

Cabinet – 16 March 2022

COVID Memorial

Portfolio: Councillor Butler – Clean and Green

Related portfolio: Councillor Craddock – Health and Wellbeing

Service: Healthy Spaces Team, Clean, Green and Leisure Services

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan: Yes

1. Aim

- 1.1. The council wishes to provide a memorial feature for the residents of the borough to recognise the COVID pandemic. The feature should provide an area for contemplation to remember lost loved ones and also recognise the services provided by all key workers. This report sets out a number of options for a proposed memorial and identifies a preferred option.

2. Summary

- 2.1. A variety of sites and forms for the memorial have been considered, including a review of the approaches taken by other organisations.
- 2.2. The preferred option for the memorial is linked to the idea that green spaces were highly significant to many people during the pandemic. They remained open and using them for daily exercise contributed to our residents' mental health and physical wellbeing pandemic. The use of open spaces increased massively over the first year of lockdown.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That Cabinet approve the proposal to create an COVID-19 memorial trail in Walsall Arboretum.
- 3.2. That Cabinet delegate to the Executive Director for Economy Environment and Communities in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Clean and Green the approval of the detailed design.
- 3.3. That Cabinet note that funding will initially be sought from external sources but should that prove unsuccessful the capital costs are to be funded via the capital investment pipeline fund, following submission of a business case to Strategic Investment Board (SIB).

4. Report detail - Know

Context

- 4.1. As there should be full public access to a memorial feature, it would be best placed in one of the borough's main parks or green spaces. Parks and green spaces were seen as a safe haven by many during lockdown as a place to seek solace and exercise when all other opportunities for recreation were closed or limited. Green spaces are a symbol of health and recreation. Many people were inspired to change their lifestyles and become more active, which improved both physical and mental wellbeing.
- 4.2. A series of site visits have taken place across the borough to look at suitable sites and the approach to marking the pandemic of other councils has been reviewed.
- 4.3. There are a number of different ideas which officers have considered following a review of proposals elsewhere in the country, from planting large healing woodlands in Solihull and Suffolk, to creating circular garden designs to be replicated in parks across communities in Birmingham. Some schemes have involved the community in their inception, delivery and ongoing maintenance. Other schemes have been developed by the private sector. Memorial schemes are being developed by funeral companies like Wesleyan who are providing stone obelisks in their cemeteries containing rainbows, the symbol of hope. A COVID Memorial Trust has been set up in Portsmouth to consult with residents and to develop the project ideas and install and maintain the feature. Barnsley and South Tyneside are creating pieces of public art to be put up in their town centres.
- 4.4. In terms of location, the main parks sites have been considered. Willenhall Memorial Park is a memorial park for the soldiers who lost their lives during the First World War, and also contains a stone and tree avenue for those who perished at Lockerbie. Bloxwich parks have also been considered as this is where a large amount of funding is being spent to improve the greenspaces in the town as part of the Towns Fund project. Pleck Park, which has recently been visited by peer assessment judges, requires considerable investment, especially horticultural features. Walsall Arboretum has the highest number of visitors (over 1 million) and has a significant regional importance. Since 2015, the arboretum has had considerable investment with high quality catering and toilets provision. The park has its own maintenance team based on site.
- 4.5. In terms of commissioning and design, officers have considered whether to hold a public competition for ideas on the kind of memorial which the residents of the borough would like to see and the venue where they think it would be most appropriately sited. However, this would have an impact on the timing of the project coming forward.
- 4.6. The preferred option is for a memorial at the arboretum. This proposal is for a waymarked woodland walk from the Grange car park, which takes you alongside the stream amongst the trees. More large standard trees would be planted as part of the project and under planting with woodland bulbs such as bluebell, snowdrop and narcissus. Bulbs are a symbol of rebirth. This would create a spring woodland garden, which becomes a memorial waymarked trail around the arboretum extension. As part of this walk, there are proposed to be memorial benches dotted along the trail and possibly memorial trees for people to purchase to commemorate a loved one affected by the pandemic.

Council Plan priorities

- 4.7. The preferred option will provide opportunities to improve an area of green space which requires some investment but in an area which is accessible for many by car, public transport, cycle and foot. It will also provide new opportunities for people to walk in pleasant surroundings and to gain exercise and improved mental health through peaceful green surroundings.

Risk management

- 4.8. There are no major risks with this project, and a project management approach will be adopted to ensure all health and safety risks etc. are managed effectively.

Financial implications

- 4.9. The preferred option of the arboretum memorial walk, would cost in the region of £30k- £50k. A more accurate estimate will be prepared when the detailed design is complete. Some of the other ideas in this report require higher ongoing maintenance costs, with more formal garden designs costing more to maintain than informal natural designs. The cost of maintaining the preferred option will be contained within existing revenue budgets.
- 4.10. External funding will be sought for the project. Crowd funding using the council's own crowdfunding platform 'Space hive' will be explored. The disadvantages of these external funding streams is the time it takes to develop external funding bids. However, if external funding is obtained this will reduce the amount of capital funding required to be funded by the Council in full or in part.
- 4.11. If there remains a shortfall in funding following review of external funding options, the capital costs are to be funded via the capital investment pipeline fund, following submission of a business case to Strategic Investment Board (SIB)

Legal implications

- 4.12. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Procurement implications/social value

- 4.13. The project will be delivered through the internal grounds maintenance team with input from the approved contractor Tarmac for the pathways. Therefore, no procurement implications will arise from this report.

Property implications

- 4.14. The preferred option, at the arboretum extension, would be carried out on property within the ownership of the Council and would not extend onto other land.

Health and wellbeing implications

- 4.15. The Council's memorial will provide a new facility for residents who may require a place for consolation and relaxation. This project will add to mental health provision through good quality green space and a recognition of the many deaths from the pandemic and the work of the emergency services and others. The memorial will also observe the following Marmot Principles:

- Create and develop healthy and sustainable communities
- Strengthen the role and impact of ill-health prevention

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.16. The proposals will ensure that accessibility is taken into account when designing the scheme and that the feature is as inclusive as possible.

Staffing implications

- 4.17. There are no staffing implications arising from this report

Climate impact

- 4.18. The project will aim to encourage residents to become more active as a result of providing a pleasant green walkway as a memorial feature and will encourage active travel as opposed to using vehicles to get to the trail.

Consultation

- 4.19. No consultation has taken place to date. It is proposed to consult with stakeholders and the public to inform the detailed design. This will include schools, to reflect the impact of COVID on families and children's education.
- 4.20. In addition to the COVID memorial garden, it is likely that there will also be a desire for local arrangements such as plaques in district centres and other localities. Ward Members will be engaged to determine how this can be facilitated.

5. Decide – options considered

- 5.1. Some of the open spaces which have been considered may not be adequately tranquil and peaceful (e.g. Pleck Park and Bloxwich Park, where the noise of traffic is quite a disturbance and doesn't give an ambience of quiet reflection). Willenhall Memorial Park is already well resourced in terms of memorial gardens having recently received investment to recreate a feature for the WW1 centenary in 2018, plus the park has a memorial avenue for the Lockerbie disaster. The most accessible and peaceful location for the memorial is considered to be the arboretum, creating a memorial walk alongside the brook, through the trees. This will provide quiet and calm solitude for reflection. The proposal includes bulb and tree planting and the creation of a good accessible circular walk from the Grange car park, waymarked and signed as the COVID memorial trail. The proposal will include opportunities for memorial benches and tree planting if families do wish to contribute to the memorial in this way.

6. Respond

- 6.1. Following approval in principle, consultation will be carried out and detailed plans will be drawn up and costed. Funding will initially be sought from external sources. If there is any shortfall a capital bid will be made. Subject to available funding the project can be delivered by spring 2023.

7. Review

- 7.1. Monitoring of the project's progress will be carried out on a monthly basis to ensure that the project is on track and a final project review will be undertaken to ensure that any learning from the project is fed back to the team.

Appendices

None

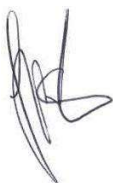
Background papers

None

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Signatures



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7 March 2022

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7 March 2022