Response from the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust (WWT) to the WDC consultation on the future of Newbold Comyn 11th September to 10th November 2019

We note that the maps provided in the consultation are different to those provided to the WDC Executive Committee on 21st August. One difference is that the original maps for Layout 2 & 3 indicated the *existing clubhouse repurposed to Visitor Centre/café* whereas all three maps provided as part of the consultation indicated the *existing clubhouse potentially repurposed to service golf/outdoor activities.* In our opinion this is a significant change to which we will return later in our response. Section 3.9 of the paper Newbold Comyn – Update and Approach to Engagement for WDC Executive (Agenda Item 5, 21st August) all three layouts included a visitor centre.

The public survey is not suitable for a response from an organisation such as WWT but we have issued via our communication channels to our members, volunteers and the general public to make as many people aware of the opportunity to comment as possible. This organisational response is however private and has not been promoted through that communication.

[Warwickshire Wildlife Trust](http://www.warwickshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/) (WWT) is one of the 46 UK Wildlife Trusts. Established in 1970 we are a grass roots organisation in every sense governed by 14 trustees elected from a membership of 24,000 people, 99% of whom live in the county, and supported by more than 500 active volunteers. We manage an estate covering 1,000 ha in Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull and no one living or working in that area is more than 6 miles from one of our 65 nature reserves. More than 25,000 local children joined in our environmental education programme last year, and tens of thousands more people came to our two visitor centres at Brandon Marsh and Solihull, or took part in our vibrant and varied programme of events.

Our reach is also national as members of the influential Wildlife Trust movement we are part of a collective covering the whole of the UK with 800,000 members, 40,000 volunteers and 2,500 nature reserves, working together through a small central unit (the [Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org)). The Wildlife Trusts have a vision of a society where there is more wildlife, more wild places and more people with a strong connection to the natural world. We believe that human beings are part of the natural world, valuable in its own right and as the foundation of our health and wellbeing, as well as our economic prosperity. Being physically and emotionally in touch with wild plants and animals, and with places where they thrive, contributes to our mental and physical health.

Over the past 20 years WWT and WDC have had a partnership through which we manage sites owned by WDC for wildlife and people. This was renewed in May 2019 with an agreement for the next 25 years covering 11 different sites over a total of 146 ha (the size of sites range from Oakley Wood at 48 ha to Hunningham Meadow at 1.2 ha).

We are therefore principally concerned that WDC make the most of the excellent opportunity which a new long-term future for Newbold Comyn provides for wildlife, people and the health & well-being of residents and visitors to Leamington Spa.

The three options provided in the survey generate an extension to the existing Leam Valley nature reserve of between 32 and 47 ha – so all three options create the opportunity to significantly enhance the biodiversity value of a large area on the fringe of the town and, because of the easy access, people’s enjoyment of local wildlife and the benefits that brings to their lives and well-being. The biodiversity enhancements would be delivered through active management of part of the former golf course as a nature reserve, including the creation of new natural habitats on previously intensively managed fairways and greens. Improvements in people’s enjoyment of nature would be delivered through enhancing that aspect of the visitor experience – access trails, expert interpretation and informal exploration but above all by having staff on site skilled in helping people make the most of what the Newbold Comyn will have to offer.

WWT strongly prefer Options 2 and 3 over Option 1 because:

* the potential for these benefits is far greater with a larger extension to the existing nature reserve
* this would double the size of the contiguous Welches Meadow and Leam Valley nature reserves and create an area of approximately 100 ha being managed for wildlife and people – creating a new single nature reserve of this size on the doorstep of 60,000 would mean WDC and Leamington Spa would be leading the recovery of nature in the UK
* this contributes to the principle of creating bigger, better, more joined up areas as outlined by the [2010 Lawton Review](https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402170324/http:/archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf) and a requirement of [Nature Recovery Networks](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/nature-recovery-network) which are a requirement on Local Authorities under the forthcoming [Environment Bill](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-introduces-ground-breaking-environment-bill) (as legislation stands at the bill’s second reading)
* a nature reserve of this size and the numbers of visitors already coming to Newbold Comyn (and predicted to come in the future) would need to be served by the facilities of a visitor centre similar to Brandon Marsh – Options 2 & 3 originally indicated that the *existing clubhouse* [could be] *repurposed to Visitor Centre/café.* This is unavailable in Option 1.
* a golf offer has already failed at Newbold Comyn and is therefore likely to do so again in the future, and no evidence has been provided that the alternative golf offerings are viable or even desired by residents/visitors or providers of such services.

Between Options 2 and 3 we have a mild preference for Option 3, not because the maps indicate a slightly larger extension to the nature reserve (the extra 1 ha is negligible) but because we are concerned that too many new activities are being squeezed into Newbold Comyn in Option 2, and no evidence has been provided that they are all viable or how conflicts would be managed between so many different operations (and that having so many different users would create considerable ongoing management costs for WDC as landlord). Many of these potential activities will require private and exclusive use of land which has been previously publicly accessible and the necessary fencing off of areas for e.g. archery, golf driving, artificial sports pitch *etc* will significantly change the attractive open space character of Newbold Comyn.

The potential of an increased offer of diverse and expanded activities also turns the site from a local hub into a regional destination which, whilst well supported for the current level of use in terms of sustainable transport systems i.e. cycle lanes, bus routes and limited car parking, would be under significant strain on high days and holidays. Therefore much more careful consideration is needed for the increased offer, and the knock on effects of increased visitor numbers from further afield and how that would be managed.

We are also concerned that the floodlighting which will necessarily accompany e.g. golf driving and artificial sports pitches will adversely affect bats for which Newbold Comyn is a very important site (a bat survey is not mentioned in the information on the ecological impacts of the Options).

Economic Information

We would have expected to have been consulted on the financial viability of an extension to the existing nature reserve but this has not happened and therefore we assume that this important aspect has not been properly considered. If correct then this is a serious omission.

The Importance of a Visitor Centre

With 50 years’ experience of managing a 87 ha nature reserve at Brandon Marsh our opinion is that a visitor centre will absolutely necessary at Newbold Comyn to (i) enhance the visitor experience and generate ongoing public support (practical and financial), (ii) act a base for staff servicing visitors and managing habitats on site, and (iii) as a facility for the storage and servicing of the necessary equipment. While the recommendations to WDC Executive Committee included repurposing the old golf clubhouse into a visitor centre no further details have been made available on:

* how the cost of repurposing the clubhouse to a visitor centre would be met
* who might operate a centre, and under what terms
* what services would be offered from any such centre

Warwickshire Wildlife Trust

In principle, and obviously subject for much further detailed discussion and negotiation, WWT would be prepared to:

* manage a new nature reserve at Newbold Comyn created from a portion of the former golf course, and Leam Valley and Welches Meadow (which we already currently manage under a long term agreement with WDC)
* repurpose and operate a Newbold Comyn nature reserve visitor centre

This expression of interest is made on the assumption that delivery would be in partnership with WDC and recognition that that partnership would require careful thought and detailed discussion to agree respective roles, contributions and responsibilities. However our experience, track record and reputation are obvious qualifications behind our interest.

Royal Leamington Spa - A Centre for Health & Wellbeing

WWT has been consulted by the authors of the proposal submitted to WDC for Leamington Spa to become a Centre for Health and Wellbeing building on its cultural spa heritage. This response is submitted on the particular future of Newbold Comyn but is compatible with the thinking behind that wider proposal.

Submitted in person and by email on 14th November 2020