

## Agenda item 7

For decision – Improving the public toilets in Victoria Park

Author: Chris Stringer, Environment Manager



### Summary

This report presents an update on the project to improve the public toilets in Victoria Park.

It recommends a new approach for the project – improving the existing toilets building – noting that this should prove less expensive and less impactful to the park and the environment.

### Background

In spring 2017, the town's residents were asked to vote on whether they wanted to keep the public toilets in Victoria Park - and if so - how we might provide better toilets than the current ones.

Over 1,000 residents voted; and the result was clear:

- 99% of the people who voted wanted to have toilets in the park
- With nearly two-thirds of those voting for 'A new or extended café, incorporating toilets'

Subsequently, a project group was established comprising (then) Cllrs and staff. Early on, the group discussed the merits and drawbacks of:

- adding toilets to the existing café in the park and improving and/or extending the café
- designing a new building for the park combining toilets and a café/concession space.

Highlighting the opportunities presented by a new building, the project group recommended a new building located where the old storage shed is (with the storage shed being demolished as part of the project).

This recommendation was presented to the Council Matters committee in May 2018; and was approved as part of the wider Management & Improvement Plan for Victoria Park.

This resulted in more detailed feasibility work looking at this location, including a survey assessing the potential impact on the nearby trees. In completing these next steps, significant difficulties and challenges became apparent.

Most crucially:

1. The difference between the level of the path and the level of the internal floor in the existing storage building meant that it would be near-impossible to engineer access to the new building from the path (and thereby from Mary Baily)
2. A new building with a larger footprint would have necessitated felling and removing one beech tree and posed a potential risk to a significant and mature lime tree nearby – a tree that is a major part of the landscape and a valued tree in the park

Simply, it became impractical to continue to look at this location.

As such, alternative locations were explored. However, these all saw the building move further away from Mary Baily, further into Victoria Park and closer to the existing cafe.

As such, one of the main aims of the project was becoming diluted. An alternative approach was identified, one that would minimise the impact on the trees in the park, limit the impact on the green space on offer in the park and limit the environmental impact and costs of an entirely new building.

For these reasons then, it seems preferable and sensible to consider adapting and improving the existing toilet building. This approach will avoid the need for new paths in the park, too.

### Wider works

It's intended that this approach will coincide with landscaping works elsewhere in the park, too.

This will include demolishing the existing storage building; to afford natural lines of sight and a more natural link and relationship between Victoria Park and Mary Baily.

This means that the scope of project is now proposed to include the following works:

- Improving and adapting the existing toilets building
- Demolishing the existing storage building at the middle entrance to Victoria Park
- Preparing a new planting scheme for the eastern boundary of the park (the one closest to and facing Mary Baily)
- Including new planting for the bed immediately outside the toilets

### Costs and budgets

These will be confirmed in detail at a subsequent Council Matters meeting; assuming the decision is to progress this approach. However, it can already be noted that the main part of the project – refurbishing and improving the toilets - is expected to be paid for from an agreed and capped Earmarked Reserve of £38k.

And by breaking the project down into smaller but complementary pieces, it also means that the work can be scheduled and staggered to suit budgets, Ranger time and other things happening in the park (and elsewhere).

So, if we can afford to demolish the existing storage shed and re-landscape this part of the park this year, then we will. If not, this can be considered as part of the budget-setting process for 2021/2022.

### Recommendations

1. Approve the approach suggested in this report: designing and costing the refurbishment of the current toilets
2. Delegate responsibility to the Environment Manager to organise the refurbishment of the current toilets, to be funded by the existing Earmarked Reserve
3. Delegate responsibility to the Environment Manager to organise for the existing storage shed to be demolished, subject to funding
4. If there are not sufficient funds available, return to this committee for approval of alternative ways to fund the project