

Friends of Marple Memorial Park

Timeline and key points of consultation on Community Hub with SMBC:

January 2019: First confidential consultation with David McHendry. Followed by regular dialogue with Peter Ashworth about latest news until Visioning Session.

March 2020: Took part in the “Marple Pool Visioning Session” with GT3 Associates. We advised that “this is a once in a lifetime opportunity and we must get it right!”

April 2020: Responded to 3 questions from Suzanne Blair of GT3 with 6 x A4 pages of detailed comments (appendix 1). This included the following key points and issues:

- Plans for £28k toilet block refurbishment placed on hold. Urged that the scheme includes new public toilets accessible by all park users (outcome: unknown).
- Plans for drinking water fountain and bottle-filling station placed on hold. Urged that the scheme includes this provision (outcome: unknown).
- Highlighted that Bowling Pavilion is a War Memorial built by WWI soldiers and must be retained as is (outcome: acknowledged).
- Plans for £200k merger and upgrade to Play Areas placed on hold and urged that new Play Area(s) be included as part of the scheme (outcome: successful).
- Requested that the scheme include relocation of the Diamond Jubilee Flowerbed in front of Marple Library to another area of the park if required (unknown).
- Requested that the scheme include relocation of Samuel Oldknow memorial plaque from All Saints' Church Tower (outcome: unknown).
- Advised of park projects that could be supported by the scheme included Outdoor Exercise Equipment; Outdoor Table Tennis; a Bandstand; and new display lecterns (outcome unknown).
- Raised the issues of current CCTV provision and asked for this to be carefully considered during proposal development so that the whole park can be protected from ASB, not just the buildings (outcome: unknown).
- Asked that the timeline display at the front of Hollins House be retained and untouched (outcome: unknown).
- Suggested a open air rooftop cafe area to make most of the views across the park (outcome: unknown).
- Asked that the woodland wildlife area not be built on but be incorporated into / linked with the scheme design (outcome: uncertain / unknown).
- Expressed concerns about access to our tool store and mess room (unknown).
- Asked for an area + noticeboard for Friends of the Park (outcome: unknown).
- Asked for discussion about removal of items displayed in Marple Library owned by The Marple Website / Mark Whittaker (outcome: unknown).
- Advised that if all the existing buildings in the park are not replaced by the new facilities then this will be an opportunity missed (outcome: uncertain).

October 2020: took part in a “Zoom” Stakeholder Workshop with Council Officers and GT3 Associates, where we vetoed two alternative locations suggested in the park near to the cinema and near to Lock 10. We also asked why the Station Road area of the park had not been considered and suggested that it should be (outcome: unknown).

December 2020 - January 2021: Working with Council Officers and GT3 we shared and promoted the community consultation via The Marple Website and park noticeboards.

January 2021: We submitted our own detailed comments on the consultation (appendix 2), which included reiteration of key issues raised in April 2020, plus new comments and queries, that we specifically asked to be discussed with us (outcome: they weren't).

The new issues raised were as follows:

- The Police Station should be demolished (outcome: unknown).
- We expressed surprise and concern that the Station Road area of the park had not been considered. We asked why this was? We suggested it should be considered before committing to an option (outcome: unknown).
- We asked if the Recreation Ground had been considered and what was the outcome of that? (we received no response).
- We asked the team to work with us to consider how the woodland area could be retained and how a net loss of green space could be avoided (no response).
- We asked for discussions on relocation of the Jubilee Flowerbed (no response).
- We asked for discussions on access to tool store and mess room (no response).
- We expressed concerns about traffic issues using Parkfield Ave (no response).
- We suggested an additional entrance / link-up via the Hollins Lane car park may be possible and should be investigated (outcome: unknown).
- We asked what the plans were for the existing toilet block (no response).
- We asked the team to look further at the idea of relocating the Samuel Oldknow plaque with us (no response).
- We asked to be consulted on the CCTV scheme to be included (no response).

March 2021: We wrote to Peter Ashworth / Georgia Buckley (appendix 3) reiterating again our concerns that (as far as we knew) the Station Road area of the park had not been looked at. We explained that we had examined this ourselves and concluded that the scheme could start at the existing Infants Play Area then out into the Station Road area of the park. We advised that the following advantages were envisaged:

- The woodland will not be destroyed, in fact it could be extended if the library is demolished.
- Neighbours on Parkfield Ave should be much happier as they will keep the woodland backdrop.
- It alleviates the need to knock the library down before building the new hub.
- It even gives the opportunity to consider not knocking down the library at all.

- It resolves access issues to the Bowling Pavilion store for FoMMP and the council.
- It may be possible to enlarge the size of the pool (a common complaint).
- The bowling green facilities could become integrated with the hub building / cafe (this would need to be discussed with all stakeholders including the Bowlers).
- Construction could be scheduled to minimise loss of access to facilities.
- Extra parking may be possible using part of the site of the library.

We shared a plan of this idea and advised that we were very eager for it to be discussed with us. We also shared this with all Marple Councillors. We were thanked for the suggestion and told no options would be written off at this stage and this would be built into internal discussions with a view to developing a workable scheme.

At this point detailed and meaningful dialogue with us ceased.

October 2021: We wrote to Peter Ashworth saying:

“We feel that your engagement with us has grown incredibly one-sided this year, with us putting a lot of effort into feeding you with our thoughts and ideas and basically getting absolutely nothing back.”

We received a positive response acknowledging our contribution but declining to discuss our ideas. We took some encouragement from this but reiterated that we were very keen for our suggested alternative location to be properly discussed and considered.

November 2021: An updated statement from SMBC indicated:

“We have explored a number of alternative locations within Marple Memorial Park, which were suggested through the engagement process, but our preferred location remains the site of the current library, with the scheme re-orientated to distance it from residential properties and protect the woodland to the rear of the library.”

We wrote to Peter Ashworth saying: “We note that you appear to have rejected our suggested alternative location and are proposing to still use the library site but reorientate it somehow to distance it from the woodland and residential properties.

We find it hard to understand exactly what reorientating it means to the park and we are very frustrated that you have rejected our suggestion location without talking to us about it. Since raising this with you we have repeatedly asked that you look at it properly and discuss it with us. We are therefore very concerned that our suggestion has not been looked at properly and extremely disappointed that there has been no discussion at all with us before publicly rejecting it.

We do not feel like we are being treated as stakeholders in the park any longer.”

We were encouraged not to be concerned by Cllr Malcolm Allan and eventually received a reply from Peter Ashworth saying: “I’d confirm Malcolm’s comments. The alternative locations have not been rejected and remain as options still as the detailed work progresses and the intentions of partners become clearer. Our preferred site is still the library site, but we are keeping an open mind on this.”

January 2022: Local Conservatives state in their newspaper that “Plans are now drawn up which will incorporate a new swimming baths with a gym, coffee shop and library..”

They included confusing graphics and layouts that were very hard to understand.

Our Chairman also received an unsolicited and unauthorised copy of part of a Levelling Up Fund submission update from June 2021 that showed the same graphics as the Conservatives' newspaper plus other slides from a presentation.

He wrote to Peter Ashworth expressing concern that these plans were in the public domain without being discussed with Friends of the Park and reiterating again our disappointment that our suggestions and ideas have not been discussed with us.

Peter advised that the graphics and layouts were from a confidential bid, so out of respect for that they were not shared any further, even with our committee.

October 2022: At Marple Area Committee it was announced that the Levelling Up decision is now delayed until next year. We wrote to Local Councillors saying:

“We share the incredible frustration that this is all taking so long.

However, at Friends of Marple Memorial Park we are very concerned that some of the comments made by councillors suggest that whatever scheme is proposed in our park - and we certainly have no details whatsoever of this - is going to be pushed onwards in isolation from us to be ready for a planning application, without the further consultation that we were expecting to take place before planning.

Phrases like, we're going through the planning process imminently, so we're ready to go when a decision is made and “we're taking a cart before the horse approach” are incredibly worrying to us.

We would urge you to think hard about this and talk to us sooner rather than later about the details of the scheme as we would not hesitate to object if we are presented with something that we think is not in the long term best interests of the park at the planning stage. How can we make sure this doesn't happen please?”

We were assured by councillors that the consultation process would not be bypassed.

January 2023: Amid growing concerns that we were not being treated as proper stakeholders in the park and details would not be discussed with us until everything was too far advanced, we asked a Public Question at the January Area Committee Meeting:

“In March 2021 Friends of Marple Memorial Park wrote to the Community Hub team suggesting an alternative location within the park for the scheme and explained the advantages we felt this would give over existing proposals.

We asked for discussion asap and followed up again in October 2021 when this didn't happen. Since then we have regularly asked for further dialogue but that has been refused. We have become increasingly concerned since we got wind in 2022 that our suggestion may have been partly implemented but misunderstood.

Now that the outcome of the Levelling Up bid gives time for pause and reset, can Councillors please ensure the team engage with us urgently to determine if our suggestions have been misinterpreted and to avoid potential conflict with our group during the next round of consultations and planning for the scheme?”

In response, it was commented that Members of the Committee had spoken to the relevant officers on this issue, and requested that all interested parties would be consulted at the earliest opportunity on this matter.

March 2023: Council announce success of the Levelling Up bid and then advise they will will shortly announce timescales for pre-planning engagement with local stakeholders.

This gave us hope that engagement would recommence in spring 2023 but we waited, and waited, and waited, growing increasingly frustrated at the lack of communication.

August 2023: We are finally invited to an Engagement Session at Marple Library on 30 August with 7 working days notice in the middle of the holiday season. The session is only planned to take 2.5 hours, we are restricted to 4 attendees and two other groups will be present. The session is only 3 working days before public consultation commences and it appears the project is already out to tender as companies bidding have recently visited the park and one of them has reached out to engage with us.

Our current thoughts on the situation

We hope the proposals are well thought out as we are concerned this feels more like a box-ticking exercise than the engagement and discussions with a key stakeholder in the park that we've been waiting for and repeatedly asking for since March 2021.

Extracts from FoMMP minutes of meetings post March 2021:

Community Hub: October 2021

We first learned of this potential scheme to replace the swimming pool, library and possibly other existing community buildings with a brand new development in the park during confidential discussions with the council's architect in January 2019.

We later attended the council's first consultation with local community groups in Marple Library on 12 March 2020, just prior to the first lockdown. One of our key suggestions was that the scheme should include the provision of a new play area.

We were asked to provide further information in April 2020 and submitted extensive comments and questions, plus information about our ongoing and future projects.

In October 2020 some of us took part in an online review of the provisional scheme and various options via a Zoom meeting with the the council and their architects. During this review we vetoed certain suggested locations in the park and also asked why the open area adjacent to Station Road had not been considered. We were pleased to learn our suggestion to include new play areas had been taken on board.

In January 2021 we took part in the wider public consultation on the scheme.

In March 2021 we wrote to Peter Ashworth and local councillors asking for careful consideration to be given to an alternative location using the site of the existing play areas and some of the open land adjacent to Station Road. We explained that we were eager for this to be properly explored and discussed with us as we considered that it provided solutions to many potential issues, including destruction of the woodland behind the library; proximity to neighbouring properties and access issues.

Our suggestions and ideas were acknowledged in March 2021 and we were told that they would be fed into options with a view to developing a workable scheme.

Since then we have heard nothing, so on 3rd October we wrote to Peter again expressing our dissatisfaction in the lack of feedback and discussion with us and asked if this could please be remedied. We received an encouraging reply the following day explaining that the council has been struggling to finalise agreement of non-council partners involvement in the scheme and commitment to then assemble a funding package to bring forward a more finalised scheme.

Peter acknowledged the issues around losing the woodland, proximity to neighbours and transport and access issues and confirmed that they will consider our suggestions and will engage with us as key stakeholders prior to wider public engagement.

Community Hub: May 2022

No recent news on this but we have added for reference and future discussions.

Although we haven't seen any drawings or diagrams it is understood that the layout has been reorientated to avoid destroying the woodland. This may have been influenced by our suggestion that the scheme should be sited on the Play Area.

The general feeling is that we are fed up of waiting for positive developments on this scheme and it has been going on for far too long without further consultation or positive news. Cllr Allan advised that MAC now having regular monthly meetings on this and he is hopeful that details of a new scheme will be consulted on soon.

Community Hub: June 2022

Nothing new.

Community Hub: September 2022

Malcolm advised that a Levelling-Up application was submitted by the council and the outcome is expected in the autumn, hopefully by around mid-November. Funding is key and if successful they would expect further consultation and planning next year. Our suggestion to reorientate the scheme has been taken onboard.

Community Hub: October 2022

No change. The outcome of the levelling up bid is expected in November.

[Post Meeting Note: at the Marple Area Committee on Wednesday 19 October it was announced that the outcome will now not be learned until the New Year due to government delays. Councillors also seemed to be suggesting at the meeting that they would be pressing on to get ready for a planning submission behind the scenes pending the levelling-up decision. This is a bit of a concern as it sounds like it may bypass further consultation. We will need to ask councillors about this.]

Community Hub: November 2022

Councillors have advised that they are now not expecting to hear the outcome of the Government Levelling Up funding bid until the New Year. At MAC they expressed an intention to press on with processes to get ready for the planning stage so that they can “hit the ground running” in the event of a successful bid outcome.

We have written to councillors expressing our concern that consultation with us has not moved on for some considerable time and urged them to talk with us sooner rather than later before plans are developed too far. We’ve received some initial reassurances but we don’t think they understand properly what our concerns are.

Months ago we suggested changing the location of the proposed hub building. We have heard on the grapevine that this may have been at least partially adopted but have no idea of the details and are concerned it has been misinterpreted.

We are worried pressing on towards planning without discussing fundamental issues such as location with us will force a situation where we feel compelled to object at the planning application stage. Mark explained our concerns in more detail when he met with Cllr Allan today. Cllr Allan has agreed to take up the matter up with officers and hopefully we can have a dialogue to seek reassurances as soon as possible.

Community Hub: December 2022

We've written to Marple Councillors to express our concerns about the lack of recent consultation with us on the siting of the Community Hub. Mark has also discussed our concerns at length with Cllr Allan last month and today but we have been told it will not be possible to have any form of dialogue prior to the next round of consultation.

Councillors have given reassurances but we remain sceptical we are understood.

Our concerns are that snippets of information received suggest the park will be cut in half by the latest scheme and we are worried it will have been developed too far by the time we get to the next stage of consultation, making it very difficult to change.

It is very frustrating that we appear to have exhausted all avenues to discuss what is proposed for our park in what we think is a timely manner. We will just have to accept that conflict may develop when the scheme reaches consultation and planning.

Community Hub: January 2023

No change - our concerns that conflict may develop over the location when the scheme reaches consultation have been outlined to Cllr Allan at length but he has advised that officers are not willing to talk to us until the next round of consultations.

[Post Meeting Note: The 2nd round Levelling Up bid was not successful. The next steps are unknown at present but our concerns remain and we have submitted the following Public Question to the Marple Area Committee Meeting on 25 January 2023:

In March 2021 Friends of Marple Memorial Park wrote to the Community Hub team suggesting an alternative location within the park for the scheme and explained the advantages we felt this would give over existing proposals.

We asked for discussion asap and followed up again in October 2021 when this didn't happen. Since then we have regularly asked for further dialogue but that has been refused. We have become increasingly concerned since we got wind in 2022 that our suggestion may have been partly implemented but misunderstood.

Now that the outcome of the Levelling Up bid gives time for pause and reset, can Councillors please ensure the team engage with us urgently to determine if our suggestions have been misinterpreted and to avoid potential conflict with our group during the next round of consultations and planning for the scheme?]

Community Hub: February 2023

The second round Levelling Up bid was not successful. The next steps are unclear at present but our concerns about engagement remain and we submitted the following Public Question to the Marple Area Committee Meeting on 25 January 2023:

In March 2021 Friends of Marple Memorial Park wrote to the Community Hub team suggesting an alternative location within the park for the scheme and explained the advantages we felt this would give over existing proposals.

We asked for discussion asap and followed up again in October 2021 when this didn't happen. Since then we have regularly asked for further dialogue but that has been refused. We have become increasingly concerned since we got wind in 2022 that our suggestion may have been partly implemented but misunderstood.

Now that the outcome of the Levelling Up bid gives time for pause and reset, can Councillors please ensure the team engage with us urgently to determine if our suggestions have been misinterpreted and to avoid potential conflict with our group during the next round of consultations and planning for the scheme?

There is no formal response yet but comments on the night were encouraging.

Cllr Allan advised that a dialogue with Government about levelling up is ongoing but he couldn't say more at this stage. He was able to confirm that the council team working on the scheme consider us to be stakeholders and have given him assurances that engagement with us will be resumed as soon as possible.

It was suggested that it may be more practical to build a new pool on the existing Stockport Road site, which could potentially be used much more efficiently.

Community Hub: April 2023

On 16 March it was announced the council has secured £20M funding. This is good news for the community and hopefully good news for the park but we remain unsure as we have been trying to get them to talk to us about their proposals for two years.

On 25 March the council advised that they will shortly announce timescales for pre-

planning engagement with local stakeholders and residents, followed by the submission of a formal planning application and indicative timescales for construction.

We believe we are considered to be stakeholders and will therefore be consulted soon but we haven't heard anything yet. We remain concerned that we will soon be on a roller-coaster with no time for carefully considered discussion or change.

Hopefully we are wrong but we feel we face many uncertainties about the park's future well-being followed by an unknown period of considerable disruption.

The old pool is now being demolished. We wonder what is happening to things like the Macnair Memorial Plaque and Mark will make enquiries with councillors.

Community Hub: May 2023

No change, we are still waiting for the council to consult with us as stakeholders.

We remain very concerned about what may be planned, the quality of consultation that we will be allowed and the time pressures we envisage being in place.

We understand they may have been holding off consultations due to the elections but don't really see why this would have effected consultation with us.

Community Hub: July 2023

No change, we're still waiting for the council to consult with us as stakeholders.

In March the council's update said they will shortly be announcing timescales for pre-planning engagement with stakeholders and this is still the current message on the council web site. Shortly obviously means something different in council world.

We hear the library closes in September and the swimming pool will be demolished.

We have repeatedly expressed our wishes to discuss the possible location to councillors, particularly to former Cllr. Allan in these meetings. Now that Malcolm is no longer a councillor we are worried all that dialogue will be water under the bridge.

Early engagement was good but since submitting our location ideas in March 2021 and asking for them to be discussed with us we have been kept at arms length and our repeated requests for discussions since then have been refused.

We're concerned whatever is planned now will be steamrolled through whether we like it or not and there will be no time to have a properly considered debate.

We are also concerned at the impact on the park during construction, especially with regard to access restrictions and availability of play areas.

We're disappointed the council has refused to keep us in the loop for so long but look forward to the promised engagement. We hope it won't just be a box-ticking exercise and we will be given the opportunity to properly consider what is best for the park.