Ahoghill New Park

Landscape Proposals

Mid & East Antrim Borough Council
Landscape Proposals

Introduction and background
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEABC) owns approximately three hectares of rough agricultural land adjacent to their properties at Ahoghill Community Centre, sports grounds and cemetery. (Figure 1) Council have undertaken community consultations which have indicated that local people would like to see these agricultural lands reverting to public use as an informal park which offers a wide range of benefits for community use.

Figure 1. Current layout of council grounds in and around Ahoghill Community Centre. The area highlighted in red is the agricultural lands to be developed as a community park.
Community Consultation
A community Consultation was carried out by MEABC Parks and Opens Spaces with a wide range of interest groups in the community from school children through to senior citizens. Feedback from the consultation provided a varied vision for the park that included a secure, safe space with:

1. A simple natural feel, including meadows and woodlands
2. A walking trail
3. A Wildlife pond
4. A natural play/activity area
5. A Sensory/contemplative area
6. A community art theme celebrating the agricultural heritage of the region
7. Learning opportunities (was expressed as a learning zone) for children and adults to interact and learn about the natural world.

The community also expressed interest in a range of activities which could be offered within the broader setting. These included:

1. Regular council events and learning opportunities including biodiversity, gardening and/or allotments programmes
2. A place to relax for tea or coffee
3. A men’s shed.

Physical Survey
A survey of the site was completed in February 2017. The survey was accompanied by a topographic survey to provide more detailed information with regarding most appropriate place to site features and create and overall natural flow through the park in keeping with the consultation.

The fields envelope much of eastern part of the current community centre grounds and also adjunct to the east of the cemetery. This location lends itself to a simple integration of the whole site into a more enriching and connected park. Contrast between the formal nature of the predominantly modern white community centre, with formal layouts of playing fields, memorial area, bowling and carpark into a more natural simplistic and wilder feel has the potential to add a broader dimension that will improve the utility, amenity, aesthetics and biodiversity of the new greater park area.
The eastern edges of the site are dominated by large trees on the adjacent land, these, primarily Scots Pine (Pinus sylvestris) and Birch (Betula pubescens) and Ash (Fraxinus excelsior). There are also a few smaller ash trees within the site, growing on the remnants of a field boundary. While most of these trees are off-site they are important in creating a woodland feel. The boundary consists of primarily gappy hawthorn (Crataegus monogyna) hedges, which should be retained for the same purpose. These hedges, especially along the eastern edges of the site should be augmented with a new native hedge. Overall the boundaries lend themselves very well to woodland creation which would flow from the northern edge of the site along edge to and down through the wetland areas. Species selection of native trees will reflect soil conditions.

**Note:** Ash will not be used in the planting scheme because of a ban in using this species due to Ash Dieback Disease. Tree and hedge planting days with community are a really useful way of engaging the community in this work and further increasing interest and connection with the park.

The survey indicated several wet areas within the new park area, which have a profusion of soft rush (Juncus effusus), which prefers wet and heavy clay soils. These lower areas lie close to the water table and, in several areas drain into a stream/drainage ditch that flows along the northern and western margins of the site. These two areas would lend themselves easily to creating wetland/pond features. This would be excellent for native wildlife, including frogs and newts and would create a wonderful focus for ecological study for local schools and interest groups.
Figure 2. Two low lying areas in the field that would lend themselves to wildlife pond/ wetland feature.

The sites undulating natural form also provides areas of drier land like on the small hillock directly to the east of the MUGA, this area follows a spine across the western parts of the fields which lend themselves to natural play areas and flower rich grassland meadows with mown summer paths. Wildflower meadows can be effectively created using a range of native species which can be grown on and planted into the grassland. The management of these meadows is basic and can afford significant reduction in management costs, while delivering wide range of benefits in relation to beauty, amenity and biodiversity of the site. Sharply defined mowed pathways create and important managed feel for the meadow, which grows from March to Late August/September and is then cut and lifted (local arrangements can often be made with local farmers who will take the grass as silage for fodder). Creation of the meadow can be delivered through community engagement with local gardening groups, schools etc. partnering on growing on the native plug plant. This is a really useful way creating and organic connection between community and the new park.
Figure 3 higher areas of land run through the western spine of the site which lend themselves to sitting of natural plan areas and creation of native meadows with mown paths.

**Connection from main carpark to the park**
Currently there is a sheep and barbed wire fenced with gate and make shift livestock pen between the carpark and proposed park area. Other infrastructure here included a livestock drinking trough and recycling facility on the on the carpark side. All these features create an untidy feel. It is proposed these will be removed.
Figure 4. Photographs illustrate the ‘busy’ and untidy nature of the connection between carpark and proposed park.

The steep bank feature along the carpark lends itself well to a ‘semi-formal terrace feature which creates connection in the flow of the overall site between. The feature would be created out of a number of 500-600mm retaining stone faced walls with pathway, grass terraces and natural wooden seating built in. This feature would create a natural connection between the formal carpark and community centre / sports grounds and informal/natural parkland. It creates an interesting and quirky link to draw in the user towards the natural play areas, meadows, wetlands and woodland beyond. (Figure 1)
Fencing
The fencing along the southern and eastern sides of the site are mainly agricultural, sheep-wire fencing. It is proposed that this fence is retained as it is in keeping with the agricultural landscape around. The fence should be reposted, rewired and repaired as required. It is important that any barbed wire is placed on the outside side of the site and that it is matched with the strand of smooth bull wire in the inside. This will ensure that site users will not come into contact with the barbed wire, but it still act as a deterrent for potential transgression of livestock onto the site.

Fencing along the northern side should be retained along with the hedgerow. The ranch fence within the cemetery is being undermined by the stream and should be removed and replaced where required.
Figure 4. Ranch style and sheep wire fenced at northern edge of this fence should be retained along with the hedgerow. (When barbed wire presents a risk at should be put in the side of the fence a way from people and replaced by bull wire on the inside)

Figure 6. Ranch fencing in the northern side of the cemetery is being encroached by stream.
Other features
A bank feature on the southern side of the site, bordering Fourtowns Manor Housing development, appears to be important in bunding the wetter areas of the site from the backs of the estate houses. This should be retained and incorporated into a bank feature with low tree planting to create a naturalized bank feature to the wetland. Note: it is important on this southern sides, that smaller trees species should be selected so the light from the south is not shadowed into the site.
Landscape Proposals

Some of the key themes from the design brief include (see Landscape Masterplan and Landscape Plans below):

Access
It is proposed that a meandering pathway will wind through the site, covering approximately 660m. The construction has several options each increasing in cost with each surface offering varying finishes.

Recommended finishes are one of the following:

- Compacted quarry dust
- Hoggin
- Tarmac
- Resin bond aggregate

In wet and ponded areas, a wooden boardwalk (~135m) (Larch or similar) would be used to create another dimension and facilitate access to the wetland, pond areas. This would meander through the edge of the pond area bringing the user into the pond environment. The board walk will be wheelchair friendly with non-slip surface and safety rails were required. Other forms of access include the meandering meadow paths and the ramp and steps into the plaza area bring the total access to approximately 1km.

Natural play
Natural play was a strong feature in the community consultation. The whole site, will lend itself to imaginative natural play with meadows, woodland and walkways providing multi-dimensional seasonal changes with which young people can interact. Natural play differs from ‘traditional playgrounds’ in that it is not focused on play equipment. Instead it aims to develop imaginative play, which has many cognitive, emotional and physical advantages. This approach to play is more holistic and aims to provide a wider and more connected play experience. Equipment there-in is integrated with green space of the site limited only by the child’s imagination, rather than the physical limitations of a piece of equipment. The natural play will focus on the hillock spine to the east of the MUGGA, but this will seamlessly integrate with the landscape.
The other component of the Play Park area offer space for natural outdoor classrooms. This can be built large enough to accommodate outdoor plays but also intimate enough for the local schools to use.

**Plaza & Café**
A plaza with the room for construction of a café is proposed near the main car park. This will act as the focal point for the entire park. It will overlook one of the wildlife ponds. It will also include an area for outdoor eating that has views onto the Play Park offering passive supervision. Stone clad terracing will help secure the bank between this area and the car park. The plaza will also have space for a sculptural piece.

**Contemplative (Woodland) Garden**
A quiet area of contemplation was requested beside the cemetery. It is proposed to set this garden within the woodland perimeter which will help buffer the users from the activities of the surrounding park. The garden will borrow heavily from the Japanese style gardens but with the use of native Irish plants and other edible planting species (fruiting trees and shrubs, hazel, etc.).

**Habitat Creation for Wildlife**
The proposals aim to create a wide range of new habitat for wildlife in the park including two ponds (~0.3ha), reedbeds (~0.2ha), wildflower meadow (~0.6ha) and woodland (~1ha). Some non-native parkland tree species will also be used in selected locations throughout the site. White swift boxes and a caller are proposed for the community centre building. Woodland bulbs are proposed for under established trees and these will spread with time. These should be sourced from local provenance Irish stock only. Another option to further increase the wildflower meadow habitat would be to extend this into the southern section of the cemetery which is currently unoccupied.

**Agricultural Heritage**
Suitable selected agricultural equipment that showcases the agricultural heritage of the area can be displayed either temporarily or permanently at selected locations throughout the park. This will depend on the suitability and availability of such equipment. Any items should be used only in ways that do not affect the necessary maintenance of the different spaces.
Landscape Masterplan

- Woodland trail
- Wildflower meadow with mown paths
- Wildlife pond & boardwalk
- Contemplative garden
- Amenity lawn
- Natural play area & outdoor learning
- Wood / hedge boundary
- Plaza with cafe
- Wildlife pond
View looking from north to south across the park
View onto proposed plaza, café and surrounding landscaping
View into the proposed contemplative (woodland) garden with the proposed wildflower meadow and paths to the north
View across landscaping to the northern half of the park including contemplative garden, wildflower meadow, woodland trail and wildlife pond with boardwalk.
Landscape Plan 1 (Northern Section)

1. Cemetery: possible wildflower meadow on southern half until it comes into use; plant with woodland bulbs on turning circle; fix fencing on northern boundary.
2. Maintenance Access: construct 5-6m wide access track for maintenance machinery.
3. **Woodland Perimeter:** new native woodland planting with trail. This path runs throughout the park linking all the major areas of interest proposed. Seating, bins and interpretation will be provided at selected locations along the path.

4. **Wildflower Meadow:** manage grassland as wildflower meadow (~0.6ha) with mown grass paths. If agricultural machinery available as sculptural art pieces they can be positioned in this general area.

5. **Contemplative (Woodland) Garden:** new contemplative garden area set within woodland perimeter beside the cemetery to include: sheltered seating (2 gazebos); natural planting islands composing small ornamental trees, fruiting trees and shrubs, ivy groundcover, fens, woodland bulbs and feature boulders.

6. **Amenity Lawn**

7. **Wildlife Pond:** create wildlife pond with boardwalk access and small island.

8. **Wetland Area:** establish native wetland plants such as Yellow-flag Iris with the boardwalk running through it.
1. **Ball Court (Entrance):** link path from the ball court and northern end of the community centre into the park. New specimen tree planting on green spaces.
2. **Natural Play Area 1:** install a custom made themed play feature and other smaller natural play pieces.
3. **Natural Play Area 2:** install smaller natural play features e.g. willow hut, etc.
4. **Natural Play Area 3:** outdoor classroom area using natural materials e.g. log seats, etc.
5. **Café / Coffee Shop**: small café building overlooking plaza, pond and play area with adjacent outdoor seating / picnic benches.
6. **Steps**: steps linking into car park.
7. **Plaza**: feature public meeting space to act as main focal point for the park. To include a planting island with built in seating, a sculptural piece and a single Yew tree.
8. **Terraced Bank**: install terracing to retain bank between the car park and the park. Terraces to be ~500mm height with feature tree and ornamental planting.
9. **Main Entrance**: feature entrance with wheelchair accessible ramp to the plaza area. An orientation sign should be located here.
10. **Wildlife Pond**: create a natural pond with island and fringed by wetland planting such as Yellow-flag Iris.
11. **Earth Bund**: plant small native trees and shrub species along bank to screen boundary but not excessively block sunlight to the pond.
12. **Woodland / Hedgerow Boundary**: plant native trees and hedgerow plants along boundary.
13. **Path**: create a path system that incorporates all the main park spaces and include benches and bins at selected locations. Interpretation signs will be located at selected areas of interest within the park along the paths as well.
14. **Tree Line**: a line of fastigiated tree species (e.g. fastigiated oak) to be planted along bank.
15. **Community Centre Building**: install swift boxes and callers on selected faces (ideally south east face) of the building.
## Indicative Costings

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Mood Board

Wildlife Pond

Woodland Trail
Contemplative (Woodland) Garden
Plaza & Terracing

Natural Play Area

- Outdoor Classroom
- Examples of smaller natural play features

Portlaoise Town Park

- Examples of the type of main custom made natural play structure
Tollymore Forest Park
Princess Diana Play Park, England
Appendices

Importance of Public Space Grasslands
Public Space grasslands include lawns, parks and amenity grasslands. The maintenance of amenity grasslands is surprisingly high, forcing many local authorities to seek cheaper management protocols or regimes. Allowing grassland habitats in urban settings for the provision of native grasses and flowering plants offers several advantages:

- Plant diversity attracts insects (including butterflies and bees), arthropods (from spiders to millipedes), birds and mammals.
- Opportunities for learning, both formal and informal abound.
- Even small areas can change the atmosphere of a setting and make amenity grassland more interesting and inviting to the public.
- The reduced-intensity management needed for meadow type grasslands makes them a cost-effective alternative to closely mown amenity grassland.
- Flowering species gradually increase, creating a subtle improvement and adding colour to the urban or amenity grassland environment throughout the seasons.

Practical considerations
Obviously not all urban grassland is appropriate for meadow creation and management. Short, regularly cut turf is needed for playing fields and other high traffic amenity areas.

There may also be a perception amongst the public that tall areas to grassland that are only cut in autumn and early spring are unsightly.

But there are benefits of tall grasslands that merit their wider consideration.

- **Biodiversity** - Meadow grasslands tend to include nectar-rich plants, in turn attracting hoverflies, butterflies, moths and bees. The habitat will also be more likely to support small mammals, amphibians and even lizards.
- **Social benefit** - tall grasslands are particularly attractive to young children, stimulating the imagination and natural play, educating with respect to
insects and other invertebrates associated with the habitat, and introducing them to wild habitats. Through simple pathways cut through the grass you create a more interesting experiences for children and adults.

- **Economic sustainability** - the management regime for grassland varies according to the specific habitat to be created (or maintained) and the objectives associated with it. The management regime for tall grasslands and wildflower meadows is less intensive than for closely mown grasslands, so they can be a cost-effective alternative.

Public acceptance of grasslands other than monotonous and barren amenity grassland can be fostered through community engagement, education and carefully balanced design. For example, signs explaining about wildflowers providing a changing splash of colour through spring, summer and autumn can stimulate interest through visual appeal. Maintaining closely mown grass along edges and paths, and cutting wide meandering pathways through the tall grasses, will improve aesthetic appeal and encourage people to wander in and out of the meadows.
Native meadows with mown paths increase the amount of summer paths through simple green infrastructure. They also provide opportunities to engage with biodiversity and create habitat for endangered species. (Photos from County Antrim area)