

Response to Solihull Draft Local Plan

PART B: Concept proposal for “The Windmill Managed Open Space” On Green Belt Land between Kenilworth Road and Windmill Lane



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“The Borough will continue to be ‘Urbs in Rure’, protecting the integrity of the Green Belt and retaining the strategic Meriden Gap between the Birmingham Conurbation and Coventry.” SMBC 2020

Purpose

This report should be read in conjunction with Part A of the response from the BARRAGE action group to the Solihull Draft Local Plan Review, 'Objection to the proposed allocation of Site BC3 Windmill Lane/ Kenilworth Road Balsall Common,' (Wilson, McGarry and Wilson, 2020).

This report (Part B), presents the outline concept plan for Managed Open Space on 11ha of Green Belt Land in the Meriden Gap between Windmill Lane and Kenilworth Road, with the Grade II* Berkswell Windmill as a key focal point. The combination presents a unique opportunity to create a significant tourist attraction for Solihull borough.

The proposal should be seen as part of a wider Open Space strategy for the Balsall Common settlement. This strategy is needed to address the current deficit of 19ha in Public Open Space and will become essential should the village expand in accordance with the housing allocations proposed in the SMBC Local Plan review, with a resultant deficit in Public Open Space of 39ha.

Recommendations

- That the proposed housing allocation Site BC3 is removed from the draft Local Plan Review with immediate effect for the reasons detailed in Part A
- A detailed concept plan for "Windmill Managed Open Space" is created by SMBC officers in conjunction with local residents
- A tourism strategy is developed for the park, with the Berkswell Windmill as a unique and key attraction.

Please note that this report is intended to follow on from previous documents already submitted to the council:

Wilson, W., McGarry, J., and Wilson, J., "Response to Solihull Local Plan Review 2019: Objection to the proposed allocation of Site 3 Balsall Common," 22nd September 2019

McGarry, J., and Wilson, W., "Draft Proposal for "The Windmill Open Space for All" on Green Belt Land between Kenilworth Road and Windmill Lane," 15th November 2019

1. Background and Strategic Context

- 1.1 The 11 hectares of Green Belt Land between Windmill Lane and the Kenilworth Road is currently proposed to be developed for housing (Site BC3) as part of the Local Plan Review being undertaken by SMBC.
- 1.2 Residents have strongly objected based on non-compliance with both NPPF and SMBC policies, as detailed in Part A of this response (Wilson et al., 2020)
- 1.3 In Autumn 2019, senior officers from SMBC requested that BARRAGE submit a detailed proposal for a Country Park as part of the Local Plan Review
- 1.4 This proposal, for Public Open Space and in response to that request, aligns with the following National, Regional and Local strategies:

1.4.1. National Policy

- NPPF 138: “They should also set out ways in which the impact of removing land from the Green Belt can be offset through compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of remaining Green Belt Land”
- Environment Bill (2020) requires mandatory biodiversity net gain of 10% through the planning system
- NPPF 194: “Substantial harm to...assets of the highest significance, notably...grade II* listed buildings....should be wholly exceptional”
- NPPF 174: “To protect and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity, plans should..... promote the conservation, restoration and enhancement of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species; and identify and pursue opportunities for securing measurable net gains for biodiversity”

1.4.2. SMBC Local Policies

- Climate Change Emergency (2019) :
“There is an increasing recognition that the problems of climate change, air pollution and reduction of species & biodiversity need to be treated together”
“We will work with nature, rather than against it, to ensure continued economic success of Solihull in the interests of all its people”

- Draft Local Plan (2020) :

Natural Environment (P10) :

“The Council will seek to protect, enhance and restore the diverse landscape features of the Borough and to create characteristic habitats such as new woodlands, copses, hedgerows and standard trees, urban trees, species-rich grassland, wood pasture, parklands, wetlands and heathland. To halt, and where possible reverse, the degrading of the Arden landscape and promote local distinctiveness.”

“The Council will seek to protect, enhance, restore, increase and connect the natural environment and secure measurable net gains in biodiversity.”

Amenity (P14) :

“iii. Seek to safeguard important trees, hedgerows, natural habitats and woodlands, and will require new and replacement tree and hedgerow planting; and, where appropriate, new woodlands;”

Health and well-being (P18)

Para. 468: “Publically accessible open spaces are a key component of the Borough’s multifunctional green infrastructure network. They have many roles including providing for recreation and physical activity; encouraging social interactions; promoting physical and mental health and wellbeing and quality of life; providing facilities for a child’s development; encouraging walking and cycling; reducing flood risk; and safeguarding biodiversity. They are essential to promoting and facilitating healthy lifestyles, benefitting wellbeing and a key component of the quality and visual amenity of the local character of areas. Furthermore, open spaces, in particular natural green spaces, are a vital part.”

- Health and Well-Being Strategy (2016-2019)
 - Priority 4: Healthy and sustainable places and communities
This recognises the impact on both physical and mental health of contact with the natural environment
- Green Prospectus (2015) – see Fig 1 for segments supported by this proposal

Green Prospectus Themes and Objectives

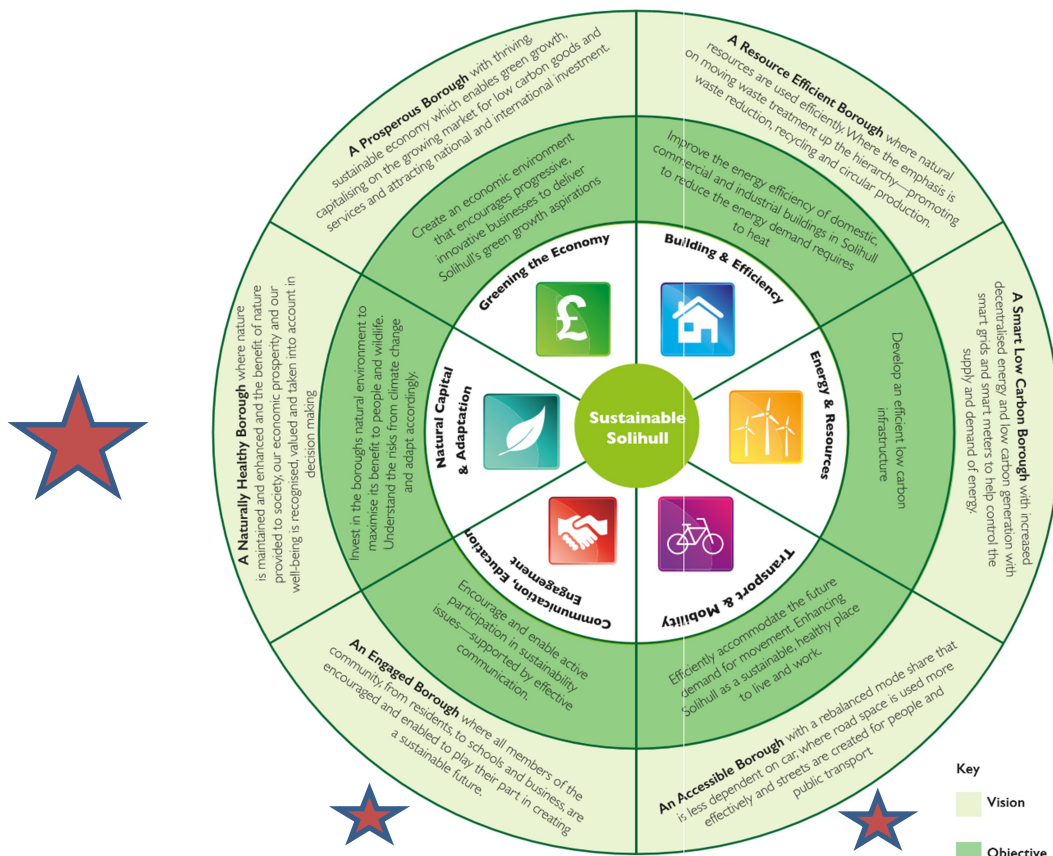


Fig 1: Green Prospectus – segments supported by this proposal (SMBC (2015), adapted by Wilson (2020))

- Green Space Strategy (2014)

“By 2025 Solihull aims to provide a network of attractive, high quality, accessible green spaces that are managed and developed, recognising the Borough’s landscape character and local distinctiveness, to meet the diverse needs of the community and the natural environment. Our green spaces should be safe, clean and maintained in a sustainable way, becoming an important element of everyday life, for the future enjoyment and well-being of all”

Fig 2 highlights aspects supported by this proposal

PPG17 Typology	Primary purpose
Parks and gardens	Accessible, high quality opportunities for informal recreation and community events.
Natural and semi natural green spaces, including urban woodland.	Wildlife conservation, biodiversity and environmental education and awareness.
Green corridors.	Walking, cycling or horse riding, whether for leisure purposes or travel, and opportunities for wildlife mitigation.
Outdoor sports facilities.	Participation in outdoor sports, such as pitch sports, tennis, bowls, athletics or countryside and water sports.
Amenity green space.	Opportunities for informal activities close to home or work or enhancement of the appearance of residential or other areas.
Provision for children and young people.	Areas designed primarily for play and social interaction involving children and young people, such as equipped play areas, ball courts, skateboard areas and teenage shelters.
Allotments, community gardens and urban farms.	Opportunities for those people who wish to grow their own produce as part of the long term promotion of sustainability, health and social inclusion.
Cemeteries, disused churchyards and burial grounds.	Quiet contemplation and burial of the dead, often linked to the promotion of wildlife conservation and biodiversity.

Table 1: PPG 17 green space typologies

Fig 2: Green Space Strategy – aspects supported by this proposal (SMBC (2014), adapted by Cassidy (2020))

- Wildlife Ways (2019)

This initiative, funded by the EU, is to help local wildlife thrive and native species survive in Solihull borough through tree and hedgerow planting and the creation of wildflower areas. There are currently no projects listed for the Meriden Ward.

- Cycling and Walking (2020)

Balsall Common has been identified as a Core Walking Zone together with Cycle corridors (see Fig 3 below).

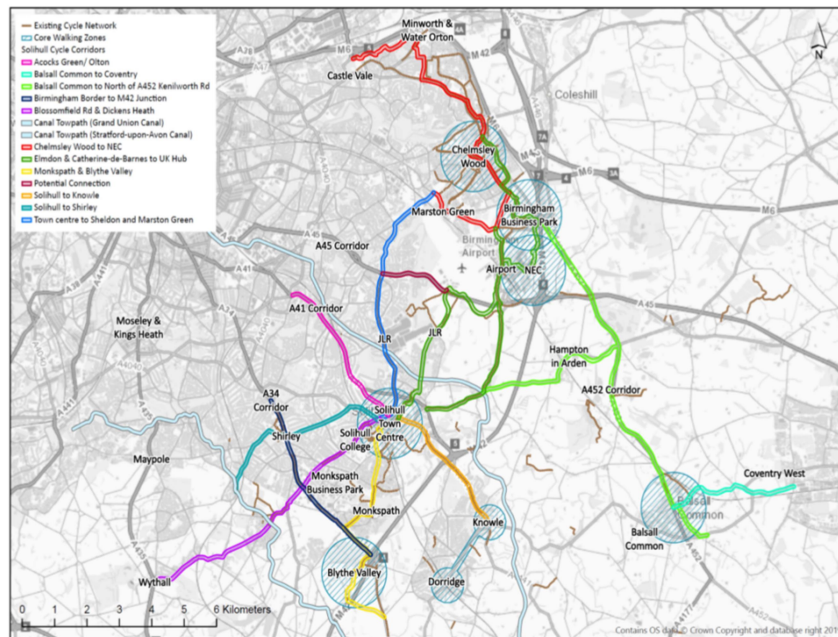


Fig 3: SMBC Cycling and Walking strategic map (SMBC, 2020)

2. Public Open Space in Balsall Common – current situation

- 2.1 According to the Green Space Strategy Review (2014), the average provision of open space per 1000 head of population in Solihull was approximately 5ha
- 2.2 Given that the current population of Balsall Common is 7500, this would require 37.5ha of Public Open Space. However, the current provision, as estimated by the Barrett's Farm Neighbourhood Action Group (BFNAG), is approximately 18.5ha. As such, there is already a deficit of 19ha.
- 2.3 The proposed site allocations in the Local Plan review (excluding Site BC3) will result in a total population of circa 11500, necessitating 57.5 ha of Public Open Space. As such, the potential future deficit will rise to 39ha.
- 2.4 Whilst acknowledging that Public Open Space will be required as part of the individual specific site plans, the need for significant new Public Open Space is clear. This proposal will contribute to that requirement.
- 2.5 There are four principal areas of Public Open Space currently in Balsall Common, as shown in Fig 4. These are all similar in character and use.

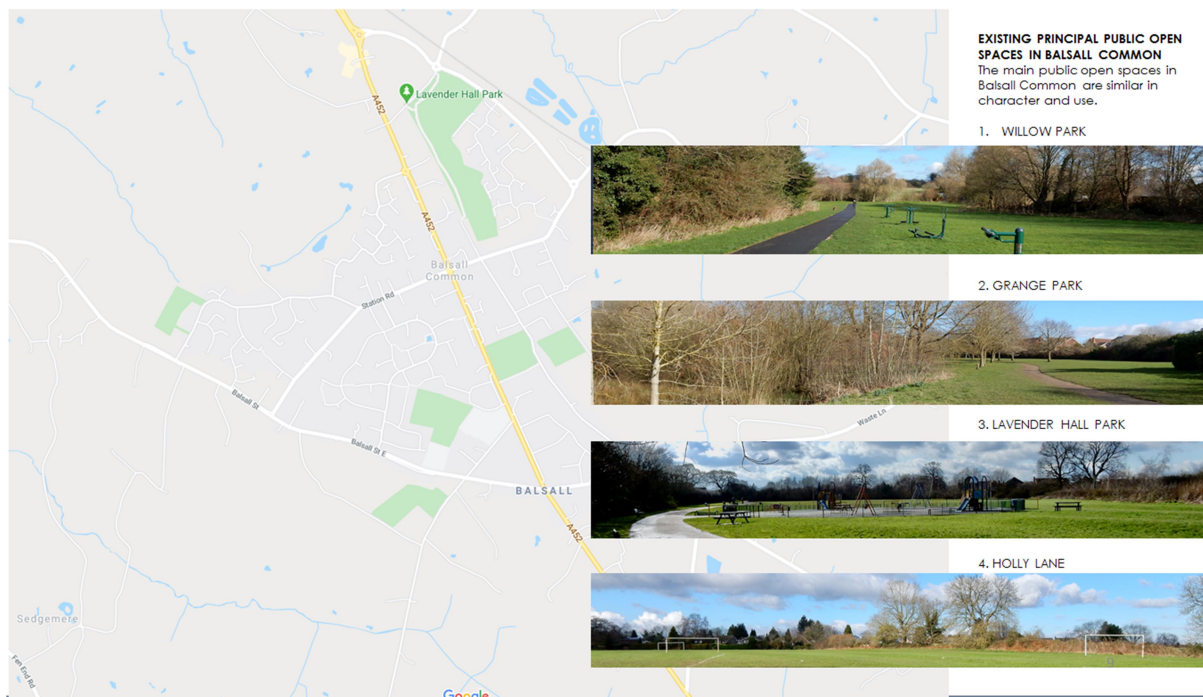


Fig 4: Nature of existing Public Open Space in Balsall Common (Cassidy, 2020)

2.6 In terms of the distribution of current Public Open Space, it can be seen that there is a total absence in the south-east quadrant (Fig 5)

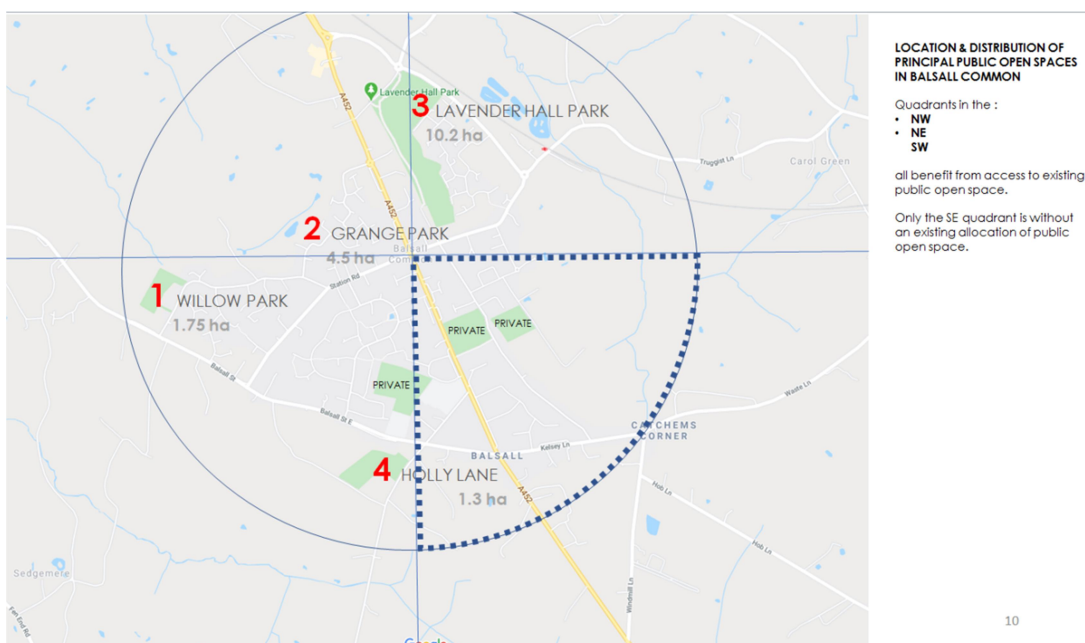


Fig 5: Location of existing Public Open Space in Balsall Common (Cassidy, 2020)

2.7 This is of particular concern as the largest site being proposed (Site BC1 Barrett's Farm 875 units), as well as Site BC4 Pheasant Oak Farm (200 units), are both in this quadrant.

3. Outline Open Space Strategy for Balsall Common

- 3.1 Given the scale of development being planned for Balsall Common, it is recommended that an open space strategy be developed, to be incorporated within the Local Plan review. A central tenet of this should be to diversify the scale and type of Public Open Space within the village and connect these together
- 3.2 The key features of this strategy are proposed as follows and summarised within Fig 6.
- Develop plans for maintaining and enhancing the existing four Public Open Space areas. The positive character of each site to be developed so as to contrast and complement each other. The existing landscape uses and characters to be supplemented with new characters and uses.
 - Create new Public Open Space to address the deficit. The creation of Managed Open Space between Windmill Lane/Kenilworth Road will contribute to that requirement

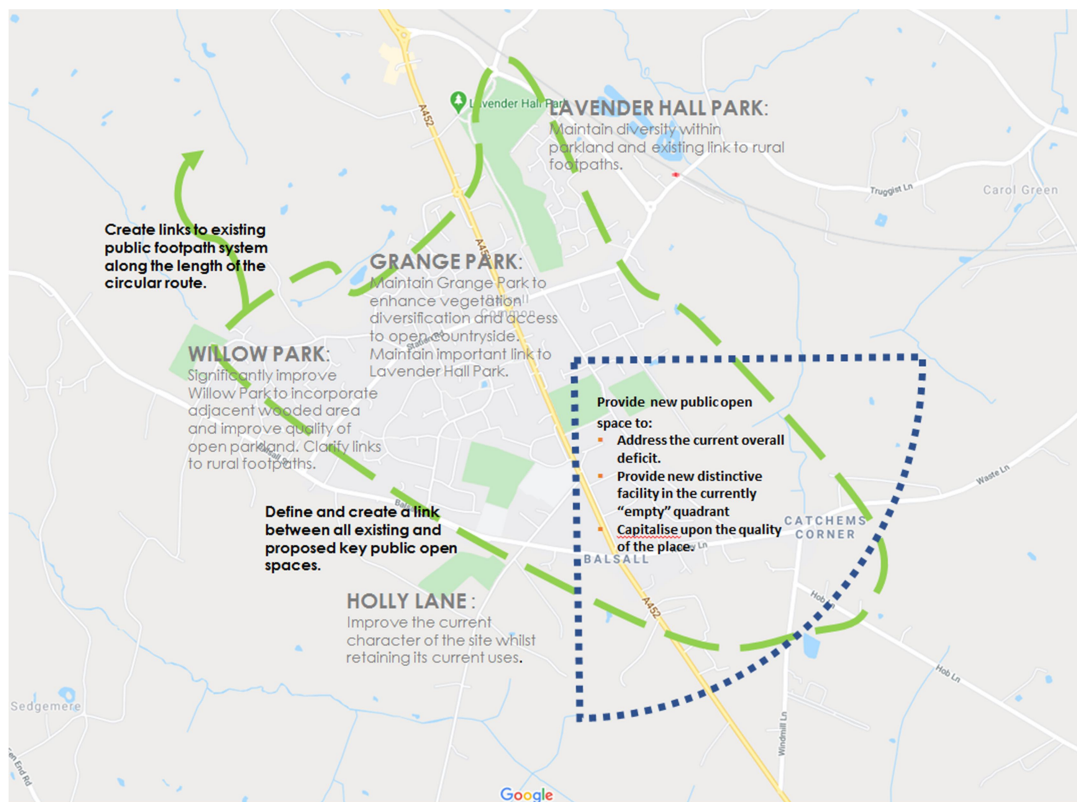


Fig 6: Outline Open Space Strategy for Balsall Common (Cassidy, 2020)

- Ensure all residents have easy access to a range of parkland types and characters. To assist with this, a "village loop" is to be identified, making

use of existing public footpaths wherever possible (see Fig 7). This will improve the access between each site to contribute to wider agendas and policies, such as well-being. By linking the existing and proposed open spaces together, the contrasts will be accentuated

- Enhancing and creating Public Open Space will provide opportunities for increased woodland planting as well as improving biodiversity, habitat creation and sustainability
- By adopting an Open Space strategy of this nature, the landscape of Balsall Common could become a key feature of the village

4. Proposal for Managed Open Space Windmill Lane/Kenilworth Road

4.1 The rationale for creating new Public Open Space specifically on the 11ha of Green Belt Land between Windmill Lane/Kenilworth Road is presented in this section, together with the outline concept plan. It is worth noting that many of the reasons for rendering this area unsound, unsustainable and hence unjustifiable for housing development are the very same reasons why it is ideally suited to Managed Open Space.

4.2 The rationale for Managed Open Space in this locality is as follows:

- It provides SMBC with the opportunity for biodiversity offsetting to mitigate for the loss of Green Belt Land and habitat in Balsall Common
- The site provides approximately 11 hectares of open space, which reduces the projected deficit of 39 ha to 28ha and the existing deficit from 19ha to 8ha.
- The site has existing potential for Public Open Space, consistent with SMBC “Green Space Strategy” (see Fig 2)
- Balances the distribution of open space around the village and helps to resolve the “empty quadrant” deficit in the SE, together with the Central Park proposed by other residents (BFNAG) and now incorporated into the Concept Plan for Site BC1
- Accessible to more than 1700 existing residents (800m threshold), including students at the Heart of England secondary school, Barchester care home residents, Albany Meadows retirement village, Windmill Park, Capella’s nursery and Holly Lane nursery.
- It provides a potentially important attractor on the village loop, as can be seen in Fig 7
- The large scale of the site provides significant opportunities to create a vividly different but complementary style of diverse landscape types, characters and uses to existing open spaces
- The scale of the site also facilitates sizeable woodland planting

- It provides the opportunity to capitalize upon both the ecological potentials of the site and its relationship to the historic Grade II* Listed Berkswell Windmill, providing a unique opportunity for creating a significant tourist attraction
- It is consistent with the aforementioned Outline Village Open Space Strategy

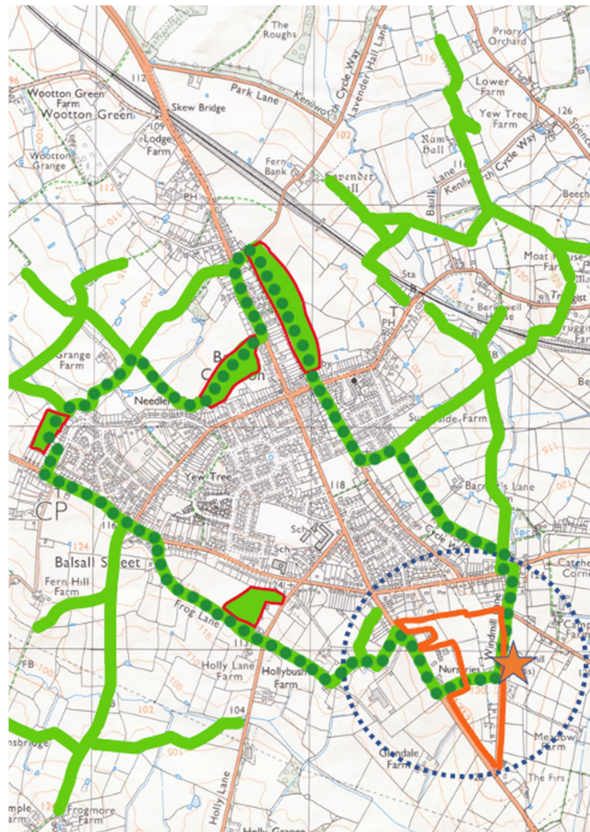


Fig 7: Proposal for Managed Open Space between Windmill Lane/Kenilworth Road (Cassidy, 2020)

4.3 Design concept and principles for this Managed Open Space

- The design concept is based upon the Dutch Heem park. (See Appendix 1 for photographic illustrations). Heem parks originated in the Netherlands, as a means of vividly demonstrating intense, man-made, local native plant communities and vegetation types. They provided not only high quality visual and recreational experiences but also educational opportunities related to the natural environment and associated wildlife.

Design principles of the concept plan (Fig 8) include:

- Diversity & variety of scale, habitats, characters and uses.

- Creation of landscapes not found elsewhere in the village.
- Contrasts in scale and sense of place.
- Complementing the existing landscape on site.

4.4 Constraints and design considerations include:

- Vehicle movements and access
- Soil conditions
- Existing tree cover
- Existing habitats
- Land use



Fig 8: Concept Plan (Cassidy, 2020)

- 4.5 Fig 9 illustrates potential land use. Note that the scheme preserves the openness of the viewing cone in front of the mill (see Fig 10 for existing view) in the form of a substantive arena for holding community events. Fig 11 illustrates potential woodland types across the site. Figs 12, 13 and 14 provide illustrations of the types of ground flora that could be included within the design

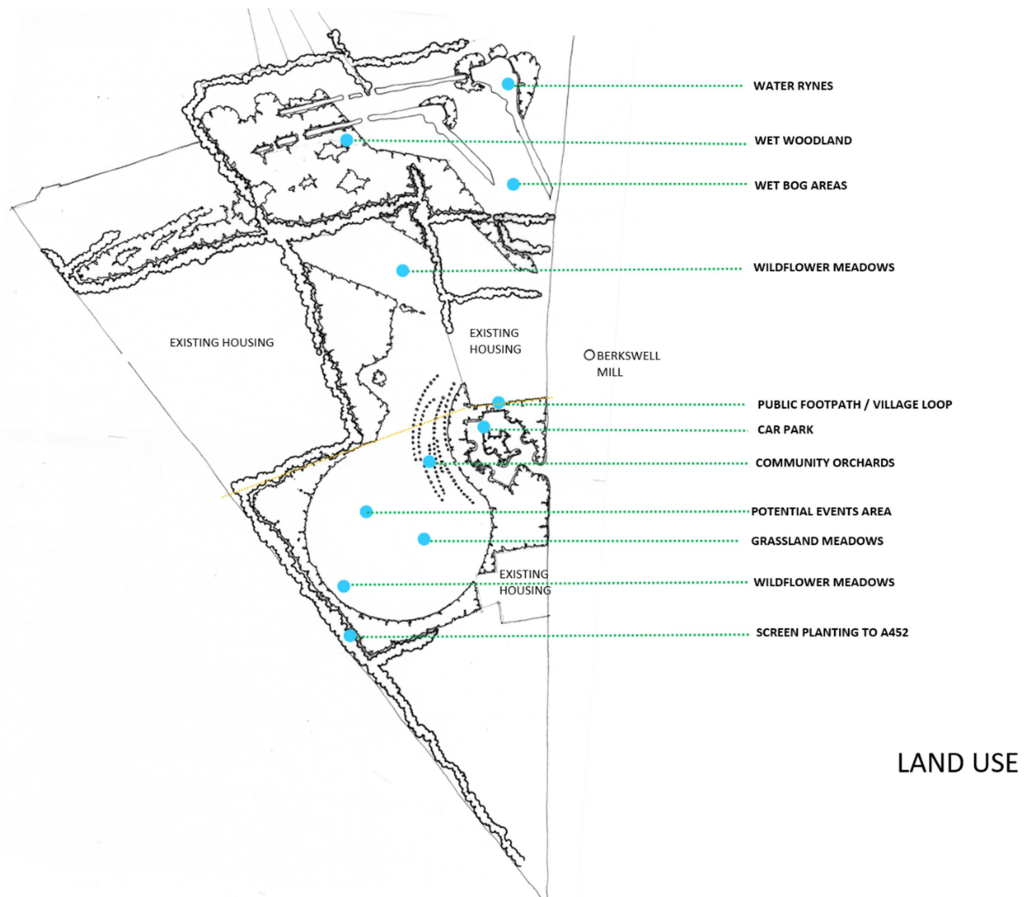


Fig 9 : Land use (Cassidy, 2020)



Fig 10: Location of proposed arena to preserve view cone to Berkswell Windmill (Wilson, 2019)



Fig 11: Woodland types proposed for the site (Cassidy, 2020)



Fig 12: Illustration of southern area character (Cassidy, 2020)



<https://jnes.org/campaigns/dormice/hotel-dormouse-conservation/ancient-ox-bow-woodland/>

Fig 13: Illustration of car parking area character (Cassidy, 2020)



<https://twitter.com/NigelDunnett/status/114431194389072816>

Fig 14: Illustration of central area character (Cassidy, 2020)

Please note that these figures provide a top level overview only of the design concept. The details (including many further drawings) and associated rationale for the scheme, together with the Open Space strategy, are to be presented to SMBC by Emeritus Professor Derek Cassidy, landscape architect and town planner, in due course.

- 4.6 It is worth noting that Warwick District Council, are currently in the process of detailing the design for a new 56ha Country Park, “Tachbrook Park”, in consultation with the community. There are many similarities with this proposal, in that the purpose of the park is to mitigate for a lack of Public Open Space in the south of Leamington Spa and the significant urban expansion of that settlement proposed in the Local Plan. There is also a focus on wildlife and biodiversity as well as outdoor activities. Warwick District Council’s Chief Executive, Chris Elliott, has advised that WDC would be very pleased to work with SMBC, to mutual benefit, if that would be of use.

5. Opportunity for biodiversity enhancement

- 5.1 NPPF 174, as well as the impending Environment Bill, requires a demonstrable net gain in biodiversity as part of the Local Plan process. The need to protect and enhance the natural environment, including biodiversity and geodiversity, has never been more acute, as our knowledge of complex ecosystems, the destruction of species, human impact on climate change and the need for greenspace for our health and wellbeing grows.

‘Nature- our ecosystems and their component species- plays a vital role in climate change mitigation, by removing, trapping and storing carbon, as well as in pollution, flood alleviation, and public health and wellbeing’

(www.gov.uk, Briefing on the Environment Bill, March 2020)

- 5.2 The development of Site BC3, as Managed Open Space, will provide SMBC with the opportunity to demonstrate how proactive measures are being taken to align with National policies, as well as with the WMCA Climate Change Declaration (2019) and SMBC Climate Change Emergency statement (2019).
- 5.3 Site BC3 is home to over 20 Protected Species including bats, Great Crested Newts, Barn Owls, Bullfinches, Corn Buntings, Fieldfare, Grey Heron, Grey Partridge, House Sparrow, Kestrel, Little Owl, Song Thrush, Sparrow Hawk, Tawny Owl, Swift and Yellow Hammer.
- 5.4 The Park will protect these species and further enhance habitats through the design of the spaces within. As such, it will be fully supportive of the Wildlife Ways initiative by SMBC. Specifically, complex ecosystems will thrive within the diverse range of habitats such as: wetlands, grassy areas, wildflower meadows, fruit trees and hedgerows, planting of native woodlands, remnants of the Ancient Forest of Arden.

- 5.5 The park helps to address the UN declaration (May 2019) that human activity is causing an unprecedented decline in biodiversity, with more than a million species across the planet threatened with extinction . The fragmentation of habitats has been instrumental to this.
- 5.6 It is also important to note that Site BC3 is in the Meriden Gap, which is of national strategic importance. The ecologically diverse nature of this space would be a considerable asset in continuing to support the essential north-south ecological corridor.

6. SMBC Tourist Strategy

- 6.1 The “Draft Proposal for “The Windmill Open Space for All” (McGarry et al., 2019) outlines the unique opportunity afforded to SMBC to develop this Managed Open Space as a significant tourist attraction, with the internationally acclaimed and fully operational Grade II* Listed Berkswell Windmill at its heart.
- 6.2 As a tourist attraction, the proposal may include:
- Educational and Information Centre
 - Annual festival to celebrate traditional arts and crafts, using the park arena
 - Skills and economic development, including the training of millwrights and the grinding and supply of specialist flours to artisan bakeries
 - The development of artisan, cultural and specialist craft businesses
 - Frequent, regular openings of the Berkswell Windmill
 - Breadmaking workshops for young people and adults
 - Wildlife and nature walks
- 6.3 The area has the potential to become a hub for new artisan, cultural, craft, artistic, educational and horticultural businesses

7. Conclusions

The conclusions of this report fully support and build on those detailed in the previous submissions relating to Site BC3

- 7.1 Site BC3 is not a sustainable site for housing
- 7.2 There is a proven substantial lack of Public Open Space in Balsall Common, particularly in the SE quadrant. This will become more acute with the development proposed through the Local Plan review
- 7.3 There is a need for a strategic approach to address this deficit and create complementary and linked areas throughout the village
- 7.4 The proposal for Managed Open Space on site BC3 is in line with National, Regional and Local policies relating to the environment, biodiversity and heritage assets
- 7.5 It will create an extraordinary space which, together with the working Grade II* Listed Berkswell Windmill, will provide a unique opportunity for tourism, skills, business and employment
- 7.6 The park will serve to protect and enhance ecological and biological diversity as well as promote the health and well-being of people

8. References

Burton-Pye, D. (2019) "Heritage Impact Assessments Report no. 2: Site 3 – Windmill Lane. Balsall Common"

Cassidy, D. (2020), "Windmill Lane, Balsall Common. A proposal for a New Type of Public Open Space". [Powerpoint Presentation Version 11.00]

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SMBC (2020), "Solihull Cycling and Walking Engagement Report"

SMBC (2014), "Green Space Strategy Review"

SMBC (2020), "Solihull Local Plan – Draft Submission version"

United Nations (2019), "Sustainable Development Goals – UN Report: Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented'; Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating'", <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/>

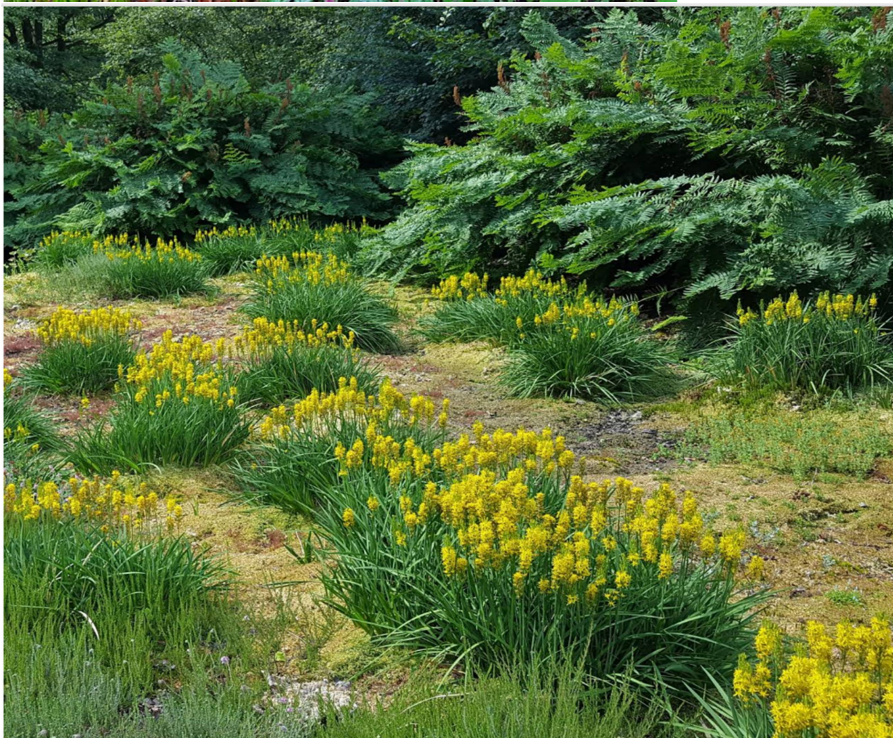
Warwickshire Wildlife Trust (2016), "SMBC Additional Site Options Ecological Assessment: Windmill Lane and Kenilworth Road"

Wilson, W., McGarry, J., and Wilson, J. (2020), "Response to Solihull Local Plan Review 2020 Part A: Objection to the proposed allocation of Site BC3 Balsall Common"

Appendix 1 – Photographic illustrations of Dutch Heem park



<https://thijsssepark-gemeente-amstelveen.business.site/posts/8058271335842549690?hl-nl>



<https://thijsssepark-gemeente-amstelveen.business.site/>

<https://talklocalist.wordpress.com/eng/the-8don-local-history-society/>

<https://thijssepark.nl/fotos>