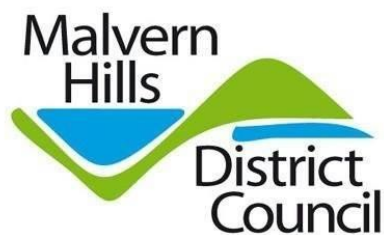


South Worcestershire Development Plan Review

Areas of Informal Recreation (AIRs) Site Allocations Background Paper



March 2022

1. Background

- 1.1. The Worcestershire Green Infrastructure Framework 3: Access and Recreation Document (2020)¹ highlighted limited opportunities to expand existing informal recreation sites across Worcestershire. The report identified areas of search for sites for new recreation assets in the county, including three locations in south Worcestershire. The focus for these areas was on the creation of new large strategic informal recreation sites which form part of a wider network of accessible greenspaces, and to take pressure off existing Green Infrastructure assets, such as the Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Croome Court, whilst also not increasing inappropriate accessibility to any European site.
- 1.2. Further, work undertaken by Footprint Ecology² relating to recreational impacts on the Malvern Hills Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI), including visitor surveys, established that there is an urgent need to address recreational pressures on the Malvern Hills SSSI, and that this pressure has been potentially exacerbated by increased use during the Covid-19 pandemic. The report identifies that further housing growth will increase pressure on the Malvern Hills SSSI but recognises the role that strategic planning has in ensuring adequate protection. A range of recommendations relating to visitor management and access strategies and the related mitigation measures were identified, including the creation of alternative greenspace; 53% of interviewees indicated that they would use a new Country Park or similar area of new greenspace. Such areas have now been named 'Areas of Informal Recreation', in the initial process however, they were referred to as 'Country Parks'.
- 1.3. The concerns related to increased pressure on the Malvern Hills SSSI have also been raised by Natural England as part of the SWDP Review process.

2. Methodology and Assessment

- 2.1. In response to the evidence base updates discussed above, the South Worcestershire Councils (SWC) complemented the County Council's recommended areas of search with their own 'Call for Sites' exercise.
- 2.2. The Call for Sites was conducted in June and July 2020 and provided the following background information:

"As part of the ongoing Review of the South Worcestershire Development Plan (SWDP), the SWC are conducting a Call for Sites inviting landowners and / or their agents / developers to submit land for a potential large scale Country Park site.

¹ https://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/downloads/file/3776/worcestershire_green_infrastructure_framework_3

² SWDPR Footprint Ecology.

The SWC are required to plan, monitor and manage the delivery of at least 13,957 additional new dwellings across the plan area to 2041. The addition of the new dwellings would increase the population by approximately 32,195. This would undoubtedly put additional pressure on existing beauty spots and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) including the Malvern Hills SSSI, Worcester Woods Country Park, Broadway Tower, Croome Court and a number of other popular leisure destinations.

In order to reduce this pressure from increased footfall in the future damaging these important assets, the SWC are aiming to facilitate the delivery of a new large scale leisure destination in the form of a Country Park.

The site for a new Country Park would ideally need to be a minimum of 50ha in size, with direct and safe access on to the public highway and would preferably be on a bus route.

The deadline for submissions is 5pm on Friday 24th July 2020, after which Officers assessed submissions to determine the suitability of the land as a potential allocation for a Country Park in the SWDP Review.

Please note if you had submitted a site / land in the past through the SHLAA / SHELAA process or through the Renewable and Low Carbon Energy Call for Sites process you needed to submit the information again as this Call for Sites exercise is specific to identifying potential Country Park sites and not housing and employment sites or renewable and low carbon energy projects”.

2.3. The Call for Sites form sought information on a variety of considerations, including current land use, any legal constraints, availability and ownership of the site, planning history, existing features including trees and other ecological and biological features of importance, known planning designations, means of access, accessibility to public transport, and availability of utilities and services. The Call for Sites form also sought confirmation that the landowner(s) support the development of the site as a Country Park, and any supporting comments.

2.4. There were 17 submissions made in total, with a full list provided at Appendix 1, broken down by District as follows:

Malvern Hills - 6
Worcester - 1
Wychavon - 10

2.5. Of the 17 submissions made, 10 were ruled out at the initial sifting stage as unsuitable due to one of the following reasons:

- Availability Unknown / Not a Country Park Proposal – submitted speculatively by a party with no control over the parcel of land up for consideration or submitted as an aspiration without wholesale landowner support to date (CP004, CP011, CP013 and CP014).

- Deliverability – requires residential development to support deliver of Country Park, in a location which is otherwise not sustainable in planning policy terms (CP008, CP015 and CP016)
 - Size – less than the required 50 hectares, and not a reasonable size to consider it as a Country Park site in combination with other submissions (CP009)
 - Flood Risk – majority of the site within Flood Zone 2 or 3 (CP012 and CP017).
- 2.6. Seven sites were then subject to further detailed assessment, with consultee input from the Council’s Landscape and Wildlife Site Projects Officers, Natural England and Worcestershire County Council Highways department; the full list of site assessment criteria is provided at Appendix 2, with the comprehensive site assessment spreadsheet provided at Appendix 3.
- 2.7. During the assessment process, it became clear that the initial expectations of an allocation and delivery of a single Country Park site which could achieve accreditation was not necessarily achievable or appropriate, and that sites which may be available for more general recreational use without the facilities required to become an accredited Country Park are equally as important in seeking to limit recreational pressures on existing sites, as identified in the evidence base. This is particularly pertinent given there is currently only one accredited Country Park in south Worcestershire, Worcester Woods Country Park, supported by a network of informal recreational green spaces with varying degrees of facilities and accessibility.
- 2.8. It was also observed that the term Country Park is vague and can interpreted in a number of ways, several of which are not appropriate in this context. As a result, the ‘Country Parks’ have been renamed ‘Areas of Informal Recreation’ (AIR) and the focus has been altered to allocate sites for recreational green space, with a description of the anticipated uses on site.

3. Site Allocations

- 3.1. Further to the assessment process, three sites are deemed appropriate for allocation in the SWDP Review as new country park / recreational green space sites:

Site Ref.	Site Location	Site Area	Local Authority
CP001	Lower Hall Farm, Hampton Lovett	73.21ha	Wychavon
CP003	Land south of Jennet Tree Lane, Deblin’s Green	46.55ha	Malvern Hills
CP006f	Land north-east of Blenheim Farm, Honeybourne	59.31ha	Wychavon

- 3.2. The delivery of these sites will involve the creation of informal publicly accessible land intended to increase the amount of natural green space available to local residents for their recreation and wellbeing. This will include development of routes and trails suitable for all visitors and provision of cycle and limited car parking facilities in the first instance. Opportunities to provide educational access may be explored in the future, as may the addition of other visitor facilities, such as toilets and refreshments, subject to further consultation on a site by site basis.

Lower Hall Farm, Hampton Lovett

Creation of traditional parkland on existing agricultural land with new access routes incorporating woodland, hedgerow, and wetland features. Provision of a small-scale café and car parking facilities.

Land south of Jennet Tree Lane, Deblin's Green

Retention and enhancement of pastoral and arable landscape with woodland and veteran trees, with increased and enhanced public access routes within the site and to the adjacent Old Hills. Provision of small-scale car parking facilities.

Land north-east of Blenheim Farm, Honeybourne

Creation of new woodland and associated habitats with new and enhanced access trails around the site. Provision of small-scale car parking facilities

4. Conclusions and Next Steps

- 4.1. The SWC are seeking to address the likely increased pressure on existing recreational land through the provision of site allocations for country park / recreational green space. Through a specific Call for Sites exercise conducted in June and July 2020, 17 submissions were assessed for their suitability for allocation using a range of criteria and with input from bodies such as Natural England. Three sites have been deemed suitable for allocation: Lower Hall Farm, Hampton Lovett; Land south of Jennet Tree Lane, Deblin's Green; and Land north-east of Blenheim Farm, Honeybourne.
- 4.2. The three AIR site allocations are being publicised and subject to public consultation for the first time as part of the wider SWDP Review Publication (Regulation 19) consultation in November and December 2022.
- 4.3. Given the infancy of the SWDP Review and the elements of the Local Plan process still to be undertaken, there is a possibility that the site allocations may change before the SWDP Review is adopted. The country park / recreational green space site allocations which feature in the adopted version of the SWDP Review will be afforded in-principle planning policy support for such development within the SWDP Review plan period to 2041. It will be the responsibility of the landowners and their agents to bring these sites forward, with support from the SWC where necessary and appropriate.

Appendix 1 – Call for Sites Submissions

CP001 Lower Hall Farm, Hampton Lovett

CP002 Land at Church Farm, Grafton Flyford

CP003 Land south of Jennet Tree Lane, Deblin's Green

CP004 Land adjacent to The Valley, Evesham

CP005 Land at Hill Court Farm, Throckmorton

CP006 Heart of England Forest (Ab Lench, Sherriff's Lench, Broad Marston and Honeybourne)

CP007 Land at Leigh Sinton Farm and Nurseries Ltd, Leigh Sinton

CP008 Land at Middle and Upper Battenhall Farm, Worcester

CP009 Land south of Pointon Way, Hampton Lovett

CP010 Land at Ashmores Farm, Evesham Road, Norton

CP011 Land west of Crutch Lane, Droitwich Spa

CP012 Land south of Temeside Way, adjacent to River Severn

CP013 Land from Malvern Wells to Guarlford

CP014 Land from Sherrad's Green to Powick

CP015 Land north of Martley Road, Lower Broadheath

CP016 Park Farm, Evesham

CP017 Land north of Pershore Bridges, Pershore

Appendix 2 – Site Assessment Criteria

ESSENTIAL CRITERIA	Landowner supportive of Country Park development?
	Site available within SWDPR Plan Period?
	Any significant Legal Constraints?
	Deliverable and Viable?
	At least 95% Greenfield?
	Land constraints which would limit building development (café / visitor centre etc.)?
	Flood Risk?
	Safe Access (vehicular and other to include current or potential cycle route)?
	Availability of Public Transport?
	Less than 10 miles from an urban area (Worcester or a Town)?
	Size
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS	Quality of the site?
	Habitats?
	Viewpoints?
	National Habitat Recovery Network?
	Existing Heritage and Landscape features that could make the proposal more attractive to visitors?
	Natural England Comments
OUTCOME	Ruled In / Out?
	Officer Summary

	Allocated as a Country Park in the SWDPR?
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Appendix 3 – Site Assessments Spreadsheet