

## **Vogrie Country Park – feasibility update**

### **Report by Executive Director Place**

### **Report for Information**

## **1 Recommendations**

It is recommended that the Council:

- i. Note the findings of the User Survey and the contents of this report;
- ii. Approve the use of £40,000 of Blueprint funding (in addition to the £10,000 previously allocated to Vogrie) to commission a landscape and access strategy for the site, noting that officers will ensure that the redirection of Blueprint Grant (£50,000) to fund this has the full written consent of Scottish Ministers prior to any expenditure being incurred;
- iii. Approve the preparation of an updated Management Plan by Midlothian Council, which would be resourced internally by Land and Countryside team.
- iv. Approve the allocation of £200,000 of the 2022/23 Place Based Investment Fund towards the upgrade of toilet facilities within Vogrie, as an immediate action in response to the User Survey;
- v. Support the continued exploration of revenue streams that are complementary to an overall vision and ambition to utilise the asset of Vogrie Country Park.

## **2 Purpose of Report/Executive Summary**

A report was requested from elected members on the current status of Vogrie Country Park and to provide answers to the following:

- i. How many user groups utilise Vogrie Country Park?
- ii. How much it costs Midlothian Council to run Vogrie Country Park year on year and what income is generated by the Park?
- iii. What are the locations of the Core Paths around Vogrie?
- iv. What is the estimated time for progressing any emerging investment strategy?

Following the request, the Place Directorate commissioned a user survey of Vogrie Country Park to inform this report. The aim of the

survey was to understand what aspects of Vogrie were valued most and what elements users felt were priorities for improvement.

This report presents the findings of the survey and sets out three key actions, namely:

*Action 1 Enhance Accessibility and Quality of Vogrie Landscape – commission a new landscape and access strategy that will inform a refreshed Management Plan for the park.*

*Action 2 Quick Wins – direct funding from the Place Based Investment Fund into priority investment highlighted by the User Survey, namely refurbishment of toilet facilities on site.*

*Action 3 Continue to explore ways to enhance long term sustainability of Vogrie Country Park, specifically through introduction of glamping to a suitable site, and enhanced use of Vogrie House for events and suitable opportunities.*

**Date:** 04/10/22

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### 3 Background

- 3.1 James Dewar acquired the Vogrie estate in 1719 and laid out the park and grounds in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Vogrie House was built by the Dewar Family in 1876 with the Stable Block having been built some 50 years earlier. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the house and estate were sold and became an exclusive residential nursing home. In 1975 Midlothian House took on the ownership of Vogrie House and grounds.
- 3.2 In 1982, Vogrie estate was designated a Country Park under the Countryside (Scotland) Act 1967 which led to significant works to the grounds and creation of a path network along with a nine-hole golf course to create one of Midlothian's most visited attractions. In 1994 the lower ground floor and ground floor of Vogrie House were refurbished to allow occupancy of the house and allowing the provision of a café.
- 3.3 Under the Act the site was designated a Country Park by the local authority "*which by reason of its position in relation to major concentrations of population affords convenient opportunities to the public for enjoyment of the countryside or open-air recreation*". In addition there were a number of facilities including toilets that government stipulated were required. These government requirements for designation of a Country Park have now lapsed.
- 3.4 Today, Vogrie Country Park ("Vogrie") retains much of its character as a Victorian parkland estate with sweeping carriage drives and landscaped vistas and remains a key attraction in Midlothian.
- 3.5 The key features of the house and Country Park are:
  - 103 hectares of landscape parkland, leading down to the Tyne Valley.
  - 11.5 miles of woodland trails.
  - Vogrie Country Learning & Childcare Setting located within part of the original walled garden
  - Ranger Service is based in Vogrie House
  - Adventure Playground
  - Miniature Railway, operated by EskValley Model Engineering Society
  - Cafe
  - Stable buildings currently let to the Girl Guide Association
- 3.6 The park has been submitted for Green Flag four times and has been successful each time. The award recognises parks that attain a level of excellence.
- 3.7 In 2015, as part of the Diamond Jubilee Dedication scheme, the park became protected through a "Queen Elizabeth Field" designation under Fields in Trust which is a national organisation whose main purpose is the protection of public open spaces. The protection, conferred by designation, is legally binding and was approved by the Council.
- 3.8 If the Council determines to take the Country Park out of the protection scheme this would need to be with the agreement of Fields in Trust and would require compensatory land to be designated which has a commensurate public value as open space.

- 3.9 Initial feasibility work to examine the commercial potential of Vogrie was instigated in September 2018, this work being part funded by the Borders Rail Blueprint Fun, with update reports provided to Council at the time.
- 3.10 The initial feasibility work included consultation with experts in the commercial leisure and tourism industry, as well as other related enterprises. This study examined the potential for the following uses:
- Main House: boutique hotel / self-catering apartments (holiday lets etc.)
  - North field: tourist accommodation / chalets.
  - Existing café: relocation from the main house to a more attractive location, such as the walled garden.
  - Grounds of Main House/Walled Garden<sup>1</sup>: small bespoke retail outlets/small scale distilling manufacture and retail outlets.
  - Existing play area: relocation to a more attractive position.
  - Nine Hole Golf Course: bring back into use, possibly as an adjunct to a boutique hotel within the main house.
- 3.11 These initial findings were the subject of internal officer discussions with the Planning and Economic Development services. The principle of tourist facilities, tourist accommodation and tourist-related development were considered to be generally acceptable in planning terms subject to normal design criteria and other matters such as access and environmental impact. However, significant commercial and retail development could be considered contrary to the provisions of the Midlothian Local Development Plan (2017).
- 3.12 The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in this work not being progressed. This report seeks to answer elected members questions and revive the subject of the future direction for Vogrie Country Park and sets out a preferred approach for potential Project Benefits that could be realised;
- To provide a year round, family orientated, multi activity leisure attraction which will enhance and safeguard the future of Vogrie Country Park.
  - Delivers a diverse business opportunities backed by additional activities, including glamping, potential indoor play space, conferencing, retail offering and food court space to enhance the existing leisure offering
  - Direct and indirect employment FTEs supported by the facility annually
  - Creates the opportunity for an expanded tourist attraction for Midlothian
  - Total direct and indirect income impact in the local economy annually to be determined

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<sup>1</sup> This work was carried out prior to the Early Years Centre located in the Walled Garden

### **How Many User Groups Utilise Vogrie Country Park?**

- 3.13 Until 2009 it was estimated from car counters that Vogrie received over 250,000 visitors per annum. Over recent years the car counter has fallen into disuse and estimates based on payment for car parking are nearer 100,000 users, with the largest user group being the general public.

#### **Key stakeholders**

- 3.14 There are a range of stakeholders based within the park and these include:

|                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Land &amp; Countryside Service</b> | Grounds Maintenance Team – estate maintenance includes grass cutting, litter picking and cleaning duties.<br><br>Ranger Service – visitor management, volunteering opportunities, maintaining access and facilities, group work, biodiversity and habitat management, environmental education, Vogrie House, Green Flag monitoring and standards for submissions. Ranger Service is key generator of additional resource through their co-ordination and management of significant programme of voluntary work, which plays a significant role in the upkeep of Vogrie Country Park. |
| <b>Early Learning</b>                 | Based in the former walled garden, an outdoor nursery with 80 attending.   |
| <b>Girl Guiding Assoc.</b>            | Based in former stable block, residential accommodation for Girl Guides and Brownies from around Scotland.   |
| <b>Miniature Railway</b>              | Esk Valley Model Engineering Society runs a model train and offers public rides throughout the summer and on demand.   |
| <b>Tree Top Cafe</b>                  | Based in Vogrie House provides refreshments for customers  |
| <b>Saltergate School</b>              | Based in former golf starters hut undertakes therapeutic education in the outdoors with young people from the school.  |
| <b>Other Tenants</b>                  | Includes Social Services Community Action Team, The Wildlife Information Centre and Riederer Hospitality.  |

- 3.15 There are several other stakeholders such as Parkrun that arrange a free 5km run every Saturday of the year for around 150 participants contributing to Midlothian as a healthy place to live and work.

#### **User Groups**

- 3.16 Prior to Covid the number of groups using the Ranger Service was in the region of 350 annually. This included schools, corporate and local volunteers, community organisations, conservation groups etc. The majority of these groups performed a variety of activities from improving the park by volunteering to self-led activities and learning about Midlothian's natural environment and history. The number of groups visiting is gradually building up again following the removal of Covid restrictions.
- 3.17 The Girl Guide Centre runs residential and non-residential sessions with Guides and Brownies attending from different parts of Scotland although the focus is on local groups from Midlothian.

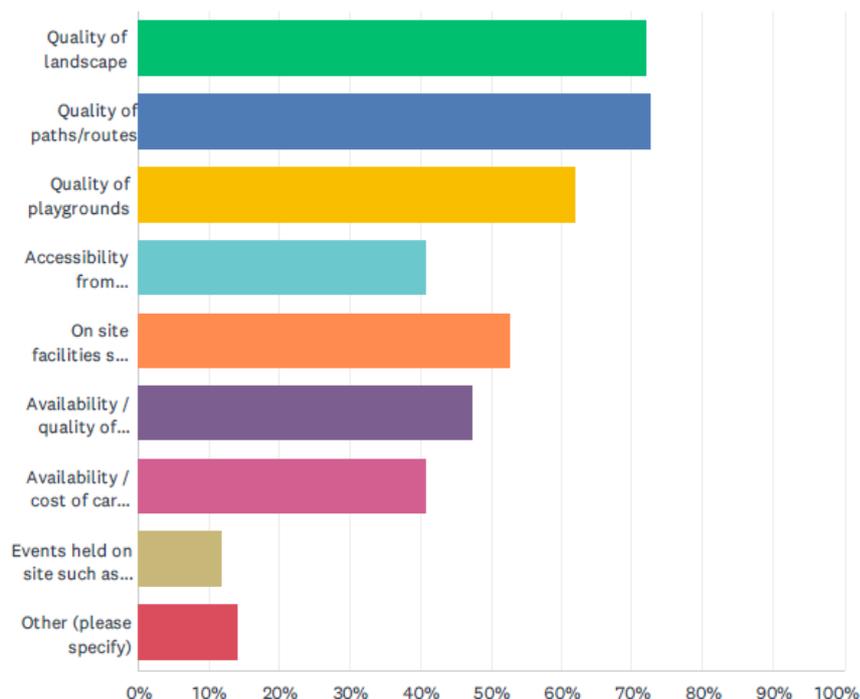
- 3.18 Family groups book commercial activities such as barbeques, the segways and the events field for activities such as horse riding. Additionally many dog-walking businesses use the park.
- 3.19 There are also larger scale events attended by several thousand attendees such as the Woodland Dance Project and Vogrie Pogrie.

**Survey of the general public**

- 3.20 An online survey on Vogrie Country Park carried out in 2022 attracted a very strong response, with 730 responses received, indicating a high level of engagement and interest in the park in Midlothian and beyond.
- 3.21 The survey found that 51% of visitors visited the park once per month or more, with 12% visiting more than once a week. The majority of visitors (83%) came to the park the same frequency or more than they did pre-Covid 19.
- 3.22 93% of respondents stated that they visited Vogrie for general leisure purposes rather than organised activities (17%).
- 3.23 Question 6 in the survey asked people what they most enjoy about the park.

| Enjoyment Factor                     | %  |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Walking, running cycling dog walking | 73 |
| Landscape                            | 72 |
| Playgrounds                          | 62 |
| Cafe                                 | 53 |

Figure 1 Enjoyment Factors



- 3.24 The conclusion to be drawn is that the majority of users enjoy the attractive landscape for walking with opportunities for children's play. However, the café, playgrounds and toilets provide additional incentive to enjoy the natural elements.
- 3.25 Question 7 in the survey asked what people least enjoyed about the park. Issues associated with the public toilets on site and also the cost of car parking were the two most common issues raised. Due to the age of the parking control system there have been ongoing technical issues which have caused frustrating delays for visitors to leave the park. Under "Other", respondents also highlighted difficulties accessing the park by public transport and challenges associated with accessing facilities within the park by those with mobility issues.

| <b>Least Enjoyed Factor</b>            | <b>%</b> |
|--|----------|
| Availability/quality of public toilets | 38       |
| Cost of car parking                    | 32       |
| Cafe                                   | 19       |
| Quality of playgrounds                 | 12       |
| Quality of paths                       | 8        |
| Other                                  | 32       |

- 3.26 Question 8 asked respondents to rank their top priorities for improvement.

| <b>Quality Factor</b> | <b>Ranking</b> |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| Paths                 | 1              |
| Playgrounds           | 2              |
| Toilets               | 3              |
| Landscape             | 4              |
| Cafe                  | 5              |
| Cost of car parking   | 6              |

- 3.27 Question 9 asked, if there was anything respondents would like to add to their views about the park.
- 3.28 An analysis of this answers found many of the comments to be very positive. Typical comments were: 'I love Vogrie' to 'It's an amazing place', 'It's lovely', 'A wonderful resource', 'The staff are always so helpful and friendly', 'I love walking / running there', 'It's a very affordable day out' etc. It is clear therefore that Vogrie is much valued by Midlothian residents.
- 3.29 Another theme which emerged was the importance of the natural environment to visitors with trees, ponds and wildlife being seen as a vital characteristic of the park and reflect people's principle reason for enjoying the park in response to Question 6.
- 3.30 The Ranger Service also received a lot of positive comments through their work with volunteers, education and management and maintenance of the site.

## **What are the location of the Core Paths Around Vogrie?**

### **Core Path Plan and Midlothian's Green Network**

- 3.31 Within Vogrie there are 11 miles of path network. Approximately four miles of the network is designated as Core Path within the Midlothian Core Paths Plan. One of these paths, that follows the River Tyne, is a right of way.
- 3.32 The paths form a comprehensive network around the park and give visitors a range of experiences from formal policies to semi-natural woodlands and grasslands with ponds and a river. There is, however, not a circular route around the less formal areas of the park for wheelchair users so that opportunities to explore the more natural side of Vogrie are constrained.
- 3.33 The paths within the park link to the wider path network outside of Vogrie. Paths such as the Tyne Esk Trail link to the nearby settlements of Newlandrig, Dewarton and the wider countryside. The Callender Estate, which owns much of the land around Pathhead is seeking funding to improve one of the main paths between Vogrie and the settlement in order to improve accessibility to the park for local residents.
- 3.34 The Midlothian Green Network identifies Vogrie Country Park as one of several locations where strategic connections can be improved. There are, however, difficulties in providing active travel routes for cycling to Vogrie due to gradients out of Dalkeith and through Gorebridge. Walking to Vogrie from public transport stops is challenging for all but the very enthusiastic and not practical for a family day out.
- 3.35 Off-road links to other local estates along the Tyne Valley are limited by topography. There is a right of way that links Borthwick with Crichton and Vogrie. The route is mainly used by enthusiastic ramblers and is not really suitable for the casual visitor. The development of this could make an excellent cultural trail. It has many points of historic interest and great natural beauty with spectacular views.

## **How Much Does It Cost / What Income Is Generated by Vogrie Country Park?**

### **Income and Expenditure Associated with Vogrie Country Park**

- 3.36 The operating costs for Vogrie Country Park including all the elements of maintaining the park are estimated by Land & Countryside Services to be around £231,000 per annum. This is set against estimated income by the service of £96,000 and have to be validated by Financial Services.
- 3.37 Not reflected in the additional resource is a value the Ranger Service generates through management and co-ordination of voluntary work, which makes a significant contribution to the maintenance and upkeep of Vogrie Country Park.
- 3.38 A net operating loss for a Country Park will not be unusual given the nature of the asset. In the past, revenue streams have been sought to bring

additional income into the park and assist in its upkeep. However, there is clearly a balance that needs to be struck between revenue generating activities and maintaining the core characteristics that attract the vast majority of users i.e. the quality of landscape and overall experience that the park offers. However, there is clearly scope to further increase and diversify income streams to reduce this deficit.

- 3.39 To achieve the balance between retaining the core character of the park, while generating additional revenue streams, the following is the proposed approach:

### ***Action 1 Enhance Accessibility and Quality of Vogrie Landscape***

*The Vogrie Country Park Management Plan (2018-2023) requires updating. Since it was published, the golf course has closed and the Early Years setting has opened.*

*The key quality that attracts people to Vogrie is the quality of its landscape and the enjoyment people get from experiencing it. It is therefore important to ensure there is an up to date vision and clear set of actions to guide ongoing enhancement of the park.*

*It is therefore proposed that the Management Plan is updated, but that it is supported by the commissioning of a landscape and access strategy for the park.*

*The key objectives for this work will be:*

- 1. Provide a long term strategy for investment in the core asset of Vogrie Country Park, i.e. its landscape and key features including the walled garden.*
- 2. Set out key priorities and actions for enhancement of landscape and access within the park.*

*Outputs of the study should comprise:*

- 1. An updated long term vision for the landscape of Vogrie Country Park;*
- 2. An analysis of the different landscape elements within Vogrie Country Park and areas where enhancement / investment should be prioritised;*
- 3. An access strategy that allows appropriate access paths /routes to be provided for different kinds of users, enhancing overall accessibility while reducing conflicts. This should also highlight opportunities to enhance connections from outwith the park for walkers and cyclists;*
- 4. Guidance on where there is capacity within the landscape for new uses to be accommodated that could generate additional income streams e.g. bike trails, additional café facilities, enclosed dog field/park and glamping.*

5. *A funding strategy, highlighting appropriate funding sources that could be utilised to implement the strategy.*

*A budget of £50,000 (ex VAT) should be made available to deliver this work, which will then inform an updated Management Plan.*

*£10,000 of funding from Blueprint was allocated to Vogrie Country Park in 2019 and was not utilised. It is proposed that this £10,000 is augmented with a further £40,000 from the same fund to ensure sufficient budget is available for landscape and access strategy, which will guide investment priorities and support the revised Management Plan.*

### **Action 2 Quick Wins**

*Two key issues were highlighted by users in their response to the survey on Vogrie Country Park: the operation and cost associated with the car park charging system and the condition of the toilets on site.*

*Since the survey was carried out, the toilets within Vogrie House have been re-opened. This will enhance toilet availability. However, it is proposed to utilise the Place Based Investment Fund to refurbish and enhance the toilet provision within Vogrie, with the potential for the creation of a Changing Places toilet at a suitable location within the park to be explored. This will support users of the park who have additional support needs.*

*It is proposed that a budget of £200,000 is set aside to carry out these works from the Place Based Investment Fund. These works must be under contract by March 2023.*

*In relation to car park charging, the Land & Countryside team will examine the response to the survey and work with the contractor to provide an efficient car park barrier system to reduce delays and avoid customer frustration. The service will also investigate a replacement system that allows reduced rate passes for regular visitors.*

### **Action 3 Continue to explore ways to enhance long term sustainability of Vogrie Country Park**

It is recognised that Vogrie would benefit from additional revenue streams to support its ongoing operation and overall financial viability. However, any additional commercial activity will need to be compatible with existing patterns of use and ensure ongoing free and open access to the Country Park. This is particularly important now there is more widespread understanding of the health & wellbeing benefits of quality green infrastructure to our communities. This approach is in keeping with the outcomes of the Single Midlothian Plan priorities for 2022/23, which are to work towards improved health and learning for individuals and communities in Midlothian; work to make sure that no child or household is living in poverty, and make progress towards meeting net zero carbon emissions.

Of the uses examined previously, glamping offers the opportunity to introduce a leisure use that is low impact in terms of landscape and could bring additional users to the park that would support the café (and wider local economy). It also offers up the potential for linked room lettings in Vogrie House for parties and family events, making greater use of an under-utilised asset.



The optimum location for a glamping use will be determined through market engagement, the development of the landscape and access strategy and opportunities and constraints presented by local planning policy and access to services and utilities.



The use of Vogrie House for events, including private receptions, more generally should continue to be promoted.

### **What is the Estimated Time for Progressing Emerging Investment Strategy?**

- 3.40 As per the actions set out above, there are actions that can be taken forward in this financial year to achieve some quick wins. However, more substantial elements of investment should take place in the context of a landscape and access strategy for Vogrie. It is estimated that this will take approximately 6 months to procure and deliver. Market testing with glamping operators will happen in parallel with this. If the decision is taken to move ahead with that

use (or any other uses) in a specific location, that can happen once the landscape and access strategy is approved.

#### **4 Report Implications (Resource, Digital and Risk)**

##### **4.1 Resource**

£200,000 to be directed to refurbishment of facilities within Vogrie Country Park from the Place Based Investment Fund (2022/23).

£40,000 (plus VAT) funding from Blueprint requested to fund a landscape and access strategy for Vogrie.

Internal resource will support this work and also the updated Management Plan.

##### **4.2 Digital**

None

##### **4.3 Risk**

Without an updated vision and strategy for investment, Midlothian Council will not be able to prioritise most impactful projects to support ongoing running of Vogrie Country Park. Failure to invest will result in a widening operational deficit.

Lack of a strategy for investment and understanding of how potential additional revenue generating impact on Park and users will also result in risk of increased conflict between uses and the qualities of landscape and policies, to the detriment of the park and user experience.

##### **4.4 Ensuring Equalities (if required a separate IIA must be completed)**

Not required at this stage

##### **4.4 Additional Report Implications**

None

#### **Appendices**

**Appendix A – Additional Report Implications**

**Appendix B – Background information/Links**



## APPENDIX A – Report Implications

### A.1 Key Priorities within the Single Midlothian Plan

- **Reduce economic inequality:** through provision of high quality environment in a location that is more accessible
- in a decreased carbon footprint for the operation of the school.

### A.2 Key Drivers for Change

Key drivers addressed in this report:

- Holistic Working
- Hub and Spoke
- Modern
- Sustainable
- Transformational
- Preventative
- Asset-based
- Continuous Improvement
- One size fits one
- None of the above

### A.3 Key Delivery Streams

Key delivery streams addressed in this report:

- One Council Working with you, for you
- Preventative and Sustainable
- Efficient and Modern
- Innovative and Ambitious
- None of the above

### A.4 Delivering Best Value

The report does not directly impact on Delivering Best Value

### A.5 Involving Communities and Other Stakeholders

#### Planning / Design / Delivery Consultation

Community engagement will commence once this report has been approved and the project has governance to progress to Planning.

### A.6 Impact on Performance and Outcomes

The aim of this paper supports the priority to reduce inequalities.

### A.7 Adopting a Preventative Approach

Not applicable

### A.8 Supporting Sustainable Development

Not applicable at this stage

**APPENDIX B**

**Background Papers/Resource Links (if applicable)**