

12 April 2018

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Green Space Strategy

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr C Jones – Clean and Green

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report outlines Walsall's third Green Space Strategy, which updates and replaces the previous one. The new document includes a revised five-year action plan, which establishes the basis of Green Space development and management during that period.
- 1.2 In September 2012, Cabinet approved Walsall's second Green Space Strategy. This five-year strategy was a milestone in the management and development of the service. It led directly to the successful achievement of many service delivery improvements and initiatives, and gained much widespread recognition.
- 1.3 Independent analysis and community consultation have seen increases in the quality and value of Walsall parks and green spaces, improved customer satisfaction, the achievement of ongoing external investment (such as the nearly completed restoration of Walsall Arboretum) and the achievement and retention of seven Green Flag Awards in Blackwood Park, Palfrey Park, Willenhall Memorial Park, Merrion's Wood and Rough Wood and Bentley Haye, and secured new Community Green Flag awards for the Chuckery and Old Hall Pocket Parks.
- 1.4 The positive contribution parks and green spaces make towards people's overall physical and mental wellbeing and the quality of their environment is well evidenced nationally along with the economic benefits they attract. This link is referenced in the Black Country Core Strategy.
- 1.5 The importance of providing a strategic framework in the management of this valued asset and in the delivery of the Parks and Green Space service has been well recognised. It provides a framework for establishing the quality and level of green space provision and a mechanism for improved service delivery and community participation. Most importantly, it identifies priorities, sets the vision and enables the focusing of limited resources where it really matters during the five-year life time of the plan.
- 1.6 The new strategy provides additional value compared to the previous one. It not only updates the data on green space changes over the last but years, but accounts also for policy changes, the new Playing Pitch Strategy and Health and Wellbeing Strategy. It reflects wider consultation than the previous strategy and it also revises the hierarchy of green spaces, based on their strategic values and management needs.

- 1.7 In the development of the new strategy, extensive consultation was undertaken with a wide range of stakeholders and organisations both within the Council and externally, including the various Friends and User Groups, local residents, key partners such as Public Health and Sports and Development.
- 1.8 The evidence gathered from this extensive consultation, along with baseline data arising from an independent quality assessment using Green Flag Award criteria, as well as a quantity analysis of existing green space, has resulted in a prioritised action plan which has been developed under a number of clear strategic headings to be achieved over the next five years.

2.0 Reason for scrutiny:

- 2.1 To inform the committee of the new Green Space Strategy 2018-2022.

3.0 Recommendations

- 3.1 The Committee is recommended to consider the Green Space Strategy 2018-2022 and consider whether they wish to make any recommendations to Cabinet.

4.0 Report Detail

4.1 Background

- 4.1.1 Walsall's Green Space Strategy 2018-2022 represents the third such strategy for Walsall, with previous versions adopted in 2006 and 2012. It updates and replaces the last version and includes a revised five year action plan.

- 4.1.2 The Green Space Strategy 2018-2022 has been developed within the following context:

- Set out a shared Vision for green spaces in Walsall Borough
- Contribute to the wider objectives of the Council as set out in the Corporate Plan 2018-2021, Sustainable Community Strategy, Volunteering Strategy and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- Establish an accurate picture of the quality of green spaces
- Meet government guidance, inform the Local Development Framework and planning policy process and to help develop local standards
- Establish if there is enough green space in the borough to meet the needs of local people
- Provide a framework for improved service delivery linked to the Council's corporate objectives
- Provide a framework for identifying priorities for future investment and improvement
- Provide a framework for community and voluntary groups to participate in green space provision and management
- Guide the allocation of reduced resources during the five year period to meet community and strategic aims

4.1.3 The revised aims of the Green Space Strategy 2018-22 are:

- To provide opportunities for people to actively participate in green spaces
- To develop and strengthen existing partnerships to bring added value to the parks and green spaces
- To ensure that green spaces conserve and enhance bio and geo diversity
- To realise the potential that green spaces can play in addressing health inequalities
- To develop a financially sustainable Parks and Green Space service through innovation
- To ensure green spaces to play their part in the economic prosperity of the borough
- To provide safe, accessible, clean and well-maintained spaces and facilities

4.2 Green Spaces

4.2.1 Parks and public spaces are the most accessible and well used leisure and recreational facilities both locally and nationally. Walsall's green spaces form part of both the Birmingham and Black Country Nature Improvement Area and Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark Project.

4.2.2 High quality parks and public spaces create economic, social and environmental value:

- Economic benefits – high quality green spaces have positive impacts upon property prices, are good for business and being close to public space adds economic value, supporting the local visitor economy.
- Social benefits – green spaces are highly valued by people. Safe, clean spaces offer places for events, play, recreation and relaxation, all benefiting physical health and mental wellbeing.
- Environmental benefits – networks of green spaces and green corridors encourage cycling and walking, improve air quality, provide sustainable urban drainage solutions, mitigate against climate change, support biodiversity and geodiversity, and enable people to experience nature firsthand.

4.2.3 National research shows that the average revenue cuts to parks services from 2013 to 2015 are around 18%, with the north of England being hit the hardest. Also, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the single biggest funder of parks restoration and redevelopment over the past 21 years, recently closed its Parks for People programme.

4.2.4 Walsall's Parks and Green Space Service has seen the reduction of £1m revenue budget and around 25% of its management and development staff over the last five years. As a consequence, the service has not been able to deliver all of the objectives set out in the previous strategy. However, a number of key levels of output and engagement have been achieved:

- The number of Green Flag Awards has risen to five (three in 2012) – new awards have been secured for Blackwood Park and Rough Wood & Bentley

Haye, with Community Green Flag awards for the Chuckery and Old Hall Pocket Parks.

- The number of Friends Groups has remained fairly constant, though membership is increasing
- Through supporting community engagement over £120k per annum of in kind contribution was generated
- The restoration of Walsall Arboretum is almost complete and visitor numbers are close to 1,000,000 per year, making it one of the most visited parks in the region
- External funding is still being secured and a leverage of around five times is being attained i.e. for every £1 the council invests a further £4 is secured
- Site quality has increased on key spaces through external funding, council match and investment by Friends groups
- Basic operational and infrastructure maintenance is being improved on selected sites
- Partnership working is a key priority and it highly valued by internal and external partners

4.2.5 A quality assessment was carried out across 53 green space sites. Sites identified were assessed against the criteria derived from the national standard for parks and green space quality, the Green Flag Award. The same assessment was used in the 2005 and 2011 quality assessments. The top ten sites overall are mostly parks with one natural and semi natural green space (Merrions Wood) included. The top three ranked sites are also the 3 sites where the authority has secured major restoration grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

4.2.6 The quality audit has highlighted a number of changes since the 2011 assessment was carried out. Changes have been noted on both a site basis and a quality criteria basis. Across all sites the following changes were noted;

- The average quality score has increased for all sites from 39 in 2011 to 42 in 2017
- 75% of sites (40) improved upon their quality score since 2011, 2 remained the same and 23% (12) sites were seen to have declined
- Sites that had improved have received significant investment in improvements since 2011 and/or seen beneficial changes in user behaviour and site management

4.2.7 Through the development of this Green Space Strategy, it became clear that the 40 sites assigned to be of 'strategic significance' in the 2012 document were too many. The aspirations for those sites in terms of maintenance, management and development cannot now be achieved with the significant decreases in resources that have been experienced over the past five years.

4.2.8 Green spaces were reviewed using criteria from the previous strategy: size, quality and value, access, facilities and proximity. Other measures were also used, namely: popularity, community engagement, management plan, user and non-user surveys, and service priorities. The revised list of sites gives a reasonable distribution across the borough. It is also suggested that the significance of Walsall Arboretum sets it apart from other green spaces and that it needs to sit at the top of the hierarchy as a Destination Site. Green spaces not identified as such Sites would continue to receive routine maintenance.

	Green Space	Current Green Flag Award
Destination Site	Walsall Arboretum	
Strategic Site	Aldridge Airport	
	Barr Beacon	
	Blackwood Park	Yes
	Brownhills Common / Holland Park	
	Doe Bank Park	
	Fibbersley	
	King George Vth Playing Fields	
	Kings Hill Park	
	Merrions Wood	Yes
	Palfrey Park	Yes
	Pelsall Commons	
	Pleck Park	
	Reedswood Park	
	Rough Wood Chase	Yes
	Shire Oak Park	
	Willenhall Memorial Park	Yes

4.2.9 It is planned to increase the number of sites with a Green Flag Award over the next five years.

4.2.10 In relation to the Allotments, all allotment groups are part of a management association where the majority have agreed lease terms. This will inform self management for the groups. Four Community Gardens have also been developed, with a focus on sustainability over the next five years. There are three derelict allotment sites, one of which is being regenerated by the local community, whilst it is proposed to take forward options appraisals for the others.

4.2.11 As part of an earlier review of play provision, a draft hierarchy was produced. This set out three categories of site, namely: Play Hub, Neighbourhood Play Site and Local Play Site. Definitions for each category were produced and these now need to be re-visited and tested against the revised Strategic Sites. It will be important for this work to look at accessibility to play, its distribution across the borough and what the minimum requirements for each category will be. Also it will be necessary to consider inspection frequencies and maintenance costs.

4.2.12 Part of the strategy was to explore the links between green space quantity, quality and accessibility to wider factors such as deprivation and health. A potential relationship between green space quality and deprivation has been investigated, with investment over the past 20 years focussed in some of the most deprived parts of the Borough around Willenhall Memorial Park, Palfrey Park, Walsall Arboretum and Kings Hill Park, which helped to determine how the service was using its management within the available resources.

4.2.13 It is proposed to use all existing data sets to explore the links between green space and health, to map external funding and site improvement data to show spend in more deprived areas of the borough, to develop a more robust monitoring and evaluation system across green spaces and develop research around mental health and green space use.

4.2.14 Walsall's Site Allocation Document seeks to allocate land to accommodate many of the additional homes identified through the Black Country Core Strategy. Open space sites proposed for housing which are in both the 2012 Green Space Strategy and the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment, which if developed would see a net loss of 7.84 ha of limited accessibility open space and 2.11 ha of unrestricted accessibility open space. However, development could result in direct provision of new open space by developers to mitigate for the extra pressure caused and/or commuted sums for offsite provision. The Urban Open Space SPD (2015) sets a threshold of ten or more dwellings as a trigger for open space contributions to be sought.

4.2.15 An ongoing review of review of Section 106 funding will seek to make recommendations on how contributions may be allocated to revenue and capital activity in line with national and local policy, and in accordance with the hierarchy of sites as identified in the Green Space Strategy.

4.3 Consultation

4.3.1 Allotment Associations' Survey

- In 2017, a survey was distributed to all 21 of the current Local Management Associations and 15 organisations submitted a response (71%). Since the survey was issued a further LMA has been formed.
- The top three areas where groups felt they need the most support in the future were:
 - Funding (86.7%)
 - Guidance on legal and lease concerns (73.3%)
 - Guidance on land management issues (46.7%)

4.3.2 Friends Group Survey

- A survey was sent to the 23 Friends groups across the borough, with responses received from 10 (43%) groups. Groups predict that they will have to do more particularly in the areas of recruiting new members (67%), fundraising (56%), networking with other groups (50%) and practical activities such as nature conservation (50%), gardening (40%) and events (44%).
- In terms of support, the groups appear to have good levels of support from the Council, and do not expect a significant higher level of support, however, more assistance is desired in the areas of assistance with identifying funding (particularly S106), more staff time on site, and generally better communication with groups and the Council should consider prioritising these areas.

4.3.3 Household Survey

- In early 2018, a household survey was distributed to 9,886 households across the borough and also hosted online. A total of 1,505 responses were received, with the paper version representing a return rate of 13% (12.6% in 2011). However, the sample of respondents is skewed in terms of gender,

age and geography with more women, more older people and more people from the east of the borough taking part.

- Almost two thirds (62.8%) of respondents are regular users of green spaces, using them weekly or more often, which is an increase on the 2011 survey. As in previous surveys and research, Walsall Arboretum is the most visited green space in the borough. The majority of people (64%) walk to green spaces, with around 29% driving. Cycling is slightly increased from the previous survey at 4%.
- For their most frequently used green space, the overall quality average is 7.3 out of 10. There is a strong trend that people think that the quality of green space that they use most frequently has improved. Walsall Arboretum had the greatest proportion of respondents who felt that their most frequently used green space had improved over the past three years.
- Overall, levels of satisfaction with their most used green space are high, with a 75.3% satisfaction rate. Only around one in eight respondents (13.0%) reported dissatisfaction with their most used space,.
- The top five reasons for using green spaces all have positive health benefits: Fresh air, for walking / jogging, for health or exercise, to relax / peace and quiet or for wildlife / nature.
- Respondents were asked about the importance of different types of green space maintenance work – the removal of graffiti, litter and fly tipping was considered the most important, with an average score of 4.5 out of five. Respondents were also asked to rate development work, the most important being making improvements to support and encourage wildlife, as well as developing partnerships to help improve sites.
- Generally, respondents supported the future funding options, with the most support for greater funding from sources like the National Lottery, with over four fifths of respondents (82.3%) supporting this. However, over half (52.8%) opposed the suggestion of increasing charges for using green space facilities.

4.3.4 Consultation Workshops

- As part of the development of the strategy, three identical workshops were delivered with staff, councillors, friends and community groups, and other stakeholders to explore service priorities. The workshops were designed to explore the three key components of green space service delivery:
- Management priorities:
 - Health and Safety was seen by all groups as the highest priority. High priority was also given by all groups to managing facilities, managing staff, monitoring maintenance standards and financial management.

- Maintenance priorities:
 - Graffiti, litter and fly tipping are clearly considered to be the most important element of maintenance activities. It is estimated that Walsall Council spends a large amount funds a year on this area of work.
 - At the other end of the scale, there are very differing views between the three cohorts when it comes to ornamental borders. Finally, there was significant discussion at the staff workshop about the maintenance of sports pitches – it was felt that the council was essentially subsidising sports clubs, which had a limited audience.
- Development priorities:
 - The results from the workshops showed broadly comparable priorities. All shared the highest priority of developing community involvement, which would reflect the need to develop alternative ways of delivering services and the value that the Friends place on their own activity.
 - All groups placed similar priority on making improvements for wildlife, marketing and promotion, education and interpretation and developing new projects. This has helped shape the programme of delivery and how some of the recommendations have been determined

5.0 Legal Considerations

- 5.1 National planning guidance sets out clear expectations for local authorities to take a strategic approach to green space. Green space strategies should contribute to development plan documents (such as the Black Country Core Strategy) and become important supplementary planning documents.
- 5.2 Section 164 on the Public Health Act (1875) and Sections 9 and 10 of the Open Spaces Act Open spaces grant power to local authorities to acquire land for or to provide recreation grounds, public walks, pleasure grounds and open spaces and to manage and control them.
- 5.3 Section 23 of the Small Holdings and Allotments Act (1908) places a statutory duty on local authorities to provide a sufficient number of allotment plots.
- 5.4 Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act (2006) requires all public bodies to have regard to biodiversity conservation when carrying out their functions – commonly referred to as the ‘Biodiversity duty’.
- 5.5 The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) and Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) place further duties on local authorities with regards to management and maintenance of Sites of Special Scientific Interest and public rights of way.

6.0 Citizen impact

- 6.1 There are considerable health and well being implications for providing green spaces. The Green Space Strategy advises that good quality accessible green space is a necessity, not a luxury, which contributes to the unique character of

Walsall Borough, improving the quality of people's lives, bringing economic benefits and contributing to physical and mental health and well-being.

- 9.2 There is considerable evidence that safe, clean spaces encourage people to visit more and therefore offer significant health benefits. Parks and green spaces offer places for organised sport, informal recreation and quiet relaxation, benefiting physical health and mental wellbeing. There is evidence that access to good quality local spaces can help people live longer and green spaces can provide solutions to redress worsening public health.

7.0 Environmental impact:

- 7.1 The positive contribution parks and green spaces make towards the quality of the environment is well evidenced nationally. High quality networks of green spaces and green corridors encourage cycling and walking, improve air quality, provide sustainable urban drainage solutions, mitigate against climate change, support biodiversity and geodiversity, and enable people to experience nature firsthand.
- 7.2 Additionally, the access and use of green spaces provide and support sustainable environments and services, which make Walsall an attractive, healthy and safe place to live and work through maintaining clean, safe and attractive urban environments.

8.0 Performance management:

- 8.1 The Green Space Strategy 2018-2022 includes a five year action plan, which aligns recommendations against its aims and a timescale.
- 8.2 The Action Plan will be reviewed annually, with new actions developed as appropriate.


9.0 Reducing inequalities:

- 9.1 A key recommendation within the strategy would be to ensure that public need to be targeted to best possible effect and collecting and managing baseline data (e.g. visitor counters) about urban green spaces helps to maintain a strategic view, co-ordinate provision, measure the effects of investment or policy initiatives, and respond to changing circumstances. The data can support more equitable access to public services, regardless of income or ethnicity.
- 9.2 Green spaces contribute to the cultural identity of an area, helping to shape a sense of place and also, if good quality, can contribute to civic pride. They have a key role to play in bringing people together on common ground, uniting diverse communities through activities, education, celebrations, cultural events and engagement. Public spaces are open to all, regardless of ethnic origin, age or gender, and as such they represent a democratic forum for citizens and society.
- 9.3 The Strategy identifies the need to develop a planned approach to engaging with groups to identify wider barriers to the use of green spaces. It also recognises the need to provide a safe environment and one in which people (particularly young) can be confident in, through effective enforcement, visible presence and joint working with other enforcement agencies and partners.

9.4 An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken

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