



# **Proposal for a Community Garden and Environmental Improvements at Downhorn Park, Plymstock.**

**For consideration by the Natural Infrastructure Team,  
Plymouth City Council.**

*Submitted by Friends of Downhorn Park, in association with Mewstone Primary Care Network, Age UK Plymouth Centre and Plymstock Community Centre.*

## **1 Overview**

- 1.1 The overall aims of the Friends of Downhorn Park are to promote protection and conservation of this public Neighbourhood Green Space and to enhance the benefits of its use by the community. The site consists of two connected fields with a combined area of about 0.81 ha, (2 acres) located in the centre of Plymstock. Figure 1 shows an aerial view of the site with key features and proposed improvements. These will:
- enhance accessibility and use
  - provide benefits for health and well-being
  - develop active community action to enrich the area's biodiversity and ecological sustainability to address continued habitat loss and the climate emergency.
- 1.2 This proposal has resulted from a partnership of the Friends' group, other community organisations, and individuals. Plymstock Community Centre and the Age UK Plymouth Day Centre about the site and have been actively involved in developing the plans. They support our plans to link improvements to the park with involvement and use by their visitors and clients. A special feature is the involvement of local GP surgeries (Mewstone Primary Care Network; PCN) in connection with the Plymouth Healthy Futures social prescribing initiative. social prescribing initiative. The PCN will encourage participation by their clients to provide benefits for mental and physical health through the social interactions, exercise and open-air activities involved in the development and maintenance of the Community Garden and the wider environmental improvements. The PCN provided initial funding for community training and design workshops involving 15-20 participants in January-March 2022, led by a permaculture instructor. These sessions resulted in the proposal presented here. We are seeking advice and approval from Plymouth City Council before public consultation with the wider community in May 2022.

## 2 Executive Summary

- 2.1 Members of the community will share knowledge and expertise in soil preparation, planting, growth and care of vegetables, fruit, flowers, hedges, and trees; with special attention given to sustainable practices that enhance biodiversity.
- 2.2 People of all ages\* and backgrounds will be welcomed to experience the joy of gardening and conservation activities — whether learning new skills or sharing experience — by working together in a nurturing and supportive environment. [\*Subject to Child Protection and Vulnerable Adults Policies].
- 2.4 We have submitted funding applications for an initial 2–3-year programme for:
- building a cluster of raised beds to grow vegetables, herbs, flowers, and shrubs
  - planting parts of the sloping grassland and edges with spring bulbs and summer wildflowers
  - restoring the neglected orchard
  - planting new hedges and trees
  - forming a bog garden
  - installing a shed, compost bins, water butts and waste bins
  - installing a picnic table and seating throughout the park
  - erecting signs and information boards
  - installing paths to provide better access

## 3 Details of Proposals

- 3.1 **General information.** Numbers in brackets [ ] indicate the location of items on the Plan, Figure 2. Items are arranged in approximate order of the anticipated timeline for activities (shown in *italics*). We have made several applications for funding different aspects of the project and the sequence and scope of plans will depend on the outcome of these bids. It is planned that most works will be carried out by a team of volunteers, with additional community support for large-scale planting and other activities arranged around family events. We also hope to involve local schools, Scouts, Plymouth Environmental Action, and other conservation groups. Some works such as installation of paths and hardstanding for benches will require support from PCC.
- 3.2 **Materials, equipment, and plants.** Wherever possible, ecologically sustainable materials will be used, including peat-free compost and recycled/recyclable materials. Only UK grown plants will be planted. Many young plants will be grown by volunteers in their own gardens and donated; trees and some shrubs will be purchased from local nurseries with careful consideration of suitability for the site, ease of maintenance, and benefits for biodiversity.

- 3.3 **Raised beds [1].** These will be constructed from tanalised timber (100 x 47 mm) to form eight wedge-shaped beds (sides = 3600 mm, ends = 1500 mm and 900 mm, height = 300 mm) arranged on points of the compass, erected by volunteers, and filled with soil/compost for no-dig cultivation. These will be planted with a range of plants selected to provide succession of visually attractive and sensory interest as well as edible crops throughout the seasons. Volunteers and other members of the community will be able to enjoy caring for and harvesting crops, which can be linked to community events with alfresco cooking and picnics. *Spring/summer 2022.*
- 3.4 **A large octagonal picnic table [1]** (1200 mm top) at the centre of the arrangement will serve as a visible meeting point for volunteers and visitors to the garden. *Spring/summer 2022.*
- 3.5 **Shed [2].** A small lockable metal shed (2570 x 2260 mm) will be erected for secure storage of tools and other garden equipment. *Summer 2022.*
- 3.6 **Compost containers [2]** will be placed near the sheds. *Summer 2022.*
- 3.7 **Grass mowing policy [18].** The 2022 policy issued by PCC will result in mowing the Upper Field every 6-8 weeks. However, the lower field is currently scheduled to be mown only at the edges following the 'for nature' initiative. We support the general principle of minimising mowing to preserve biodiversity, but we request that the policy is amended so that the grass area north of the bank is mown regularly. This is essential to allow successful development of the Community Garden and to allow this space to be used for informal play and exercise activities. In addition, we are planning to run regular open-air community events in this space, including the revival of an annual Plymstock Community Festival. We argue that the proposed changes elsewhere in the field will provide a very significant improvement for biodiversity, more than compensating for this retention of the minor area of close-mown grass. *Request amendment of PCC policy, Spring 2022.*
- 3.8 **Dog waste/refuse bins [13].** The fields are popular with people walking with dogs and we are fortunate that most owners appear to be considerate about cleaning up. We hope to make a visit to the park more interesting for the dog-walkers and safe for all visitors. There is a combined general waste bin at the Memory Lane entrance/exit to the upper field, but an additional one is required in the vicinity of the Sackville Close entrance/exit. Ideally, we would like to see separate bins for recyclables. A bin at the entrance/exit to Church Road would also be beneficial, but this will likely be a difficult site for PCC staff to collect). Additional signs indicating the need to pick up dog faeces are needed. *Request installation by PCC as soon as possible.*
- 3.9 **Footpaths [12].** At present, the only way to access the field is via the mown grass paths on the edges of both fields and a route crossing the lower field. They are very muddy and slippery when wet and it deters many visitors to the park. Access for people with walking difficulties and parents with children in pushchairs is nigh on impossible when wet. Installation of inset honeycomb plastic or compacted aggregate in key areas would provide a reasonably inexpensive possible solution. As

a temporary measure, wood chipping paths could be laid in some heavily used areas. Hedges and the boundary wall between the fields were damaged during construction of the housing estate. The remaining gap has become a steep slope, forming the most obvious path to pass between the fields. It is particularly unsafe when wet. Ideally, this could be remodelled to create a gently inclined zigzag path. This would also improve access between the fields for mowers and maintenance vehicles, which is currently problematic. This will depend on support from PCC to commit funds to create fully accessible paths linking the access points. *Request advice from PCC.*

- 3.10 **Shrubs and perennial garden plants [7].** The area at the SW corner of the field would benefit from planting with a range of perennial garden plants to provide a more attractive entry point adjacent to the access lane from Church Road. *Spring/summer 2022.*
- 3.12 **Signage [15].** We propose to post some temporary signs to welcome visitors to the park to explain the stages of the project, with the later aim of installing interpretation boards illustrating the plants and wildlife in the park. Trees and other plants of interest will be identified with wooden labels staked nearby. We hope to involve local artisans in creating signs. *Temporary signs in Spring 2022, permanent signage in 2023 on.*
- 3.13 **Bug hotels, bird, and boxes.** These will be erected at various positions around the site following consultation with Buglife, Devon Wildlife Trust, and local experts. We plan to involve children in helping to make and install these as part of a family event. *Summer/Autumn 2022.*
- 3.14 **Planting on the bank [9].** The sloping bank which runs across the field is a very distinctive feature. We plan to plant patches of spring bulbs to provide a very attractive aspect. Varieties will be chosen for maximum early spring benefit to pollinators, such as native daffodils, bluebells, snakeshead fritillaries, winter aconite, and crocus. Areas of wildflowers will be also planted (as plug plants) to provide swathes of summer colour and benefits to insects. The initial focus will be to establish perennial species, such as ox-eye daisies, champions, hawkbit, betony, speedwell, birdsfoot trefoil, buttercup, mallow, and scabious. *Sep-Oct 2022.*
- 3.15 **New trees [4].** The area adjacent to the bog garden will be an ideal site for 2-3 moisture-loving trees such as willow or multi-stem alder, after checks for nearby drains. *Oct-Nov 2022.*
- 3.16 **Orchard [5].** Most of the 30 apple trees planted in 1997 have been lost and the remainder are in bad shape. We have begun to rejuvenate the remaining 11 trees (this will involve a thorough 3–4-year pruning programme}. We intend to plant 10+ new trees (a mixture of different native, locally grown varieties of apple, plum, and cherry). Besides providing a valuable community asset for the in the form of beautiful spring blossom and fruit, an enlarged orchard will be very beneficial for biodiversity. Orchards support wildlife, such as flies, bees, bats and birds. The flowers are a major spring food source for pollinating insects. A recent report from the National Trust has emphasised their importance, highlighting the loss of 80% of small orchards since 1900. *Oct-Nov 2022.*

- 3.17 **Benches [14].** Besides the picnic bench in the raised bed area (1), we hope to install several benches where people can sit and enjoy the views in peace or meet others to chat. We hope to be able to install simple rustic log and plank seats alongside the paths in Year 1, as these are relatively inexpensive. Provision of traditional park benches will be more costly and hopefully these might be provided through sponsorship or donations from community members, e.g., to install memorial benches. *Some in 2022, others to follow in later years.*
- 3.18 **Edible hedging and fruit bushes [6].** Wild blackberries grow prolifically at the margins of the park and provide a valuable resource both for community pickers and for wildlife. The area at the SE corner of the field is a good site for partial clearing and planting with loganberries, tayberries, and raspberries, choosing semi-wild low maintenance varieties. Other edible hedging plants include field, sweet-briar and dog roses, hawthorn, crab apple, barberry, ribes, and cornelian cherry. Also see 3.16). *Oct-Nov 2022, 2023.*
- 3.19 **Screening hedge for fence [11].** Subject to agreement from the Community Centre, we propose planting an edible hedge with species such as elder, blackthorn, dog rose, crab apple, wild cherry, and hawthorn. Berries and flowers will provide a valuable resource for birds, insects, and other wildlife as well as for making jams, jellies, preserves etc. This will provide desirable additional security for the Playschool outdoor area. (Also see 3.18). *Oct-Nov 2022 or 2023.*
- 3.20 **Trees and hedges [8].** There is a good variety of trees in the southern part of the boundary between the upper and lower fields, plus a wide band of hedge bushes, including blackthorn, hawthorn, and elder. However, there are significant gaps, and some trees appear to be damaged or diseased. We plan to undertake a detailed survey of this area with advice from Plymouth Tree Partnership and the Woodland Trust to develop a planting programme, selecting appropriate species to provide varied habitat and maximum benefit for wildlife, especially birds and insects. (In conjunction with plans for Upper Field, see 3.23). *Survey: summer 2022; Planting: Oct-Nov 2022, 2023.*
- 3.21 **Herb garden [10].** We plan to construct a herb spiral (about 3000 mm diameter) using local limestone to provide microclimates and habitats for a range of culinary herbs. *Early Spring 2023.*
- 3.22 **Bog garden [3].** This is proposed for the site adjacent to the Scout Den and Downhorn farmhouse, which is damp, semi-shaded and away from the main paths. Soil will be removed to create a shallow area, fitted with a liner, and refilled to create a boggy area for a selection of moisture loving plants to provide a valuable wildlife habitat, especially for insects and amphibians. A comprehensive risk assessment will be undertaken; to ensure the safety of children, there will be no areas of standing water at the edges. *Early Spring 2023.*

- 3.23 **Improvement of the Upper Field [17].** We would like to see the upper field remain as a mown grass area with specimen trees, creating an arboretum effect and areas for play. Several of the mature trees have been lost or are showing signs of disease and decay. In particular, the hedgerow on the boundary wall adjacent to the Community Centre has been badly damaged. We plan to undertake a full survey with advice from Plymouth Tree Partnership and the Woodland Trust to develop a planting programme in conjunction with plans for the Lower Field (see 3.10). *Survey: Summer 2022. Planting: Autumn 2022, 2023.*

**CBM 28/03/22**

**Fig. 1 Aerial view of Downhorn Park showing key features and proposed improvements**







**Fig. 2**

## PROPOSAL FOR A COMMUNITY GARDEN AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS Downhorn Park, Plymouth

TREES, BUSHES AND SHRUBS

Existing

New planting

ORCHARD TREES

Existing

New planting

BENCHES

STRUCTURES

ENTRY FOR SERVICE VEHICLES



ROUTE OF NATURAL PATHS



**1** More information on numbered items is given in the accompanying document





