

Birchall Recreation Ground

Management Plan

2024 – 2034



1. Foreword

This management plan seeks to recognise the importance of this recreation ground and how improvements at this site could be developed for the benefit of the residents, while considering opportunities for environmental and biodiversity improvements.

We have a commitment to care for the site, for the benefit of all users, by working with communities in identifying priorities and using available resources wisely. This management plan will recognise all the valuable work that has been done to date and focus on the future management and maintenance of the site. Considering sustainability, it will ensure that any developments or refurbishments are completed in a manner which are sensitive to local community needs and the nature of the site in terms of its historical, ecological, and environmental value.

2. Introduction

South of Leek, lies Birchall Recreation Ground. Used traditionally for its football pitches and running track, it is recognised as a welcoming green space. Recent developments here have seen the addition of a perimeter accessible pathway, increased seating and the installation of outdoor fitness equipment. All of which creates an environment for the community that encourages them to move more. The site is now used and enjoyed by a wider section of the community for walking, running, casual exercise and movement, as well as the more traditional organised team sports on the grass pitches.

This plan will define the current and future management and maintenance of Birchall Recreation Ground for a 10-year period from 2024 to 2034 with a review annually. In compiling the plan, we acknowledge the essential and valuable contribution from all key stakeholders, partners, councillors and community groups. Without their contribution, this plan would be severely limited.

3. The Purpose of the Management Plan

It is imperative that this management plan provides clear direction for the future management and maintenance of the green space, ensuring that the area is conserved and enhanced in its entirety whilst balancing the needs of visitors and residents alike.

This management plan seeks to: -

- Take a holistic approach to the future management of the green space, play development and supporting opportunities to be active by assessing professional and community needs and desires.
- To establish a shared vision and objectives for the green space.
- Ensure community involvement within the development and management of the space.
- Establish standards that are effective and accountable to ensure clear management and maintenance objectives are identified and implemented.
- Benchmark the green space and analyse the management regimes and policies against best practice.
- Prioritise resources and action to ensure effective management of the space and the success of any future developments.

4. Responsibility for the Plan

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council is responsible for the overall management of all our parks and open spaces.

The Service Commissioning section of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council, working in partnership with all stakeholders and the community, has compiled this plan. Implementation of the plan will also be led by the Service Commissioning section with specific project leads as shown in the Action Plan.

Likewise, the monitoring and review of the plan will be led by the Service Commissioning section. It is recognised that regular effective monitoring and review of the plan will ensure that the document evolves to meet changing priorities.

However, all key stakeholders and users of the park together with the wider local community will be engaged to ensure that future revisions reflect a combination of views, needs and aspirations.

5. Strategic Context of the Management Plan

The Green Spaces Strategy is the overarching document that sets out the strategic context which informs the management of all our parks and green spaces. For this strategy to focus on the future effectively, it is important to recognise the key influencing documents and evidence base which frame the provision and development of the green spaces. It is also equally important for people to understand the current context in which green spaces are managed and maintained, as this will play a part in decision making and delivery of future projects which aim to maintain and enhance these areas.

The purpose of our Green Spaces Strategy is to bring these key issues into focus and by doing so:-

- 1) Set the overarching context and direction for the management and development of our green spaces.
- 2) Outline the approach for managing, protecting and developing green spaces, which gives consideration to the council's resources, management and maintenance responsibilities, and the contributions from community and interest groups.
- 3) Highlight a set of principles which will guide future maintenance, investment, community engagement decisions and actions regarding our green spaces.
- 4) Agree a set of priorities which focus effort, resources and decision making, ensuring that our green spaces remain high quality spaces for everyone to enjoy.
- 5) Help secure additional investment and external funding towards enhancing infrastructure, facilities and opportunities for the benefit of the community.

6. Site Details

6.1 Site Address and Access

The site is an informal recreation area with sports pitches and a large area of open green space. It is situated off Cheddleton Road, within the south of Leek and adjacent to Leek Golf Club, with access to the old Leekbrook railway line path.

The postal address is as follows:

Cheddleton Road, Leek, ST13 5RE

It should be noted, however, that postal correspondence relating to this space should be directed to:

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council, C/O Service Commissioning, Moorlands House, Leek, Staffordshire. ST13 6HQ.

A plan of the site is shown below:

Birchall



The main entrance and car park to the site is off Cheddleton Road, to the east of the site. There are secondary (pedestrian) entrances off the old Leekbrook railway line to the west edge of the site.

There is a good-sized car parking area available on-site. The site is easily accessible by foot for the surrounding community and neighbouring housing estates who can access it directly from their homes.

6.2 Ownership and Designations

The Recreation Ground sits within the Leek south ward of the Staffordshire Moorlands and is owned and managed by Staffordshire Moorlands District Council. The town of Leek lies within the Staffordshire Moorlands area of Staffordshire with a resident population of approximately 20,604 (2021).

There are no public rights of way across the site. There is, however, a new hard-surfaced path that runs around the site perimeter which improves accessibility around this natural environment, while encouraging physical activity.

7. Physical Assets

It is essential to fully understand the physical assets of the site, including both natural and manmade features. This will assist in determining the strengths and weaknesses in the information base for the site. This in turn will provide a better understanding of the context of the site and inform how we might develop and effectively manage it for the future.

Sitting on the outskirts of the town, the site looks out across fields to the east and otherwise is settled into a ring of trees and hedgerows, making it the perfect environment to enjoy peaceful recreation.

- **Football Pitches**

There are 11 football pitches on site (depending on configuration, from small-sided mini-football through to adult pitches). All the pitches are registered under the FA's Pitch Power scheme, which enables the Council to inspect the pitches and access support from the FA to ensure that the turf and sub soil are healthy and good quality.

- **Running Track**

The running track was refurbished and resurfaced in August 2022 and is a 400-yard cinder (redgra) track, available to everyone and regularly used by Staffordshire Moorlands Athletic Club on a Tuesday evening for their coaching sessions with their junior and senior members.

- **Pavilion and parking**

The recreation ground provides adequate parking and a pavilion where clubs can meet and change. Housing a meeting room, changing and toilet facilities.

- **Perimeter path, outdoor fitness equipment, seating and signage**

The park provides several opportunities for walking or jogging around its perimeter path as well as its running track. These recently built and refurbished paths, along with the outdoor fitness equipment, provide plenty of opportunity for open access physical activity. The seating throughout gives the opportunity to rest as you go, as well as providing tranquil spots to sit and engage with the natural environment of the green space.

8. Value Assessments

8.1 Educational Value

The site provides a valuable educational resource for schools/nurseries and other community organisations, such as Brownies, Beavers and Cubs, to encourage outdoor activities and learning experiences.

8.2 Recreational and Amenity Value

The site is a valuable recreational and amenity resource. It is a well-placed green space on the outskirts of the town centre and could easily be linked into walks around the town and much further with access to the Leekbrook Line. Having a green space near to where we live improves our quality of life and is known to help reduce the risk of physical inactivity.

Birchall Recreation Ground provides excellent opportunities for informal recreation to the local population which it serves. There is a good, hard surfaced car park providing spaces for more than 100 vehicles, including two disabled marked bays. A new perimeter path runs around the site, encouraging users to walk freely. There is easy access onto the old Leekbrook railway line path, providing the ability to utilise this green corridor for wider walking and cycling activities for the local community.

It is currently used for informal recreation and sport, as it has approx. 11 marked grass football pitches (dependent on need). The site also has a cinder (redgra) running track which is 400 yards in length and uniquely shaped with long straights and tight bends. Recently, a new outdoor fitness area was installed at the site to offer even more opportunity for the community to be active. The fitness area is located near to the car park and just off the new pathway for ease of access. The site is regularly used for walking and dog walking and many residents appreciate the beauty of the natural space.

There is a large main pavilion building which can cater for four teams at any one time, with additional match official changing and toilets. The pavilion also has a usable space for community hire or exercise classes. Additionally, there is a small storage building located on the side of the running track which is currently used by Staffordshire Moorlands Athletics Club (SMAC). The main pavilion building will be used for group exercise classes whilst Brough Park LC is closed, whilst also retaining its football changing facilities.

The site is located on the edge of Leek and blends recreational opportunities with the benefit of the natural living environment. Priority species such as bees can flourish within the area. We aim to work, together with the local community and partner organisations such as Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, to ensure that we help to mitigate climate change with the help of our natural environments by changing our maintenance regimes and increasing biodiversity within this area.

Towards the end of 2024 Leek's first official parkrun commenced at Birchall Recreation Ground. In the first few weeks of this new activity around 150 to 200 people were regularly attending, to walk and run the 5km course. This activity is completely free and relies on volunteers who ensure the activity is managed safely.

8.3 Ecological Value

Having green spaces helps to contribute to a wide range of ecosystem services that improve urban space and enhance the lives of the residents, particularly their health and wellbeing. In addition to the benefits of climate change mitigation, green spaces can improve air quality, with trees in particular serving as natural air filters and helping to reduce the risk of respiratory problems. Providing an opportunity to reconnect with the natural environment can help to reduce stress, lower blood pressure and improve overall mood. Natural environments have also been proven to stimulate the mind and promote relaxation, reducing stress and fatigue.

Good quality and biodiverse green spaces can help act as stepping stones for species moving between habitats and help contribute to nature's recovery. With the current nature crisis including many species threatened with extinction, it has never been more important to improve biodiversity in our local green spaces and help contribute towards 'bigger, better, more, and joined-up' habitats so that wildlife can flourish. Implementing changes in management and maintenance of green spaces will support the recovery of nature across the Staffordshire Moorlands in line with the aims and ambitions of the Council's Plan for Nature.

The Plan for Nature makes suggestions to increase carbon sequestration at the site through "maintaining existing hedgerows and planting flower margins around the car park and some of the periphery". Wider Nature Recovery Network mapping indicates that the location of the site is strategic in relation to woodland, wetland and moorland habitat creation, and may also be an important stepping stone for grassland habitats.

Several areas around the site have been identified as suitable for reduced mowing regimes, resulting in improved grassland habitats. Changing to an annual 'cut and collect' meadow mowing regime in these identified areas will lower nutrient levels in the soil and encourage grass and flower diversity. In the longer term, varied mowing in these areas could be explored to encourage further diversity of habitats through different sward lengths. After 3 – 5 years, the soil may be tested to determine whether additional seeding of wildflowers would provide further benefit to biodiversity. Framing strips or similar will be cut next to footpaths where these border with areas of longer grass, and potentially around the border of reduced mowing areas to ensure they look deliberately managed.

Tree planting opportunities have also been identified in several locations around the site – around benches for climate change adaption through shading (a number of which have been planted already), and on the top of the sloped ground on the northeast margin of the site – small whips could be used for the latter due to low accessibility and reduced footfall.

To the northwest of the site is an overgrown field which has been left to re-vegetate naturally over time, with dominant species prevailing. This area does not fall under current mowing regimes. The area has good potential for meadow habitat creation through changes to mowing regimes and subsequent seeding or traditional methods using local cuttings to establish a meadow habitat.

In front of the aforementioned field is a drainage ditch which has started to naturally cover over and re-vegetate – vegetation should be left to grow here to reduce accessibility to dogs and young children.

The existing hedgerow line to the south of the site has the potential for enhancement through gap-filling and robust maintenance regimes. Including a 'buffer strip' of longer grass in front of the hedgerow will improve habitat quality for mammals such as hedgehogs through increased ground

cover. A new hedgerow has been planted (winter 2023/24) along the west boundary, alongside the Leekbrook line.

Nature in your Neighbourhood is a new project which is being rolled out across the Staffordshire Moorlands. This is a partnership project involving Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, Keele University, Moorlands Climate Action, Staffordshire Council Voluntary Youth Services, OUTSIDE and Staffordshire Moorlands District Council. Some of our sites may be nominated for this project and that may open up further opportunities for community involvement and ecological improvements.

9. Management Responsibilities

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council will be responsible for the overall management of the green space. Working with partners, the community, and other interest groups to develop and deliver projects that improve the green space.

Alliance Environmental Services (AES) are the Council's delivery partner and, as such, would be responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the site and also hold the budgetary responsibility regarding maintenance. A schedule for the associated standards of maintenance is defined by the contract with AES, and the site itself will develop a specific maintenance schedule and Tree Management Plan.

Community and interest groups are a vital and valued support network and play an important role in assisting with maintenance and development projects. These groups can also provide additional capacity, undertake selected maintenance tasks, and could attract additional funding to help an improvement plan.

10. Health and Safety

Health and safety is of primary concern to the Council. AES will be responsible for the day-to-day maintenance and management of the site, and this includes keeping the area safe for the public to use. Regular site inspections, six monthly in-depth surveys and regular tree inspections are all part of the suite of checks and procedures which are in place. These will ensure that all issues, repairs, and replacements are identified quickly and scheduled into the work programmes as necessary.

The park has a site-specific risk assessment which is reviewed and updated annually by the Operations Service Lead (AES). All AES staff are given specific training to ensure they are always operating in a safe manner. Any work on our parks and open spaces which is carried out by external contractors, partners or community groups/volunteers is governed by the Council's health and safety policies, which they must abide by and follow.

11. Involving Communities

It is well recognised that for any park or public open space to be successfully managed it must respond to the needs of the local community and users. Actively engaging and encouraging community participation and involvement is essential in the continued development of the site.

The establishment of a community group in this area would help to achieve the following:

- Provide a community focus for the site
- Take practical action to improve the area
- Raise the profile of the space
- Help to raise funds to improve the site

- Sustain and enhance the flora and fauna of the green space and its habitats.
- Preserve public access into and throughout the space in perpetuity.

12. Marketing and Communications

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council is responsible for managing Birchall Recreation Ground and has a variety of communication mechanisms that can be utilised to give feedback on the performance and continued relevance of this Management Plan. As the Council is committed to reducing the need for paperwork, there is an increased reliance on the use of the relevant sections of the Staffordshire Moorlands District Council website and social media platforms.

The Council has both a Facebook page and an X account:

- Facebook - <https://m.facebook.com/staffsMoorlands>
- X (Formerly Twitter) - <https://x.com/StaffMoorlandDC>

For anything specific to Birchall Recreation Ground, the link below gives a number of options for how you might get in touch.

- <https://www.staffsmoorlands.gov.uk/article/1169/Birchall-Playing-Fields-Leek>

The Council can also be contacted by writing to:

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council, C/O Service Commissioning, Moorlands House, Stockwell Street, Leek, ST13 6HQ.

13. Action Plan

The Green Spaces Strategy provides the guiding principles and headline priorities for the management and development of our green spaces and following on from this, we can develop specific site action plans. These plans identify our priorities, linked to the Strategy, and ensure they are appropriate, relevant, resourced and provide a flexible and realistic approach to realising the aims of the Management Plan.

Green Spaces Strategy Objectives

We will:

1. Review maintenance regimes to ensure that our green spaces are maintained to a high standard, in an affordable and sustainable way, and make improvements to increase and enhance biodiversity. (Addresses priorities 1,2,3,4 & 5)

2. Ensure that infrastructure and heritage features are protected and well maintained, in accordance with the resources available to the council. (Addresses priorities 1 & 2)
3. Encourage and enable positive physical and mental well-being by developing strong partnerships with community groups, sports clubs and other stakeholder groups. Ensuring that our green spaces fulfil their potential for enabling healthy lifestyles for all ages, encouraging all residents to move more. (Addresses priorities 1, 2, 4 & 5)
4. Plant more trees within our green spaces to help combat climate change (carbon storage) and increase canopy cover, providing future new habitats for wildlife and additional shade for our communities in periods of extreme heat. (Addresses priorities 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5)
5. Ensure our green spaces are safe, welcoming, and accessible places for all of our communities and that the highest possible standards of health and safety are maintained by our service providers, event organisers and when engaging the community in projects. (Addresses priorities 2, 4 & 5)
6. Actively encourage community engagement and involvement in the protection, maintenance, development and positive environmental impacts of our green spaces. (Addresses priorities 1,2,3,4 and 5)
7. Effectively manage internal budgets and attract external funding wherever possible towards the ongoing maintenance and the future development of our green spaces. (Addresses priorities 1,2,3,4 and 5)
8. Review management plans and their associated action plans annually to ensure these objectives are being delivered effectively. (Addresses priorities 1,2,3,4 and 5)
9. Create a green spaces development fund to make improvements to our green spaces. (Addresses priorities 1,2,3,4, and 5)

Action Plan 2024/25 & 2025/26

Objective 1: To protect and enhance biodiversity, address the effects of climate change and ensure the park is sustained for the future

Action	When	Estimated Cost	Responsibility	Resources	Partners	Comms	Status
Identify opportunities to protect and enhance the biodiversity of the site.	Summer 2024	N/A	SMDC	Existing budgets / External Funds	SWT Other industry recognised professional bodies		Complete
Explore opportunities for creating naturalised areas across the site.	Summer 2024	N/A	SMDC	Existing budgets / External funds	SMDC / AES / Staffordshire Wildlife Trust / community groups	Signage on site / PR	In-progress
Review current maintenance regimes to identify best practice that reflects emerging principles which address climate change.	Summer 2024	N/A	SMDC	Existing budgets / External funds	SMDC / AES / Staffordshire Wildlife Trust / Recognised industry professionals in this field	Signage on site / PR	In-progress
Implement mowing regime changes.	April 2025	Unknown	SMDC / AES	Existing budgets	SMDC / AES	Signage on site / PR / social media	In-progress

Objective 2: Ensure that infrastructure and heritage features are protected and well maintained

Action	When	Estimated Cost	Responsibility	Resources	Partners	Comms	Status
Ensure the infrastructure of the site is maintained. All infrastructure to be monitored on regular site checks.	Ongoing	Unknown	AES	Budgeted	SMDC / AES	PR / social media if appropriate	Ongoing
Ensure that the football pitches are maintained to a high standard and improved as appropriate.	Ongoing	Unknown	SMDC / AES	Existing budget	AES / MyActive / Staffs FA	PR / social media if appropriate	Ongoing
Keep Pitch Power updated and implement regular checks to monitor the condition of the pitches.	Annually (September)	N/A	SMDC / AES	N/A	AES / Staffs FA	PR / social media if appropriate	Ongoing
Review the condition and usage of the pavilion building & small store.	Summer 2025	Unknown	SMDC / MyActive	Existing budget	SMDC / MyActive / User groups / Stakeholders		Not started

Objective 3: Ensuring that our green spaces fulfil their potential for enabling healthy lifestyles for all ages, encouraging all residents to move more

Action	When	Estimated Cost	Responsibility	Resources	Partners	Comms	Status
Continue to promote and maximise the opportunities for physical activity within the park.	Ongoing	Unknown	SMDC	SMDC / Together Active / Public Health	Public Health / Together Active / Move More Partnership / MyActive		
Design & install Active Trail signage.	Spring 2025	Unknown	SMDC	Existing	Move More partnership / MyActive	PR / social media if appropriate	Started
Ensure activity track, perimeter path, fitness area is in good condition and promoted.	Ongoing	N/A	AES / SMDC	Existing	AES		Ongoing
Work with parkrun team to bring activity to the site.	Ongoing	N/A	SMDC	N/A	SMDC / parkrun volunteers / MyActive	PR / social media	Started

Objective 4: Plant more trees within our green spaces to help combat climate change (carbon storage) and increase canopy cover, providing future new habitats for wildlife and additional shade for our communities

Action	When	Estimated Cost	Responsibility	Resources	Partners	Comms	Status
Review opportunities to plant more trees.	Summer 2024	N/A	SMDC	N/A	SMDC Tree Officer / AES / Community groups		On-going
Plant trees in identified areas.	Winter 2024/25 & 2025/26	£500	SMDC / AES	Existing budget	AES / Community groups	Signage on site / PR / social media	Not started
Gap up existing hedge on south boundary.	Winter 2024/25 & 2025/26	£350	SMDC / AES	Existing budget	AES / Community groups	Social media	Not started

Objective 5: To ensure our parks are safe, welcoming and accessible for the communities they serve

Action	When	Estimated Cost	Responsibility	Resources	Partners	Comms	Status
Review entrance points for barriers to accessibility.	Winter 2024/25	Unknown	SMDC	Existing budget	AES		Not started
Review signage to include 'welcoming' message and important contact details (will be part of Active Trail work).	Spring 2025	Unknown	SMDC	Existing budget	AES		Started

Objective 6: Actively encourage community engagement and involvement

Action	When	Estimated Cost	Responsibility	Resources	Partners	Comms	Status
Invest time to encourage better community links and potential for a 'Friends of the Park' group to be established.	Ongoing	N/A	SMDC	Unknown	AES / Leek Town Council / other organisations		Not started
Continue to engage with key stakeholders in the site.	Ongoing	N/A	SMDC	Unknown	AES / MyActive / Leek Town Council / Staffs FA / other organisations		Ongoing
Explore opportunities to increase educational activities at the site.	Ongoing	N/A	SMDC	Unknown	Local schools / SSP / children and youth services		Not started

Objective 7: To ensure effective financial management of resources

Action	When	Estimated Cost	Responsibility	Resources	Partners	Comms	Status
Ensure that the existing budgets are used to gain best value and maximise opportunities.	Ongoing	N/A	SMDC/AES		AES		Ongoing
Review and investigate opportunities to apply for external funding, where appropriate.	Ongoing	N/A	SMDC				Ongoing
Work in partnership with both internal and external colleagues to expand the impact of relevant projects.	Ongoing	N/A	SMDC		AES / Staffordshire Wildlife Trust / Public Health / Move More Partners / Leek Town Council / Community groups		Ongoing

Objective 8: Review and Monitoring

Action	When	Estimated Cost	Responsibility	Resources	Partners	Comms	Status
Annual condition review of park infrastructure including seating, bins, paths and built structures.	Annual (April)	Unknown	SMDC / AES	AES / SMDC	AES		Ongoing
Annual review of action plan for the park.	Annual (January)	n/a	SMDC	Existing	AES / Community groups / Leek Town Council / wider community		Ongoing
Ensure that all health & safety aspects are annually reviewed.	Annual (April)	n/a	SMDC/AES	Existing	AES		Ongoing

Objective 9: Green Spaces Development Fund

Action	When	Estimated Cost	Responsibility	Resources	Partners	Comms	Status
Look at opportunities where the GSDF could be used to improve the site.			SMDC		All stakeholders		Ongoing