



Parks & Landscape Services Section, Municipal Services Department

**Proposed Development of Fernhill Park &  
Gardens, Stepside, Co. Dublin with Works  
within the Curtilage of the Protected  
Structure (Fernhill House)  
PC/PKS/01/17**

**Appendix 5 – Design Statement**



# Fernhill Park & Gardens

Stepaside, County Dublin

## DESIGN STATEMENT



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Nicholas de Jong Associates  
U R B A N   D E S I G N



# Fernhill Park & Gardens

## DESIGN STATEMENT

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## **Fernhill Park and Gardens – Design Statement**

### **1. Introduction**

Fernhill Park and Gardens offer a unique opportunity for developing a high quality sustainable Regional Park to serve the residents of the Dún Laoghaire Rathdown area and surrounding region. Located on the edge of the metropolitan area and extending to around 34 hectares, the Fernhill Estate is capable of providing all the amenities associated with such a major park within a high-quality landscape setting.

The special character of Fernhill is defined by its appearance as a small country estate, with its former substantial and unusual family residence and ancillary buildings set within an informally designed and renowned landscape of woodlands and meadows. The surviving features of the house and gardens are numerous, and considered to be of Regional Significance.

Given the heritage importance of Fernhill, and its location at the foothills of the Dublin Mountains, it will be essential to conserve and restore (where appropriate) the defining landscape features and retain the natural character of the estate.

Also, in the context of an increasingly urbanized environment of the urban fringe, Fernhill is an important feature of biodiversity/green infrastructure within the county, comprising a matrix of habitats that connect the uplands to the coast via two watercourses.

Consequently, the following Aims and Objectives have been formulated to guide the preparation of the design for the appropriate future development of the estate:

1. To develop Fernhill Park and Gardens as a high quality sustainable Regional Public Park.
2. To conserve, restore and enhance the plant collections and gardens in a sensitive and sustainable manner in line with its ICOMOS designation.
3. To conserve and protect the natural heritage, the flora and fauna of the site.
4. To conserve and restore the built heritage including Fernhill House and provide suitable, sympathetic and sustainable uses for the properties in the setting of the public park and gardens.
5. To ensure the natural character and topography of the site is protected in its setting and proximity to the Dublin Mountains.
6. To ensure sustainable innovative proposals and green principles are at the core of the project.
7. To ensure that interventions in the landscape are deliberate and at an appropriate scale to provide aesthetically pleasing and functional spaces.
8. To ensure a suitable range of visitor facilities are provided including opportunities for play, active and passive recreation.
9. To ensure there are extensive opportunities for community engagement and education throughout the park and gardens.

10. To ensure the park is designed to cater for existing and future needs of its users and adequate provision is made for the use of SMART technologies to improve visitor facilities and experience.
11. To ensure the Right of Way is maintained, enhanced and developed as an integral part of the park while strengthening the link to the mountains.

These Aims and Objectives underpin the approach adopted for the Fernhill design. In addition, the development of the design has been informed by a comprehensive Feasibility Study and the public consultation process (Have Your Say) undertaken between December 2016 and January 2017. The design was led by DLR Parks and agreed by a multi-disciplinary team who attended regular workshops throughout the design development process. The Feasibility Study also included a wide range of supporting documents such as a Preliminary Engineering Report, a House and Gardens Conservation Study, an Ecological Constraints Report, an Arboricultural Assessment, a Ground Investigation Report, an Historic Gardens Report, and a detailed Topographical Survey.

## **2. Landscape Sensitivity**

The sensitivity of the Fernhill estate to the type of change envisaged has been a major influence on the Feasibility and design processes. As described in the Feasibility Study, sensitivity is concerned with the susceptibility of the landscape to a particular type of change or development. An assessment of landscape sensitivity combines the vulnerability of the landscape resource (including its historical and ecological features) and visual sensitivity (such as views and visibility). In the context of Fernhill, sensitivity also includes values that contribute to the appreciation of the landscape, such as designations and constraints (i.e. Protected Structure and inclusion on NIAH List of Historic Gardens).

In consideration of the natural and built heritage features, the views and other special characteristics of the estate, the overall susceptibility of the Fernhill landscape to the type of change envisaged must be considered as high. However, the sensitivity assessment recognizes that the relative vulnerability of the estate varies, according to the historical and ecological features present within a particular area and the extent to which these features can be viewed from public vantage points. Consequently, the areas of highest sensitivity are defined as those areas in closest proximity to Fernhill House, i.e. within the curtilage of the Protected Structure and incorporating the main designed parts of the gardens. The less sensitive parts of the estate are assessed as the three large agricultural fields to the south-west of the estate and the linear belt of trees along the north-western boundary with the school, of which the boundary vegetation and the most northern field (road Field) is considered least sensitive to change.

The sensitivity analysis of the estate has strongly influenced the design approach to the future development of Fernhill by organising the main interventions with most likely impact in the low or medium-low sensitivity zones and the lesser impact interventions in the high or high-medium zones.

### **3. Design Concept**

In meeting the development objectives for Fernhill House and Gardens, it has been necessary to strike an appropriate balance between the special character of the estate, the anticipated number of visitors and the protection of wildlife, while also providing suitable opportunities for active and passive recreation so that Fernhill can fulfil its new function as a successful Regional Park.

The design clearly sets out and presents the overall aspirations for Fernhill as a high quality Regional Park with a compatible range of active and passive recreational uses that are sympathetic to, and where possible, enhance the special landscape setting.

The design concept involves building upon the high-quality landscape setting with a series of careful interventions aimed at improving the amenity and recreational potential of the estate. This includes the conservation and restoration of the most sensitive landscape zones, while allowing controlled visitor access along re-surfaced paths and woodland trails. Conversely, the more intensive interventions, such as active recreational facilities, are located within the less sensitive areas of the estate.

In all situations, however, it must be expected that any required intervention will affect the landscape character of the estate to a greater or lesser extent, and an appropriate design approach is essential to ensure that the relative vulnerability of all parts of the estate are not compromised by the new recreational requirements. In order to ensure that this is consistently achieved, the design advocates the provision of high quality visitor facilities, undertaken in a contemporary and innovative manner throughout the new park.

### **4. Main Features of the Design**

#### ***Access and Circulation***

The primary vehicle access to the Park is proposed via the existing Rosemont School entrance at the north-western corner of the estate. Having examined a range of access options, the Feasibility Study concluded that this location was optimum in terms of road geometry, forward visibility, and resulting in least landscape and visual impact. The existing Fernhill House entrance driveway is considered as unsuitable for general vehicle access.

Pedestrian and cycle access will also be via the Rosemont School entrance, supplemented with the existing Fernhill House entrance as well as by a new route at the north-east edge of the park, close to the Belarmine roundabout. Signalised Toucan crossings are proposed at the two main entrance points to facilitate pedestrian and cycle access across the Enniskerry Road from adjacent residential areas.

Each pedestrian/cycle access point connects directly with the primary path network proposed throughout the main parts of the park. The primary paths extend into the central

parts, linking with existing pathways and providing access to the buildings, car parks and main recreational facilities. An outer path continues around the southern edge of the park, providing access to formal and informal recreational areas and to the existing woodland areas, as well as offering an invigorating looped walk around the park. Regular rest areas with linear seating are proposed along each of the primary paths, particularly at intersections and at vantage points for enjoying the views.

The existing informal pathways of the woodland and garden areas of the park will be restored and supplemented where required by additional links in the form of boardwalk type surfaces that improve general access and create viewing/seating/resting spaces, while helping to control pedestrian movement through the more sensitive areas. The Broadwalk will be reinstated as the prime recreational route through the ornamental gardens.

Car parking will firstly be distributed along the new access driveway extending southwards from the Rosemont entrance, within one of the least sensitive parts of the estate. This parking area (approx. 44no. spaces) will be arranged informally between existing clumps of trees that can be retained, and the driveway designed as a shared surface avenue for the use of vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians. This also gives access to further parking along the northern edges of Road Field (approx. 50no. spaces) and Nine Acre Field (approx. 70no. spaces), both screened by new mounding and tree planting.

Service access will also be accommodated from the Rosemont entrance, via the new driveway and connecting to the rear of the farmyard complex. Existing resident access, and occasional special deliveries, can be retained from the current Fernhill House entrance on Enniskerry Road.

The Public Right-of-Way through the eastern part of the estate will also be retained (and upgraded where necessary), providing pedestrian access (walkers in particular) a route from the Enniskerry Road to the Ballyedmonduff road, onwards to the upland access routes and, eventually, to the Wicklow Way.

### ***Active Recreation Facilities***

The higher intensity active recreational uses are located within the medium-low sensitivity area of Road Field. They will be arranged within a large oval space across the sloping ground of the field, and provide for multi-use games and a 400m long running circuit. A modest sports building is located adjacent to the oval, accessed by a flight of steps from the shared surface plaza space linking the main car parks. A children's slide will also be provided down the slope.

### ***Passive Recreation Activities***

The natural character of the park is ideally suited for a wide range of passive recreation activities, with a particular emphasis on walking through the grounds to appreciate the designed landscape of ornamental gardens and woodlands. The existing footpath network will be supplemented with primary and secondary paths to ensure that all parts of the estate are accessible, in accordance with their relative sensitivity to disturbance, and to offer a



series of looped walk possibilities of differing lengths and abilities. Whereas some of the mid-level sections of the primary path network may be fully accessible, between the car parks and the main central facilities, the remainder of the paths would not be suitable for universal access due to the steeply sloping character of the estate.

In addition to the various walks through meadowlands, woodlands and ornamental gardens, the new park will provide opportunities for other passive activities such as bird-watching, horticultural and habitat interpretation, pic-nicking, and sculpture trails. A dogs-off-leash area is included on the upper parts of Nine Acre Field.

It is also intended that Fernhill Park and Gardens should become a model for education and community participation, particularly in relation to the special horticultural and arboricultural features of the estate together with the opportunities presented by the kitchen gardens for activities such as vegetable and fruit growing, bee-keeping and growing of medicinal herbs.

### ***Children's Play Facilities***

A range of play facilities are proposed within the park to cater for different age groups and abilities, and each will be designed to form an integral part of their landscape setting. A toddler's play area is located towards the northern edge of Nine Acre Field, in close proximity to the eastern car park and set within an ornamental landscape of sculptural mounds and tree planting that offer further opportunity for natural play. The remainder of Nine Acre Field will also be available for informal recreation activities.

An adventure play area for older children will be located to the north of the adjacent Wood Field, within an area of existing woodland and adjoining a small stream. The play equipment to be provided will be well-dispersed amongst the trees and of a natural type that promotes the adventure concept. The grass meadow that comprises the rest of the field, together with adjoining clumps of trees and hedgerows, will provide extensive space for further informal play activities.

Towards the top of Wood Field, a children's zip wire ('Flying Fox') is proposed extending across the contours, while the adjoining upper woodland areas of mostly coniferous trees will provide opportunities for further natural adventure play such as den building and a small orienteering course at suitable locations.

### ***Habitat Creation and Management***

The existing ecology of the estate is recognised as comprising a mosaic of habitats which include mature trees and woodland, watercourses and ponds, a variety of grasslands and scrub. Fernhill is also important for its variety of fauna that includes birds, bats, badgers, deer and other mammals. The ongoing management of this important resource forms an integral part of the design strategy for the park.

Areas of particular ecological sensitivity, such as the species-rich meadow to the north of the estate, will be retained and where possible enhanced through access controls and suitable

management operations (such as seasonal grazing). Similarly the more sensitive woodland gardens will be safeguarded through ensuring appropriate public access by way of defined boardwalk pathways, and where necessary by subtle gates and fencing. Habitat appreciation through the provision of signboards and leaflets will be an important part of the interpretation strategy for the park.

In addition, the design envisages new habitat creation such as extended woodland, scrub areas, replanting of shelterbelts and specimen tree planting to supplement and sustain the distinctive vegetation cover, as well as the creation of ponds and an attenuation wetland within the lower parts of Wood Field.

The future development of the park will therefore be fully informed by a comprehensive Landscape Management Plan that assimilates and expands upon the findings and recommendations of the feasibility technical studies, including:

- Ecology Report in terms of protecting and enhancing the existing habitats;
- Arboricultural Report in relation to tree removal and remedial works, and suitable replacement planting that secures the distinctive long-term tree cover; and
- Historic Gardens Report for identifying and sustaining the unique plant collections.

### ***The Buildings***

The Fernhill buildings, comprising the Main House and its Outbuildings, offer considerable potential for reinforcing the function and appeal of the new park. A number of long-term uses are being explored as part of the design process, including the restoration of Fernhill House for community purposes and the conversion of the farm buildings for comfort and support facilities such as tearooms, toilets, interpretation centre and for maintenance operations. It is also intended that the kitchen gardens and glasshouses are retained and restored, to complement the building uses and as a visitor attraction, while the main courtyard could be used for small farmers markets or external seating.

The buildings within the extents of the life tenancy agreement will remain in their current use for the foreseeable future. In the longer-term they could possibly be converted to use as a park maintenance depot with associated storage and administration uses. The period gate lodge at the existing entrance to the estate could be retained as park keeper accommodation and/or park information centre.

### ***Renewable Energy Provisions***

It is intended that Fernhill Park will become a model of renewable energy technologies to be fully explored through further studies during the Design stages. Interventions to be considered include the incorporation of mini-hydro power as part of the ponds and wetlands creation, together with suitably sized and located wind turbines. The building conversions will also encourage the inclusion of suitable renewable and sustainable energy technologies that can create environmentally friendly solutions.