

7 April 2011

Green Space Strategy

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Councillor Anthony Harris – Leisure, Culture and Environment

Summary of report:

This report seeks to inform the Community Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel of the significant progress undertaken by Walsall Council Green Space Services in its ongoing development as a key prominent and priority service area in Walsall Council and its key role in delivering the corporate pledge of 'clean, safe and green neighbourhoods' and national 'Big Society' Agenda.

The report details the key role of Walsall's first Green Space Strategy (2006 – 2011/12) in setting the strategic direction of the service, its priorities and allocation of resources which has seen Walsall achieve national recognition and accolades.

In addition, it recognises that the Green Space Strategy has entered the final year of its 5 year action plan and aims to seek the support of the Panel to continue the significant progress made through the present Strategy and to invest resources in the development of a new 5 year Green Space Strategy to continue this positive direction of travel during the period 2012/13 – 2017/18.

“A Greenspace Strategy sets out how a local authority will invest and manage the open space in its area”. Open Space Strategies (2009) What Local Authority Decision Makers Need to Know

Background papers:

- Green Space Strategy Adoption - Cabinet Report November 2006
- Internal Audit Report 2009
- Green Flag Award Success – Cabinet Report 17th September 2008

Reason for scrutiny:

To inform Members of the progress made in the implementation of the existing five year Green Space Strategy and secure members involvement and support in the development of a new strategy.

Background

The Green Space Service was established in 2006 and is responsible for the management and development of over 1,262 hectares of public open space including formal parks, recreation grounds, countryside sites, nature reserves and allotment sites. In all the Service holds management responsibility for over 286 individual sites varying considerably in size and character and is the largest land manager within the Council.

The service is divided into 5 specific operational areas all of whom operate in an integrated, supportive, coherent and strategic organisational unit.

- Park Ranger Service. Key functions include:

Providing an identifiable visible physical presence, monitoring use, ensure security and safety, tackling anti-social behaviour through enforcement, monitoring grounds maintenance operations, providing an annual parks events programme, undertaking limited grounds maintenance functions, children's play area inspections, health and safety inspections, undertake minor infrastructural repairs,

- Green Space Improvement Service (incorporating the Allotments and Community Gardens Service). Key functions include:

Production and delivery of policies and strategies including the Green Space Strategy, Play Strategy, Allotment Strategy and Service Plan, community led regeneration and ongoing improvement of Green space, coordinate and submit external funding bids, manage the production of individual site management, maintenance, development and business plans, establishing a framework for participation and involvement of local people and volunteers, management, implementation and investment of major restoration schemes and capital projects, lead and coordinate applications for the achievement of relevant quality management awards, administer S106 funding, coordinate customer satisfaction surveys, manage the Boroughs allotment and community gardens service.

- Countryside Services. Key functions include:

Developing an awareness and understanding of Walsall's Countryside Service and sites, undertake programme of ecological surveys, produce site management and development plans, implementation of events and educational activities, implementation improvement projects, preparation of external bids, maintain infrastructural features and undertake highly specialised and skilled creation of wildlife habitats and landscapes, involvement of the general public and volunteers, to provide an onsite presence, implement training courses, events and educational activities, production of promotional literature, press releases and articles. production of educational material and co-ordinate educational events and activity programmes, prepare grant applications and secure external income, health and safety inspections,

- Infrastructural Maintenance. Key functions include:

Infrastructural improvement projects, address anti-social behaviour in relation to play and infrastructural features, implement planned schedules for inspection, repair and maintenance for leisure centres, schools and green space sites, tender, commission and monitoring contracted works, undertaking Health & Safety, prepare cost estimates, negotiate service level agreements with client departments, receive and manage all complaints about infrastructural issues, prioritise inspections and organise necessary works.

- Urban Forestry Unit. Key functions include:

The cyclical inspection of all the Councils trees for risk and condition Based on the findings of the survey the unit, Prioritise all work, issue work to Streetpride and monitor, receive and manage all complaints about trees, develop and manage street tree planting programmes, submit bids for external funding, organise and co-ordinate Walsall Tree Warden Programme, develop the Councils Agro-Forest project, provide expert advice to Councils departments,

The Green Space Service continues to be a high profile and key Service Area and priority of Walsall Council and its local community and partners. The service continues to achieve local, regional and national recognition and seen as an example of best practice in the management, maintenance and development of its parks and green spaces - through the strategic direction of the Green Space Strategy.

Walsall's first Greenspace Strategy was adopted by Cabinet in November 2006. The strategy was the culmination of a considerable amount of research and community and partner consultation.

The production of the strategy represented a milestone for the strategic delivery of the service setting the scene for the management and development of green spaces for the 5 year period of the plan (2006 – 2011) and recognised the importance green space played in the Councils regeneration framework and its contribution to the local environment, Walsall's economic profile and the health and well being of the community.

A total of 57 strategic objectives were established and a series of performance measures and indicators have been developed for each of the strategic objectives. During the life time of the plan these objectives have been used to monitor the implementation of the strategy and have been scrutinised through both Directorate and Service Area plans and ongoing reviews by Internal Audit. The strategic objects inform the annual service plans and are also reflected in staff personal objectives providing the golden thread of true strategic and successful management.

The Green Space Strategy and its five year action plan now enters its final year and Green Space Services are now in the process of building on this document and its successes to ensure that the service continues to travel in a positive direction in providing high quality opportunities and facilities for local people to enjoy there local parks and green spaces – which is particularly important in the present economic

climate.

Service Excellence

In 2006 during the development of the first Green Space Strategy, Peter Neal, Head of Enabling and Delivery at CABI Space noted that *“whilst Walsall has inherited a final legacy of parks and green spaces, their value has to be enhanced and sustained over the long term. This can only be achieved by taking a considered and strategic approach to their planning, design, management and maintenance. The delivery of this important piece of work (Green Space Strategy) will be the key to its success and we look forward to see it bearing much fruit in coming years”*

Since the adoption of the Greenspace Strategy, Walsall Council Green Space Services has received considerable local and national recognition and awards as a case study example for community involvement and the management, maintenance and development of parks and green spaces.

Examples of best practice have resulted in the Head of Green Spaces being asked to give presentations at national conferences and to take part in regional and national Working Groups organised by leading national bodies including GreenSpace and CABI Space.

In addition, regular presentations and visits are given to local neighbouring authorities who seek to learn best practice examples from Walsall.

The achievement of Walsall's first three Green Flag Awards has created a benchmark of excellence for Greenspace Services to sustain and work towards achieving for the Council's other premier green spaces, The Green Spaces Urban Forestry Unit achieved national government recognition and came second in the prestigious national 'Excellence in Forestry Award' in 2010. It is hoped that a fourth Green Flag Award will be achieved during 2011/12.

As the current strategy is now coming to the end of its lifetime the report aims to briefly examine a number of notable successes borne from the Green Space Strategy.

- Production and delivery of Walsall's first Play Strategy and Allotment Strategy – both adopted by Cabinet in 2007 (both due for review in 2012). A key action will see substantial improvements to the LIDO's at both King George V Playing Fields and Willenhall Park
- National Indicator NI199: Children's and teenagers satisfaction with parks and play areas achieved 51.3% in TellUs4 last year, Walsall Green Spaces has improved with an increase of 12.2% satisfaction
- Walsall Green Space Strategy recognised by the Government Department CABI Space as an example of best practice in the production of the plan, community involvement and its delivery. CABI being the Government Department for the design of high quality public spaces
- Development and ongoing support to 16 Parks and Green Spaces Friends Group and the umbrella Walsall Parks and Green Spaces Network – Big Society in Action since 1994 securing real community participation in the

- management, improvement and development of the Councils Green Spaces.
- Achievement and annual retention of the national quality Green Flag Awards at Palfrey Park, Willenhall Memorial Park and Merion's Wood – with targets for a further 5 sites to achieve the award. Existing and agreed maintenance standards divide parks into Green Flag sites, Premier Parks and other green space sites with differing maintenance arrangements. This ensures that the Green Flag sites do not impact the standards maintained on other green spaces.
 - Production of site specific 10 year Management and Maintenance Plans to guide the management, maintenance and development of Walsall's 25 premier green spaces. The process of developing the plans contributes to ensuring that they meet local community needs and helps to secure external income by providing the evidence of need.
 - Production of new Green Space Service Level Agreements to guide grounds maintenance operations in Walsall's green spaces
 - Introduction of GreenSTAT a permanent online consultation tool enabling local residents to complete a questionnaire on their local park or the service provided by the Green Space Service
 - Installation of electronic visitor counters at Palfrey Park and Walsall Arboretum recording annual visits of just under 1 million people per year – planned roll out to 3 more park and green spaces in 2011/12 including Willenhall Memorial Park. This enables the service to monitor the success of the improvements made to its green spaces and provide statistical information.
 - Achievement of £8 million pound of local and external investment to restore and regenerate Walsall's premier jewel – Walsall Arboretum.
 - Countryside Services achieving the National Target of one hectare of Local Nature Reserve status per 100 head of population
 - Development of Green Space Services Urban Forest Unit – including Government Recognition and achievement of 2nd place in the Excellence in Forestry Award in 2010. Key to this has been the successful implementation of a sustainable tree management system which has received national recognition.
 - A total of 55 medium to large projects have been delivered in Walsall's parks and green spaces at a total cost of £3,800,000.00 between the period 2008 / 09 – 2010/11
 - A total of 29 projects were delivered during this period (2008/09 – 2010/11) with S106 funding allocated to Walsall Council Green Space Services to the value of £422,500.00
 - Current introduction of a national benchmarked real time electronic inspection system covering Walsall's parks, play area, tree management, countryside and allotments and community gardens – providing key management information and protecting the service against public liability claims
 - Creation of a new community gardens and allotments post to raise the profile and quality of Walsall's existing Allotments and the development of Walsall's approach to Community Garden and national health agenda
 - Introduction of enforcement powers for the Park Ranger Service under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 to serve fixed penalty notices for the offences of littering & dog fouling thereby further improving the 'quality' of the borough's parks.
 - The training of Green Space operational staff, particularly the park ranger

service in tree inspections to assist the Urban Forestry Unit in identifying potential hazards and providing high levels of health and safety and quick response,

- Present Green Space Strategy has informed the production of Walsall Council's new PPG17 Audit and Guidance Document – to be adopted in 2011.
- Walsall Council Greenspace Services local and regional recognition with presentations and visits organised to share best practice with neighbouring local authorities and Green Space national conferences
- Introduction of an apprentice scheme in Countryside Service and the Urban Forestry Team. Not only has this offered much needed employment opportunities and experience within the Green Space environment to young school leavers but has reintroduced valuable and much needed training in the field.
- Ongoing development of links at Birmingham University in which the Green Space Improvement Service deliver lectures and practical case studies which form part of the first and 2nd year students Geography and Town Planning Degree Course – resulting in on average 6 university placements each year in addition to approximately 10 school and 6th form placements.

The above synopsis aims to give a brief overview of the successes of the Green Space Service since the adoption of the Strategy in 2006 which has contributed greatly to highlighting the importance and raising the profile of Walsall's parks and green spaces.

'our green space strategy sets out clearly how green space delivers against the councils' corporate objective. Green space is now a key part of the strategic planning of Walsall' Graham Hood, Head of green spaces, Walsall Council quoted as a national best practice leader in Open Space Strategies (CABE Space 2009) What Local Authority Decision Makers Need to Know.

Future Strategy and way forward - recommendations

As noted at the beginning of this report, the current 5 year Greenspace Strategy and Action plan is in the final year of its life span and the development and production of a new 5 year Plan is a key Corporate and Green Space Service Priority.

The new Green Space Strategy will allow Green Space Services to build on the achievements noted during the life time of the first plan, ensure the continuation of the high levels of quality in providing a customer orientated service, and for Walsall to continue its local and national prominence as a case study for best practice.

It is anticipated that approximately 25 projects to the value of £7,200,000 will be delivered in Walsall's parks and green spaces during the period 2012 /13 – 13/14. In addition to targets for the achievement of 5 future Green Flag Awards and Production of a further 15 site specific management and maintenance plans

In the present climate of public sector cuts, economic down turn and the need for Walsall Council to provide services in new and innovative ways and with diminishing budgets whilst continuing to meet local expectations the development and delivery of

a second Green Space Strategy (2012 – 17) is vital to the continued strategic direction of the Green Space Service and providing both the evidence base and justification both prerequisites in securing external income. This benefit has become increasingly more important as sources of external income reduce and are difficult to secure.

“There is growing evidence that those local authorities that have published a comprehensive Green Space Strategy are better able to make progress towards improving their green assets than those that have not” CABE Space (2004)

It is hoped that members will recognise the significant progress made by Walsall Council Green Spaces Services as a local and national case study of green space best practice and in acknowledging the role that the present Green Space Strategy has played in this ongoing transformation and support of the development of a new 5 year Strategy to guide the collective management, maintenance and development of Walsall’s parks and green spaces.

“research has shown that where a park or green space strategy links into the wider strategic thinking of the authority that the quality of their green spaces is often higher than stand alone, inward looking document and that without a strategy resources will be poorly targeted”. The national Audit Office (2006) Enhancing Urban Green Space

Resource and legal considerations:

The Greenspace Strategy and the delivery of its five year action plan are undertaken entirely from within the existing resources held by the Green Space Service or through external funding agencies and partners.

Citizen impact:

Extensive consultation with local residents, community organisations and key partners undertaken as part of the Green Space Strategy and extensively since its adoption in 2006 through GreenSTAT and site specific surveys has identified Walsall’s green assets as a key priority in both usage and ongoing investment and improvement.

Walsall Green Space Services have since 1994 played a leading role recognised locally and nationally in achieving high levels of community involvement and empowerment in the borough parks and green spaces and the continuation of this service directed by a second Green Space Strategy is vital to the national and local ‘Big Society Agenda’

Environmental impact:

Parks and green spaces have been recognised as contributing greatly to the health, well being and quality of life of those who live and work within the borough and the Green Space Service is a key contributor to the council’s high profile and

successful delivery of its clean, green and safe neighbourhood agenda.

Performance management:

The success of the present and future Green Space Strategy is linked to both the Directorate and Service area plans ensuring that there is a continual review and learning mechanism.

Specific elements in the delivery of the Green Space Strategy including the achievement of Green Flag Awards, introduction of GreenSTAT, installation of electronic visitor counters and the present introduction of the Real Time Inspection Programme will continue to provide a wealth of management information to assess the continued improvement of the service and allow the setting of tangible and challenging performance measures and bench marks.

Equality Implications:

N/A

Consultation:

N/A

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