Re: Submission to Draft Phoenix Park Visitor Experience Strategic Review (Oct. 2018)

Introduction

An Taisce welcomes this initiative specifically addressing the Visitor Experience of the Phoenix Park, however there are a number of areas of concern, in particular the impacts of introduction of modern pavilions into the Park’s historic central avenue, and concerning the overriding problem of motor-traffic impact in the Park.

The proposals for a funicular, a footbridge to the Memorial Gardens in Islandbridge, a driverless shuttle-bus, and a train station stop are welcome, but there must be a stick as well as a carrot to change around the Park from its current deference to the uncurtailed and marauding motorist. The vision for Chesterfield Avenue is of incremental and tentative improvements and studies, modest traffic calming, visitor centres and the like, but something much more radical is demanded for a straight 4km rat-run in the climate-challenged mid-twenty-first century.

In general the Strategic Review seems too focused on architecture-led visitor centres and needs to instead place the sensitive historic designed landscape at the centre of the initiative.

The Phoenix Park will be a success when it is virtually traffic-free, like all good parks, and facilitating an array of outdoor activities providing dynamic, sustainable and healthy infrastructure for the citizenry while safeguarding the fragility and pre-eminence of its natural and historic landscape character.
Motor Vehicle Traffic

While progress has been made in reducing the impact of through-traffic on access roads outside Chesterfield Avenue, the Park remains overrun with cars. Levels of car parking accommodation are unsustainable and seriously undermine the natural and historic landscape character.

Remarkably, the Strategic Review includes objectives whereby further surface car parking might be provided in connection with development at Ashtown Visitor Centre, following existing car parking models there, and also along the central avenue of the Park. This is not supportable in view of existing, breaking-point levels of cars in the Park to the detriment of other users, and the impacts resulting from increased visitors on the organic elements - disturbance to flora and fauna and the deer herd.

The overarching objective of the Strategic Review must be for a significantly reduced number of motor vehicles entering and using the Park.

Further car parking provision within the historic landscape footprint is fundamentally in conflict with the provisions of the Phoenix Park Conservation Management Plan 2011 which contains as a strategic objective:

“To protect and conserve the historic landscape character of the Phoenix Park”
(section 2.2)
And, in particular, with the Vision, which states:

“Given the over-riding importance of the historic designed landscape of the Phoenix Park, priority must be accorded to the conservation of the landscape, even where this restricts or limits the achievement of other objectives relating to the Park.”

With the millions of cars presently using the park annually and hundreds of commuter cars parking daily on Chesterfield Avenue for proximate access to the city, it seems reasonable, if public transport is improved including by way of the proposed shuttle, that they should be tolled. (A shuttle bus introduced a decade ago on a pilot basis from Heuston Station to serve all the major attractions in the Park was insufficiently promoted and no effective control was put on car parking in the Park.)

The objective of the Strategic Review for a Mobility Plan should be in accordance with the government report *Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future 2009-2020*, promoting cycle- and public-transport access and including extension of the Dublin Bikes scheme to the Visitor Centre and Zoo. At the same time increased control on car parking is required, including strict controls on commuter parking and introduction of a charge or permit structure (for example in the case of sports clubs).

**Pedestrian Approach to Park from City Centre**

The proposed actions of the section of the Executive Summary, ‘Bringing the Park and the City Together’ (3.1), focus on the commissioning of studies and the supporting of initiatives. An Taisce would urge that more readily achievable improvements are focussed on.

With the increased numbers visiting and entering the Park from the City Centre on foot (owing to numerous factors including an increased younger, international city-centre population, the ‘citybreaks’ phenomenon, location of nearby Luas stops etc.), it is recommended that the OPW work with Dublin City Council and the NTA to implement public-realm improvement to the critical Parkgate Street approach to the Park, and having regard to proposed Action 24 of the Strategic Review.
Doubling of Pavement Width, Parkgate Street

While the Criminal Court building of 2010 resulted in the undertaking of improvements to the public realm between the Infirmary Road junction and the Park Gate, the pedestrian experience on Parkgate Street itself remains poor, with a narrow, cluttered, decades-old concrete pavement serving shops and businesses and linking the Heuston Station / Collins Barracks Museum area to the Park (figs. 2 & 3).

With less vehicle traffic entering the City Centre from the west now than a decade ago due to constraints placed, for example, by Luas Cross City and increased bus priority on the Quays (and consequently more east-bound private-car traffic turning left at Infirmary Road), the pavement on the north side of Parkgate Street can be doubled in width to improve the ‘welcome’ on this critical approach to the Park, with appropriate high-quality surface treatment.

Figs. 2 & 3 Parkgate Street - poor quality, narrow, cluttered pavement on main pedestrian approach to Park from City.
Fig. 4 Sketch from 2004 An Taisce report illustrating removal and pedestrianisation of one of the two traffic lanes through the main Park Gate (reflecting traffic access at the opposite end of Chesterfield Avenue, at Castleknock Gate).

Entry at Park Gate and Proposal for ‘Welcome Pavilions’

Once through the gates, the pedestrian is confronted with a broad, protracted motor-vehicle avenue on a slight incline with no relief in sight. When west-bound traffic lights on Conyngham Road turn green, a line of cars enters the Park, leaving a trail of exhaust fumes for pedestrians to inhale – not a welcoming greeting to an internationally-significant historic city park.

The Strategic Review proposes addressing deficiencies at the Park Gate entrance by addition of ‘welcome pavilions’, which would mean introduction of modern structures into one of the Park’s primary classical vistas. The Park was designed to have open vistas along planted avenues, interrupted by centrally-placed monuments (Gough and monument and Phoenix Column). The proposed pavilion structures in this location will intrude on the sightline of the historic avenue vista and their modernistic design is not appropriate to the historic character which has been creditably preserved intact over the years.

Furthermore, as the Strategic Review does not envisage measures directly curbing motor traffic levels at the main Park Gate it is questionable that ‘welcome pavilions’ would effect any improvement in the visitor experience. The problem, then, comes back to the overriding need for reduction and restriction of numbers of cars entering and using the Park, which must be addressed.
The proposal for a replacement for the Gough monument is welcome. The eastern ‘half’ of Chesterfield Avenue is long and unremitting and would benefit by being broken up here as per the classical avenue design, and to reinstate a pause- or stop-point here for users of the Park (fig. 5).

The creators of the grand-scale central avenue through the Park could not have envisaged the impacts of the mass motor-car era. Again, in order for this to be a successful pause-point for the public, reduced overall traffic usage of Chesterfield Avenue must be the objective.
Facilities

As per the increased visitor numbers, the City end of the Park is more intensively used in recent years, but facilities are inadequate. The tiny Tea Rooms cafe overfills on sunny days, with long queues and very limited seating. It could be extended, with a low-key, timber-clad extension overlooking the Bandstand Hollow (with toilets relocated underground), which would maintain the Victorian folly/pavilion character of the Tea Rooms and retain the primacy of the historic setting.

For a park of its size and proximity to the city, the Phoenix Park lacks recreational activities and facilities. Reduction of the number of football pitches in the area between Magazine Fort and Acres Road (whose number is out of proportion to their usage) could be considered and provision of, for example, an outdoor swimming pool, a track for jogging, skating etc.
Figs. 7 & 8 The Cricket Club building in the 1960s (top), and today (above).
Built Heritage

Re-use of existing buildings, as opposed to new-build, is the preferred approach having regard to sustainability and the need to conserve the Park’s sensitive historic landscape.

Magazine Fort

The restoration of the Magazine Fort to best conservation standard, and without any new-build, is welcome.

Wellington Monument

The black tarmac apron surrounding the base of the Wellington Monument does not befit this extraordinary landmark granite obelisk which is one of the first visitor stops along the Park’s central avenue. A high quality beige tarmac (as at Collins Barracks courtyard) or stone apron treatment would be more sympathetic and befitting to the historic monument.

Cricket Club

The proposal for restoration of the Park’s lodges and other historic buildings is welcome. There is scope for improvement of architectural character, for example replacement of uPVC doors at the Cricket Club building with the correct timber design (figs. 7 & 8).

Castleknock Gate lodge

Similarly the uPVC windows to the stone Castleknock Gate lodge send out the wrong message and the correct timber design should be reinstated.

Clock Tower, Farmleigh

The 1880s Italianate-style Clock Tower enjoys a terrific location at the western edge of the city and overlooking the Park and Liffey valley. Public access to its viewing platform should be considered.

Nos. 10-12 Conyngham Road

CIE/Dublin Bus needs to be pressed in regard to the longterm derelict historic buildings in its ownership on Conyngham Road, immediately outside the Park Gate (figs. 9 & 10).

These protected derelict buildings have become so familiar to local eyes as to be invisible, but are seen fresh by hundreds of visitors entering/exiting the Park every day, presenting a dereliction blackspot at the key interface of the Park and the City.

Though derelict more than two decades, the buildings are essentially handsome mid-19th century houses, using the good quality materials and construction of the time - stock brick with granite dressings and ironwork - and befitting the prominent civic location adjacent the Park Gate.
Due to their location and derelict state the buildings have a significant negative effect on the main entrance to the Phoenix Park. Pressure must be applied to secure their refurbishment for use, with appropriate conservation brief. New residential or other units can be built within the shell of the buildings, with restored brickwork, architectural detail and chimney/roofline. An Taisce would be happy to form part of any discussions in this regard.

*Fig. 9* Dereliction spectacle in prime location at the Park Gate.

*Fig. 10* Longterm derelict 19th century buildings sitting in the historic axial view towards the city along the Park’s main central avenue.
Fig. 11 North Circular Road entrance to the Park.

North Circular Road Gates

The North Circular Road entrance to the Park also needs attention. Approached along a magnificent formal avenue lined with mature trees and period redbrick houses, this is one of the key entrances to the Park from the city. In circa 1900, improvements were carried out, with erection of decorative iron screen gates and a new two-storey shop building adjoining (Fig. 11).

The two-storey shop building has a commanding location looking down Infirmary Road, and creates an effective marker at this entrance to the Park. It is angled to enclose the sharp turn between Infirmary Road and North Circular Road, and has a feature central oriel window on the first floor, with leaded timber casement windows.

Fig. 12 Historic photo.
Regrettably the leaded timber window frames, including the oriel window, have recently been replaced in uPVC (figs. 13 & 14), with the loss of historic fabric. A holistic approach to the historic setting at this entrance to the Park is needed to prevent these type of damaging, ad hoc alterations.

There is also significant scope for improvement of the presentation of the ground-floor shop unit, by the reducing of the level of signage clutter, and the streamlining and improvement of the overall shop-signage design so as to complement and befit the historic setting.

(The gates are on the Dublin City Record of Protected Structure (Ref. 6778) but the two-storey building is not.)
Also at the North Circular Road entrance to the Phoenix Park is a rare surviving cluster of painted iron arrow signs (fig. 15), though in neglected and unmaintained condition. These signs date to the early Free State period and feature raised lettering and give distances in miles. Most of these old iron signs across the city and country have now been replaced by characterless modern, spray-painted and laminated aluminium signs. This group - which includes two signs relating to the Phoenix Park - should be conserved as a surviving example contributing to the historic setting at this gate to the Park.

It is recommended that the OPW work with Dublin City Council, the NTA and relevant property owners in regard to these suggested improvements the North Circular Road entrance to the Park.

*Fig. 15 Historic signs at North Circular Road gate.*
Department of Defence headquarters (former Royal Infirmary)

This classical James Gandon-designed building is an important architectural landmark of the city however its setting to the front has become obscured by growth. Selective trimming and removal of planting could be considered to improve the visibility and setting of the building. (Note also that the Dept. of Defence / Royal Infirmary forms part of a protected view-cone from the front terrace of the Royal Hospital Kilmainham towards historic landmarks within the Phoenix Park (ie. the Royal Infirmary, the Wellington Monument and the Magazine Fort), as identified in Fig 4, Chapter 4 of the Dublin City Development Plan 2016-22.)