Watercress Fields is a strategic park as outlined in the Local Plan and is situated adjacent to significant housing developments including the former Powergen site, Ashford market site and South Kent College, Jemmett Road plus commercial development on Victoria Way.
Background Papers:	The Visioning Exercise documents are in the Members Room for information and are available from the Lead Officer.
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Purpose of the Report

1. This report updates Members on the positive progress made on creating a concept masterplan for Victoria Park and Watercress Fields (refer Appendix A) prioritised as part of the Land Management Improvement Plan adopted in 2014.
2. An opportunity for a first stage development application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) is explained that could support timely and beneficial repairs and improvements to the Grade II Listed Hubert Fountain and surrounding area as part of creating a 'Fountain Zone' (refer Appendix B for draft concept).
3. The report asks Members to adopt the draft Victoria Park & Watercress Field's Concept Masterplan and endorse a Heritage Lottery Fund first stage application.

Background

4. Victoria Park and Watercress Fields is Ashford's largest and most central strategic urban park situated on the edge of the expanding Town Centre. Members acknowledged its importance as part of the Land Management Improvement Plan and recognised that it is a much valued open space and 'green lung' for local people. It was agreed that a clear framework is needed that helps interpret, articulate and reinforce the importance of the site and appropriately manages and reacts to investment opportunities.
5. Officers, with support from partners and an external consultant, have drafted a Concept Masterplan for the site (refer Appendix A).
6. The Grade II Listed Hubert Fountain provides a landmark entrance at Victoria Parks' key junction of path routes. As part of the masterplanning process, detailed below, its remarkable history was uncovered and its current condition surveyed. It is in much need of restoration, and surrounded by poor quality paving, degraded picnic seating and some planting which detracts from its setting.

Visioning Exercise and draft Concept Masterplan

7. In March 2015, the Council hosted a workshop with some key stakeholders to describe the site, produce a SWOT analysis, identify what work has taken place, and what people would like to achieve in the future.
8. In November 2015, local Landscape Architects Lloyd Bore were appointed to host a Victoria Park and Watercress Fields workshop with Members, officers and partners to create a zonal plan of key landscape character areas throughout the park, future uses, constraints and opportunities, management issues, events and activities.
9. This workshop, research feedback has been placed in the Members Room – *The Visioning Exercise*. It includes a full site appraisal (the context of the site, its key features and strategic position in the borough) and presents the site's priorities and proposed concept zones.

10. Following this visioning exercise a draft Victoria Park & Watercress Field's Concept Masterplan has been produced (refer Appendix A). It provides sketch plans for the site that shows potential ideas for buildings, landscaping and key features. The concept masterplan suggests a series of zonal areas including:
 - a) HERITAGE focusing on the Hubert Fountain and piazza area (the Fountain Zone);
 - b) SPORT & RECREATION encouraging physical activity through play and leisure provision;
 - c) ADVENTURE featuring more challenging activity (e.g. bike ramps and jumps);
 - d) RIVERSIDE supporting the landscape and conservation value that extends through to Watercress Fields.
11. Members are asked to note the visioning work and adopt the Victoria Park & Watercress Field's Concept Masterplan.
12. Zoning allows the Council to consider in more detail their individual management plans and improvement opportunities. It will help officers promote opportunities for engagement by the community and seek different funding sources and partnership support.
13. One zone that has already been researched in light of recent conversations with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) is the Fountain Zone. The Council has a major opportunity to develop and secure funding to support key features in this area through a HLF bid.

Fountain Zone and Heritage Lottery Fund Bid

14. Officers have had several meetings with the Heritage Lottery Fund who were very interested in receiving a bid based on the refurbishment of the Grade II listed Hubert Fountain and elements within the surrounding area, as well as shaping a significant programme of community and local partner activity that celebrates and reveals its remarkable story. Thus a first stage HLF bid (deadline March 2016) has been drafted requesting £70,000 of lottery funding in order to work up proposals and maximise the opportunity for significant lottery investment.
15. If successful in receiving a first stage development grant the Council will be able to produce detailed design specifications, project costs and procurement plans, management proposals and consult widely on the project as well as pilot community engagement projects to produce a community activity and engagement plan. This development work enables a robust second stage bid to be submitted.
16. A strong and committed Community Steering Group for the Heritage project has been forming including Ashford Oaks Primary School, Ashford/Hadlow College, Ashford Museum, Ashford Volunteer Centre, Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership, Create Music Festival and Revelation St Mary's. They are in support of the bid and wish to take part and lead the pilot community engagement projects, helping to form and deliver the second stage application.
17. Fundamental to HLF second stage bid is the capital works to conserve and refurbish the Hubert Fountain (estimated to be £758,000) and upgrading the

public realm in which its sits (estimated at £500,000). HLF also stress the need for a strong community activity and engagement plan which aims to deliver a programme that raises the profile of heritage, builds capacity, ownership and engages local people in education, volunteering, environmental, and arts & heritage activities. It is considered a key part of any capital work to support long term engagement and provisional ideas (to be tested in the first stage) are estimated to cost £360,000.

Financial Implications

18. The HLF two stage processes (the first stage development phase and second stage capital delivery phase) each require a minimum of 10% partner funding. As detailed above, our best estimates for the first stage is a total grant of £70,000 requiring circa £10,000 which is already earmarked from the New Homes Bonus funding allocated in 2015/16 for masterplanning Victoria Park.
19. The second stage total application costs could be circa £1.6m thus a partner contribution of circa £160,000. This does not have to be in the bank at this stage of the bid, meaning officers have time to source contributions from S106 and other grants which will need to be applied for. Obviously this total amount may change as the first stage development phase progresses with more detailed costing.
20. If first stage HLF bid is successful, the estimated timetable for this project is as follows, with an official unveiling and large scale celebration event in 2019:
 - a. First stage decision by HLF: June 2016
 - b. Development phase begins: July 2016 – July 2017
 - c. Submission of second-stage bid: September 2017
 - d. Second-stage decision by HLF: January 2018
 - e. Delivery-phase begins: March 2018 – July 2019
 - f. Unveiling, final celebration & evaluation July 2019 – Sept 2019

Risk Assessment

21. A risk assessment has been produced that will be monitored by the Head of Cultural Services in consultation with an in house working group of key officers to help support and steer the project.
22. A serious risk is the continued deterioration of the Hubert Fountain (a Grade II Listed Structure) which is in need of restoration and thus a key driver for the HLF bid.

Community Impact Assessment

23. The Concept Masterplan aims to provide an indicative framework to support future investment that helps improve the site to benefit residents and visitors. Developing the site alongside a strong Community Activity Plan hopes to support improved community cohesion, inclusion and equality.

Other Options Considered

24. The Land Management Improvement Plan recommends a Victoria Park masterplan and this has been created for Members consideration and adoption.

25. The concept zones will be considered as opportunities and investment comes forward and grants are available. It is believed that the HLF provides an excellent opportunity to bring forward the heritage area and engage the public on a wide and varied scale.

Consultation

26. At this early stage of masterplanning, officers have already consulted with Members, relevant officers and key stakeholders mentioned in this report (refer to the *Visioning Exercise* for more information). South Ashford Community Forum is actively involved and informed, and has received a presentation on the masterplan process, which was very well received. For the HLF bid, there are seven local community groups engaged in the activity plan. If the first stage bid is successful, the 'development phase' of the project includes significant advocacy and community/partner consultation and the production of a communication plan.

Handling

27. The Portfolio Holder for Culture and the Environment, Ward Member for Victoria and Head of Service, will at every opportunity continue to update Cabinet and other relevant networks and forums.
28. An officer steering group led by Cultural Services will help the lead officer, steer the project and support the production of the required documents for a second stage HLF application. Some external expertise will be required to produce design specifications and the community engagement plan and this is part of the costings within the first stage bid.

Conclusion

29. This report brings forward the proposal to begin planned improvements to Victoria Park (CP Priority 3), improving and conserving our local heritage and areas of outstanding landscape (CP Priority 4).
30. Upon Members endorsement of the concept masterplan for Victoria park and Watercress Field's and submitting a first stage HLF bid, Culture Services will continue to look at opportunities to securing partnership funding.

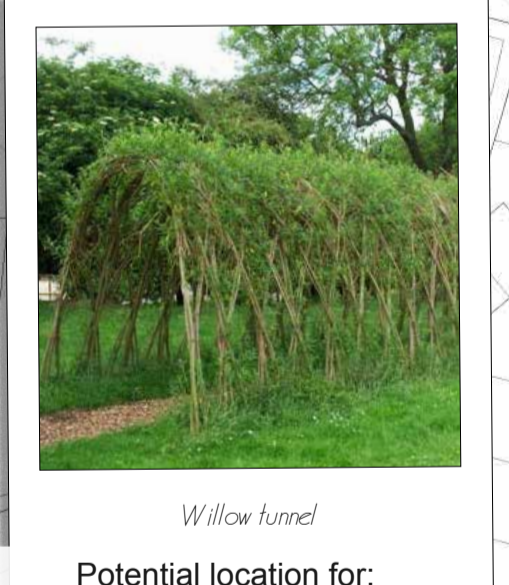
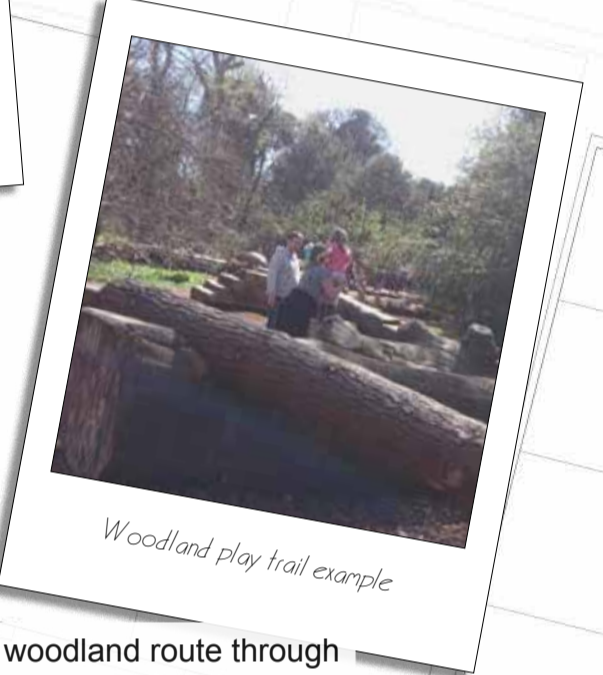
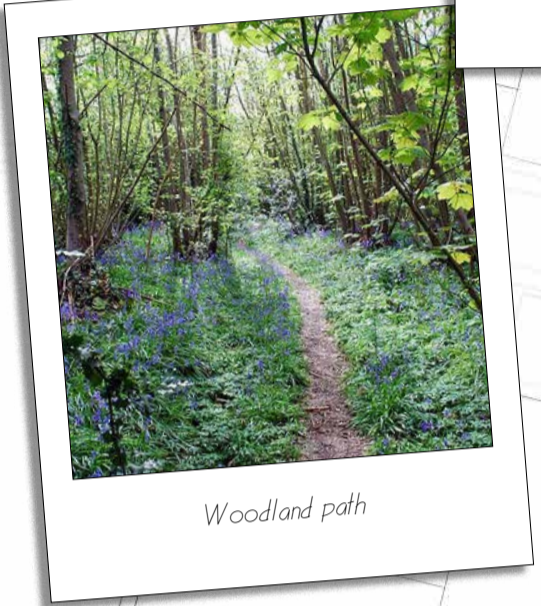
Portfolio Holder's Views

31. Following on from the stakeholder workshop in November, where we identified and prioritised the needs for Victoria Park and Watercress Fields, I endorse this draft concept masterplan and first stage HLF application, and provisions to confirm in principle match funding in order to secure significant partnership funding. I am confident that by developing these proposals we will create desirable and active communities, higher standards of public space, alongside improved standards of presentation for our key municipal park.

Portfolio Holder for Culture and the Environment, Cllr Jessamy Blanford

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The Great Stour river flows along the northern edge of Watercress Fields and Victoria Park. From correspondence with the Environment Agency, there are opportunities for improvements to improve flow velocities and fish habitat.

Water vole are in this stretch of the river; white-clawed cray fish and otter are present in the Great Stour in small numbers and could be encouraged into this stretch.

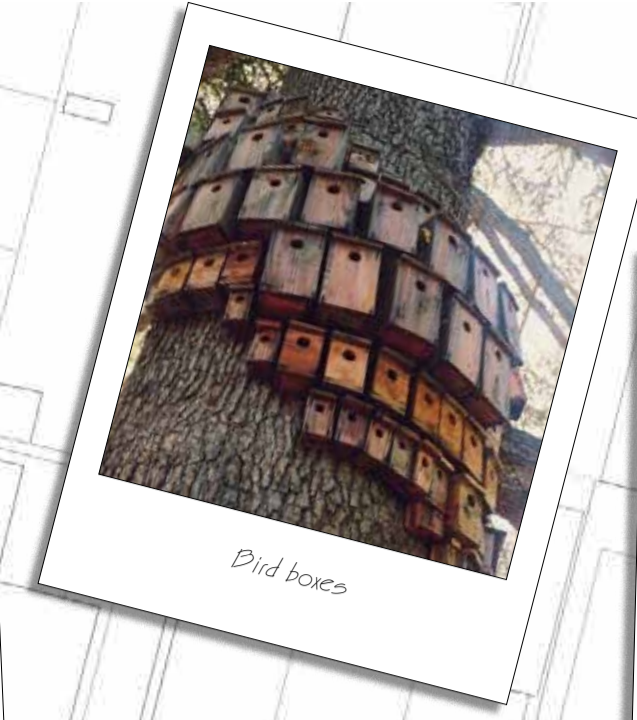
The River Stour currently fails the Water Frame Directive for fish, and therefore there are clear opportunities for improvement.

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 Ashford Borough Council
 Victoria Park & Watercress Fields
 drawing title
 Landscape Masterplan, Sheet 1
 scale
 1:750
 sheet
 A1
 FINAL
 drawn by
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Landscape Masterplan, Sheet 2 of 3

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Potential wetland sites along the river corridor to provide flood alleviation and habitat diversity, designed in partnership with the Environment Agency



Improvements to riverside landscape with removal of terrestrial habitat and replacement with appropriate aquatic habitat

Access provided to river edge with pollarding of trees and scrub removal, creating picnic areas with some areas of maintained grass

Proposed extension to combat play area with bike ramps, jumps and tracks within existing copse area

Existing combat play area to be refurbished; there is potential for re-use and relocation of existing play equipment for the proposed natural play space. Proposed equipment at this location could be more adventurous and high level, co-located and designed in conjunction with the potential bike park

Potential location for formal wetland feature such as model boating lake

Potential Bike Park

Proposed bold swathes of trees and shrubs to screen and soften the buildings, and reinforce the existing tree planting. Layout allows access to buildings



Consultation with residents to determine legible path routes



Recreation space allows for flexible use, to include informal ball games, overflow parking, events

Recreation space

Meadow planting / long grass to path and woodland boundaries, with mown path margins. Meadow mixes suitable for target species such as bees and butterflies.

Rock Garden

Proposed 3m wide surfaced path to southern boundary, to link with residential housing blocks and Victoria Park

Hillbrow Lane



drawn: 3644_DR_005
 client: Ashford Borough Council
 project: Victoria Park & Watercress Fields
 drawing title: Landscape Masterplan, Sheet 2

status: FINAL
 scale: 1:750
 sheet: A1
 checked by: EP, JB

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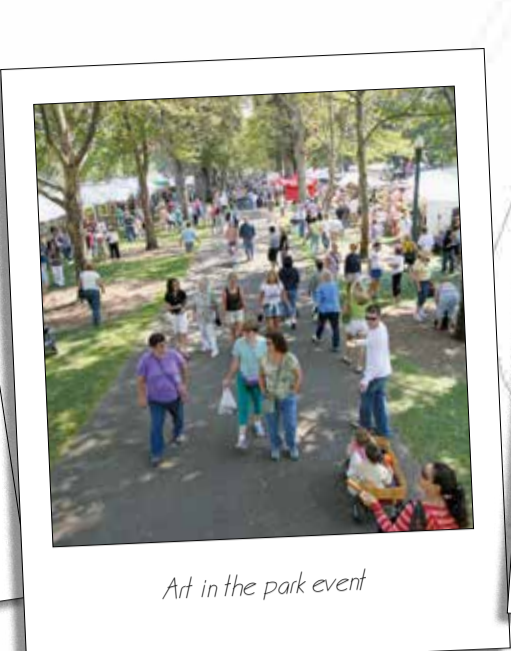
Landscape Masterplan, Sheet 3 of 3

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Victoria Road

The masterplan process provides an opportunity to remove poor quality trees, open up views and consider a wider strategy for trees planting in the park.

Typically the approach to tree planting has been piecemeal; a long-term strategy for tree planting, with specific aims and in conjunction with delivery of other projects, would reverse this ad-hoc approach.



Potential location for pedestrian footbridge connecting with anticipated residential development to the north

Existing combat play area to be refurbished; there is potential for re-use and relocation of existing play equipment for the proposed natural play space. Proposed equipment at this location could be more adventurous and high level, co-located and designed in conjunction with the potential bike park

Potential Bike Park

Events area with necessary services permanently provided on site

Gasworks Lane

Gasworks Lane entrance refined with new paving, works to bridge and signage, as part of site wide strategy for detailing entrances, and in liaison with potential development north of the river

Potential access to the river with a terraced riverbank



'Jemmett Jaunt' route following the original path layout

Screening of industrial development

Town centre link

Recreation space

Events space

Fountain Zone

Existing access to be upgraded with new surfaced path route, and removal of vegetation

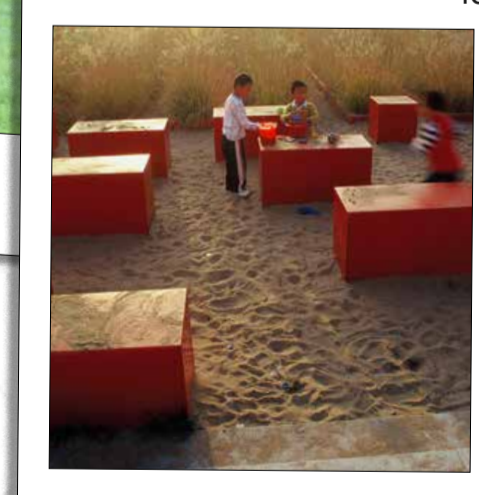
Secret Garden area to be restored, with access improved between Watercress Fields and Victoria Park

Play space to be informally laid out with no boundaries, in view of the seating area and new building. Play to be natural in approach, with opportunities for climbing, swinging, sliding, exploring.

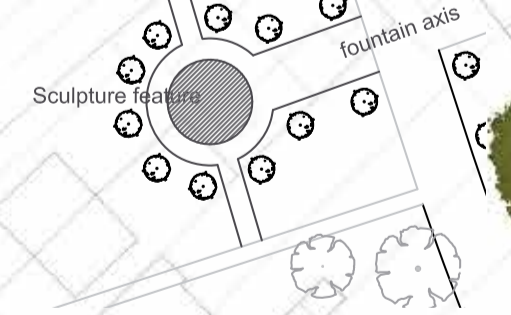
Paved seating area laid out beneath an avenue of proposed trees, which continue the existing tree lined avenue. The paved area is designed in conjunction with the building, as a seating area beneath the trees

Proposed feature to terminate the new axis path; potential for sculpture, water feature, play feature

Potential location for secure and fenced outdoor flat green bowls, to National and International standard (40.75 x 40.75m). Location subject to consideration of existing heritage trees, tree survey, and capital cost to divert the existing path. Alternative option is to create a formal garden with sculpture feature to terminate the axis from the fountain; refer sketch below



Hillbrow Road



Private car park for bowls club users (subject to tree survey)

Existing Bowls Club

Flexible space for temporary events e.g. marquee, archery, fairs

Existing MUGA courts

New Building

Paved plaza area

Space for informal and imaginative play

Existing fountain axis extended

Scope for removal of existing trees to open up the space and views

Existing avenue of trees are of poor quality; there is scope for replacement and potential widening of the existing path, subject to tree survey and necessary root protection

Existing park gates to remain, as important heritage feature. Boundary to be decluttered, with removal and refinement of all street furniture. Park railings reinterpreted as artistic feature(s), temporary and permanent. Park boundary to remain open, welcoming and accessible.

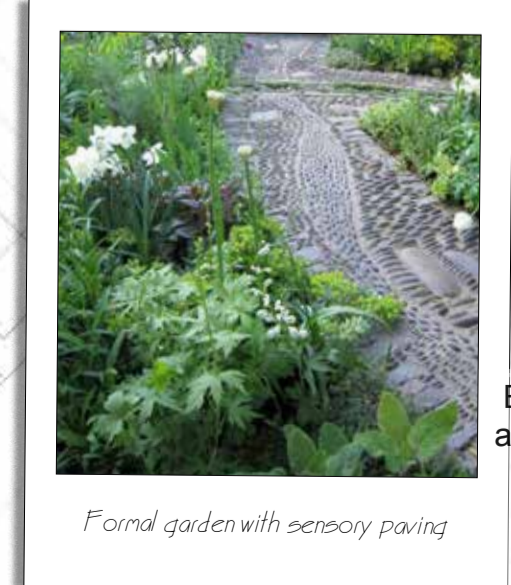
New building to replace the existing structure, with toilets, cafe, meeting space, childrens nursery and storage.

Existing public car park upgraded, and realigned towards Jemmett Road

Main entrance; potential access for HGV with widening and realignment of existing routes, subject to tree survey and further detailing by traffic engineer, with necessary root protection

Existing sub station
Potential space for public car park (subject to levels)

Existing play space to be removed and replaced with sensory gardens of a high horticultural standard, with opportunities for community involvement and disabled access



Refer to drawing 3644_DR_007 for detailed design regarding the Fountain Zone

Refinement to Bowens field entrance with removal of unnecessary street furniture, new paving, signage and soft landscaping

Refer to 3644_RP_001 Landscape Masterplan Report for detailed narrative on the design process and proposals

3644_DR_006

Ashford Borough Council
Victoria Park & Watercress Fields

Landscape Masterplan, Sheet 3

FINAL
Scale 1:750
Sheet A1
drawn by EP
checked by JB

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Concept Stage for Fountain Zone – Appendix B

This is a summary of the potential enhancement of the area around the Hubert Fountain. Parts of the development will be included in a Heritage Lottery Fund with the remaining works being brought forward as part of the Victoria Park Masterplan that aims to provide a framework for future investment opportunities.

Hubert Fountain History

Victoria Park, true to its name, is of typical Victorian design, with one outstanding architectural feature, the large and exuberant Hubert Fountain. The fountain is Grade II listed, from a world famous foundry in France. It is a magnificent example of 19th century cast-iron work, in the neoclassical style commonly known as Beaux Arts.

First presented at the International Exhibition of 1862 alongside its 'sister' fountain - what is now the Grade A listed Ross Fountain situated adjacent to Edinburgh Castle, it was purchased by John Earl-Drax – known as the 'Mad Mayor of Wye', for his home in the grounds of Olantigh Towers, Ashford. The fountain was sold on to Mr George Harper in 1910 during the rebuild of Olantigh Towers after a major fire, and it was George who presented the fountain in a generous act of philanthropy to Victoria Park in 1912. It was gifted on one condition that the fountain 'played' every year on his birthday (23rd July). Unfortunately George Harper committed suicide only a month later. This story is little known locally, and it is not known whether the fountain has ever 'played' on his birthday.

Fig. 41: Ross Fountain, Hubert Fountain, Great Exhibition 1862



Fig. 42: Hubert fountain, Victoria Park, 1916



Fig 43: Current condition and signs of degradation



The following key elements have been considered for the Fountain Zone as part of the Victoria Park Masterplan.

- The zone provides the entrance point from the town centre, and is an important junction for a network of routes. The importance of this location is reflected in the proposed layout and the relationship with the path network.
- The entrance should provide a logical layout, enhancing the setting of the fountain, and creating a clear sense of arrival at the park.
- Development is planned for northeast of the river, as detailed in the extract from the Illustrative Landscape Masterplan for the former Powergen site planning application.

FOUNTAIN ZONE: 3D ELEVATIONS

View from the southeast

- 5.65 This main view is from the existing boundary path, from a location where benches are proposed, and the fountain would be seen beneath the proposed shelter structure.
- 5.66 The view indicates the small paved events area, with long bench seating to the sides.
- 5.67 Planting beds and grass areas frame the fountain.

Fig. 69: View 2: Fountain Zone view through the shelter

Fig. 70: Approximate existing view



Shelter structure indicated at 4 - 5m in height

Long timber bench seats

Paved area beneath structure, for informal events, temporary features, catering concession

Not to Scale

Fig. 71: Fountain Zone from Bowens Field

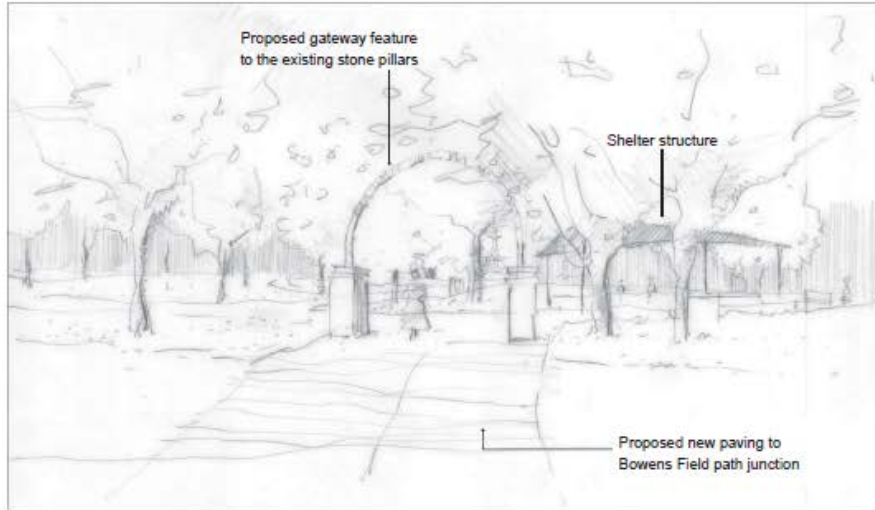


Fig. 73: Fountain Zone from the end of the new axis



Fig. 72: Main Entrance: approximate existing view



Fig. 74: New Axis: approximate existing view



Fig. 75: Fountain Zone from Gasworks Lane entrance



Fig. 77: Fountain Zone from the existing axis



Fig. 76: Gasworks Lane: approximate existing view



Fig. 78: Existing Axis: approximate existing view



Fig. 79: Fountain Zone from Bowens Field



Fig. 80: Main Entrance: approximate existing view

