

Future Greenspace Strategy in Walsall

Report of the Greenspaces Working Group



To be presented to Community Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel on 28 February 2012



Walsall Council

Foreword

Did you know that there are 535 green space sites across the borough providing over 2,000 hectares of open space? These sites vary in type and character and are important to the everyday lives of all residents.




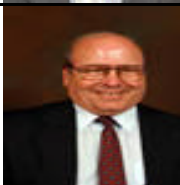
This has led the working group to recommend that ‘Greenspace in Walsall should be a proud public asset securing the environmental and ecological future of the borough for the benefit of the health and wellbeing of the whole community’.

In order to achieve this Members recommend that the following priorities are included in a new greenspaces strategy:

1. *‘Green space in Walsall should be enhanced and improved’*
2. *‘All green space should be safe and free of crime and anti-social behaviour’*
3. *‘Green space should be used to increase the health and well being of residents’*
4. *‘Commercial opportunities should be sought in green space’*
5. *‘Greater partnership working for the development of all green space should be pro-actively developed’*
6. *‘Green space should be used to create rich habitats and biodiversity’*

This report outlines ambitious methods that could bring about substantial improvements to local green space but it also acknowledges the financial position of reducing government settings by proposing alternative grounds maintenance regimes.

I would like to thank the many people that have attended working group meetings to advise us of their views and opinions of green space, my Councillor and co-opted colleagues on the working group and the groups support officers who have all made this report possible.

	Councillor L. Harrison Lead Member		Councillor I. Azam
	Councillor C. Creaney		Councillor K. Sears
	Councillor I. Shires	Mrs Jackie Cocken	Mrs Jo Lester
		Co-opted Members Friends Group Network Arboretum User Group	

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Introduction

The Community Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel (the Panel) identified the opportunity to investigate the effectiveness of the current Greenspaces Strategy and make recommendations for its future direction back in 2010/11.

To complete this task a small working group was established at the Panels meeting on 7 June 2011.

Terms of Reference

Draft terms of reference were discussed and agreed by a meeting of the working group that took place on 25 July 2011. These were subsequently agreed by the Panel at its meeting on 6 September 2011.

The full version of the Working Groups terms of reference can be found at Appendix 1 to this report.

The Working Group was supported predominantly by two Officers and one consultant:

Graham Hood	Head of Greenspaces
Ian Baggott	CFP Consulting
Craig Goodall	Scrutiny Officer

Membership

The working group was made up of the following Councillors:

Louise Harrison (Chair)	Imran Azam	Carl Creaney
Ian Shires	Keith Sears	

To assist Members with their understanding of the management of local parks two members of the local Friends Group Network were co-opted onto the working group. They were:

Jackie Cocken	<i>Arboretum User Group</i>
Jo Lester	<i>Arboretum User Group</i>

Methodology

The Working Group has held 10 meetings during its investigations. This has included a consultation meeting with representatives from the Friends Group Network, NHS, Sports and Leisure, Area Managers and an external consultant.

Witnesses

The Working Group met and discussed issues relating to Greenspace with the following witnesses:

Keith Stone	Assistant Director (Neighbourhoods), Walsall Council
Mark Holden	Head of Streetpride, Walsall Council
Graham Hood	Head of Greenspaces, Walsall Council
Ben Percival	Sports and Leisure Manager, Walsall Council
Suzie Gill	Healthy Weight and Sexual Health Programme Manager, Walsall PCT
Barbara Watt	Consultant in Public Health, Walsall PCT
Mike Smith	Planning Policy Manager, Walsall Council
Matt Stanczyszyn	Senior Regeneration Officer, Walsall Council
Lyndon Parkes	Area Manager, Walsall Partnership
John Morris	Area Manager, Walsall Partnership
Ian Baggott	CFP Consulting
Bruce Mackay	Greenspaces Improvement Officer, Walsall Council
Clive Ault	Chair of Friends Group Network
Pat Stockford	Friends of Blackwood Park
Maureen Payton	Friends of Pelsall Common
Cllr Kath Philips	Bloxwich Civic Society
Mr & Mrs Russell	Friends of Chuckery Green
Steve Moutt	Friends of Pleck Park
Colleen Jones	Palfrey Park Friends
Cllr P. Bott	Friends of Darlaston South Parks
Cllr R. Martin	Friends of Park Hall

Report Format

The report sets out the working groups findings along with supporting evidence. The report is based around the vision and priorities the working group recommend the Council uses moving forward and sets out activities which could be implemented to achieve the recommended priorities.

Context

What is 'Greenspace'

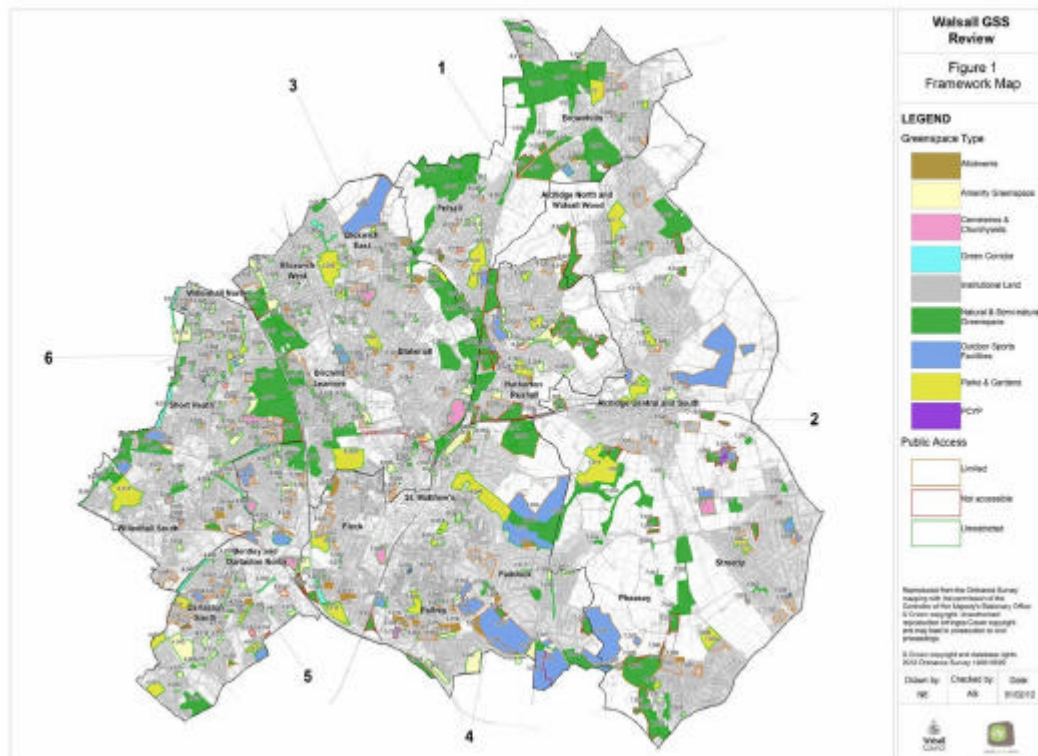
For the purpose of this document Green Space is taken to mean all areas of publicly accessible open space of value, including not just land, but also bodies of water such as lakes and reservoirs which offer important opportunities for formal and informal sport, recreation and education, an environmental resource and visual amenity.

How much greenspace and where

There are 535 green space sites across the borough providing over 2,000 hectares of open space. The space is broken down as follows:

Type	No.	Area (Ha)	% by Area
Natural & Semi-natural Greenspace	132	980.57	45.4%
Outdoor Sports Facilities	51	367.99	17.0%
Parks & Gardens	37	269.67	12.5%
Amenity Greenspace	157	201.10	9.3%
Institutional Land	68	185.24	8.6%
Cemeteries & Churchyards	24	63.33	2.9%
Allotments	39	44.12	2.0%
Green Corridor	17	42.73	2.0%
PCYP	10	7.34	0.3%
Total	535	2,162.09	100.0%

A map showing the distribution of space across the borough can be seen below:



How is Greenspace Managed in Walsall?

Greenspace in Walsall is looked after by two services within the Neighbourhoods Directorate.

The Greenspace Service is responsible for strategic planning and other on the ground services such as Park Rangers.

The Streetpride Service is responsible for grounds maintenance.

Further details on both services is provided below.

Overview of Greenspaces Team

The Greenspace 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.

The Service has a staffing establishment of 54 and an annual operational budget of £2.4m. The team is broken down into the following sections:

- 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 Council departments.

Overview of Streetpride

Street Pride provide grounds maintenance to all Council sites within the borough, including parks, public open spaces, cemeteries, highway verges and some school sites. Activities include grass cutting, fine turf maintenance, shrub bed maintenance, provision of floral bedding, tree and hedge maintenance and maintenance of sports pitches.

The total Street Pride budget for grounds maintenance is circa £2.8 million. The work is carried out by 77 employees and supported by additional agency staff at peak times.

These costs are detailed below

Arboretum	£180,000
Green Flag Parks	£ 402,000
Premier Parks	£ 173,000
Other Parks, Open Spaces and Play Areas	£880,000
Tractor Mowing	£102,000
Tree Maintenance	£353,000
Cemetery Work	£361,000
Other	£349,000

Findings and Priorities

The evidence the working group heard and its influence on their overall conclusions are interwoven. Therefore the report is drafted around the priorities and actions that the working group has identified should be included in the new strategy.

Greenspaces Strategy 2006 – 2012

The production of the greenspace 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). It recognised the importance green space played in the Council's 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 by the Community Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

The working group found that the majority of the Strategy's 57 objectives had been achieved. For example, five year development plans for the boroughs premier parks and subsequent Green Flag awards at Merrions Wood, Palfrey Park and Willenhall Park. The objectives that were not achieved, whilst desirable, did not materially affect the achievement of the remaining and most significant objectives.

Since its adoption the Greenspace Strategy and Greenspaces Service has received both local and national recognition as a case study example of best practice. This has led to Greenspaces Officers being invited to give presentations at regional and national conferences organised by leading representative groups.

The working group would like to congratulate all those involved in the development and implementation of the Greenspaces Strategy 2006 – 2011/12. The Strategy has achieved the majority of its aims and received recognition from regional and national bodies.

Following the success of the first Greenspace Strategy the working group would like to recommend that a further strategy be developed. Over the next section of the report the working group would like to suggest what it believes the vision and priorities for the new Strategy should be.

Vision for Greenspaces 2012 - 2017

Following consideration of many areas and discussion with a significant number of witnesses the working group believes that the vision for the next Greenspaces Strategy should be:

Greenspace in Walsall should be a proud public asset securing the environmental and ecological future of the borough for the benefit of the health and wellbeing of the whole community.

A five year lifetime for the new strategy is recommended to allow sufficient time for the long term improvements to be planned and implemented.

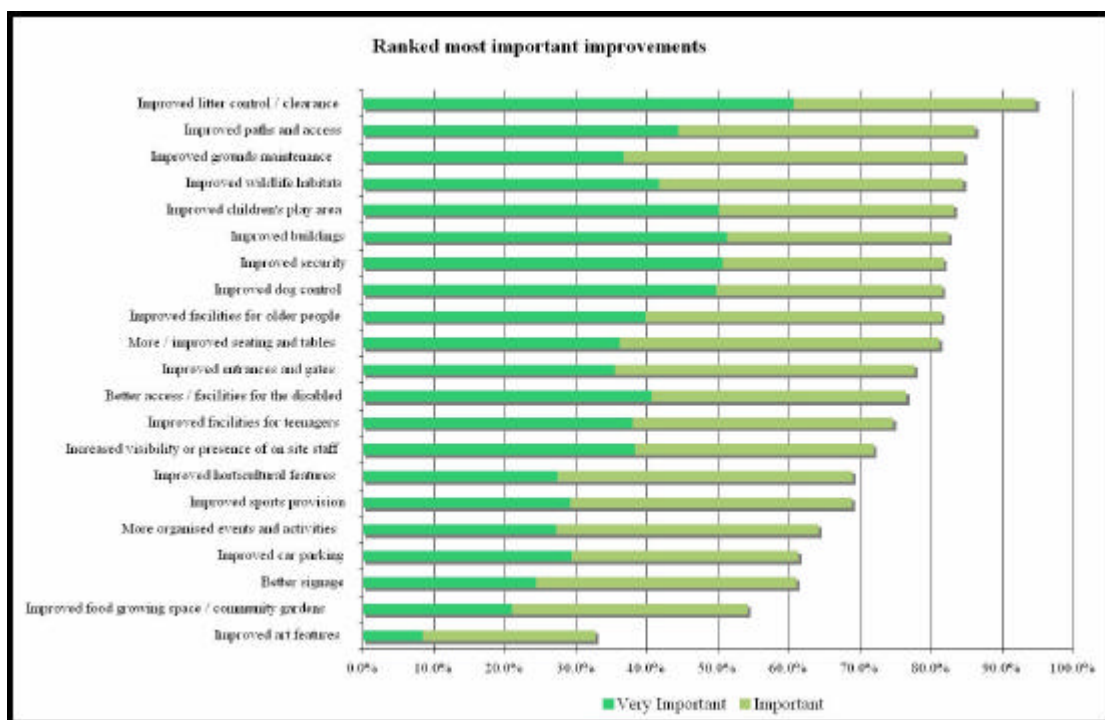
The case for this vision is set out in the following pages together with the working groups suggested priorities and actions.

Priority 1

Greenspace in Walsall should be enhanced and improved.

The working group believe that all parks and open space should be considered as a 'proud public asset' to local communities. Currently green space in the borough is in a good place and the previous green space strategy delivered three Green Flag parks which is a sign of increasing improvements.

However, there is still room for improvement if the vision of a 'proud public asset' is to be delivered. A recent household survey of local residents has taken place that received around 1200 replies. One of the questions within the survey enquired about was: 'what improvements would residents wish to see in local greenspace'? The results of the question can be viewed in the table below:



Improved litter control/collection, improved paths and access and grounds maintenance are the top three priorities for respondents to a recent household survey on green space.

This indicates the importance of ensuring that the boroughs green space looks presentable and attractive to users.

The working group believe that high standards of grounds maintenance and efficient litter control are two areas that are essential to ensuring that green space remains attractive to local people.

Improved paths and access are one other way that users can be attracted to use local open space. This is particularly important to disabled or elderly residents who may otherwise be unable to experience open space.

The importance of high quality open space is further enhanced when it is considered that many local residents do not leave the borough. Therefore it is critical that the experience that these residents receive is positive.

What should take place to achieve this priority?

Borough-wide Country Park

The working group would like to recommend that the area aspires to the creation of a Borough-wide Country Park, radiating out from the Arboretum, in which all green spaces will eventually be seen as part of a whole, which offers an exciting and innovative challenge.

This inter-connective approach will place Walsall in the vanguard of green space management and offers opportunities for creative planning in which all Greenspace operational areas, including Grounds Maintenance, need to be actively involved.

Walsall Council should retain management of Greenspace

The working group considered the possibility of forming an external trust to manage green space on behalf of the Council. As part of this exercise the advantages and disadvantages of a Trust were considered.

Trust: Advantages	Trust: Disadvantages
A more focussed organisation Opportunity to save business rates payments on property Potential for increased opportunities to gain external funding Potential opportunity to source cheaper contracts for back office support (i.e. human resources) and grounds maintenance Engagement with local community through a board structure Independent but linked to Council priorities	High start up costs Loss of control over day-to-day management Difficulty in recruiting good quality trustees Financial stability of trust if Council needs to made savings Potentially a small organisation that would be unable to secure appropriate economies of scale Savings on business rates would be small due to a size and nature of green space buildings A smaller organisation could have less clout with partners

Follow consideration of above issues the working group would like to recommend that the management responsibility for green space remain with Walsall Council in partnership with local communities and Friends Groups.

Revised strategic approach to grounds maintenance

The working group strongly believe that enhanced and improved parks will encourage additional use by local residents which will in turn have a positive effect on the health and wellbeing of the area.

High quality open space will attract new users and contribute to the health and wellbeing of residents. Green space is also important to maintaining wildlife and bio-diversity in the borough.

The working group also recognise the current financial situation of local government with reducing settlements from national government guaranteed until the end of the current Parliament and probably beyond. This means that it is unlikely that the current grounds maintenance regime can be maintained moving forward.

The working group recommend that a balanced approach to grounds maintenance is developed in the following ways:

- ***A strategic spread of high quality parks and open space. Preferably to Green Flag standards.***
- ***Development of an effective low maintenance approach to open space of low strategic importance with the aim of creating rich habitats and bio-diversity. For example, wildflower meadows and wildlife corridors linking eco-friendly habitats.***

Organisation of grounds maintenance

In Walsall there is a split in the way that green space is managed.

The Greenspaces Service undertake the strategic planning for the area and grounds maintenance is delivered by the Streetpride Service. Both Services are part of the Neighbourhoods Directorate.

During a meeting with the local Friends Group Network (a representative body of all local parks friends groups) the working group received feedback that currently services in parks and open space were disjointed due to the split between strategy and day-to-day operations. It was explained that the split made it difficult to hold different departments to account and had a detrimental impact on the delivery of services on site. For example, there was confusion regarding responsibilities for litter picking between the two services.

The working group undertook further investigation into this issue and would like to highlight the following areas of concern:

- The development of an unrealistic service level agreement between Greenspaces and Streetpride that has never been monitored.

- The lack of accurate and up-to-date budgetary information about spending on grounds maintenance in local parks and open space. Moreover no financial information is shared between services.
- Poor communication between both services.
- Lack of communication between Streetpride and local Friends Groups.

It is the view of the working group that further improvements would be made to the boroughs green space if strategic planning and grounds maintenance were managed within a single service.

A single holistic service would create greater ownership and accountability for service delivery and overcome the current communication problems being experienced. The new holistic service should also be required to keep, maintain and share accurate financial records regarding spending in the boroughs green space.

The working group recommend that this new single strategy and grounds maintenance team should be managed by the existing Greenspaces Service with control of the grounds maintenance budget transferring to make this possible.

The organisation of greenspace services in this way is supported by numerous national and international reports produced in recent years such as CABI Spaces' 'Blueprint for Action 2007' and 'Managing Green Spaces: Seven Ingredients for Success 2010'.

Maintenance and management plans

Feedback from the Friends Group Network established that developing a maintenance and management plan for a park or open space was a very beneficial exercise and should be considered best practice.

Therefore the working group would like to recommend that maintenance and management plans should be developed for Green Flag and Premier Parks in consultation with Friends Groups across the borough.

Development Opportunities in Grounds Maintenance

The work undertaken to enhance local parks as a public asset can provide development opportunities for many local residents.

The working group would like to see opportunities to increase the skills and responsibilities of those who work in, volunteer and visit local open space developed. Specifically:

- ***Grounds maintenance apprenticeships should be encouraged.***
- ***Volunteers should be engaged and trained to help out with specific tasks.***
- ***Opportunities to get children involved and interested should be developed.***

Toilets

Due to problems with vandalism and anti-social behaviour toilets located in parks across the borough are only open when a member of staff is present. When no staff member is present the toilets are locked.

Feedback received from the Friends Group Network has led the working group to conclude that this situation is unacceptable. Anecdotal evidence reports children and adults 'going in the bushes' when toilets are unavailable.

The working group would like to see the availability and access to toilets across the boroughs parks and open space to increase.

This could be achieved by consideration of the following ideas:

- Restructuring staff shift patterns for increased on-site presence.
- Making toilets available for the public in occupied buildings where use can be monitored.
- Investing in vandal-proof facilities.

The working group accept that capital investment may be required to increase the availability of toilets but feel that the current situation is very poor.

Representative Bodies

The Council should be aware of influential, respected national agencies such as Royal Horticultural Society, Tree Council, Woodland Trust etc. and the support/challenges they can offer.

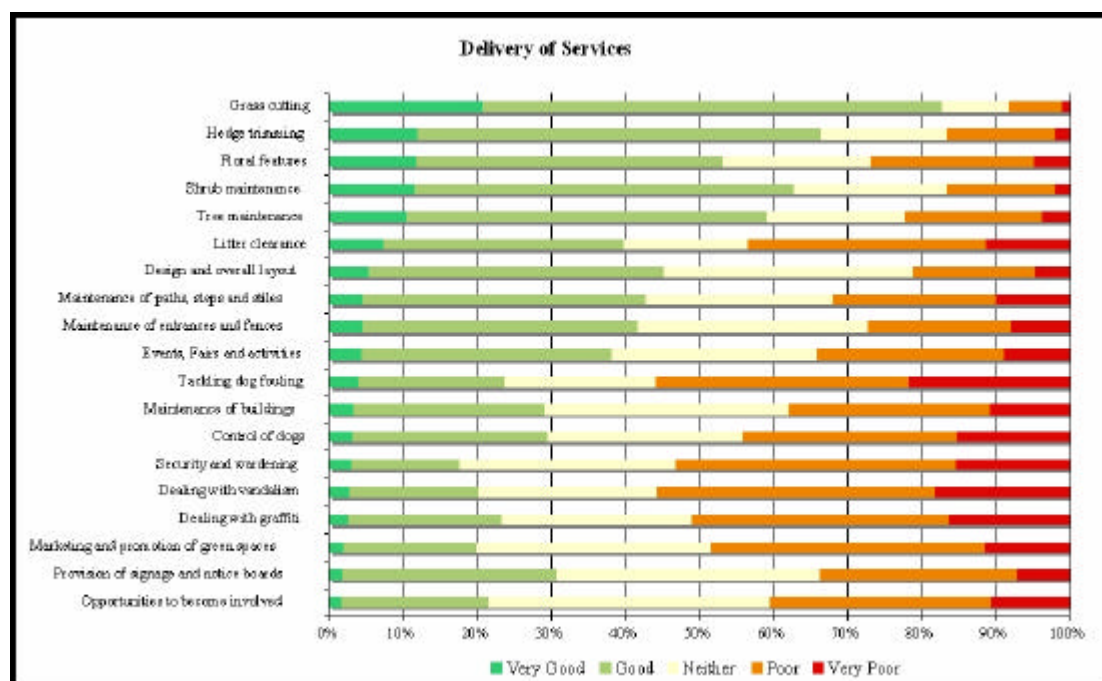
Participation in initiatives of this kind would not only serve to develop skills but also provide a focus for achievement e.g. Apprenticeship Participation in competitions such as Birmingham Borders Student Competition at NEC and entrance into Royal Horticultural Society Parks Section of Tatton Park Flower Show.

Household Survey

The working group were pleased to have the benefit of the initial outcomes from the household survey. The working group understand that the survey has collected a lot of useful data and as such ***recommend that further analysis is completed at neighbourhood partnership and, if necessary, ward level.***

Priority 2

All green space should be safe and free of crime and anti-social behaviour.



Above is a table that illustrates the barriers to residents using local open space. The more red and orange displayed indicates greater perception of a problem. The top five anti-social behaviour issues raised are:

- Dog fouling and control
- Dealing with vandalism
- Security and wardening
- Dealing with graffiti
- Litter clearance

The working group recognised that these problems create a barrier to residents using their local park and open space. Issues such as dog fouling, graffiti and vandalism give open space the perception of being neglected and unloved and thus create barriers to use. It is believed that creating safe and pleasant open space would encourage people to have pride and undertake additional visits which will lead to improved feelings of safety as well as community ownership of local open space.

What should take place to achieve this priority?

Enforcement

The working group felt that if an open space was used by local people then this would create a deterrent to those who wished to cause anti-social

behaviour. However, the problem remained in encouraging users into open spaces that were currently hot spots for problems.

In order to overcome this the working group would like to see a more visible on site presence of official staff. This could be park rangers, grounds maintenance staff or civil enforcement officers. In addition to this mobile staff from partner agencies, such as the Police, should be encouraged to send further patrols of police officers and police and community safety officers into local parks and open space. It is hoped that this 'official' presence will help to reduce ongoing issues in relation to anti-social behaviour and encourage use.

In addition to these further visible patrols opportunities to clamp down and prosecute those undertaking anti-social behaviour should be pro-actively sought. The working group heard that although Park Rangers had been delegated civil enforcement powers a 'softly softly' approach was in practice with enforcement action and it would only be used a last resort. Therefore to date no fixed penalties or further action has been taken. ***Members strongly felt that it was time for firmer enforcement and that all prosecutions should be actively promoted as a further deterrent to other residents who cause anti-social behaviour. The working group would greatly appreciate the support of the Police with this enforcement action.***

In order to assist with enforcement the working group would support the erection of signs in open space.

Improved lighting in parks and open space could also assist in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour.

Dog Control and Dog Fouling

A common problem in parks and open space is irresponsible dog ownership.

Poor dog control can be a factor which puts off residents from using local open space and can see horticultural displays damaged. The bigger issue, however, is dog fouling.

Over 50% of residents who participated in the household survey perceived dog fouling to be a serious problem in Walsall.

To overcome problems with dog fouling and dog control the working group would like to see strong, pro-active enforcement action take place against dog owners who do not clear up after their animals.

Encourage greater use and ownership

If residents perceive an open space as safe then they are more likely to use it which will promote the space to other residents and in turn contribute towards the improvement of other important priorities such as health and wellbeing.

Priority 3

Green space should be used to increase the health and well being of residents.

Parks were created in Victorian times by the Public Health Act with the specific intention of improving the health of the population. The working group learnt that green space was still very much essential to the health and wellbeing of the local population.

For example, the Sports and Leisure Service has a target of adults participating in 3 x 30 minute exercise sessions a week which was impossible to deliver through local leisure centres. Therefore organised and informal exercise sessions in the boroughs open space were critical to meeting the boroughs demand for exercise opportunities.

In addition to exercise opportunities green space also provided an opportunity for residents to unwind and relax to help relieve stress and improve mental health.

The importance of green space to health and wellbeing is reflected in the Governments recent white paper 'Healthy Lives, Healthy People' which highlights the vital role played by green space in addressing health inequalities between rich and poor communities.

What should take place to achieve this priority?

The working group recognise the important contribution that green space plays in maintaining and improving the health and wellbeing of residents.

Investment should be made to provide further opportunities for residents to access green space for health and wellbeing purposes. Good work is taking place but the potential benefits are not currently being maximised. The healthy walking programme was considered successful and it was felt that this could be built on by, for example, creating further pathways for local people to use. It was felt that improving links between nearby green space could also be beneficial.

Partnership working

The health and wellbeing of residents is an issue of significance to the whole area and is the responsibility of many statutory agents.

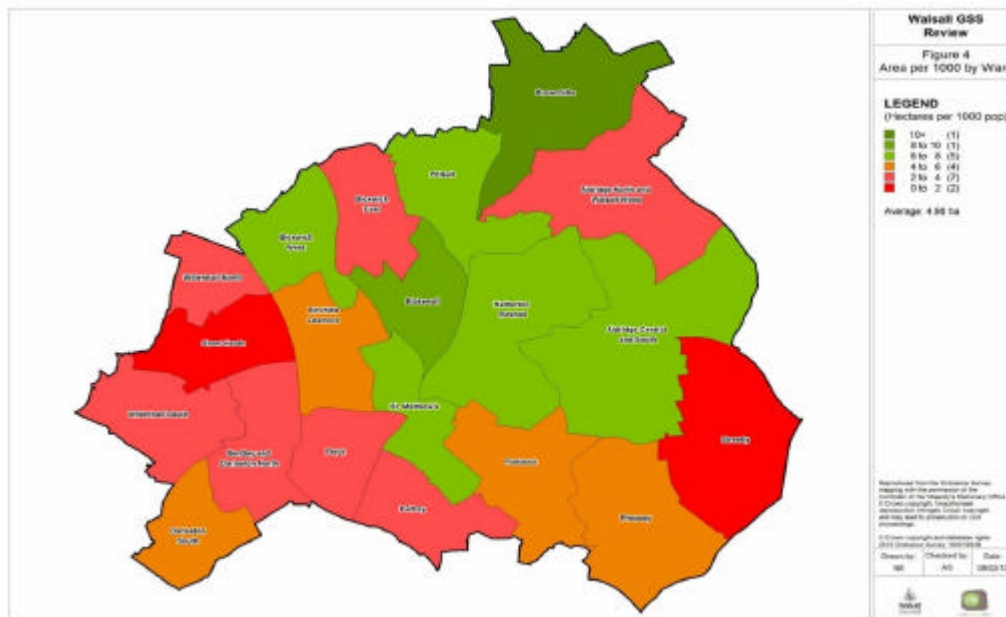
Positive partnership working with the NHS is taking place but there is potential for joint working to grow significantly.

In particular ***it is important for the Council and the NHS to share data***, in particular around the location of green space and play equipment. This would allow the NHS to undertake stronger strategic planning to tackle obesity and inactivity.

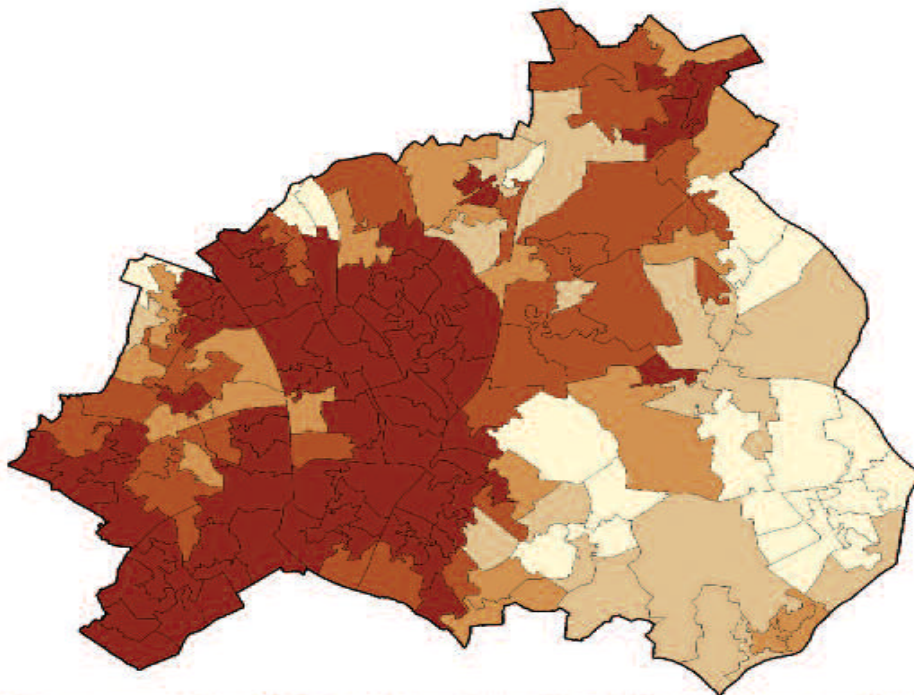
Inequalities

There are well known inequalities in Walsall when comparing the east and west of the borough.

These inequalities are generally borne out when comparing access to green space. The map below shows the amount of green space available in hectares compared to 1000 people.



When this is compared to levels of deprivation a remarkably similar pattern occurs (darker colours are more deprived):



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*Source: Director of Public Health Annual Report 2010 'Future Proofing Health'

It is also well known that the more deprived an area a resident lives in the more likely they are to have low educational achievement levels, be economically inactive and suffer from additional health problems.

These problems are complex and require a multi-agency approach over a number of years to tackle. However, the working group believe that green space can play a role in improving the lives of residents in deprived areas. For example, high quality open space could be developed to raise the aspirations of local people. In addition to this activities could be arranged to encourage physical activity and reduce anti-social behaviour.

Good quality, safe open space with numerous activities can contribute towards improving the health and wellbeing of residents. The 'Healthy Lives, Healthy People' white paper argues that urban areas dominated by traffic can discourage activity with lower socio-economic groups and those living in deprived areas experiencing the greatest environmental burdens. Not only this but a high quality open space can make residents feel proud of the area that they live in.

This leads the working group to conclude that green space in deprived areas, or those areas where there are deficiencies with the availability of green space should be protected and enhanced for the health and wellbeing of the local populations.

Encouraging greater female participation

Open space is currently male dominated in terms of use for exercise. This is mainly for pitch based sports such as football. Girls and women's teams make up only 8% of the numbers of teams identified.

The working group believe female participation in sport and outdoor activities needs to be increased to male levels to assist in improving the health and wellbeing of the area. Female friendly activities for all ages should be designed, marketed and implemented across the borough.

Education

Parks and open space provide wonderful opportunities for life long learning.

When local residents use a park or open space they are subjected to a different experience to the usual 'urban jungle'. Open space is home to rich habitats and wildlife which provide opportunities for learning.

For example, signage could be located next to flower beds or on viewing points explaining the biodiversity of a particular area or its history.

The working group recommend that opportunities for education and lifelong should be maximised in open spaces.

Priority 4

Commercial opportunities should be sought in green space.

The working group firmly believe that there are commercial opportunities to be taken advantage of in the boroughs parks and open spaces.

What should take place to achieve this priority?

The working group would like to recommend that the following commercial opportunities are explored:

- **Leasing buildings to local organisations and businesses.** This should be encouraged as a way of gaining income but importantly a clause should be added to any contract so that any leased buildings should include a form of public accessibility and at the minimum include access to toilet facilities.

In addition to this no leased building should be available for exclusive use or booking of a single individual, group or organisation for a prolonged period.

- **Creating social enterprises.** Social enterprises could be created to take over buildings in parks to run services and sell products to park users.
- **Events** should be organised to attract people to use their local open space. These events could be advertised through an exclusive 'Greenspace' website. Friends Groups should also be allowed to advertise events in the First Stop Shop.
- **Sale of green products** – for example compost from waste materials.

Priority 5

Greater partnership working for the development of all green space should be pro-actively developed.

As aforementioned green space provides opportunities for commercial operations, education and improving health and wellbeing. This illustrates the strategic importance of green space therefore its potential contribution needs to be maximised.

In order to maximise the potential role green space can have in the borough substantial partnership working between the public and private sector with fully engaged local communities is required.

What should take place to achieve this priority?

Stronger strategic and local partnerships

This report has already described how data sharing between the Council and the NHS could be improved to enable better strategic planning.

This report has also suggested that the Police assist enforcement staff with tackling problems with anti-social behaviour.

The working group believe this illustrates the need for strong strategic and local partnerships to bring about real improvements to the education, health and social wellbeing of the area.

This priority should be taken forward by Walsall Partnership where the Borough Management Team can consider the wider strategic issues whilst neighbourhood management focuses on delivering on the ground.

Friends Groups

Many local parks and open spaces have formal Friends Groups. Friends Groups are groups of volunteers who have taken an interest in the management and upkeep of their local open space.

Friends Groups are a very important tool in the management of parks as they allow local people to play a role and be involved with important community assets. Friends Groups provide a key consultative group for the Council.

Crucially Friends Groups are often very enthusiastic volunteers who contribute to the upkeep and management of their local open space. In times of austerity this *pro bono* behaviour should be applauded and encouraged, however, the working group would like to comment that it is important that Friends Groups are not viewed as 'cheap labour' to fill any gaps created by funding shortages. Moreover, Friends Groups need to be seen through their

potential to add value to the priorities set out within the new green spaces strategy.

Friends Groups can also provide opportunities for external funding which the Council would not be able to successfully apply for on its own. An example of this is the Heritage Lottery Funded restoration programme in the Arboretum.

Friends Groups should not be used for political gain and they should be inclusive and representative of the local population.

The working group would like to recommend that the Council and its partners pro-actively engage with local Friends of Parks Groups.

Friends Group Network

As part of its evidence gathering the working group held a meeting with the local Friends Group Network.

The Friends Group Network is a representative body of all local Friends Groups and provided the working group with lots of valuable evidence.

One issue that arose during the discussion was the need for the Friends Group Network to be reinvigorated as representatives at the meeting felt that it had lost some of the dynamism and relevance that it had held previously.

Therefore the working group would like to suggest that the Friends Group Network reconsiders its purpose, terms of reference and membership in order to re-establish itself as an influential body.

Internal Partnerships

An important factor in the provision of local open space is planning policy.

Planning Policy Guidance Document 17 on recreation, sport and open space (PPG 17) was important guidance in relation to planning decisions. PPG 17 requires local authorities to undertake an assessment of the type and availability of open space available and to calculate whether or not an area has a surplus or deficiency in particular types of open space. This information then informs planning and development decisions.

The working group learnt that separate studies of the type and availability of open space had taken place to inform PPG17 and the current Greenspace Strategy. This predictably reported different findings. Further to this a recent audit has been undertaken to assess the type and availability of green space as part of preparations for the developing the next Greenspace Strategy. The findings of which can be found on the next page.

For reasons of consistency the working group recommend that PPG 17 and the new Greenspace Strategy be informed by the same data sets and integrated decisions concerning development take place.

The below table illustrates the type and availability of open space by area partnership area and compares the findings of PPG 17 to the findings of an audit carried out by an external consultant as part of the preparation for the next Greenspace Strategy.

It is clear to see that there are large deficiencies in the availability of green space for the majority of areas.

C) Current Surplus or Deficiency			Parks & Gardens	Natural & Semi Natural Green Space	Formal Outdoor Sports (excluding Golf Courses)	Amenity Greenspace	Provision for C&YP (including sites within other typologies)	Green Corridor						
			PPG 17 Recommended Standard (per 1,000 population)											
Area	All Population	Children's Population	1.08		2.70		0.62		0.73		0.17		0.12	
			PPG17	GSS 2012	PPG17	GSS 2012	PPG17	GSS 2012	PPG17	GSS 2012	PPG17	GSS 2012	PPG17	GSS 2012
1	35,939	8,609	-0.68	-0.79	172.75	143.42	-3.57	-3.63	1.62	1.56	1.68	1.15	-4.48	-4.48
2	49,579	11,203	23.83	20.63	-31.65	-28.80	-2.11	-4.42	-27.62	-25.63	-0.16	0.48	-5.68	-5.68
3	51,506	14,631	-2.45	-3.29	10.55	4.60	-24.98	-25.00	2.97	0.94	-0.81	-0.93	-1.36	-2.97
4	53,456	15,474	-3.72	-1.50	-88.17	-70.09	33.49	11.93	5.81	6.81	-0.29	-0.29	-1.68	-1.70
5	25,555	7,371	-2.23	-6.33	-55.57	-45.65	7.54	7.49	17.27	17.88	-0.52	-0.58	6.97	7.31
6	38,438	9,772	-14.75	-14.38	-7.90	-16.48	-10.36	-10.41	-0.05	5.42	0.10	0.10	6.22	6.39
Borough Total	254,473	67,060	0.00	-5.66	0.00	-13.00	0.00	-24.04	0.00	6.98	0.00	-0.07	0.00	-1.13
Area	Wards				Area	Wards								
1	Brownhills/Pelsall/Rushall/Shelfield				4	St Matthews/Paddock/Palfrey/Pleck								
2	Aldridge/Streeley/Pheasey/Walsall Wood				5	Darlaston/Bentley								
3	Bloxwich/Blakenhall/Birchills/Leamore				6	Willenhall/Short Heath								

Monitoring of land swap agreements

Green space sites are desirable to developers as they are easy to build on when compared to brownfield sites which may require remediation work to take place before they are suitable for construction.

In order to facilitate development 'land swaps' are often offered by developers. In the context of open space a green space site will be redeveloped and in exchange a suitable green space will be developed elsewhere to compensate for the space lost to development.

The working group heard anecdotal evidence that 'land swaps' did not always turn out how they were sold to local communities and as such would like to recommend that any future similar details are actively monitored to ensure that agreements are kept for the benefit of local communities.

Priority 6

Green space should be used to create rich habitats and biodiversity.

The working group unanimously agreed that greater importance should be placed upon creating rich habitats and biodiversity when determining future plans for green spaces.

As aforementioned green space provides opportunities for education. By enriching habitats and biodiversity more opportunities for learning will be created. In addition to this many of the methods that assist in creating additional habitats and biodiversity require less intensive forms of maintenance therefore enabling financial savings to be made in the context of adding to the green spaces offer.

What should take place to achieve this priority?

There are many methods that could be used to achieve this priority.

For example revising the ***mowing frequency*** to include designated areas where the frequency of mowing is reduced thereby lowering carbon emissions, noise pollution and, by allowing plants such as clover to flower, improving feeding opportunities for pollinating insects. Such a reduction would also lower maintenance costs.

Habitat restoration could be encouraged together with the creation of new areas for biodiversity, for example, wildflower meadows.

The planting/bedding scheme could be adapted to include bee/butterfly friendly species and where possible extend the season for nectar-rich pollinating plants.

'Wild life corridors' could also be developed linking eco-friendly habitats.

It is important to note that a new approach to grounds maintenance of this nature may well require ***a pro-active policy of public information*** to explain the aims and objectives involved. It would be equally important to inform the public that this policy not only provides ecological benefits but also improves public health and well-being.

Conclusion

Walsall is fortunate to have many good quality parks and open spaces across the borough. There are 535 green space sites that provide over 2,000 hectares of open space. There is less green space in the east of the borough which mostly corresponds with Walsall's most deprived areas.

The working group would like to see a new 5 year Greenspace Strategy developed with the following vision: *'Greenspace in Walsall should be a proud public asset securing the environmental and ecological future of the borough for the benefit of the health and wellbeing of the whole community'*.

In order to achieve this vision a number of suggested priorities and action points have been developed by the working group.

Priority 1 is *'Greenspace in Walsall should be enhanced and improved'* which could be achieved by creating a borough-wide country park where all green space is interconnected; the Council retaining management responsibilities in partnership with local communities; a new balanced approach to grounds maintenance seeing a strategic spread of green flag parks and new low maintenance methods used for other open space; grounds maintenance responsibilities returning to the Greenspace Service; and increasing the availability of toilets.

Priority 2 is *'All green space should be safe and free of crime and anti-social behaviour'* which could be achieved by strong and high profile enforcement action taking place against crime, anti-social behaviour and dog fouling; improving lighting; and encouraging greater public use and ownership.

Priority 3 is *'Green space should be used to increase the health and wellbeing of residents'* which could be achieved by protecting and enhancing open space in Walsall's most deprived areas; strong partnership working to maximise the contribution green space can make to health and wellbeing, including improved data sharing; increasing female participation in outdoor activities; and maximising education and lifelong learning opportunities with regard to wildlife and habitats.

Priority 4 is *'Commercial opportunities should be sought in green space'* which could be achieved by leasing buildings; creating social enterprises; and seeking opportunities to sell green products such as compost.

Priority 5 is *'Greater partnership working for the development of all green space should be pro-actively developed'* which could be achieved by stronger strategic and local partnerships; pro-active engagement with Friends Groups; and planning policy guidelines and the Greenspace Strategy sharing the same data sets.

Priority 6 is *'Green space should be used to create rich habitats and biodiversity'* which could be achieved by revising the mowing policy to create

feeding opportunities pollinating insects; habitat restoration such as wildflower meadows; and creating wildlife corridors.

By recommending the setting of these priorities the working group hope that the boroughs greenspace assets can be further enhanced and developed for the benefit of local communities.

Recommendations

That:

1. A new five-year greenspace strategy should be developed;
2. the vision for the new greenspace strategy should be: ‘Greenspace in Walsall should be a proud public asset securing the environmental and ecological future of the borough for the benefit of the health and wellbeing of the whole community’;

The following are the suggested priorities for the new greenspace strategy along with recommendations for how these priorities could be achieved.

3. **Priority 1: ‘Greenspace in Walsall should be enhanced and improved’.** This should be achieved by:
 - a. an aspiration to create a Borough-wide Country Park;
 - b. Walsall Council retaining management responsibility for greenspace in partnership with local communities and Friends Groups;
 - c. A balanced approach to grounds maintenance should be developed in the following ways:
 - i. A strategic spread of high quality parks and open space. Preferably to Green Flag standards.
 - ii. Maintenance and management plans be developed for Green Flag and Premier Parks in consultation with Friends Groups across the borough.
 - iii. Development of an effective low maintenance approach to open space of low strategic importance with the aim of creating rich habitats and bio-diversity. For example, wildflower meadows and wildlife corridors linking eco-friendly habitats.
 - d. Grounds maintenance responsibilities and budgets be delegated to the existing Greenspace Service;
 - e. Accurate and up-to-date records be kept of grounds maintenance regimes and budgetary spending;
 - f. opportunities to increase the skills and responsibilities of those who work in, volunteer and visit local open space should be created.
 - g. the availability of toilets across the boroughs park and open space to increase.
 - h. The Council should be consider how to engage with influential and respected national agencies such as Royal Horticultural Society, Tree Council, Woodland Trust and the support/challenges they can offer;
 - i. that further analysis of the data from the household survey be completed down to neighbourhood partnership level and, if necessary, ward level.

4. **Priority 2: 'All green space should be safe and free of crime and anti-social behaviour'. This should be achieved by:**
 - a. **strong enforcement action against criminal and anti-social behaviour that take place in parks and open space. The working group would greatly appreciate the support of the Police with this enforcement action;**
 - b. **all prosecutions should be actively promoted as a further deterrent to other residents who cause anti-social behaviour;**
 - c. **In order to assist with enforcement the working group support the erection of signs in open space;**
 - d. **Improved lighting in parks and open space could also assist in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour;**
 - e. **To overcome problems with dog fouling and dog control strong, pro-active enforcement action should take place against dog owners who do not clear up after their animals;**
 - f. **Activities to encourage greater use and ownership should take place with local communities.**

5. **Priority 3: 'Green space should be used to increase the health and well being of residents'. This should be achieved by:**
 - a. **green space in deprived areas, or those areas where there are deficiencies with the availability of green space, should be protected and enhanced for the health and wellbeing of the local populations.**
 - b. **Strong partnership working with all partners, but particularly health colleagues needs to be developed to maximise the potential contribution green space can make to health and well being.**
 - c. **Data sharing between partners, particularly health colleagues, needs improving;**
 - d. **female participation in sport and outdoor activities needs to be increased to male levels to assist in improving the health and wellbeing of the area. Female friendly activities for all ages should be designed, marketed and implemented across the borough.**
 - e. **Education and lifelong opportunities should be maximised in open spaces.**

6. **Priority 4: 'Commercial opportunities should be sought in green space'. This should be achieved by:**
 - a. **Leasing buildings to local organisations and businesses.**
 - b. **Leased buildings should:**
 - i. **Include a form of public accessibility and at the minimum include access to toilet facilities.**
 - ii. **not be available for exclusive use or booking of a single individual, group or organisation.**

- c. **Creating social enterprises.**
 - d. **Sale of green products – for example compost from waste materials.**
 - e. **Organising events.**
 - f. **Events should be advertised through an exclusive ‘Greenspace’ website.**
 - g. **Friends Groups should also be allowed to advertise events in the First Stop Shop.**
- 7. Priority 5: ‘Greater partnership working for the development of all green space should be pro-actively developed’. This should be achieved by:**
- a. **Stronger strategic and local partnerships;**
 - b. **the Council and its partners pro-actively engaging with local Friends of Parks Groups;**
 - c. **PPG 17 and the new Greenspace Strategy being informed by the same data sets;**
 - d. **the Friends Group Network reconsiders its purpose, terms of reference and membership in order to re-establish itself as an influential body;**
 - e. **land swap deals with developers are actively monitored to ensure compliance.**
- 8. Priority 6: ‘Green space should be used to create rich habitats and biodiversity’. This should be achieved by:**
- a. **revising the mowing frequency to include designated areas where the frequency of mowing is reduced thereby lowering carbon emissions, noise pollution and, by allowing plants such as clover to flower, improving feeding opportunities for pollinating insects. Such a reduction would also lower maintenance costs;**
 - b. **Habitat restoration could be encouraged together with the creation of new areas for biodiversity, for example, wildflower meadows;**
 - c. **The planting/bedding scheme could be adapted to include bee/butterfly friendly species and where possible extend the season for nectar-rich pollinating plants;**
 - d. **‘Wild life corridors’ could also be developed linking eco-friendly habitats;**
 - e. **any new approach to grounds maintenance may require a proactive policy of public information to explain the aims and objectives involved. It would be equally important to inform the public that this policy not only provides ecological benefits but also improves public health and well-being.**

Work Group Name:	Greenspaces Working Group
Panel:	Community Services
Municipal Year:	2011/12
Lead Member:	Councillor L. Harrison
Lead Officer:	Graham Hood
Support Officer:	Craig Goodall
Membership:	Councillor L. Harrison Councillor I. Azam Councillor C. Creaney Councillor I. Shires Councillor K. Sears
Co-opted Members:	Jackie Cocken and Jo Lester - Friends Group Network and Arboretum User Group

1. Context	
	The current Greenspaces Strategy comes to an end on 31 March 2012. Therefore there is an opportunity to reflect on the success or otherwise of the Strategy and look ahead to how Greenspaces could be managed after this point. It is thought desirable to develop a new strategy from 2012, however, this strategy will need to take into account the likelihood of reduced resources moving forward.
2. Objectives	
	<p>What do you want it to achieve? It is important to have clearly defined outcomes at the start to give the working group direction and ensure it adds value.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To assess the effectiveness of the 'Greenspaces Strategy 2006-2011'. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What targets were achieved? b. What wasn't achieved? 2. To assess the effectiveness in the way Greenspaces are managed. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What are the current arrangements? Can they be improved? b. Are there any different ways Greenspaces can be managed? For example, Trusts, Outsourcing or increased use of the Third Sector. 3. How do national and regional activities and policies influence Walsall Greenspaces? What is planned for the future? 4. How do partners engage with the service and now can this be improved? 5. Are there any commercial opportunities with Greenspaces? 6. Are there any opportunities to improve the Greenspaces offer for leisure activities and young people? 7. Can improvements be made to the way Greenspaces are linked?

	<p>8. Are there any opportunities to increase employment with the development of Greenspaces?</p> <p>9. To recommend a set of priorities to Cabinet for potential inclusion in a new Greenspaces Strategy.</p>
3.	Scope
	<p>What should be included and excluded?</p> <p>Included All Greenspaces sites – including countryside sites Tree management and maintenance Resources – Financial and Workforce Grounds Maintenance Management models (i.e. Trusts/potential externalisation/further empowerment of Friends Groups) Commercial Opportunities Allotments Play areas Youth and leisure activities</p>
4.	Equalities Implications
	<p>There is a legal and moral obligation to ensure that, when undertaking a scrutiny review, the impact of policies; procedures; strategies and activities is considered within the 6 strands of equality (Age, Disability, Gender, Race, Religion or Belief, and Sexual Orientation)</p> <p>The working group will ensure that their recommendations do not unfairly disadvantage any resident.</p>
4.	Who else will you want to take part?
	<p>Think about who else, other than lead officers and members, it would be useful to include either as part of the working group or to bring information at specific points. For example- partners, stakeholders, other authorities.</p> <p>Greenspaces Officers Greenspaces Improvement Team Streetpride Officers Park Rangers Sport Development Other Local Authorities Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture Area Managers Working Smarter findings on Grounds Maintenance Planning Policy Friends Group Network Representatives of All Friends of Parks Groups Community Household Survey Young People and Schools</p>

5.	Timescales & Reporting Schedule												
<p>Needs to be completed within the same municipal year and so should be able to report to full panel by the last meeting at the latest but consider the subject- is there anything else that it may need to tie into (e.g. academic or financial year or to coincide with national/sub-regional developments)</p> <p>How often will update be provided to full panel?</p>													
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6.	Risk factors												
<p>Are there any obstacles that can be predicted? For example, is it dependent on other organisations outside your control and duty to cooperate? Identifying these factors early and how they will be mitigated should help minimise their impact.</p>													
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