

MINUTE EXTRACT

TOURISM, COMMUNITIES, CULTURE & LEISURE COMMITTEE - 19 SEPTEMBER 2024

22 **BIRKENHEAD PARK: WORLD HERITAGE PROJECT UPDATE AND FINANCIAL RESOURCING**

The Director of Neighbourhood Services had submitted a report to the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee, to provide an update on progress and achievements regarding the Birkenhead Park World Heritage project; to set out the steps ahead for achieving the park's recognition as a World Heritage Site; and to 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.

The Director of Neighbourhoods informed the committee that officers had submitted a late change to the recommendations within the report. The Director told the committee that in the last few weeks, the Director of Finance had instructed officers to avoid all unnecessary discretionary expenditure within the authority, thereby instigating a spending freeze. He asked that members be willing to consider changing recommendation 3, as at this time it was not realistic to ask the Policy and Resources Committee to ask Council to allocate a capital bid of £975,000 and a revenue bid of £580,000 to this project due to the difficult financial situation.

The proposed change read as follows:

Recommend to the Policy & Resources Committee that, in light of the council's current and continuing financial position, that the Director of Neighbourhood Services is authorised to proceed with the project as described subject to securing external funding. Should that fail, then the matter can be reconsidered by members in 2025/26 when the council's financial circumstances may be clearer.

He said that the report would ask members to recognise the importance of the Council's World Heritage Status bid, and to authorise officers to proceed with this project should they be able to secure external funding. He said he was optimistic that this could be secured.

The Head of Service for Parks and Countryside, and the Birkenhead Park General Manager, introduced the report. They explained that Birkenhead Park was refuted to be the world's first publicly-funded, municipal park, and was one of the UK's most significant parks, holding a Grade I Historic England status. It had a profound impact on parks worldwide, most famously on Central Park in New York.

Officers had been working for years to get recognition as a World Heritage site. Obtaining this would have a significant impact, building international awareness and a global reputation, and increasing opportunities within the visitor economy and for investment. It would also have an impact on the Birkenhead regeneration project, though it was not officially a part of the project. Officers stressed the impact of the World Heritage brand, and told the committee that research into this had suggested that world heritage sites were significant contributors to the local economy, and were also usually successful in attracting external funding.

In April 2023, they had submitted an application and Birkenhead Park was accepted onto the UK's tentative list of potential future sites of nominations to UNESCO. This list was reviewed every 10 years, and Birkenhead Park was now one of five sites on this list. Whilst a place on the list was not a guarantee, it was a step in the right direction, and was a major achievement with the high standards required for sites.

Officers were currently working towards a formal nomination, submitted by the government and UNESCO's World Heritage Committee would review this. Officers were working to a programme to see the park's potential inscription as a world heritage site as early as summer 2027. It would be the first site nominated from the UK's tentative list. Officers would have to satisfy a rigorous technical evaluation process, and following this submission were expecting a response by December 2024. The nomination process would follow the technical evaluation, and officers were currently working towards a draft nomination submission for September 2025, and a full submission in February 2026.

Preparatory work needed to be completed to support the nomination, including carrying out priority improvements to the site's historic assets and presentation. If the nomination was to be successful, additional capital and revenue funds were needed to support this nomination.

Members raised the following questions/points of clarification:

- Whether the delay in funding would have an impact on meeting timescales for improvements to the park
- The report stated that the park was visited by "nearly 2 million every year", were these numbers tracked by officers
- Options for external funding
- Improving disability access to the park
- Catering offerings within the park, ensuring the ethos of this could be consistent with that of the park
- Rates of antisocial behaviour within the park, particularly involving drug use
- Amending the recommendation to request for Policy and Resources Committee to allocate funding for staffing costs

- Health and safety concerns regarding restoration improvements being delayed
- Opportunities to 'twin' with other parks
- Options for community payback schemes to be involved with the park's improvement works
- Revenue generated by the park
- Projected revenue should the park be granted World Heritage status
- Sponsored run for the park

Members also thanked officers for their work on this project.

The Chair proposed that, along with the amended recommendation from officers, that recommendation one be amended to read as follows:

The Committee welcomed the progress made on the Birkenhead Park World Heritage Project, and thanked officers, the Friends of Birkenhead Park and members of the Birkenhead Park Advisory Committee for their work on this project.

Resolved - That the Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee:

- 1. Welcomed the progress made on the Birkenhead Park World Heritage Project, and thanked officers, the Friends of Birkenhead Park and the members of the Birkenhead Park Advisory Committee for their work on this project;**
- 2. Endorsed its support for the nomination to UNESCO of Birkenhead Park as a World Heritage Site; and**
- 3. Recommended to the Policy and Resources Committee that, in light of the Council's current and continuing financial position, that the Director of Neighbourhood Services is authorised to proceed with the project as described, subject to securing external funding. Should that fail, then the matter can be considered by members in 2025/26 when the Council's financial circumstances may be clearer.**