



## **TOURISM, COMMUNITIES, CULTURE & LEISURE COMMITTEE**

**Thursday, 19 September 2024**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>BIRKENHEAD PARK: WORLD HERITAGE PROJECT UPDATE AND FINANCIAL RESOURCING</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES</b>

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

The purpose of this report is to:

1. provide an update on progress and achievements regarding the Birkenhead Park World Heritage project;
2. set out the steps ahead for achieving the park's recognition as a World Heritage Site; and
3. seek approval for the allocation of additional funds to realise the site's successful nomination to UNESCO, and thereby bring about the associated wide-ranging benefits of such global recognition.

In April 2023, the UK Government, through its Department of Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), announced the inclusion of 'Birkenhead Park, the pioneering People's Park' on its 'new' Tentative List of potential sites for World Heritage Site nomination to UNESCO over the next 10 years. Birkenhead Park is one of only five sites on this exclusive list for the United Kingdom and its overseas territories.

This success comes after a great deal of preparatory work over the last 8 years. Whilst being on this 'shortlist' does not guarantee that the site will be inscribed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, it is the formal 'first step on the ladder' in the journey to seek this prestigious international recognition.

The current phase of the initiative is now to work towards a formal nomination to UNESCO. This will be submitted by the UK Government and will form the basis on which UNESCO's World Heritage Committee will decide on inscribing Birkenhead Park as a World Heritage Site.

Birkenhead Park is within the Claughton ward, although it is anticipated that in the long-term this project will have positive benefits for all wards in the Borough.

This is a Key Decision due to the financial implications contained within this report.

This report supports the following Wirral Council Plan Priorities: -

- To deliver high quality efficient universal services to all residents

- To play our part in addressing the climate emergency and protecting our environment
- To deliver our ambitious regeneration programme through increased investment, jobs and new businesses throughout the borough

This report also supports the following Wirral Council Plan Themes: -

- Theme 1 – Working together to create a more efficient, effective and accessible council
- Theme 4 – Working together to deliver people focused regeneration
- Theme 5 – Working together to protect our environment

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee is requested to:

1. Note the progress made on the Birkenhead Park World Heritage project;
2. Endorse its support for the nomination to UNESCO of Birkenhead Park as a World Heritage Site; and
3. Recommend to the Policy and Resources Committee the allocation of a £975,000 Capital bid, and £580,000 revenue bid, both spread across 4 financial years..

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1.1 Birkenhead Park's journey to achieving World Heritage Inscription is now at a crucial and exciting stage. Having been formally recognised in April 2023 by the UK Government as a prospective future World Heritage Site nominee to UNESCO, Birkenhead Park is now being considered for early nomination, within the next 2 years.
- 1.2 As a consequence, there needs to be a real drive and focus on completing the required preparatory work to support nomination, including developing the nomination submission itself, and carrying out priority improvements and restoration to the site's physical historic assets and its presentation. If the Park's nomination proposal is to be successful, additional capital and revenue funds, as detailed in this report, need to be allocated to support the nomination and achieve the wider benefits of inscription.
- 1.3 Revenue funds are required to complete the existing preliminary Nomination Dossier and draft the accompanying Management Plan for the prospective World Heritage site. The Nomination Dossier is the document that comprehensively details the case for World Heritage inscription, describing the site's universal significance and how it meets UNESCO's exacting criteria.
- 1.4 This work will be ongoing through the Technical Evaluation (DCMS's quality assurance process to assess a site's readiness for nomination) and nomination phases of the project. This process will need to be informed by undertaking various studies, including physical condition surveys of the site, a setting and visual assessment study, a comprehensive long-term tree and vegetation strategy, and a masterplan. It is envisaged that most of the work in drafting the nomination submission package itself will be undertaken by 'in house' staff. This will be supplemented by the commissioning of external expert support and advice to undertake the accompanying studies.
- 1.5 Engaging stakeholders in a highly participatory approach is an essential element of the World Heritage initiative. Consequently, a fixed term, full-time community engagement officer is required, over 4 financial years until 2027/28, to provide additional and focused staff capacity in supporting a successful outcome to the nomination.
- 1.6 As well as developing the nomination package, additional capital funds are also needed to deliver a programme of priority improvements and restoration to the park's physical infrastructure in readiness for UNESCO's formal assessment. The condition and presentation of some of the park's key natural and cultural heritage attributes and landmarks are not presently at the level of World Heritage Site expectations and will need to be addressed as a matter of some urgency for a successful nomination. Various elements need improvement including: park railings and gates; structures including the Grand Entrance, Swiss Bridge and Roman Boathouse; boundaries; and lake platforms. Given that it has been nearly 20 years since the park has received significant investment through the then Heritage Lottery Fund, such additional capital funds are needed even if the Council was not seeking World Heritage recognition.
- 1.7 The ambitions for Birkenhead Park to be recognised as a World Heritage Site fully support the Council's strategic priorities and the vision to promote fairness and

opportunity for people and communities is as important today as when Birkenhead Park was created in 1847, nearly 180 years ago.

- 1.8 The benefits of becoming a World Heritage Site are potentially very significant for Wirral Borough and the wider region, including:
  - building international awareness and a global reputation;
  - growing the Borough's visitor economy, specifically national and international tourism. The World Heritage 'brand' is recognised as a significant driver;
  - increasing opportunities for inward investment and grant funding, and making significant contributions to Birkenhead's comprehensive regeneration programme;
  - increasing community and civic pride; and
  - securing the protection and improved management of this unique public heritage asset for future generations (a key factor for UNESCO).
  
- 1.9 Birkenhead Park's World Heritage ambition sits 'hand in glove' with the priorities of Birkenhead's regeneration programme and its enormous potential should not be underestimated in:
  - driving economic regeneration (generating investment and employment opportunities);
  - enabling social regeneration (tackling the causes of health inequalities for example); and
  - transforming our neighbourhoods (focusing on benefits for people and the environment).
  
- 1.10 The UK National Commission for UNESCO published a report in 2020 titled, '*The National Value of UNESCO Designations to the United Kingdom*'. It confirmed that UNESCO designations (most importantly World Heritage Sites) are significant contributors to the UK economy, notably finding that:
  - UK World Heritage Sites generate nearly £6 million per year per site, on average, in additional revenue resources; and
  - World Heritage Sites are very successful in attracting external funding – over 14 years the National Lottery Heritage Fund invested £566 million in 24 UK World Heritage Sites.
  
- 1.11 The 2015 report, '*An assessment of the Current and Potential Economic Impact of Heritage*', for Gwynedd Council, which has overall responsibility for the UK's most recently inscribed World Heritage Site, The Slate Landscape of North Wales, stated that:
  - Visitor numbers will increase between 6% and 50% after a site is designated as a World Heritage Site;
  - World Heritage Sites promote wider economic growth in the local area of between 1% and 3% in the years following designation;
  - World Heritage Sites can help alleviate socio-economic problems in their local areas;
  - the World Heritage Site inscription process can generate PR worth very large sums. This alerts international visitors of the importance and specialness of a site.

- 1.12 There is certainly some evidence of the positive impact of World Heritage association following the announcement that Birkenhead Park was to be included on the UK's Tentative List. The Tentative List announcement provoked a plethora of national, regional, and local press coverage and hugely raised awareness of the park and the wider area. 'Visits' to the park's website increased by 900%, and there has been much interest from specialist and professional organisations in terms of articles and talks.
- 1.13 Birkenhead Park is greatly valued, particularly so by local communities. It is currently visited by nearly 2 million people every year and, like parks and green spaces throughout the UK as well as further afield, it has been even more important in recent years, providing a much-needed sanctuary for people during the coronavirus pandemic. It has proved that it continues to serve the purpose for which it was created – supporting the public health and recreational needs of the local population.
- 1.14 The attainment of World Heritage Site recognition for the park would be, amongst other things, an enormous boost in terms of local pride, as well as providing a platform for realising the opportunities that exist for expanding and developing the delivery of environmental, health, and educational programmes for our communities.

## **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 At this stage in the project to seek Birkenhead Park's future recognition as a World Heritage Site there are only two options which are either to continue to prepare a nomination to UNESCO, or not to proceed.
- 2.2 Following enthusiastic support from residents, Friends Groups and Elected Members over several years, the site has been accepted on to the UK Government's World Heritage Site Tentative List and is now favoured to proceed to an early nomination. Effectively stopping or delaying the initiative now would no doubt result in considerable reputational damage for the Council and, more significantly, would put an end to realising the significant benefits to Wirral of having a site of such global importance.
- 2.3 Not continuing with the project is likely to be unacceptable to Wirral residents who have stated their wish to achieve the World Heritage Site ambition for the park.

## **3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 3.1 World Heritage Sites are places of 'Outstanding Universal Value', recognised as such under the terms of the 1972 World Heritage Convention. 'Outstanding Universal Value' is defined by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee as cultural and/or natural significance "which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and of importance for present and future generations of all humanity".
- 3.2 World Heritage Sites are nominated by their national government to the World Heritage Committee, evaluated by international Advisory Bodies to the Convention and inscribed on the World Heritage List by the intergovernmental UNESCO World Heritage Committee, a process that takes at least 18 months from submitting a nomination.

- 3.3 To be inscribed on the List, a site has to demonstrate and meet one or more of ten criteria, six cultural and four natural, established to assess 'Outstanding Universal Value', satisfy requirements of authenticity and integrity, and supported by a study of comparable international and national World Heritage and other sites which demonstrates the site's importance.
- 3.4 Sites must have in place adequate legal protection and management systems to protect their 'Outstanding Universal Value', including authenticity and integrity. The international advisory bodies evaluate nominated sites against the criteria before making recommendations to the World Heritage Committee. The Outstanding Universal Value of a World Heritage Site is defined by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee at the time of inscription.
- 3.5 Before a site can be nominated to the World Heritage Committee, it must first be included on the Tentative List of its national government. A Tentative List is a list of sites which a government might consider nominating over a ten-year period. Since 2023, 'Birkenhead Park, the pioneering People's Park' has been on the UK's Tentative List and preparations are being made for its nomination to UNESCO.
- 3.6 Birkenhead Park is the World's first publicly funded municipal park. It was created for the growing population of Birkenhead using public money and has continued in public ownership since its creation. It signified a critical stage in human development in response to the declining health conditions brought on by the Industrial Revolution in the mid-nineteenth century.
- 3.7 Birkenhead Park represents innovation both through its design, incorporating features from cultures across the world, and through its vision of providing a community space where the barriers of social class, age, colour, and creed are non-existent. As a consequence, it profoundly influenced the creation of urban parks worldwide.
- 3.8 It is one of the UK's most significant and important parks and is listed Grade I on Historic England's Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest.
- 3.9 In recognition of its worldwide significance, officers and volunteers have been working for several years to seek its recognition as a World Heritage Site. A committee consisting of UK experts on World Heritage, individuals from local community groups, and Council staff have been in the process of pursuing this ambition. Since being on the UK's World Heritage Site Tentative List that committee has been reformed into the World Heritage Steering Group, chaired by the Chair of the Council's Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee.

#### Future programme

- 3.10 The process of preparing a World Heritage Site nomination is time consuming and can take several years. Following discussions with DCMS and Historic England officials, who manage the process of WHS nominations in the UK, Birkenhead Park is working to a programme that could see it inscribed as a World Heritage Site as early as Summer 2027, (set out in more detail at Appendix 1).
- 3.11 Initially, the Park will have to satisfy a rigorous 'Technical Evaluation' process by the UK Government prior to developing the formal submission package of nomination

documents. This has commenced with a view to completing this part of the process in the Summer. Birkenhead Park has a considerable advantage in that a comprehensive preliminary nomination document for the site has already been prepared and shared with DCMS, receiving extremely positive feedback.

- 3.12 Once the Technical Evaluation has been successfully completed, the nomination process will begin in earnest. This phase essentially will involve the preparation and formal nomination submission to UNESCO. The submission will consist of two documents:
- the Nomination Document; and
  - the Site Management Plan.

Officers are currently working towards a draft nomination submission in September 2025, with the following full submission in February 2026.

- 3.13 During UNESCO's consideration of the nomination submission, the Park will be expected to host site assessment visits by its appointed Advisory Body. These will likely take place in Summer 2026.

#### **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 Commencing in 2024/25, the next phase is anticipated to be undertaken over 4 financial years. The associated investment required is significant and anticipated as:
- £580k revenue costs directly associated with preparing for nomination; and
  - £975k on priority capital improvements to the condition of the Park's heritage features.

- 4.2 Revenue funds required to support the development of the World Heritage Site nomination include:
- Additional staff capacity, including a fixed term full-time community engagement officer (£54,000 per year, including 'On-costs', for 4 years – total of £216,000);
  - Commissioning expert support and advice in developing the Management Plan for the World Heritage Site, including carrying out condition surveys, setting study, park masterplan, tree and vegetation strategy, conservation area design guide, etc. (£310,000);
  - Community engagement and consultation activities (£24,000);
  - Presentation of the nomination submission package (£20,000); and
  - Assessment visit by UNESCO's advisory body (£10,000).

This additional revenue will be sought from Budget Growth and appropriate Regeneration funds.

- 4.3 Capital funds required to support the development of the World Heritage Site nomination include:
- Restoration and replacement of gates and railings (£120,000);
  - Restoration of main historic buildings and structures – specifically Grand Entrance, Swiss Bridge, and Roman Boathouse (£230,000);
  - Ancillary improvements to park boundaries, site furniture, and lake platform structures (£180,000);

- Refurbishment of the park's visitor centre and facilities (£50,000);
- Facility improvements including visitor centre refurbishments, and installation of automated visitor counters (£100,000);
- Capitalised staff capacity to deliver the capital improvements (£120,000); and
- Allowance for inflation and contingency (£195,000).

This additional revenue will be sought from a Capital Bid as previously submitted in January 2024 (Appendix 4).

- 4.4 This investment is set out in more detail at Appendix 2 (revenue) and Appendix 3 (capital) of this report.

## **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 World Heritage Sites are places of 'Outstanding Universal Value', as set out in UNESCO's 1972 World Heritage Convention. As a State Party to the Convention, the United Kingdom is required to protect, conserve, present and transmit to future generations its World Heritage Sites. In the United Kingdom, this is done primarily through the spatial planning system.
- 5.2 At the local level, local authorities play an important role. They are responsible for spatial planning as well as having important roles in communication, management, promotion, and sometimes as owners of parts of World Heritage Sites.
- 5.3 Local Planning authorities must ensure that appropriate policies are in place to protect and conserve World Heritage Sites and their settings, including any defined buffer zone or its equivalent.
- 5.4 Birkenhead Park has a number of recognised protected heritage designations already. It is a Registered Historic Park (Grade I), is within a conservation area, and within the proposed World Heritage Site area there are 42 listed structures (one is Grade II\* and the remainder Grade II listed). Birkenhead Park is therefore well placed to meet the requirement of World Heritage status, as it is already working to a range of protected heritage designations.
- 5.5 As the owner of the majority of the proposed World Heritage Site, and as the local planning authority with powers to control proposed development, the Council already holds a key position in protecting and conserving the site. As part of the work to develop the Site Management Plan, advice will be sought from officers in the Regeneration and Place Directorate's Planning team to ensure the robustness of planning policies to cover a World Heritage Site in the Borough.

## **6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS**

- 6.1 ICT: there are no additional ICT implications.
- 6.2 Staffing: additional capacity will be required to support the nomination phase of the project, specifically with regard to engaging stakeholders in the initiative. Consequently, a fixed term, full-time community engagement officer is proposed, over



4 financial years until 2027/28. This role will enable the establishment and development of strong, long-lasting relationships with the various stakeholders with an interest in the park. This is an essential role in helping to support the requirements of the Site Management Plan – to show that stakeholders are actively engaged in the site. The nature of this role is such that, although being focused on and based at Birkenhead Park, the postholder will be able to provide support for initiatives at other parks.

- 6.3 Assets: in support of the World Heritage Site nomination process it will be necessary to undertake improvement and restoration work to a number of key buildings, structures, and features in the park. The park in many respects is overdue this level of investment with the last major refurbishment of the park taking place in 2006 using Lottery Grant money.

## **7.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

- 7.1 Assuming that the recommendations in this report are approved, there is a risk to the Council of being unsuccessful in its bid to see Birkenhead Park recognised as a World Heritage Site – either that the UK Government decides not to nominate it to UNESCO, or UNESCO's World Heritage Committee does not approve its nomination after assessment. To minimise this, officers will continue to liaise closely with DCMS, Historic England's advisors, and other influential individuals and organisations as the nomination process progresses.

## **8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

- 8.1 Engaging the wide range of stakeholders with an interest in Birkenhead Park and its potential World Heritage Site recognition is an essential element of the overall initiative presented here. Consequently, a fixed term, full-time community engagement officer is proposed, over 4 financial years until 2027/28 to provide additional staff capacity.
- 8.2 A comprehensive programme of 'engagement' with visitors, local people, interest groups, and wider stakeholders will be developed to gain a thorough understanding of park use, views, and perceptions. This participative approach will form the basis for enabling stakeholders to have a role in decision-making on aspects of the park's management and development.
- 8.3 The long-established community group, the Friends of Birkenhead Park, is working extremely closely with the Council in our aspirations for the park and is fully supportive.
- 8.4 Community consultation exercises which have been undertaken by the park's team in recent years have received overwhelming support and enthusiasm for the park potentially becoming a World Heritage Site.

## **9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact

Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.

- 9.2 An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken as part of this report. It is published here: <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments>
- 9.3 Birkenhead Park, like all parks and green spaces throughout the Borough, is provided for the benefit of the whole community and any programme or initiative that seeks its improvement will be undertaken to endeavour that there is no discrimination towards any section of the community.

## **10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 As a large public park in an urban conurbation, Birkenhead Park has a potentially huge contribution to make in terms of increasing biodiversity as well as combating the effects of a changing climate – not only within its site boundary but also in raising awareness and promoting behavioural change to its visitors and local residents.
- 10.2 The site's future designation as a World Heritage Site will certainly provide an extra level of protection for the historic park, and its immediate surroundings, as an internationally significant cultural landscape. Indirectly, it will also provide spin-off benefits to access expertise and external funding to realise the biodiversity opportunities and address the park's resilience to a changing climate.

## **11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 Wirral is facing stark economic, social and health inequalities. The Wirral Plan is committed to addressing this. With Community Wealth Building at its heart, the Wirral Plan sets out how to tackle this and makes a major contribution to improving the economic, social and health outcomes of the borough.
- 11.2 The significance of success in having Birkenhead Park inscribed as a World Heritage Site must not be underestimated. Such a designation would bring enormous benefits to the wider regeneration of Birkenhead as outlined earlier in this report – in terms of economic, social, educational, and health impacts, as well as the more obvious environmental outcomes of such a public space.

**REPORT AUTHOR: Rob Belcher**  
Birkenhead Park's General Manager (World Heritage)  
robbelcher@wirral.gov.uk

**Matthew Humble**  
Head of Parks & Countryside  
matthewhumble@wirral.gov.uk

## **APPENDICES**

Appendix 1 – Anticipated timescale to World Heritage Site nomination and inscription

Appendix 2 – Indicative additional revenue budget requirement for the World Heritage Site nomination phase

Appendix 3 – Indicative additional capital budget requirement for the World Heritage Site nomination phase

Appendix 4 – Capital Bid for Birkenhead Park (January 2024)

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Wirral Council's (Draft) Preliminary Nomination Document for Birkenhead Park People's Garden, 2023

UNESCO's 'Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention', July 2019

United Kingdom National Commission for UNESCO's 'The National Value of UNESCO Designations to the United Kingdom', 2020

## **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

This report is being considered by the Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee in accordance with Sections B, C and F of its Terms of Reference;

(B) community engagement, incorporating the Council's approach to equalities, inclusion communities, neighbourhoods and the voluntary and charitable sector, community wealth building and social value;

(C) in considering options and develop proposals for neighbourhood arrangements, including capacity building, use of assets and devolving powers and services to neighbourhoods;

(F) concerning tourism, the arts, culture and heritage, including provision of theatre, entertainments, conferences and events.

## **SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)**

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Tourism, Communities, Culture &amp; Leisure Committee</b>	<b>23 November 2020</b>