

**Walsall Green Space Strategy (Draft v3)**

**Front Cover**

**2006 – 2011**

**DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION**

**(June 2006)**

## Foreword

Foreword by Councillor Louise Harrison

Text here from Walsall Council

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Foreword from Tim Challens / Jamie Morris

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# Walsall Green Space Strategy (Draft v3)

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## Summary

This is the first Green Space Strategy for Walsall and has been produced to establish a vision for green spaces in the borough. This is the draft strategy that draws upon the work undertaken for the green space audit and assessment that was used as the evidence base for the production of the Supplementary Planning Document on Open Space Sport and Recreation, which was adopted by the council in June 2006.

The green space strategy is the council's response to the findings of the green space audit and seeks to clearly set out how the council will improve the quality of green spaces through changes to management and maintenance practices linked to the council's overall vision. The recommendations contained within the strategy are based on the findings of the green space audit, national and local policy review, a review of organisational procedures, consideration of best practice and extensive consultation.

The consultation process has included a household survey distributed to a random sample of 10,000 households across the borough, surveys to users and specialist groups and community and voluntary groups involved in developing green spaces. A series of meetings and workshops have also been held with friends groups, Walsall's Local Neighbourhood Partnerships, council staff and elected members. The strategy has been developed with regular liaison with the Green Spaces Working Group, part of the council's wider scrutiny process. Previous consultation relating to green spaces has also been reviewed and the findings used in the development of the strategy.

The consultation process continues - this is a draft strategy and the comments and views of all stakeholders will continue to be sought through a range of mechanisms prior to the adoption of the strategy in \*\* 2006.

Overall, we have found that Walsall is well served by green spaces and the quantity of all the types of green spaces in the borough compares well with neighbouring boroughs and other similar local authorities nationally. However, there is variation in the amount of green space in different parts of the borough and the level of accessibility to these green spaces based on an assessment of a reasonable walking distance linked to the hierarchy of the green spaces.

We also found that the quality of the green spaces in the borough varies significantly with some good quality green spaces in some areas. However, when all types of green spaces are considered, quality is in need of improvement. This reflects the general position nationally where parks and green spaces have experienced decades of under funding and neglect. Despite this, there has been significant investment in some parks and green spaces through the Heritage Lottery Fund and local regeneration initiatives, which has had a positive impact.

Parks and green spaces are the most valued leisure and cultural facilities in Walsall and are well used by residents of the borough for informal recreation, sports or as venues for events and activities. It is estimated that there are over 4 million visits to Walsall's parks and green spaces every year. However, there are barriers, both physical and perceived to the greater use of green spaces, most notably personal

safety, vandalism and dog fouling. In considering access for disabled people we found that some sites had good levels of accessibility while others needed some improvements to make them more accessible. However, information provision to allow disabled and other visitors to make informed decisions about visits to green spaces needs to be improved.

Walsall has an impressive track record of involving local people in the management and development of parks and green spaces with an active network of community based organisations some of which have been around for over ten years.

Green spaces are well valued and used by residents of the borough, but we found that this was not always reflected in council policies and strategies. Green spaces are assets that have the potential to contribute to the priorities set out in the council's vision but this potential has not yet been fully realised. The authority can demonstrate good practice in some areas of green space management but others areas particularly around standards of grounds maintenance and some aspects of operational management need to be improved.

In addition, the borough's green spaces are not effectively marketed or promoted to users and non-users and this is an area that needs to be addressed.

The green space strategy sets out mechanisms and an action plan for addressing these issues to ensure that green spaces in the borough achieve their potential and support the council in it's aim to become an excellent authority.

## Vision & Aims

### Vision

Our draft vision for Walsall's green spaces is;

***“To have excellent, well used and valued green spaces that are safe, accessible and welcoming at the heart of all local communities that meet the needs of current and future generations”***

### Aims

Through the process of developing and delivering this strategy we have identified a series of strategic aims that help to link to the council's overall vision for 2008. These are repeated later in the analysis section of the strategy but we have set them out here to clearly demonstrate our commitment to realising the full potential of green spaces in the borough.

#### **A Better Quality Environment**

The contribution that green spaces make to the local environment and the local economy is currently not fully appreciated.

***We want green spaces to play their part in making Walsall an attractive place to live, work and play.***

#### **Healthy, Safe and Secure**

Green spaces are an integral part of the fabric of our communities; they have a significant contribution to be made to making neighbourhoods safer places to be. Our spaces themselves need to be safe, attractive and welcoming environments and we need to do everything we can to encourage positive use of them.

***We want to create a network of safe, accessible green spaces which are full of positive activity and encourage our communities to become healthier***

#### **Raising the Standard**

Green spaces are an undervalued asset, often only realised when a space is under threat. Many people think that they can only ever expect average quality spaces and services. We want to change this. Positive community involvement in parks and green spaces has existed in Walsall for over 10 years, indeed the authority was the national pioneer in this approach.

*We want to inspire our communities to expect higher quality green spaces and to feel proud of what we achieve together.*

## **Listening to and Engaging with People**

We provide a range of ways and levels for people to become involved in their local green space, from community fundays to friends groups, from consultation to health walks. Green spaces have a key role to play in bringing people together on common ground – they can unite diverse communities through activities, education, celebrations, cultural events and engagement.

*We want to aspire to consulting and involving all sections of our diverse community*

## **Achieving Excellence**

There are many service areas and stakeholders that have their part to play in the delivery of this green space strategy. This strategy creates a new vision around which to unite and move forward and deliver excellent parks and green spaces and provide an excellent service.

*We want to work across service areas and with key partners, organisations and services to create excellent green spaces and an excellent service.*



## Introduction

The Walsall green space strategy sets out the council's vision and aims for all green space within the borough, along with an action plan and the resources that are needed to deliver this. This is the first green space strategy for the borough and as such is a landmark document that will guide service delivery and improvements.

## Definition

Green space is the collective term used to describe all parks, public gardens, playing fields, children's play areas, woodlands, nature reserves, allotment gardens, linear and other open space.

## The Need for a Green Space Strategy

The council undertook a green space strategy in order to;

- Contribute to the wider objectives of the council and support the council Vision to be an excellent authority
- Establish if there is enough green space in the borough to meet the needs of local people
- Establish an accurate picture of the quality of green spaces
- Meet government guidance, help develop local standards and inform local planning policies
- Provide a framework for improved service delivery linked to the council's corporate objectives
- Provide a framework for identifying investment priorities for capital and revenue
- Provide a framework for community and voluntary groups to participate in green space provision and management.

*"There is growing evidence that those local authorities that have published a comprehensive strategy are better able to make progress towards improving their green assets than those that have not"*<sup>1</sup>

Research has also shown that where a parks or green space strategy links into the wider strategic thinking of the authority that the quality of their green spaces is often higher than those with a stand alone, inward looking document and that without a strategy resources will be poorly targeted.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CABE Space (2004) Green Space Strategies – A Good Practice Guide

<sup>2</sup> National Audit Office (2006) Enhancing Urban Green Space

## The Scope of the Green Space Strategy

The green space strategy has considered the all land greater than 0.4 hectares that is used formally or informally for recreation or is managed for nature conservation or visual amenity. Land owned and managed by the council and in other ownership has been considered as part of the strategy, except where public access is not possible such as agricultural land or private gardens.

The strategy covers the whole of the borough of Walsall, however, consideration has been given to green spaces in neighbouring boroughs that are used by residents of Walsall.

## The Process / Methodology

The study comprises two discrete sections, first an audit and assessment of the quantity, quality and accessibility of Walsall's green spaces. Secondly, the strategy itself as the authority's response to the findings of the audit and a plan of how it will achieve the Vision for green spaces by working with it's partners and stakeholders

## A Team Effort

The green space strategy has been developed with input from a large number of people from within the authority including officers and councillors, Local Neighbourhood Partnerships (LNPs), partner organisations, friends groups, residents groups, other stakeholders and local people. The council would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this draft strategy and would welcome further comments on this document prior to its formal adoption in August 2006.

Walsall Council also gratefully acknowledges the enabling support received from CABI Space and GreenSpace in helping to define the scope of the strategy and assist in its development.

*"Parks and green spaces are a critical to the popularity, health, and sustainability of our urban neighbourhoods. They provide an essential resource for sport, play, recreation, relaxation and civic life.*

*Whilst Walsall has inherited a fine legacy of parks and green spaces, but 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.*

*Through its enabling programme, CABI Space has been pleased to support the early preparation for this Green Space Strategy. The delivery of this important piece of work will be the key to its success and we look forward to see it bearing much fruit in the coming years".*

Peter Neal  
Head of Enabling and Delivery, CABI Space

A list of those individuals and organisation involved in contributing to the draft strategy is contained in Appendix A.

# The Current Reality

## Introduction

This section of the strategy sets the scene and describes the local context with regard to Walsall, the provision of green spaces and the services delivered by the council and its partners. It also looks at the national context with respect to green spaces.

## About Walsall

Walsall has a population of just over 250,000 and is one of seven Metropolitan boroughs located in the West Midlands. Walsall lies some 12 miles north of Birmingham and 6 miles east of Wolverhampton. The borough of Walsall contains a mixture of urban and rural land uses with the Town Centre of Walsall being the key focus of activity, but one of only six district centres.

Walsall borough has a diverse population with 9.5% of its population belong to an ethnic community, a figure higher than the England and Wales average. Furthermore, the population of 5-15 year olds is increasing in Walsall, whereas nationally, the proportion of young people in this age group is declining. Overall, the borough's population is expected to decline by 1100 people in the period to 2015.

However, at present there are high levels of multiple deprivation and associated problems in areas such as health, housing, education, employment and the quality of the environment.

Walsall is ranked in the bottom quarter of life expectancies compared with local authorities in England and Wales. However, life expectancy, obesity levels and infant mortality rates differ dramatically from ward to ward. Walsall's wealthier east side fares much better than the west and the south. They typically have a longer life expectancy, fewer smokers and hardly any teenage mothers. However, more people are quitting smoking than ever before, more drug-users are going into rehabilitation and there has been a significant drop in the number of cancer-related deaths. Yet, Walsall's levels are still much higher than the national averages.

About 20% of the Walsall population report that they are suffering from a long-term illness, health problems or disability, which limits their daily activities or work. This is the 5<sup>th</sup> highest in the region (out of 34) and in the top quartile nationally with a 6% increase from 1991.

A third of the borough area, largely to the south, the east and the north, is green belt with substantial areas of green space managed to reflect this less formal and more natural character, and provide access to the wider countryside.

Parks and green spaces are important landmarks in the borough with Barr Beacon instantly recognisable to residents and many visitors. Events such as Walsall Illuminations, held in the Arboretum help to put Walsall on the map nationally.

## **Local Neighbourhood Partnerships**

The nine local neighbourhood partnerships (LNPs) are committees based on ward boundaries and comprise local councillors, primary and secondary school head teachers, the police and the primary care trust. Local people also sit on each partnership, keen to make a positive change to their local area.

The council is providing an initial £250,000 to these partnerships to help with local projects. Each partnership meets quarterly in the area and is assisted by council officers to consult with residents to improve services across arrange of providers.

The Green Space Audit and Assessment reports considered the quantity, quality and accessibility of green spaces in each of the LNP areas. In producing this strategy each of the nine LNPs have been consulted on the findings of the audit and the recommendations contained within this document.

## **Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership**

The Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership (WBSP) is made up of representatives from the community and the public, private and voluntary sectors including the Primary Care Trust, West Midlands Police and Black Country Chamber of Commerce. The Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership has a number of them groups and the Housing and Environment Theme Group considers issues relating to green spaces.

The strategic partnership with the council is responsible for the production of the Walsall Community Strategy.

## **The National Context**

Over the last 20 years park and green spaces have declined dramatically and local authority parks budgets have been drastically reduced. Reports show that the reduction totals around 20% resulting in a cumulative deficit or disinvestment of around £1.3 billion (footnote reference to Green Space PPA 2003). Along with financial and resource cuts the sector has also suffered from a “de-skilling” at all levels from gardeners to senior managers.

All of this has left a legacy that is hard to turn around however, the national agenda for green spaces has changed dramatically over recent years and it is therefore very timely that Walsall Council is undertaking such a fundamental appraisal of its current green space resource.

The Department of Communities and Local Government (formerly the Office of The Deputy Prime Minister) has led the way with its requirement for local authorities to adopt a more strategic approach to green space through the revision of PPG17. It has also funded the creation of CABE Space to develop best practice and provide advice and support to local authorities. In recent years it has also funded the Green Flag Award and wants to see the majority of local authority regions with a green

space flying the flag by 2008. In the future the latter may be more linked in to Local Area Agreements through requiring local authorities to develop local performance targets.

“Government believes profoundly that the state of the local environment affects and reflects the well-being of the people living there. Whether it is the town centre, local park or the street on which we live, it is important that they add to the quality of life and that they are safe and attractive places.” (quote from Cleaner Safer Greener web site)

Heritage Lottery Fund has continued to support the restoration and regeneration of historic spaces and has also recently launched a new programme ‘Parks For People’ which broadens the focus to community involvement and places greater emphasis on long-term management.

The recent National Audit office report ‘Enhancing Urban Green Space’<sup>3</sup> and the updated Public Parks Assessment<sup>4</sup> have shown that the initiatives are beginning to halt the decline. Figures also show that resident’s satisfaction with green space is increasing.

There are still significant challenges ahead, major issues identified include

- The need to address fragmentation of green space management across organisational structures. Embedded within this is the need to identify a green space ‘champion’ to drive through change.
- The need to address the skills shortage in the green space sector – the ‘Parkforce’ campaign launched in 2005 has shown some positive initiatives to get staff back into parks. However there is still an issue to be addressed about the skill levels throughout all parts of a green space service – “Progress in enhancing urban green space continues to be held back by skills shortages”.<sup>5</sup>
- The need to create the right image for the green space service – whilst NAO referred to “re-branding... to attract good quality individuals” the issue goes further in terms of putting across the message to funders that the service is worth investing in and also creating a positive image for the service in the local community which celebrates success and stimulates interest.

## **Green Space Assets**

Walsall is considered by many people to be a green borough, well served by parks and green spaces. Many visitors to the borough associate Walsall with the Arboretum, home to the ever-popular Walsall Illuminations, which is visited by around 250,000 people annually.

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<sup>3</sup> National Audit Office (2006) Enhancing Urban Green Space

<sup>4</sup> Green Space (2003) Public Parks Assessment

<sup>5</sup> CAGE Space (2005) Parkforce

Other significant green spaces include Barr Beacon, visited by over 250,000 people annually, Rough Wood, the largest area of oak woodland in the Black Country and the Airport Playing Fields, a popular green space for sporting and other events. Willenhall Memorial Park and Palfrey Park are also popular formal parks and both have benefited from recent investment from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The borough also contains significant areas of green space with high wildlife value including;

- 9 designated Local Nature Reserves
- 7 Sites of Special Scientific Interest
- 30 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation
- approximately 80 Sites of Local Importance for Nature Conservation

Some of these green spaces are owned and managed by Walsall Council whilst others are in private ownership.

## Leisure Trends

The term “leisure” includes the arts, libraries, museums and archives, children’s play, parks, open spaces and countryside, sports services and tourism and visitor attractions. It is “*one of the fastest growing industries so far in the twenty first century*”.<sup>6</sup> The leisure industry employs 2.5 million people in the UK, which represents 10% of the working population and accounts for one in every five new jobs created. In financial terms it generates 10% of the UK’s Gross Domestic Product, equivalent to £50 billion per annum.<sup>7</sup>

The number of adults taking part in outdoor sports in 2000 was 26.6 million and in indoor sports 18.2 million.<sup>8</sup> Walking and rambling is the most popular sport or physical activity with 21.% of adults participating, followed by swimming (17.3%) and aerobic / keep fit (10.4%).<sup>9</sup>

In terms of parks and green spaces it is estimated that 1.5 billion visits are made to public parks each year in the UK with about 7.5 million adults and 2.1 million children using parks for formal or informal sports each year. In addition, 1,294 million day visits were made to the countryside in 1994.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, parks and green spaces are some of the most frequently used cultural and leisure facilities in Walsall borough, with only 13% of members of Walsall Citizen’s Panel indicating they do not visit these important assets. In addition, participants in this survey suggested that parks and green spaces were the most important form of leisure provision in the borough. Estimates of use of Walsall’s parks and green spaces suggest over 3.3 million adult visits every year<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Business in Sport and Leisure (2005), The Active Annual, BISL

<sup>7</sup> Segal, R (2002) Taking Leisure Seriously, Leisure Management, January Vol 22(1)

<sup>8</sup> Leisure Industries Research Centre (2001) Leisure Forecasts 2001-2005

<sup>9</sup> Keynote (2001) UK Leisure & Recreation Market Review

<sup>10</sup> Coalter, F (2001) Realising the Potential of Cultural Services

<sup>11</sup> Estimated based on Frequency of Use Data From Citizens Panel Survey 2005 – excludes visits by Children / Under 18s

Parks and green spaces are therefore very well used leisure and cultural facilities and are also highly valued assets that “are an important part of the civic infrastructure of communities, providing a social focus and contributing to their quality of life.”<sup>12</sup> Recent public opinion surveys support this view;

- 85% of people surveyed in a CABE Space research project in 2002 felt that the quality of public space (parks, gardens and other open spaces) and the built environment have a direct impact on their lives and how they feel.<sup>13</sup>
- A MORI report (2004) for Barclays Spaces for Sports found that 80% of people agree that participating in sporting activities can benefit a local community through improving people's health (83%), teaching respect for others (79%) and increasing people's involvement in community activities (78%). In addition, three quarters (76%) believe that it reduces antisocial behaviour / crime amongst young people.<sup>14</sup>
- An Audit Commission survey in 2001 (Quality of Life project - MORI) found that of 20 factors that people thought might improve their area, "activities for children" was the most important and "facilities for young children" was in the top five.<sup>15</sup>

### **Changes in Patterns of Use and Demographics**

While levels of participation in organised team sports is significant, there has in recent years, been a movement towards other forms of sport and active recreation. More and more people are opting to keep fit by exercising on their own by joining a health club or using a gym or swimming pool. One in ten adults are now members of a health and fitness club and the rate of growth is set to continue. This has resulted in the growth of the health and fitness industry by 81% over the period 2001-2005<sup>16</sup>. There has also been a significant growth in passive recreational activities both out-of-home and in-home, fuelled in part by new technological developments.

With an ageing population there has also been a growth in recent years in the number of healthier and more active older people participating in leisure and sporting activities.

However, there is concern about obesity in the general population and among young people in particular;

*“Among boys and girls aged 2-15, the proportion who were obese increased between 1995 and 2004, from 11 per cent in 1995 to 19 per cent in 2004 among boys, and from 12 per cent in 1995 to 18 per cent in 2004 among girls”.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Coalter, F (2001) Realising the Potential of Cultural Services

<sup>13</sup> Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (2002) Streets of Shame

<sup>14</sup> ILAM (2005) Factsheet B16 What is Leisure?

<sup>15</sup> National Children's Play Council (2004) Planning for Play – A briefing for local authorities

<sup>16</sup> Leisure Industries Research Centre (2001) Leisure Forecasts 2001-2005

<sup>17</sup> The Information Centre for health and social care (2006) The Health Survey for England



Some commentators are so concerned about the rise in childhood obesity that there have been predictions that some young people of this generation are likely to die before their parents.

Overall future leisure trends will depend on these demographic factors, on the performance of the economy and the behaviour and attitude of different sections of the population. Some of the main factors influencing the demand for leisure activities are age, gender, ethnicity, disability and employment status. The recent growth in disposable incomes and mobility have allowed for a much greater choice in leisure opportunities.

## **Links to the Council Vision and Key Priorities**

Green spaces are important local assets that are well valued by residents of the borough. The green space strategy provides a framework for improving parks and green spaces in the borough and supports and contributes towards achieving the Council Vision. The links between the Council Vision and green spaces is set out below;

### **1. Ensure a Clean and Green Borough**

- Green spaces make up over 20% of the land area of the borough (including agricultural land) and as such are visible and important multi-functional facilities
- High quality management and maintenance will ensure that green spaces make a positive contribution to a clean and green borough

### **2. Make it Easier for People to Get Around**

- A network of green spaces connected by green ways and off road routes can assist people to get around within their local area and the borough
- Parks and green space can provide “Safer Routes to School” and other traffic free routes

### **3. Ensure all People are Safe and Secure**

- Well designed and well maintained green spaces can reduce inappropriate use and provide a safe environment
- A visible staff presence in green spaces can help reassure visitors that green spaces can be used safely
- Robust management and maintenance systems can help ensure that green spaces are safe and secure

### **4. Make our Schools Great**

- Green spaces can make excellent places for formal and informal learning
- Environmental Educational is a cross cutting theme for the National Curriculum
- Green spaces can provide good venues for schools sports and other activities
- Shared use of Community School facilities can help ensure that the best use is made of limited resources

5. Make Walsall a Healthy and Caring Place
  - Green spaces make a positive contribution to a healthy environment, helping to ameliorate air pollution and provide sustainable urban drainage solutions
  - Green spaces can provide places in the community for physical activity and recreation and support physical and mental well being
  - Green spaces support a variety of wildlife and bring people into contact with nature on a daily basis which can have proven health benefits
6. Encourage Everyone to Feel Proud of Walsall
  - Good quality green spaces help create a sense of place and civic pride – may areas of the borough are closely associated with their green spaces
  - Events and activities held in green spaces such as Walsall Illuminations help promote Walsall and attract visitors from outside the borough
  - Green space can help promote tourism initiatives in the borough
  - The creation and development of green spaces in the borough is inextricably linked with the local heritage of the borough and it's trades
7. Make it Easier to Access Local Services
  - Green spaces need to be managed in a robust and efficient manner making best use of new technology
  - Green spaces need to be marketed effectively so that residents and visitors are aware of the local facilities available
8. Strengthen the Local Economy
  - Recent research undertaken by CABI Space<sup>18</sup> indicates that good quality parks and green spaces can help attract people and businesses to towns and cities
  - Good quality parks and green spaces contribute to the attractiveness of an area and can increase land and property values
9. Listen to What Local People Want
  - Walsall Council has demonstrated good practice in working with friends groups and other community based organisations for the last 15 years
  - Communities across Walsall have been involved in improvements to green spaces
  - Events and activities in parks can provide a good way of bringing communities together and allow consultation about other services
10. Transform Walsall into an Excellent Authority
  - Achieving the Green Flag Award will demonstrate the authority's commitment to improving green spaces in the borough
  - Improvements to service delivery relating to green spaces will help the authority demonstrate it's commitment to becoming an excellent authority

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<sup>18</sup> CABI Space (2005), Does Money Grow on Trees?

## Local Policy Context

In developing this strategy a review of local policy was undertaken which considered the following documents;

- Council Vision 2008
- The Community Strategy for Walsall
- West Midlands Local Transport Plan
- Black Country Visitor Economy Strategy
- Walsall Housing Strategy
- Walsall Council's Environment Strategy

We found that the council's vision contained references to parks and green spaces particularly in respect to their contribution in making Walsall a clean and green borough. In the section above we have also set out how parks and green spaces can contribute to each of the corporate priorities.

However, other Council policies and strategies often contained little direct reference to parks and green spaces. In particular the community strategy does not explicitly include any references to green spaces despite green spaces being a key contributor to the theme of "sustaining a better place to live and work"

This finding is supported in the recently published research conducted on behalf of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the National Audit Office recently found that;

*Green space strategies show better vertical than horizontal integration of policy objectives. The majority have linked their green space strategy with their corporate plan for example. But 'sideways' links with the strategies of other local government services are much less strong.<sup>19</sup>*

The profile of parks and green spaces within the borough and the authority is addressed later in the analysis and evaluation section of the strategy.

## Good Practice

The management of Walsall's green spaces had been recognised as examples of good practice with considerable success in the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management's Open Space Management Award. Pleck Park achieved highly commended in 1995, Willenhall Memorial Park was the winner in 1998 and Palfrey Park the joint winner in 2003. A common theme of all the awards was the high level of community involvement.

Successful applications were made to the Heritage Lottery Fund for Willenhall Memorial Park (£1.26 million) and Palfrey Park (£0.6 million).

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<sup>19</sup> National Audit Office (2006) Enhancing Urban Green Space, p67

The authority was one of three national trials that developed the Walking for Health initiative in 2000. The scheme has since become well established in Walsall with a regular programme of Health Walks led by volunteer walk leaders six days a week and has gained 3-heart level accreditation, the highest quality mark standard under the Walking for Health initiative.

The “Walk On” scheme is a joint initiative with the Walsall Primary Care Trust and managed by the council and supported by The British Heart Foundation and the Countryside Agency.

Groundmiles, the incentive scheme for taking part in a range of activities that benefits participants health was recognised by the Department of Transport in 2004 as an innovative project and example of good practice. Started in 1999 the scheme now has over 1300 registered members who regularly take part in health walks, practical conservation work and events and activities in Walsall’s green spaces.

The teams within the green spaces service have all achieved the Investors in People Award for their approach to training and staff management and development. The Grounds and Street Cleansing PSE have also achieved the Investors in People award.

Walsall Arboretum gained the Chartermark award, the quality award for public services in 1995, 1998 and 2001.

## **Classification of Green Space**

Using existing Geographical Information System (GIS) data, Ordnance Survey mapping, aerial photography and the quality assessment process, all green spaces over 0.4 hectares were mapped. Agricultural land was excluded from the study except where unrestricted public access was known to exist. Some green spaces smaller than 0.4 hectares have been included in the analysis where they were already included in the data supplied by Walsall Council or where these green spaces are significant within their locality. However, new sites have typically not been mapped if they cover an area of less than 0.4 hectares.

In order to classify the green space in the study a number of levels were used. Firstly an initial classification based on land use and primary purpose. Secondly a classification of how accessible the site is to the public and thirdly a classification of the site’s significance as a visitor destination.

Table 1 below sets out the typology used to classify the green spaces based on their primary purpose. The typology is based on national guidance contained in “Assessing Needs and Opportunities”, the companion guide to Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 (PPG17). The green spaces were also classified at a secondary level to identify the total amount of semi-natural and play provision in the borough.

Green Space Typology	
Type	Description
Allotments	Areas for growing fruit and vegetables.
Amenity Green Space	Areas of mown grass around housing or road verges.
Cemeteries & Churchyards	Currently used as burial grounds or closed burial grounds used for informal recreation.
Green Corridors	Linear open space providing a links to other green space or other local facilities.
Institutional Land	Schools playing fields and hospital grounds.
Natural and Semi-natural Green Space	Natural areas such as woodlands and nature reserves such as Barr Beacon.
Outdoor Sports Facilities	Playing fields and other sports pitches
Parks and Garden	Formal and urban parks such as Walsall Arboretum
Provision for Children & Young People	Play areas and teenage provision (excluding that on other types of green space)

Table 1 Walsall Green Space Typology based on PPG17

Table 2 below sets out the accessibility levels that were used to classify the borough's green spaces.

Each site that was mapped was assigned an accessibility level, which was then checked on site when carrying out the quality audit. The focus of the audit was on unrestricted green space.

Accessibility Level	Description
Unrestricted	Sites have unrestricted public access although some sites may have limitations to access between dusk and dawn.
Limited	Sites may be publicly or privately owned but access is limited either by a physical barrier such as membership, or psychological barrier such as a feeling that an open space is private.
Not accessible	Sites are out of bounds to the general public

Table 2 Accessibility levels used to classify green space

Table 3 below sets out the hierarchy levels that were used to classify the importance or significance of borough's green spaces based on the quality assessment and how far people said they walked to each green space.

Hierarchy level	Description
Borough	Those sites whose significance should attract people from across the entire borough. Usually large sites with a range of facilities or with designated importance for history or nature conservation.
Neighbourhood	Those sites which perform a function that serves a more immediate community. Unlikely to attract people from across the borough
Local	Those sites which perform a function to a small area – typically areas of amenity green space.

Table 3 Hierarchy levels used to classify green space

Each site that was mapped was assigned a hierarchy level, which was then checked on site when carrying out the quality audit.

## Quantity Analysis

Once the mapping and classification of the green spaces had been completed an analysis of the quantity of green space by Local Neighbourhood Partnership area and Ward was carried out and this was compared to the borough average to see where any areas of deficiency might lie.

Overall the borough of Walsall is very green with over 2100 hectares of green space, making up 20.4% of the total land area of the borough.

However, of the total of 480 green spaces that were mapped, 286 (59.6% by number) were found to have unrestricted access. The table below shows the distribution of sites across the three levels of accessibility.

Accessibility	Number of Sites
Unrestricted	286
Limited	154
Not Accessible	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>480</b>

Table 4 Distribution of green spaces by accessibility level

The framework map in Figure 1 below shows the green spaces by type and accessibility.

Table 5 below shows green spaces with unrestricted access by type. Amenity green space is the most common type of provision with 107 sites, however, natural and semi-natural green space covers the greatest area with over 675 hectares followed by nearly 260 hectares of parks and gardens.

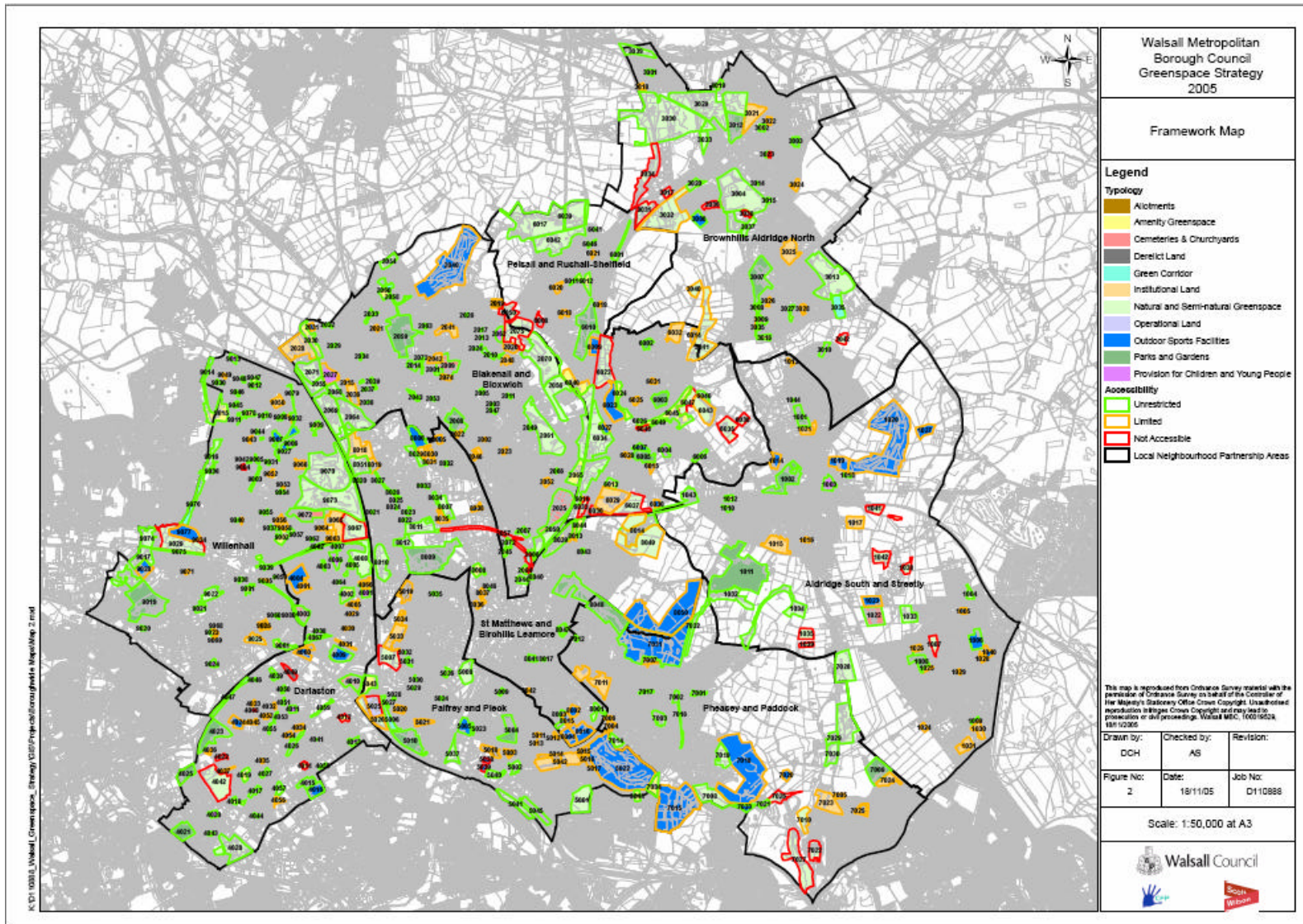


Figure 1 Green Space Framework Map

Typology Level 1	Number of Sites	Amount of Land (Ha)	% of Total Land Area
Amenity Green Space	107	120.65	9.6%
Cemeteries & Churchyards	14	52.45	4.2%
Green Corridor	15	32.89	2.6%
Institutional Land	2	2.03	0.2%
Natural and Semi-natural Green Space	71	675.46	53.5%
Outdoor Sports Facilities	12	80.46	6.4%
Parks & Gardens	27	259.54	20.6%
Provision for Children & Young People	38	38.69	3.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>1262.17</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 5 Distribution of green spaces by green space type

Table 6 below shows that there is considerable variation across the borough in terms of the number of unrestricted green spaces. Willenhall and Blakenall and Bloxwich have over 50 green spaces in their LNP areas whilst Aldridge South and Streetly and Pheasey and Paddock have less than 20 each.

Typology Level 1 / Number of Sites	Aldridge South and Streetly	Blakenall and Bloxwich	Brownhills Aldridge North	Darlaston	Palfrey and Pleck	Pelsall and Rushall-Sheffield	Pheasey and Paddock	St Matthews and Birchills Leamore	Willenhall	Borough
Amenity Green Space		27	6	14	10	7	3	15	25	107
Cemeteries & Churchyards	2	3	2	3			1		3	14
Green Corridor		2	1	3	1		1	1	6	15
Institutional Land	1								1	2
Natural and Semi-natural Green Space	6	12	9	5	6	7	8	9	9	71
Outdoor Sports Facilities	1		1	2	1	1	2	1	3	12
Parks & Gardens	4	4	3	5	2	4	1	3	1	27
Provision for Children & Young People	3	3	3	10	4	3	2	4	6	38
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>286</b>

Table 6 Number of green spaces by type and LNP



Typology Level 1 / Area (Ha)	Aldridge South and Streety	Blakenall and Bloxwich	Brownhills Aldridge North	Darlaston	Palfrey and Pleck	Rushall-Sheffield	Pelsall and Paddock	Pheasey and Leamore	St Matthews and Birchills	Willenhall	Borough
Amenity Green Space		23.43	6.04	14.1	8.75	21.47	4.36	16.15	26.35	120.65	
Cemeteries & Churchyards	8.41	22.1	2.04	9.43			1.13		9.34	52.45	
Green Corridor		5.04	0.50	7.66	3.70		1.26	1.28	13.45	32.89	
Institutional Land	0.84								1.19	2.03	
Natural and Semi-natural Green Space	34.98	129.28	167.18	25.55	27.81	95.20	58.35	44.88	92.23	675.46	
Outdoor Sports Facilities	4.66		3.23	9.50	3.43	1.53	46.55	5.03	6.53	80.46	
Parks & Gardens	55.9	27.77	23.3	25.35	15.99	26.25	8.35	55.24	21.39	259.54	
Provision for Children & Young People	4.71	2.25	2.07	10.72	5.97	3.26	2.43	2.65	4.63	38.69	
<b>Total</b>	<b>109.5</b>	<b>209.87</b>	<b>204.36</b>	<b>102.3</b>	<b>65.65</b>	<b>147.7</b>	<b>122.4</b>	<b>125.2</b>	<b>175.1</b>	<b>1262.2</b>	

Table 7 Area of green spaces by type and LNP

Overall Walsall borough has an average of 4.98 hectares of unrestricted green space per 1000 population. The largest proportion of this is Natural and Semi-natural Green Space with 2.66 ha per 1000 population. There are 1.02 hectares of Parks and Gardens per 1000 population.

Local Authority Area	Unrestricted Greenspace per 1000 Population (Ha)
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council	8.00
<b>Walsall Council</b>	<b>4.98</b>
Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council	4.90
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council	4.24
Bridgnorth District Council	3.32
London Borough Of Sutton	2.90 (Draft Standard)
Lichfield District Council	2.80 (Draft standard)

Table 8 Quantity of green space provision compared to other local authorities

The table above shows the quantity of provision in Walsall and that of a small sample of other local authorities. Walsall has approximately 15% more accessible green space using this measure than the neighbouring borough of Sandwell. Walsall compares relatively well against many of the authorities in the table including some large metropolitan authorities from similar urban areas.

However, there is considerable variation in the amount of green space across the nine LNP areas.

LNP	Amount of Unrestricted Green space (Ha)	Population of LNP	Amount of Unrestricted Green space (Ha) per 1000 population
Brownhills Aldridge North	204.36	25,471	8.02
Pelsall and Rushall-Shelfield	147.71	23,235	6.36
Pheasey and Paddock	122.43	22,008	5.56
Blakenall and Bloxwich	209.87	39,084	5.37
<b>Borough</b>	<b>1262.17</b>	<b>253499</b>	<b>4.98</b>
St Matthews and Birchills Leamore	125.23	25,984	4.82
Willenhall	175.11	37,766	4.64
Aldridge South and Streetly	109.5	25,518	4.29
Darlaston	102.31	25,941	3.94
Palfrey and Pleck	65.65	28,493	2.30

Table 9 Quantity of green space per 1000 population by LNP

Brownhills Aldridge North has the greatest amount of unrestricted green space per 1000 population, with 60% more green space than the borough average. Palfrey and Pleck has the least quantity of provision with only 46% of the borough average.

The level of variation with respect to the borough Wide average is significantly greater at Ward level than LNP level. Brownhills Ward has 12.10 ha of accessibly green space per 1000 population, which is over twice that of the borough average. Streetly Ward has the lowest amount at 0.83 ha per 1000 population.

### Quantity Analysis – Play Provision

There are currently 68 outdoor equipped children’s play areas in the borough. There is some variation in the distribution across the nine LNPs with Pheasey and Paddock containing five facilities and Darlaston eleven. While there is children’s play provision across the whole borough there are significant areas of the borough that do not have access to children’s play provision. On average, over three quarters of the residential households in the borough do not have access to a children’s play area based on a 240m catchment for this facility. Furthermore the audit stage of this project did not include an assessment of the quality of current provision.

### Quantity Analysis – Semi-natural Green Space

The amount of natural and semi-natural green space was compared against the English Nature Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt). Using the quantity element of this measure Walsall nearly meets the Standard of 1.0 hectares of Local Nature Reserve (LNR) per 1000 population with 9 designated nature reserves (including Rough Wood Chase) and a figure of 0.97 hectares per 1000 population.



Figure 2 Accessibility of Children's Play Provision

### Quantity Analysis – Household Survey

As part of the audit and assessment a questionnaire survey was sent to a random sample of 10,000 households across the borough. A total of 1420 responses were received which provides a wealth of evidence from users and non-users of green spaces in the borough. These views have been considered in developing the Green Space Strategy.

The household survey found that;

- At a borough level most people considered there to be about the right amount of parks and recreation grounds and semi-natural green space but insufficient provision of facilities for children and young people.
- Darlaston was the only LNP area that considered there was insufficient parks and recreation grounds.
- Blakenall & Bloxwich, Darlaston, Palfrey & Pleck, St Matthews & Birchills Leamore and Willenhall LNPs considered there was insufficient semi-natural green space.
- Respondents from all LNP areas considered there was insufficient provision for children and young people.

### Quality Assessment

A total of 151 green spaces were assessed using a methodology derived from the national quality standard for parks and green spaces – the Green Flag Award.

The key criteria of the Award are;

- A Welcoming Place
- Healthy, Safe and Secure
- Clean and Well Maintained
- Sustainability
- Conservation and Heritage
- Community Involvement
- Marketing
- Management

Each site that was assessed was given a score against 19 sub-criteria and an overall score out of 100 was calculated. The table below shows how the overall score can be related to descriptive terms.

Score	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Quality	Very poor		Poor			Fair		Good	Very Good	Excellent	Outstanding

Table 10 Scoring line derived from the Green Flag Award

A digital library of over 1800 photographs taken during the assessment have been produced which, with the audit scores, provide a comprehensive record of the condition of green spaces in the borough.

### Quality Assessment Findings

The average quality score for the borough was 35 (out of 100) which when placed on the scale shown above indicates that overall green space quality is poor. The individual site quality scores ranged from 10 to 62 - a variation from very poor to fair.

There was some minor variation in the quality between the LNP areas with Pheasey and Paddock having the highest average quality score and Willenhall and Brownhills Aldridge North the lowest, this is set out in the table below;

Local Neighbourhood Partnership Area	Number of Sites	Range	Average Score
Pheasey and Paddock	11	29 – 48	38
Palfrey & Pleck	9	22 – 61	37
Pelsall and Rushall-Shelfield	13	28 – 46	37
Aldridge South and Streetly	14	22 – 49	36
Blakenall and Bloxwich	26	11 – 56	36
<b>Walsall Average</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>10 – 62</b>	<b>35</b>
Darlaston	22	19 – 49	34
St Matthews and Birchills Leamore	11	26 – 43	34
Brownhills Aldridge North	16	10 – 51	33
Willenhall	29	20 – 62	33

Table 11 Quality scores by LNP

Cemeteries and Churchyards were the highest scoring green space type in the borough. The main parks and gardens and country parks in the borough also scored higher than the borough average. There was no significant variation in the overall quality of formal parks and gardens and semi-natural green space.

Name of Authority	Sample Size	Average	IoLD Rank (2001) (Out of 354)
Cheltenham BC	63	45	224
Redditch BC	45	43	146
Barnsley MBC (2002)	24	39	28
Bridgnorth	24	37	254
Barnsley MBC (2005)	24	37	28
<b>Walsall MBC</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>51</b>
Sandwell MBC	230	34	16
Rotherham MBC	6	28	63

Table 12 Average quality score comparison with other local authorities

Walsall has a similar average quality score to that of it's neighbour Sandwell where our consultants had undertaken a similar study.

There was generally an even distribution of lower and higher quality green spaces across the borough and each LNP area. There is no clear correlation between the relative levels of deprivation in different areas of the borough and the quality of green space.

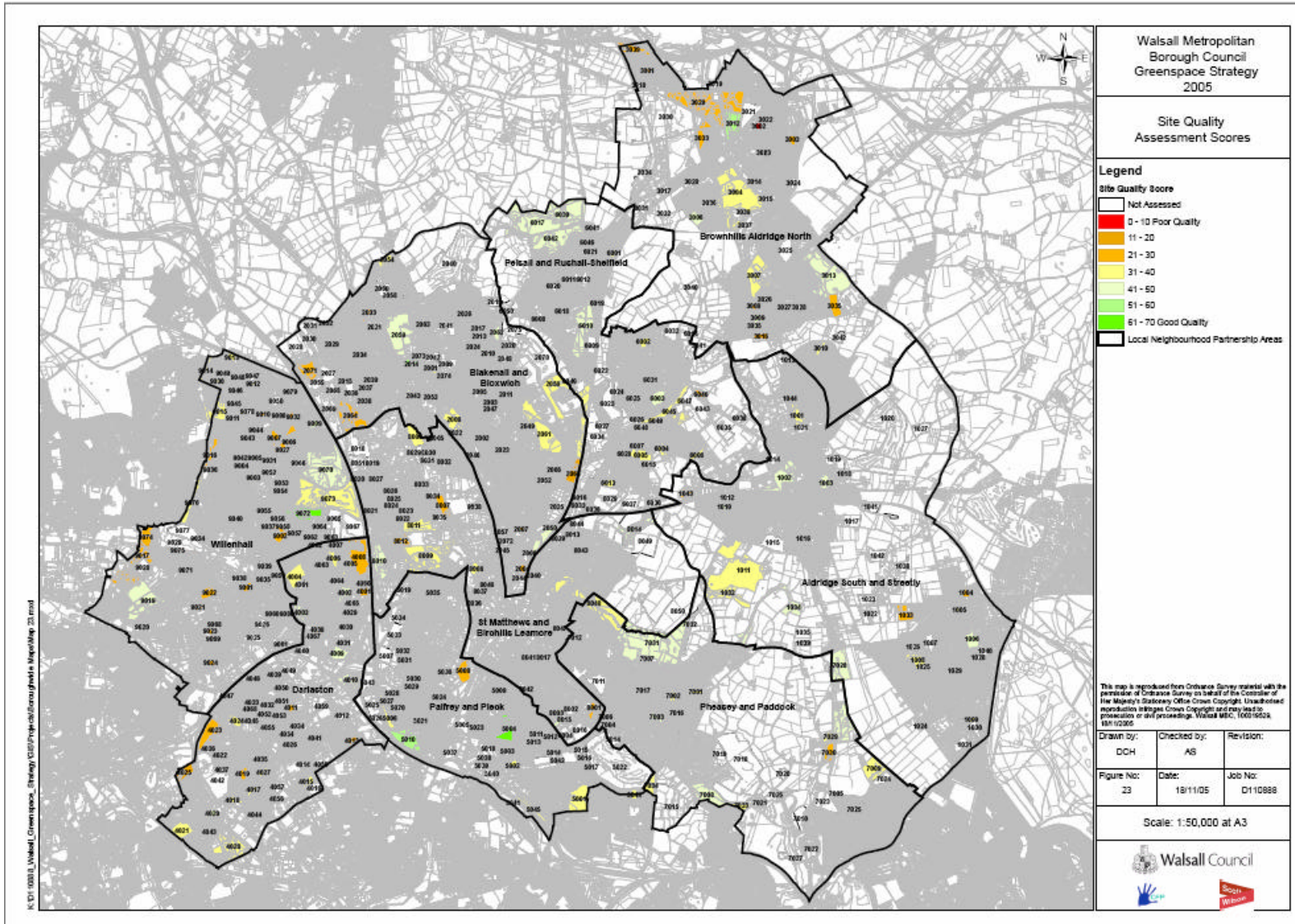


Figure 3 Quality Assessment Scores

## Quality Assessment – Household Survey

The quality audit found that Pheasey and Paddock LNP had the highest quality score and this was supported by the findings of the household survey. However, there is considerable variation between the ranking of the quality scores of the audit and the household survey findings.

This may be due to the questions used in the household survey where respondents were asked to score their most frequently used green space. Typically, the green spaces that people visit on a regular basis tend to be of higher quality and may not represent the overall quality of the green space in that area.

Most respondents to the household survey considered that the quality of green spaces have remained the same over the last three years. A greater proportion of respondents considered that quality had improved than those who indicated they considered quality to have declined.

## Accessibility

### Mapping

Once the green spaces had been mapped we considered how accessible they were to local people.

As set out earlier, the catchment areas of green spaces with unrestricted access were mapped based on their hierarchy and an indicative straight line walking distance.

Hierarchy level	Number of sites	Catchment
Borough	7	1200 metres
Neighbourhood	43	600 metres
Local	236	400 metres
<b>Total</b>	<b>286</b>	

Table 13 Catchment by Hierarchy

The catchment areas that were plotted were then reduced to take into account major severance lines such as the M6 motorway, major roads, railways and the canal network, which would limit pedestrian accessibility. These severance effects were then modified to allow for known access points such as road crossings, footbridges and subways. The contribution of green space in the neighbouring boroughs of Birmingham, Sandwell, Wolverhampton, Lichfield, Cannock Chase and South Staffordshire within 1200 metres of Walsall was also mapped and their impact assessed.

Overall the accessibility mapping provides an indication of which neighbourhoods and LNP areas do not have access to unrestricted green space (see Figure 5 below).

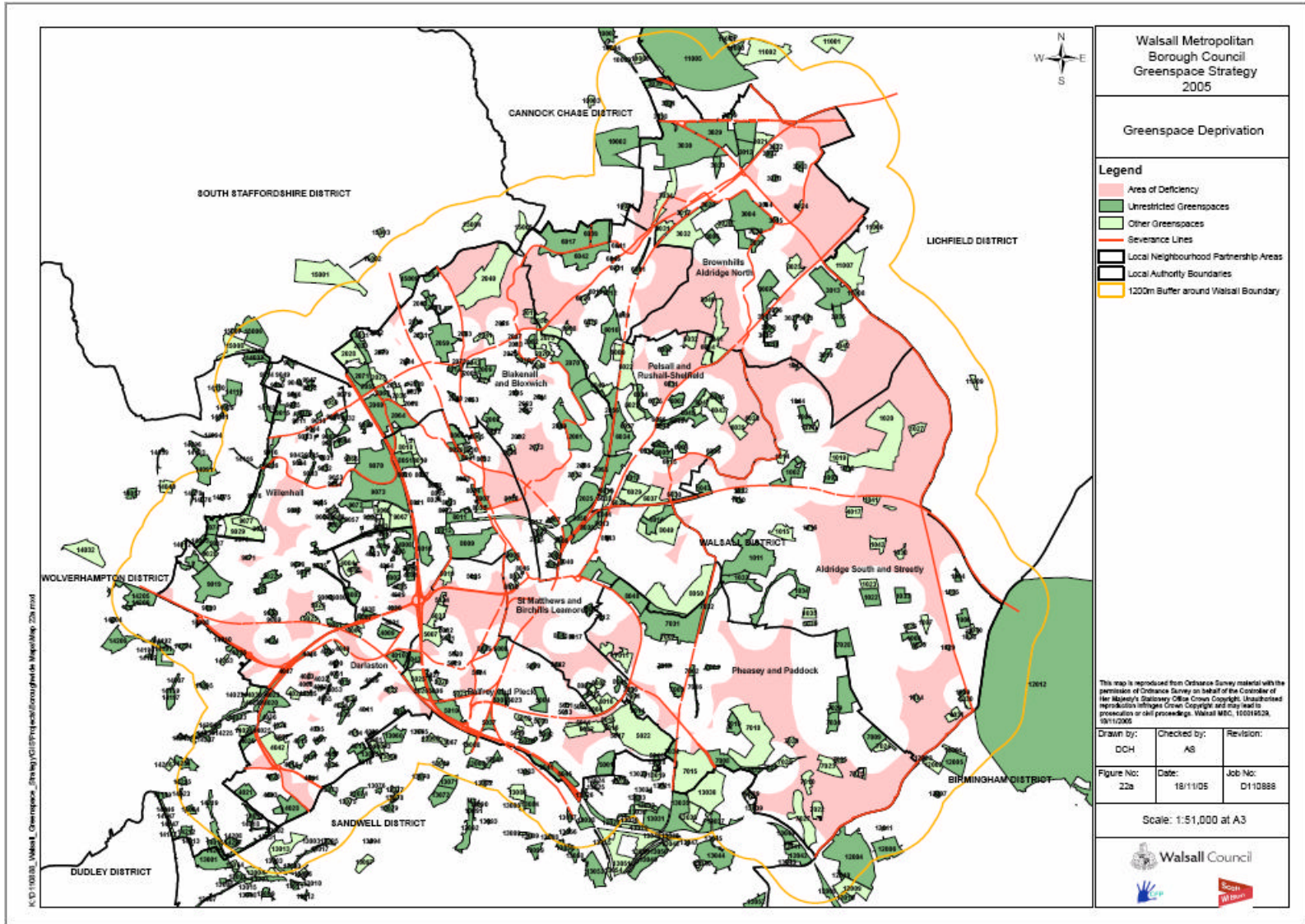


Figure 4 Map of Green Space Deficiency



A similar exercise was undertaken as part of assessing provision against the English Nature ANGSt standard and looked at the accessibility of semi-natural green spaces over both 2 hectares and 20 hectares.

**Accessibility Mapping Findings**

There is limited access to the 7 green spaces of borough wide significance in many areas of Walsall borough. Parts of Aldridge South & Streetly and Pheasey and Paddock have access to Barr Beacon, Aldridge Airport and Hay Head Wood and Walsall Arboretum. In the west of the borough Rough Wood Chase serves parts of Willenhall, Blakenall & Bloxwich and St Matthews & Birchills Leamore. Other LNP areas have no access to borough level green spaces.

There is access to neighbourhood level sites in each LNP area, although there are significant areas in each LNP where there is no access to this level of site within ‘reasonable’ walking distance.

When all accessible green space is considered along with the accessibility of greenspace in neighbouring boroughs there are many areas of the borough that do not have access to unrestricted green space within a reasonable walking distance.

Overall, 18.3% of households in the borough do not have access to unrestricted green space within a reasonable walking distance. There is considerable variation at an LNP level with only 4.8% of residential properties in Darlaston being deficient in green space but 45.0% of households in Pheasey and Paddock having no access to unrestricted green space.

	Total Households	No. of Households with no access to accessible green space	% of Households with no access to accessible green space
<b>LNP</b>			
Pheasey and Paddock	9,204	4,142	45.0%
Aldridge South and Streetly	11,176	2,731	24.4%
Brownhills Aldridge North	10,972	2,444	22.3%
Palfrey and Pleck	11,314	2,419	21.4%
Pelsall and Rushall-Sheffield	9,847	1,849	18.8%
<b>Borough Wide</b>	<b>107,906</b>	<b>19,748</b>	<b>18.3%</b>
Blakenall and Bloxwich	16,276	2,587	15.9%
St Matthews and Birchills-Leamore	12,144	1,584	13.0%
Willenhall	16,205	1,479	9.1%
Darlaston	10,768	513	4.8%

Table 14 Households with no access to unrestricted green space by LNP

In terms of the accessibility of semi-natural green space Walsall does not meet the English Nature ANGSt standards. There are large parts of the borough that are further than 300m from semi-natural green spaces of 2 hectares or greater in size and also large areas of the borough, particularly in the south that are not within 2 Km of green spaces greater than 20 hectares.

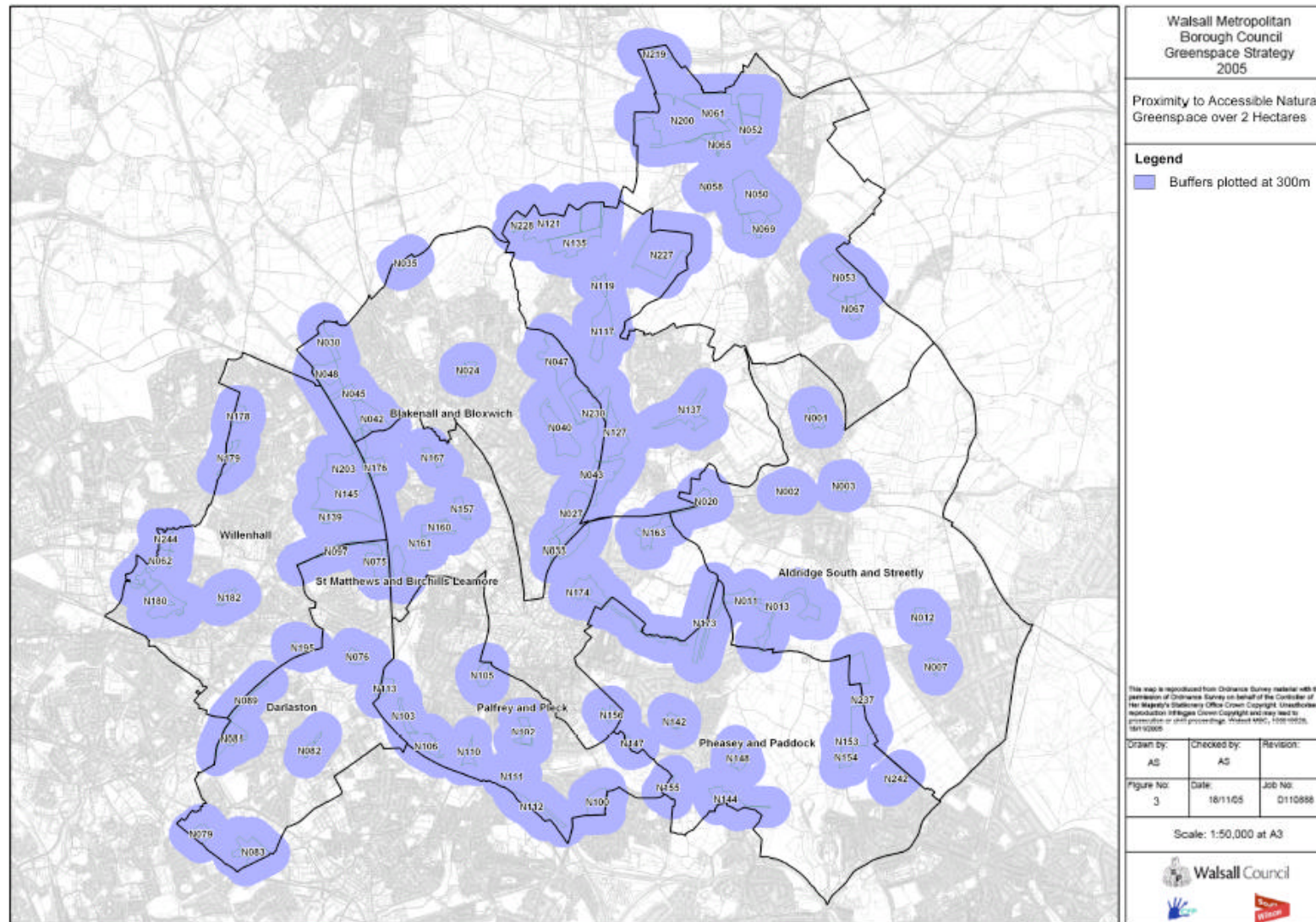


Figure 5 English Nature ANGSt Standard – Accessibility of Green Spaces Greater than 2 Hectares

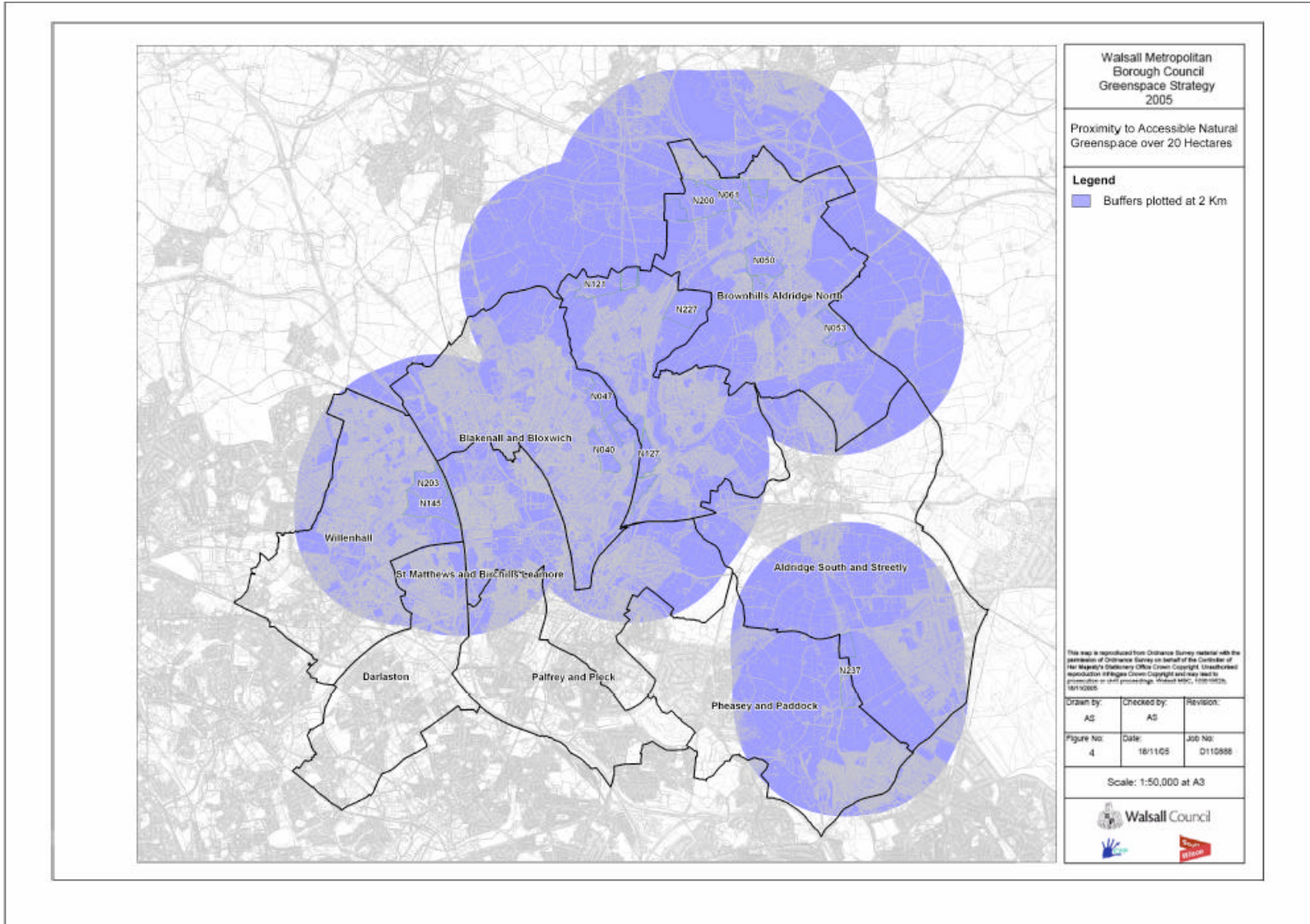


Figure 6 English Nature ANGSt Standard – Accessibility of Green Spaces Greater than 20 Hectares

## Access Audit

An extensive and detailed access audit of 23 green spaces in the Borough was undertaken during October 2005. The sample of sites included nature reserves, parks and gardens and other types of green space, in order to make recommendations to develop and consider access issues for people with disabilities. The sites visited are listed below;

- Arboretum
- Barr Beacon
- Blackwood Park
- Brownhills Common
- Clayhanger Common
- Cuckoos Nook & The Dingle LNR
- Fibbersley LNR
- George Rose Park
- Hay Head Wood LNR
- Holland Park
- King George Vth Playing Fields
- Leamore Park
- Leighs Wood
- Merrions Wood LNR
- Moorcroft Wood LNR
- Palfrey Park
- Park Lime Pits LNR
- Pelsall North Common LNR
- Pleck Park
- Reedswood Park
- Rough Wood Chase LNR
- Shire Oak Park LNR
- Willenhall Memorial Park

The BT Countryside for All Standards were used to assess the green spaces, where this could not be applied The Principle of Least Restrictive Option was used. The access audit was informed by relevant legislative and policy requirements, particularly the Disability Discrimination Act.

The access audit identified that some of the sites do currently meet the Standard and other green spaces could be upgraded to meet the BT Countryside for All Standards in the future.

Site-specific recommendations were identified on the site visits however the main recommendation for Walsall Borough was marketing to disability groups. It is suggested that focus is made on;

- i) building the confidence amongst users with disabilities that reasonable access is being provided within a planned and progressive framework
- ii) ensuring that strategic objectives are being met and if they not then appropriate corrective action is being initiated
- iii) enabling staff to effectively manage positive change in the outdoors to meet social inclusion targets

Two suggested approaches to this are;

- local people with disabilities are invited, through the council's Diversity Officer to visit outdoor sites and are consulted on some of the features that they find

interesting and would like to learn a little more about, and how they might be interpreted.

- Develop a Marketing Information System to enable staff to communicate with disabled people seeking to visit the Walsall countryside and green space.

## **Resources**

Walsall Council is currently structured around the following Directorates;

- Regeneration
- Corporate services
- Social care and inclusion
- Neighbourhood Services
- Children

The council structure is set out in Figure 7 below.

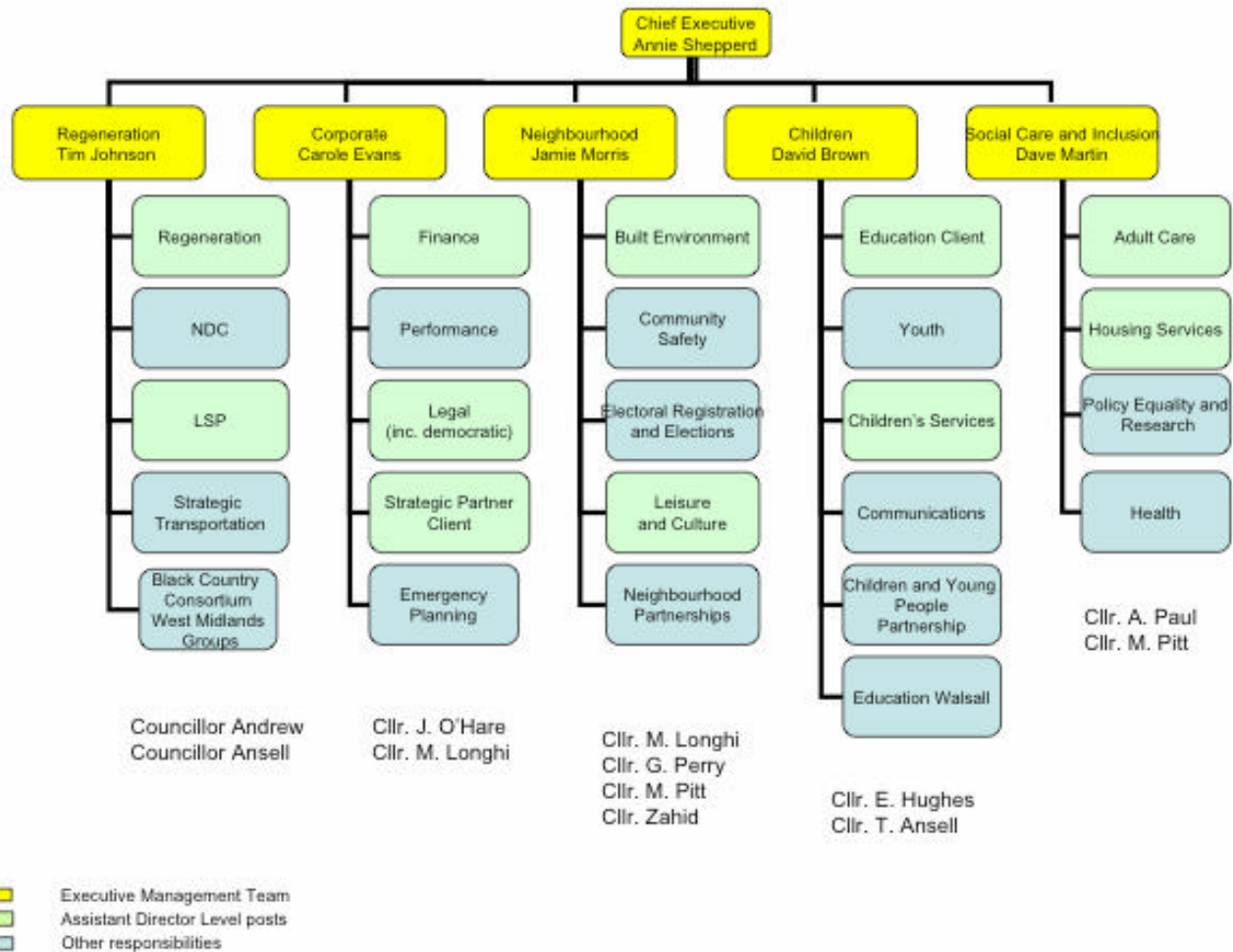


Figure 7 Walsall Council Structure

Three of the five directorates have some responsibility for council owned green space. The Children Directorate through its education role is responsible for nearly 160 hectares of Institutional Land such as school grounds and playing fields. The Social Care and Inclusion Directorate has responsibility for a small number of green spaces associated with Social Service day centres and other similar provision. Neighbourhood Services has responsibility for nearly 950 hectares of parks, countryside and other green space making it the largest land manager in the authority.

The Neighbourhood Directorate includes the following services responsible for the management, maintenance and development of green space with in the borough;

- Greenspace Services - including parks and countryside, cemeteries and crematoria
- Street Pride – council grounds maintenance and street cleansing function
- Built Environment – includes planning policy, development control, and the planning function relating to nature conservation

The Greenspace Service comprises a broad range of services including parks management, maintenance and development, countryside management, allotments, fishing pools, events in parks and play area provision.

There are 66 posts (FTE) shown on the Greenspace Service structure below along with 15 temporary seasonal posts.

The Head of Leisure and Culture and Head of Greenspaces are new posts that have been created for 2006/07. The Green Spaces Manager post has been vacant from December 2005 although a new head of service has recently been appointed and should be in post in August 2006.

The current structure includes 20 FTE frontline staff employed as park rangers and mobile patrol staff, which cover the main parks and formal recreational green spaces. The parks service manages 117 sites covering 527 hectares. The countryside service employs a countryside services manager and 4 countryside rangers and 4 countryside officers with responsibility for management and development of 27 green spaces including local nature reserves and other semi-natural green spaces totaling 422 hectares.

All maintenance operations on 13 key parks<sup>20</sup> are carried out by grounds maintenance staff within the Greenspace Service. Over 100 other green spaces are managed by Greenspace Services with grounds maintenance operations carried out by Street Pride. Street Pride are also contracted to carry out maintenance operations on behalf of other council directorates.

The authority has a good track record of securing external funding from sources such as Heritage Lottery Fund, Single Regeneration Budget, BIG Lottery (Transforming Your Space) and other sources. In the past ten years the total has exceeded £4 million across formal parks and semi-natural green spaces.

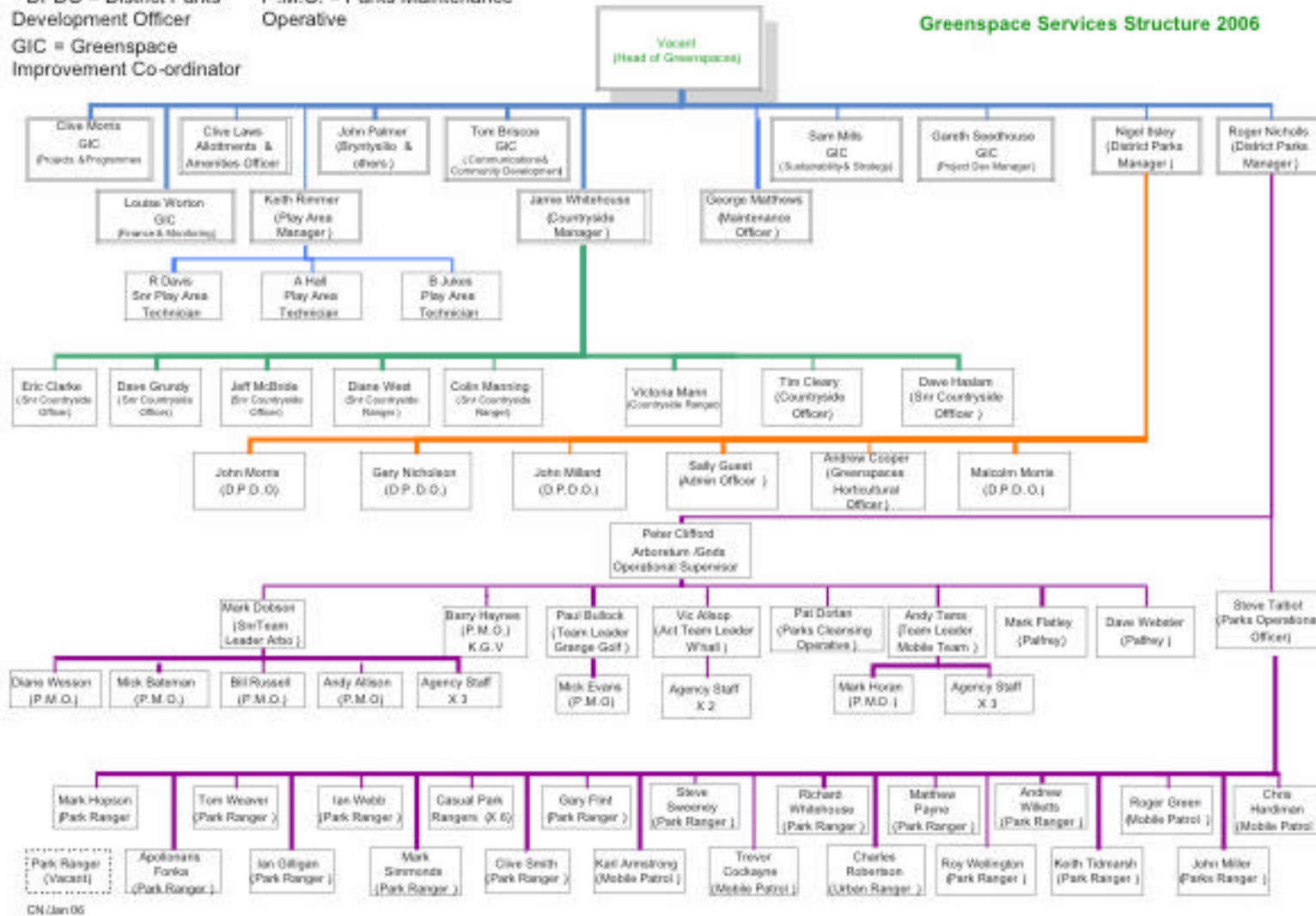
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<sup>20</sup> List of sites included in Appendix B

\* DPDO = District Parks Development Officer  
 GIC = Greenspace Improvement Co-ordinator

P.M.O. = Parks Maintenance Operative

Greenspace Services Structure 2006



CN Jan 06

Figure 8 Green Spaces Service Structure



## Analysis & Evaluation

This section of the strategy takes a step back from the current reality and uses the aims set out earlier to critically analyse and evaluate the current situation and identify measures that can be taken to improve on this position. The analysis also takes the aims and converts them into what we have described as “strategic objectives” – statements that show how we will start to turn the aims in to reality. These strategic objectives are then taken forward in the action plan later into “operational objectives” or recommendations – key actions that need to be taken to begin to effect the required change.

The analysis is informed by a research from a variety of sources;

- The quantity analysis of the audit
- The quality assessment of the audit
- Staff consultation
- Stakeholder consultation
- The household survey
- Consultation with Friends Groups
- Consultation with elected members
- A survey of specialist and interest groups
- Trend analysis of budget and resource information
- A review of policy and strategy of the authority
- A review of national policy, research and good practice
- Other external reviews of the authority e.g. best value / CPA reviews

Thus it represents a comprehensive view taken from as many angles as possible at this time. In addition we have also considered external reviews through the Best Value process and these are summarised below.

This section is separated into external review, customer satisfaction and then analysis under each of the aims set out at the start of this strategy.

## External Review

### Best Value Reviews – Leisure / Environment

The council's environment services, including grounds maintenance and street cleansing, refuse collection and highways maintenance and management, were subject to a Best Value Review in 2002. While the inspection focused on highways planning and maintenance and street cleansing, the Audit Commission reported that grounds maintenance was satisfactory with parks and open spaces being “*generally attractive and well looked after*”. The inspectors noted that there was “*some duplication between street cleaners and grounds maintenance and estates/parks etc. This results in different teams litter picking different parts of the same footpath or road*”.

The review noted that the level of expenditure on grounds maintenance in the borough, at approximately £3,100 per hectare was below the national average of £5,000 per hectare<sup>21</sup>.

The environment services were re-inspected in September 2004 which found that services had improved from a “no star” to a “one star” level and had “excellent” prospects for improvement. The report stated that play equipment within parks is generally well maintained and regularly inspected and *“the restoration of parks such as Palfrey Park with public involvement and support is resulting in increased usage of the borough’s open spaces”*.

*“During 2004 the parks service has worked with around 30 schools in projects and activities in Walsall’s parks. These include nursery, infant and junior schools. Activities range from classroom based studies, visits to parks and promoting health, practical environmental work, pond dipping and sporting and musical activities. A formal educational facility is located in the Arboretum and was publicised by the government’s Cabinet Office as an example of good practice”*.

The partnership working with friends groups was also noted as a strength of the service.

Leisure Services was subject to a Best Value inspection in October 2003, which found that leisure management, sports development and sports facilities in parks were ‘fair’ with promising prospects for improvement.

The inspection noted that the Best Value indicators for 2001/02 show that the council’s spend per capita on culture and leisure was average among the family group, however, resident satisfaction with the council’s sports and leisure facilities was amongst the worst nationally.

The report stated *“the council demonstrates good practice in involving people in improving parks and has developed a range of effective partnerships. It has attracted a considerable amount of external funding to improve the service. However the condition of leisure centres, pools, parks and other facilities is mixed. Some facilities have suffered from under investment over a number of years. Some require improvement and there is a backlog of routine maintenance”*.

It was noted that there was fragmentation in service delivery between grounds maintenance and management of green spaces, which impacted adversely on the quality of the customer experience. Staff acknowledged that different areas of the service have not been operating to a coherent agenda or within an overall planned approach and that this had limited their ability to deliver customer-focused services. At a project level there were many good practice examples of council led sports development and parks initiatives that were achieving both sporting and wider social outcomes and that reflected national priorities and local need at that time.

A key weakness was that there was no coherent approach to extending good practice in sports development and park improvements to meet identified needs

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<sup>21</sup>Audit Commission (2002), Environment Best Value Inspection, January 2002, p25

across Walsall. These initiatives were found to be heavily dependent on the availability of external funding, which is not necessarily in line with priorities, resulting in uneven provision of opportunities in meeting local needs.

**Best Value Satisfaction Surveys**

As part of the Best Value process information about customer satisfaction levels about various council services is collected by local authorities every three years.

The performance indicator BV119e relates to customer satisfaction with parks and open spaces. The survey in 2000/01 indicated that 57% of respondents were satisfied with parks and open spaces. Satisfaction levels increased in 2003/04 to 61%, but this was significantly below the national average of 71% satisfaction. Walsall ranked 343<sup>rd</sup> out of 377 local authorities, and was among the lowest 10% of all local authorities. In terms of metropolitan authorities Walsall ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> out of 36 again in the lowest 10% with regards to satisfaction with parks and green spaces.

An interim survey, the 2005 Tracker Survey, undertaken by Walsall Council resulted in a significantly lower satisfaction level than either 2000/01 and 2003/04 at 44%. The Tracker Survey found significant drops in the satisfaction levels across many services but overall satisfaction with the council improved. Satisfaction levels among users of parks and open spaces were found to be higher than non-users (58% and 9% respectively). Overall 34% of people participating in the Tracker Survey were non-users of parks and green spaces. One way in which overall satisfaction levels may be increased would be to promote the green spaces and facilities to encourage greater use.

Further research carried out with the citizens panel in 2005 found that the key issues for dissatisfaction related to;

- lack of cleanliness, rubbish and litter (31%)
- lack of facilities (19%)
- safety and security (15%)
- dog fouling (11%)
- lack of maintenance (11%)

Suggested improvements to increase satisfaction included

- improved security / more wardens (39%)
- improved litter and cleanliness (38%)
- improved maintenance (16%).

	2000/01 Best Value User Satisfaction	2003/04 Best Value User Satisfaction	2005 Tracker Survey	2005 Citizens Panel survey	2006/07 Target - Best Value User Satisfaction
Walsall	57%	61%	44%	69%	40%
National	63%	71%	-	-	75%

Table 15 User Satisfaction Data from Best Value and Interim Surveys

The Best Value satisfaction survey is due to be repeated in Autumn 2006. The national target for average satisfaction levels has been set at 75% by central government and the Walsall target is 40% for 2006/07 , 50% for 2007/08 and 60% for 2008/09.

## A Better Quality Environment

*We want green spaces to play their part in making Walsall an attractive place to live, work and play.*

### Introduction

We set out earlier that the contribution that green spaces make to the local environment and the local economy is currently not fully appreciated – more than this we have found that the current quality of the resource is poor and showing limited signs of recovery. Green spaces that are of poor quality, that are considered to be unsafe and that are declining will never make the positive contribution that they should be making.

In recent national research 85% of people surveyed said that the quality of public space and the built environment has a direct impact on their lives and the way they feel.<sup>22</sup> Earlier research undertaken by the government's Urban Green Spaces Task Force<sup>23</sup> stated that the general perception of our public environment is that it is run down and that this contributes to widespread dissatisfaction with living in towns and cities.

Green spaces have a massive potential contribution to making towns and cities more attractive places. In economic terms – research shows that companies are attracted to locations with good public spaces, which in turn attract employees, customers and services. Research has also shown a positive impact on property prices due to good quality green spaces.

### Management & Maintenance

#### Standards of grounds maintenance

The quality audit undertaken as part of this strategy finds that grounds maintenance and horticulture scored below the average criteria score. Measured against the Green Flag scoring line, grounds maintenance and horticulture was found to be 'poor' with an average score of 3.5 (out of 10).

The household survey and consultation with the friends groups found that there was also dissatisfaction with the standard of grounds maintenance and horticulture. Grass cutting was considered to be adequate but other aspects of grounds maintenance and more skilled horticultural practice was considered to be of a low standard. This was reflected in the quality assessment undertaken by the consultants with weed control, shrub pruning and litter control in need of improvement on many green spaces.

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<sup>22</sup> CABE Space (2005) Streets of Shame

<sup>23</sup> DTLR (2002) Green Spaces, Better Places

The authority has however been making structural changes to the way it delivers grounds maintenance services in parks through “reintegration” of grounds maintenance staff into parks. From the quality audit there is a clear need for such an approach – the average quality score of those 11 sites where integration has taken place is higher overall than the other 15 parks and gardens. However the average score across these sites for the grounds maintenance and horticulture criteria is lower on the sites where re-integration has taken place.

This is not a reflection on the work that has taken place since reintegration but a demonstration of the disinvestment that has taken in green spaces. Staff who have volunteered to take part in the reintegration process are highly motivated and talk of “years of neglect” that they are trying to rectify.

The reintegration of play ground staff and the inspection regime for play areas is discussed in the section “Healthy, Safe and Secure”.

Dealing with vandalism and graffiti in green spaces is also an issue where the authority does not currently perform well in the eyes of the community – this is the lowest ranked area of service delivery from the household survey. Again the poor performance was noted in the quality assessment process.

The current standard of parks and green spaces and the views expressed by residents is not dissimilar to the situation regarding the street scene and district centres 2-3 years ago. However, the council has made significant improvements to the quality of cleanliness of public areas in the town centre by developing and adopting a “Gold Standard” specification. This has resulted in higher standards of maintenance and improved public perception of these areas. A similar approach is required in parks and green spaces.

The most current maintenance specifications for parks and green spaces were produced by the authority in 1996 in response to Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) and have changed little since this time. As a consequence the specifications are out of date with many features within green spaces having been removed or new facilities added. Staff involved in developing the strategy have suggested that the maintenance specifications and schedules need to be completely revised.

The Council will review how grounds and infrastructure maintenance is delivered across all green spaces and develop and adopt new standards which are communicated to local communities.

## Financial Resources

The National Audit Office found that *“Local authority expenditure on green space . . . has increased by 19 per cent in cash terms since 2001-02, but has nevertheless not kept pace with the increasing level of overall local authority spending or the increasing amounts spent on other environmental and cultural services”*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> National Audit Office (2006) Enhancing Urban Green Space, p11

In reviewing the figures for the maintenance of green spaces in Walsall we have found that contracted maintenance budgets have increased in line with inflation only and that other budgets for infrastructure maintenance are perceived to have reduced over the last 10 years. Overall, the authority spends around £3500 per hectare per year in maintaining formal recreational green space. This is significantly below the national average of around £4700<sup>25</sup> - £5000<sup>26</sup> per hectare per year.

The level of budgeted expenditure has not been examined in any detail since there is limited financial information going back more than two to three years. Financial information covering a longer time period is not available to carry out any meaningful trend analysis. Financial management is discussed and analysed in more detail in the section “Achieving Excellence”.

Whilst this level of maintenance expenditure is below the national average, it is only one of the factors that is contributing to the poor quality of the green spaces in the borough. Fragmented service delivery, the absence of robust management systems and the low profile of the service all need to be addressed before green space quality can be improved.

The council will review its expenditure on green space maintenance linked to the management planning process

### Resource Allocation Across Different Types Of Green Space

In considering the amount of resources deployed across different types of green space it has become apparent that there is an inequitable distribution of financial resources. Furthermore the resources allocated bear little relationship to the type of maintenance inputs required.

Typically, high quality formal parks would have maintenance expenditure of around £5,000 per hectare per annum and more natural green spaces around £700<sup>27</sup> to £2000 per hectare. Parks and green spaces maintained through the grounds maintenance contracts have an average spend of £3500 per hectare, equivalent to 70% of the national average. Semi-natural green spaces managed by the countryside team have a much smaller allocated budget of approximately of £175 per hectare per year, equivalent to 25% of the minimum required. In addition, staff have expressed concern that the limited amount of maintenance work on semi-natural green spaces scheduled in the maintenance contract is not delivered.

It is clear that resources are not allocated across different green space types based on a rational approach of identified maintenance needs. It appears that this allocation is based on historical arrangements where formal green spaces were a higher priority through CCT and that habitat management, was and currently is, carried out when and where external funding is available.

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<sup>25</sup> Alan Barber (2004) ILAM Parks, Places & Countryside Seminar

<sup>26</sup> Audit Commission, Environment Best Value Inspection, January 2002

<sup>27</sup> Based on Community Forest figures for soft end use land reclamation approved by HM Treasury

The council will review its resource allocation across different types of green space.

### Long Term Sustainability of New Investment

The authority has an impressive track record of securing external funding to improve and develop parks and green spaces and has developed partnerships with community and voluntary groups and other agencies and stakeholders to achieve this. The Best Value inspections noted that the authority demonstrates good practice in this area. Over £4 million has been invested in formal and semi-natural green spaces over the last ten years. This has been sourced from the national lottery (including the Heritage Lottery Fund, New Opportunities Fund and BIG Lottery), regeneration funding, central government and government agencies, the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme and other grant providers.

The quality assessment that was undertaken found that green spaces which have received recent investment score higher than the borough average. A sample of eight formal parks and gardens that had received investment scored an average of 48 compared to the borough average of 35 (out of 100). Similarly, a sample of seven semi-natural green spaces scored an average of 44.

However, it was also apparent that in undertaking the quality assessment that the new investment was not always maintained to a high standard which resulted in reduced quality scores. Notably, Willenhall Memorial Park scored 49, which while higher than the borough average, was lower than expected given the £1.6 million investment in the past five years.

Funding has also been made available to improve green spaces and play areas through the planning process and Section 106 (s106) agreements. Approximately £300,000 of capital funding has been invested in parks and green spaces over the last ten years. There has however, been little in the way of revenue funding to maintain any new facilities. However, the Supplementary Planning Document on Open Space, Sport and Recreation, adopted in June 2006, makes provision for maintenance costs for a period of at least ten years.

The authority needs to consider how new investment in parks and green spaces can be sustained in the long term to a high standard, particularly given the significant investment that is currently being delivered through Transforming Your Space and other initiatives.

The council will consider how new investment in parks and green spaces can be sustained in the long term to a high standard.

The management planning process and a review of the maintenance arrangements should seek to adequately address these issues. Management planning is discussed in more detail in the section “Achieving Excellence”.



## Prioritisation and Rationalisation

### Premier green spaces

The authority does not currently prioritise any particular green spaces, although as set out earlier formal parks receive more resources than other green space types. Previously, the authority had defined 11 major parks as part of the Metro Parks initiative which through public consultation identified and delivered a programme of capital improvements during the 1990s, funded through the authority's mainstream funding. Similarly, the establishment of the Beacon Regional Park with neighbouring boroughs saw the establishment of the countryside service in the 1980s and a structure for managing and developing nature reserves and semi-natural green space.

Overall, there has not been a coherent structure which sets out the key green spaces in the borough based on a rational consideration of the significance of the site, the range of facilities and the importance to residents and local people rather than green space type and managing organisation. This strategy proposes that the green space service refocuses on a number of key green spaces including both formal parks and gardens and semi-natural green space and considers the resource allocation across these premier sites.

This strategy suggests there are 25 premier green spaces in the borough, which have been identified using the following criteria;

- Quality audit score
- Value assessment score
- Quality Value matrix and high quality / high value green spaces
- Green space hierarchy
- Key green spaces identified in the project brief
- The most frequently visited green spaces identified through the household survey undertaken as part of this strategy
- Green spaces where there is community involvement through friends groups
- The main parks where management and maintenance operations are delivered by the Greenspace Service

The proposed premier green spaces are shown in the table below;

Site ID	Site Name	Hierarchy	LNP Area
8048	Arboretum	Borough	St Matthews & Birchills Leamore
7031	Arboretum Extension & Golf Course	Borough	Pheasey & Paddock
7028	Barr Beacon	Borough	Pheasey & Paddock
1032	Hay Head Wood	Borough	Aldridge South & Streetly
9070	Rough Wood (incl 9073, 2064)	Borough	Willenhall
1011	The Airport Playing Fields	Borough	Aldridge South & Streetly
1008	Blackwood Park	Neighbourhood	Aldridge South & Streetly
3029	Brownhills Common	Neighbourhood	Brownhills Aldridge North
1034	Cuckoos Nook & The Dingle	Neighbourhood	Aldridge South & Streetly
7009	Doe Bank Park	Neighbourhood	Pheasey & Paddock
4023	George Rose Park	Neighbourhood	Darlaston
3012	Holland Park	Neighbourhood	Brownhills Aldridge North
2059	King George Vth Playing Fields	Neighbourhood	Blakenall & Bloxwich
4015	Kings Hill Park	Neighbourhood	Darlaston
2008	Leamore Park	Neighbourhood	Blakenall & Bloxwich
1001	Leighswood Park	Neighbourhood	Aldridge South & Streetly
7008	Merrions Wood	Neighbourhood	Pheasey & Paddock
5004	Palfrey Park	Neighbourhood	Palfrey & Pleck
8014	Park Lime Pits	Neighbourhood	St Matthews & Birchills Leamore
6010	Pelsall Common	Neighbourhood	Pelsall & Rushall-Shelfield
6017	Pelsall North Common NR	Neighbourhood	Pelsall & Rushall-Shelfield
5010	Pleck Park	Neighbourhood	Palfrey & Pleck
8009	Reedswood Park	Neighbourhood	St Matthews & Birchills Leamore
3013	Shire Oak Park	Neighbourhood	Brownhills Aldridge North
9019	Willenhall Memorial Park	Neighbourhood	Willenhall

Table 16 Proposed Premier Green Spaces in Walsall Borough

The distribution of the 25 proposed premier green spaces by LNP area are shown in the table below;

LNP	Number of premier green spaces
Aldridge South & Streetly	5
Blakenall & Bloxwich	2
Brownhills Aldridge North	3
Darlaston	2
Palfrey & Pleck	2
Pelsall & Rushall-Shelfield	2
Pheasey & Paddock	4
St Matthews & Birchills Leamore	3
Willenhall	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>

Table 17 Distribution of Proposed Premier Green Spaces by LNP

The table above shows that there is a minimum of two premier green spaces in each LNP area. St Matthews and Birchills Leamore and Brownhills Aldridge North LNPs each have three premier sites, Pheasey and Paddock has four and Aldridge South and Streetly has five premier sites.

The council will adopt the principle and list of recommended premier green spaces

## Change of primary purpose

It may be desirable to consider changing the primary purpose of some green spaces including those that are not classified as premier green spaces and specifically those that were identified as being of low quality and low value in the green space audit and assessment. Any change in primary purpose should seek to address local deficiencies in particular green space types and be based on local consultation.

This process may allow deficiencies in semi-natural green space, as identified by the proximity measures of the English Nature ANGSt model, to be addressed. There were significant deficiencies in access to semi-natural green spaces greater than 20 hectares in the south and east of the borough. However, it is likely to prove extremely difficult to create accessible semi-natural green spaces of this size. Most areas of the borough also had some areas of deficiency in access to semi-natural green space greater than 2 hectares and there are opportunities for creating new semi-natural green space, through changes to maintenance regimes, on this scale. Changing the level of accessibility of existing semi-natural green spaces may also help address deficiencies.

The playing pitch strategy will also assist in the identification of opportunities for the change of use with regard to reducing or increasing the supply of sports pitches in a particular area or LNP.

The council will review the primary purpose of non-premier sites, particularly low quality low value green spaces, and consider the opportunities for changing the primary purpose where appropriate.

It is recommended that any proposals for the change of primary purpose and discussed with Local Neighbourhood Partnerships and extensive consultation is carried out to ensure there is widespread support for these proposals.

## **Improve the quality of green space**

### Increase the average quality score for premier sites

The 25 premier green spaces set out above had a range of quality scores from 21 to 61, with an average quality score of 42. This is higher than the borough average of 35. While the average score of premier green spaces is higher than the borough average, using the Green Flag scoring line as a guide, the overall quality may be considered to be 'poor'. In addition many premier green spaces score below this average.

The council will aim to improve the average quality score of its premier green spaces and at the end of the strategy period these sites should be of Green Flag standard.

It is worth noting that the highest scoring green space is Palfrey Park, which is part way through a Heritage Lottery and SRB funded restoration programme. Walsall Arboretum scored less well, around the average score. Interestingly the authority has only made one application for the Green Flag Award for Walsall Arboretum. The park

filed to achieve the award in 2000. It is recommended that Palfrey Park is entered for the Green Flag Award in 2007, this is discussed further under “Achieving Excellence”.

The council will deliver the management plans and Green Flag applications as set out in this strategy.

Overall, improvements need to be delivered to ensure that the key green spaces in the borough are improved to a good standard and robust measures put in place to ensure that these standards management and maintenance of all green spaces can be sustained.

While the overall quality of green spaces needs to be addressed the household survey and other consultation indicated that most respondents considered green space quality to have stayed the same over the last three years.

### Poorly Performing Green Flag Criteria

In carrying out the quality assessment 19 criteria were used to assess each green space. Only two criteria scored on average “fair” all others were classified as “poor” or “very poor”. However, there were six criteria that scored below the average criteria score;

- Grounds maintenance and horticulture
- Equal access for all
- Buildings and infrastructure maintenance
- Signage
- Provision of appropriate information
- Provision of appropriate education interpretation / information

Each of these criteria are discussed in this Analysis and Evaluation section and recommendations for action are set out for the authority under separate headings.

The council will address the poor performance of green spaces against the 6 lowest scoring Green Flag criteria.

## **Local Development Framework**

### Address local accessibility deficiencies

The Audit and Assessment stages of this strategy found that there are significant areas of the borough without access to green space within a reasonable walking distance of their home. Overall 18% of the households in the borough have no access to unrestricted green space, rising to 45% of households in Pheasey and Paddock.

The planning process through the Local Development Framework and the recently adopted Supplementary Planning Document on Open Space Sport and Recreation sets out the authority's approach to addressing these deficiencies.

The household survey found that residents of the borough generally considered there was insufficient children's playgrounds and provision for teenagers. Indeed improving provision for teenagers was considered to be the most important improvement to different types of green space (using a weighted gap analysis technique).

The consultation process also revealed that the greatest levels of dissatisfaction were with the quality of children's play and provision for teenagers. The authority is currently investing in a significant number of play and youth facilities, creating new facilities and upgrading existing, through the Transforming Your Space Initiative. The authority should consult further with residents once these improvements have been delivered to establish the need for any further improvements. Any further improvements could be delivered through the planning process and funded, in part or wholly, through planning gain.

The green space strategy process has provided an opportunity for improved green space planning across council directorates and the current joint approach to planning should be formalised. There should be a mechanism established to bring together officers and members to regularly discuss future green space planning issues and ensure that deficiencies in the quantity, quality and accessibility of green space provision in the borough are addressed in a coherent and strategic manner.

The council will establish a cross directorate mechanism to review green space planning and the strategic provision of green space across the borough.

#### Shared use of community facilities

Where there are deficiencies in the provision of different types of green space the authority should act as an enabler to seek to secure shared or joint use of facilities such as school sports pitches. The authority should draw upon the audit and assessments undertaken as part of this strategy and previous assessment undertaken such as the Walsall Playing Pitch Strategy.

The council will consider the opportunities for addressing deficiencies in green space provision through joint or shared use of community facilities.

#### Provision of New Green Space

The provision of new green space needs to be informed by the audit and assessment undertaken as part of the green space strategy. Consideration should be given to the type, hierarchy and accessibility of existing provision and whether changes can be made to the primary purpose, hierarchy (through the range and quality of facilities) and accessibility level of existing green space. The design and location of new green space should be carefully considered to ensure that it is of a high quality and can be maintained to this standard.

The council will consider the provision of new green space where it will address deficiencies in particular types of green space.

#### Updating the Audit and Assessment

The mapping work, undertaken as part of the audit and assessment stages of the strategy, was carried out using a computer based Geographical Information System compatible with that used by most council directorates. However, the dataset will need to be updated and shared across the authority with appropriate measures in place to ensure the accuracy of the data.

The council will put in place appropriate mechanisms to ensure that up to date and accurate GIS data is shared across directorates.

## Healthy, Safe and Secure

*We want to create a network of safe, accessible green spaces which are full of positive activity and encourage our communities to become healthier*

### Introduction

Many urban parks owe their existence to Victorian views on improving public health, a link that is often overlooked. As part of their environmental contribution they improve the air that we breathe, provide shade and mitigate against extremes of temperature and climate and have an important role in terms of sustainable urban drainage. With climate change green spaces are likely to have an even more significant role in ensuring the urban environment is a desirable place to live and work. Green spaces are also important community facilities, they provide space to play sport, go for walk, habitats for wildlife or just a place to escape the pressures of urban living.

Green spaces are an integral part of the fabric of our communities, they have a significant contribution to making neighbourhoods safer places. Our spaces themselves need to be safe, attractive and welcoming environments and we need to do everything we can to encourage positive use of them.

*“Fear of crime and, to a much lesser extent crime itself, can deter people, not just vulnerable groups, from using even good quality public spaces”<sup>28</sup>*

### Healthy People and Communities

There is concern about the health of the nation with obesity predicted to overtake smoking as our biggest killer. Green spaces can provide venues for formal and informal recreation – it’s as simple as a walk in the park. They can also have positive effects on mental health and well being of local people. High quality and well-used green spaces can also provide an important public space for local communities to meet, engage and interact.

Walking or rambling is the most popular sport or activity among adults with over one fifth of adults participating. Parks and green spaces in urban areas provide excellent venues for walking, jogging exercising or participating in sport.

The “Walk On” Health Walk initiative in the borough has proved to be very successful with regular walks led by trained volunteers occurring 6 days per week. This innovative project has been very successful in reaching minority groups who may not have otherwise exercised or visited parks and green spaces. The involvement of volunteers to lead the walks programme should also ensure that the scheme is sustainable in the medium to long term.

The council and its partners will continue to promote green spaces as safe places for exercise, activity and sports

<sup>28</sup> CABE Space (2005) The Value of Public Space

Practical conservation work to management some park areas and semi-natural green spaces and nature reserves also provides an opportunity for local people to get involved in the management of local green spaces and also brings health benefits to participants. The council organises a Conservation Volunteer programme that meets every weekdays and weekends to involve local people in practical conservation work. Many of the friends groups and other council partners such as BTCV also work with the council in offering similar events that are open to local people.

The council will continue to provide a range of opportunities for local people to take part in practical conservation activities that encourage participation and physical activity.

The council's events in parks and green spaces are also very successful with over 60,000 annual visits to events in parks (this figure does not include visitors to the Illuminations). Part of the attraction of many of these events is that they occur in green spaces and encourage people who may not normally visit parks and green spaces. Events and activities in parks are discussed in more detail in the section "Raising the Standard".

The council will continue to provide a range of events and activities that encourage all sections of the community to undertake physical activity.

Allotments provide spaces for local communities to grow their own food. They provide fresh and healthy food and many non-market benefits, such as relaxation, enjoyment and recreation all with health benefits.

*Working an allotment offers healthy physical recreation for all people. It is increasingly being recognised for its therapeutic value, to the extent that it is being prescribed as a treatment for stress by GPs in some areas.<sup>29</sup>*

The council and its partners will continue to promote the health benefits of allotments.

Parks and green spaces are also important places for children and young people providing places for play, exploration and social development.

*From an early age, play is important to a child's development and learning. It isn't just physical. It can involve cognitive, imaginative, creative, emotional and social aspects. It is the main way most children express their impulse to explore, experiment and understand.<sup>30</sup>*

The council will provide equipped play areas across the borough on parks and other green spaces that are safe and accessible to all.

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<sup>29</sup> Local Government Association (2006) A New Local Authority Approach To Allotments

<sup>30</sup> Department for Culture Media & Sport (2004) Getting Serious About Play



The council will ensure that green spaces are safe and attractive places for children and young people to play and socialise.

Green spaces therefore are multi-functional facilities that have the potential to offer a variety of health related benefits to the diverse communities in Walsall. There are serious concerns about the state of the nation's health and Walsall performs poorly in terms of health deprivation.

## **Personal Safety**

The household survey showed that the single biggest barrier to greater use is concerns about personal safety. This is closely followed by anti social behaviour, vandalism and graffiti and dog fouling. Two of the biggest factors contributing to people not feeling safe are young people in parks and lack of site-based staff.

Site based staff was one of the highest priorities for improvement from the consultation with friends groups. Currently the authority has a range of site based staff including rangers, wardens and gardeners – this totals 27 full time staff plus 14 seasonal staff across 13 sites, supplemented by 4 mobile patrol staff who cover other green spaces. Yet the household consultation showed this as one of the poorest areas of performance and the friends group consultation showed it as a priority area for improvement. Some staff also expressed a concern that the number of events being meant that staff members were being drawn out of the park they were based in to assist with the delivery of the events. Consequently staff cover was frequently not available at peak times when visitors may expect to have staff present on site.

The council will review the role of frontline staff and their location.

## **Crime and Disorder**

### Criminal Damage and Anti-social Behaviour

Public spaces by their nature are subject to vandalism and graffiti, criminal damage, and arson. Such acts place a burden on the authority in having to utilise limited resources both staff and financial in responding to these incidents. Arson attacks in the last decade have resulted in the loss of pavilions and buildings in George Rose Park, Reedswood Park, Leamore Park, Clayhanger Common and other green spaces. Some of these facilities have been replaced others have not.

CABE Space<sup>31</sup> suggests that physical measures to address criminal damage and anti-social behaviour while important are not the only solution. Such physical measures or target hardening is not always effective and can have undesirable effects resulting in the fortification of green spaces and the urban environment. Effective solutions should also include;

- A rapid response to vandalism

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<sup>31</sup> CABE Space (2004) Preventing Anti-social Behaviour in Public Spaces

- A staff presence on site
- Providing open views and vistas
- Engaging the community in the process of reclaiming public spaces

The quality assessment found many examples of physical measures in green spaces installed in response to anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. Many of these measures while being effective also send out a negative message to other visitors and do nothing to promote welcoming green spaces where users have a feeling of personal safety.

Frontline parks staff currently record incidents of vandalism and damage and the defects are logged on a central database. Repairs and maintenance to formal parks and gardens currently costs the authority in excess of £300,000 annually. However, it is not clear what proportion of this figure is attributed to repairing criminal damage.

The council will review the way in which it collects data regarding criminal damage and activity in its green spaces.

There have been some good examples of partnership working between green space managers, the community safety team and the police and fire service. However, this has often been restricted to small geographical areas, such as New Deal or the SRB areas.

The council will work more closely with its partners to monitor and record criminal damage and activity and develop effective mechanisms for addressing such incidents.

### Diversionsary Activities

In 2003 the council and Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership allocated £400,000 to fund a programme of activities and events for young people called Summer Reloaded. The programme was aimed at encouraging young people to take part in positive activities during the summer holidays, in response to growing concerns about community safety and incidents of criminal and anti-social behaviour during the summer period. The programme was repeated in summer 2004 and 2005 under the title Ready Steady Summer and in 2005, 61 organisations were involved in delivering 250 activities. Around 9000 young people from across the borough were involved in participating in the events and activities many of which took place in parks and green spaces.

In evaluating the Ready Steady Summer programme for 2005 it was found that youth crime incidents were reduced by 17.5 % from 2004 with a 42.1% reduction in arson, 39.1% reduction in shoplifting and 27.0% reduction in criminal damage committed by young people. Based on Home Office<sup>32</sup> figures for the estimated cost incurred to the taxpayer for a range of crimes, this represents a saving of approximately £2.4m in 2005.<sup>33</sup> While the summer programme of diversionsary activities cannot be wholly

<sup>32</sup> Home Office (2000) Research Study

<sup>33</sup> Walsall Council (2005) Ready Steady Summer 2005 Evaluation Report

responsible for the significant reduction in youth crime it is likely to have contributed to this reduction.

The 2005 evaluation did not include any specific data for parks and green spaces, however, the report for the previous programme had found that incidents of vandalism and damage to parks and play areas had reduced by 47.6% from 2003.

The authority is currently involved in providing new youth facilities costing in many parks and green spaces across the borough through the Transforming Your Space initiative. This will potentially provide additional sports, wheeled sports and youth facilities that could be used through the Ready Steady Summer programme and other diversionary activities.

The council should ensure that parks and green spaces are fully utilised as venues for delivering the Ready Steady Summer programme and other diversionary activities.

## **Management & Maintenance**

The quality assessment considered both equipment maintenance (play equipment, sports equipment and other) and the maintenance of buildings and infrastructure. Equipment maintenance scored slightly above the average criteria score but buildings and infrastructure maintenance scored less well.

### Equipment Maintenance

Play areas are regularly inspected by frontline staff and the council's play ground fitters and the inspection regime has been developed based on national guidance and discussion with the council's health and safety team and the council's insurers. However, the inspection and maintenance of buildings and infrastructure is less well developed. Visual inspections are carried out by frontline staff as part of their patrolling duties and significant defects are recorded and collated on a central database. However, there is no detailed inspection programme for buildings and infrastructure and there is no planned maintenance regime. A condition survey of some of the main parks is underway but has not yet been completed.

The council will review its inspection procedures for buildings and infrastructure and will in place a programme of regular inspections and planned maintenance.

### Tree Management and Inspection

In terms of the tree stock within parks and green spaces there is no overall comprehensive approach to tree management and safety. The Arboretum and Willenhall Memorial Park are the only green spaces to have had full arboricultural assessments undertaken as part of the development of the Heritage Lottery Fund restoration plans. A tree survey is also currently underway at Palfrey Park. There have been a number of recent high profile serious incidents, nationally and in the West Midlands region where members of the public have been killed or seriously

injured by falling trees and branches. The local authority and in some cases specific local authority officers have been found negligent in some of these cases.

The council will develop a programme of tree surveys linked to the programme of producing site specific management plans (see “Achieving Excellence”).

Dog Fouling

The council has invested significant resources in addressing dog fouling in the last two years. The Dogs (Fouling of Land) Act 1996 has been adopted by the council, which makes it an offence for park visitors to allow their dogs to foul and not remove the faeces on designated green spaces. Dog bins and signage have also been provided at a number of main parks and green spaces.

However, dog fouling in green spaces was considered by respondents to the household survey and in other consultation, to be an area where the council needed to improve its service. This was supported by the findings of the quality assessment, which found the overall performance to be “poor” although some other sites had little evidence of dog fouling and the measures in place appeared to be working.

The council will continue to provide dog bins and signage on green spaces and promote the message of responsible dog ownership and use it’s powers to enforce the current legislation.

**Sustainability**

Biodiversity

Many of the green spaces in the borough are significant in terms of their wildlife and biodiversity value. The borough contains 9 designated Local Nature Reserves, 7 SSSIs, 30 SINC’s and approximately 80 SLINC’s. The borough contains a variety of habitats including ancient woodlands, grasslands, wetlands and internationally rare lowland heath. These green spaces are protected by national and international legislation and through the council’s unitary development plan and future Local Development Framework.

While these semi-natural green spaces are important in their own right they are also important place for local communities to experience nature at first hand and an important educational resource.

The council will continue to protect and enhance green spaces that are important for wildlife.

The council will continue to manage semi-natural green space in its ownership and influence other land managers to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

## Environmental Sustainability

Walsall Council adopted its Environment Strategy in 1998, which sets out how the authority will act in a manner to become more sustainable. As part of this ongoing process the green spaces service participated in an initial pilot involving three service areas using the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme as a framework for assessing its environmental performance. This found that overall the service has a generally positive impact on the environment by way of managing significant areas of green space and some areas for improved environmental performance were identified.

The Green Flag Award scheme also place emphasis on the environmental performance of land managers and the way in which particular green spaces are managed. While many of the Green Flag criteria were not assessed as part of the quality assessment they have been discussed with the authority's green space managers as part of the preparation for submitting a Green Flag application for Palfrey Park. It was found that there were areas of significant weakness with regard to the environmental performance of the green space service and on a site-specific basis most notably around peat use, energy, water and pesticide use and waste management.

The council will review its environmental performance with regard to green space management and maintenance.

## **Accessibility**

The access audit brought out a range of site-specific recommendations however the main recommendation for Walsall Borough was marketing to disability groups. It suggested that the authority focus on;

- local people with disabilities are invited, through the Council's Diversity Officer to visit outdoor sites and are consulted on some of the features that they find interesting and would like to learn a little more about, and how they might be interpreted.
- ensuring that strategic objectives are being met and if they not then appropriate corrective action is being initiated
- enabling staff to effectively manage positive change in the outdoors to meet social inclusion targets

Two suggested approaches to this are;

The council seeks to build the confidence amongst users with disabilities that reasonable access is being provided within a planned and progressive framework.

The council develops a Marketing Information System to enable staff to communicate with disabled people seeking to visit the green spaces in Walsall.

## Raising the Standard

*We want to inspire our communities to expect higher quality green spaces, to work with us to achieve this and to feel proud of what we achieve together.*

### Introduction

A recurrent theme through this strategy is that green spaces are an undervalued asset within the authority. By contrast community consultation has repeatedly shown that parks and green spaces are the most valued leisure and cultural facilities by Walsall residents. Embedded within this however is the perception that many people think that they can only ever expect average quality spaces and services if they live in Walsall.

Some key findings from the consultation carried out as part of this strategy are listed below;

- Only 49% of people were satisfied with the quality of parks and recreation grounds in the household survey – even less with children’s play (28%) or provision for teenagers (9.4%)
- Whilst 1 in 4 people thought quality of their most frequently used space had improved 1 in 5 thought it had declined
- Local people felt that hardly any of the key sites in the borough were properly promoted and celebrated.

This section of the analysis looks at creating a positive image for the service and green spaces at all levels – with elected members and key decision makers, with partners and potential funders and most importantly with the end user – the local community.

### Championing the Service

Staff and elected members recognise that the service is often viewed as a ‘Cinderella service’, community consultation has shown that the green spaces themselves are not properly promoted and celebrated. It is time that this changed and a new approach is needed to create a credible and valued service that inspires the community and engenders a sense of pride in the service and the spaces.

This new approach has to start at the highest levels – the recent appointment of a new Head of Greenspaces presents the opportunity for a new champion of the service, to lead and inspire all stakeholders. The need for green space champions was also recently identified as a key recommendation for local authorities in the National Audit Office report.

The person also needs to be able to influence policy makers to ensure that there is high-level political support for the service. This is also reflected in the NAO report, which recommends that Local Strategic Partnerships should;

- Make sure that a local green space champion is represented on the board
- Make sure their Community Plan and Local Area Agreements reflect green space ambitions

The council and the Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership will consider the appointment of a green space champion to the WBSP board and will ensure that green spaces and improvement plans are included in the Community Plan.

The champions need to

- Raise the profile of the assets and the service – the following headings give some ideas on how this can be achieved. Whatever approach is taken the campaign must be constant and unfaltering in driving home the message. Good practice needs to be developed further and celebrated – Walsall needs to get on the national map.
- Create and maintain better linkages to other strategies / services – the head of service needs to build bridges and actively ensure that green spaces are represented at every available opportunity. The key policy makers and decision takers need to know that the green space service is part of the council’s vision and is committed to doing its bit for corporate priorities.

The authority needs to

- Ensure that green spaces are better recognised in its corporate thinking – this is a service that touches more lives than almost any other, it brings free locally accessible provision in areas of severe deprivation

The council recognises the importance of green spaces in achieving its vision and will ensure that other policies and strategies take into account the cross cutting contribution of these assets.

### **The Right Image**

Walsall has demonstrated some good practice in its approaches to marketing and promoting events and activities but there is a need to decide what the image of the service is. There is a need to create what is seen from the outside as a credible service – one that has an air of professionalism about it, one that understands its customers, one that sells itself in a business like manner – a service that people will want to invest in and spaces that people will want to use.

Much of the substance of achieving this will be delivered by the other aims, i.e. the product must match the publicity claims, but creating an image is still an important factor in attracting staff, investors or new customers / users.

The authority has carried out community consultation for over a decade and has a good track record in partnership working with community based organisations but what it does not fully understand is “who are our users and non users?” This links to

the section “Achieving Excellence” in terms of performance management but it is also key to effective marketing and promotion.

The green space service needs to

- Talk to its users and find out who they are, where they come from, why they use the spaces, why they go to the events etc and share this information across the service to begin to build an accurate picture that it tracks annually

The council will develop a robust framework to enable it to carry out regular market research to understand the needs and expectations of users and non-users of green spaces.

There is also a need to identify who non users are – the household survey carried out as part of this strategy begins to identify them but, like any household survey it has a characteristic profile of respondents. Walsall is a place of great cultural diversity and also of stark contrasts – within its complex community there are great numbers of marginalised groups. There are excellent examples of creative and innovative projects that have engaged people from marginalised groups but this has been project specific and thus time and resource limited. Also much consultation has been single issue in relation to a particular space or project. Also the access audit specifically identified the needs to begin a dialogue with certain sectors of society.

The council will develop a planned approach to engaging with marginalised groups to identify wider barriers to use of green spaces.

### **Good Practice**

Walsall has delivered some innovative projects that have gained national recognition

- It is the only authority in the country to have won or been highly commended 3 times in the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management Open Space Innovation Award
- The ‘Walk On’ and Groundmiles initiatives have led the field as national pilots programmes that others have followed
- National accreditation has also been achieved through Investors in People and Chartermark awards
- Best Value reviews have also highlighted successes such as the restoration of Palfrey Park, partnership working with friends groups and schools work
- The former Local Involvement Programme gained recognition from the government’s Urban Green Spaces Task Force and many national publications

There are still opportunities to develop new good practice and to gain recognition for existing projects and programmes.



- Walsall has already signed up to the 'Parkforce' campaign and could make more of the fact that it has retained a front line service for many years. It could take this further in developing a training programme for front line staff and investing in training for its managerial and developmental staff.
- It could do more with the Friends Group Network – this has existed for almost 10 years and is a model that many authorities have copied.
- The events and activities programme touches literally tens of thousands of lives every year.

The council will develop models of good practice and make everyone aware of them.

### **The Right Message**

This is linked to 'the right image' above but takes the issue further in terms of what information the service puts across. This may be in the form of marketing and promotional material but also in terms of information provided on site through signage and interpretation. The latter was identified as a key weakness in the quality audit and whilst many countryside sites have shown the way forward many formal parks fall well short of any acceptable standard.

The council will develop a comprehensive approach to signage, interpretation and information presented on site

How the message about the service is communicated to the general public is a key issue not only in celebrating successes but also in countering negative perceptions that may be acting as barriers to non-users. The 2005 Tracker Survey and the subsequent panel survey suggested that satisfaction was linked to the use of green space and that increased promotion could ultimately address satisfaction levels. Currently the service has no mechanism in place although there have been suggestions of an annual report or household leaflet. In a sense both suggestions could actually be one and the same and could achieve wide reaching outcomes. An annual report could be linked into the performance management discussed under 'achieving excellence' later in that the service / authority could set out its targets for the forthcoming year and report its progress against the previous year. It could also feature key projects or examples of good practice, contributions could be obtained from friends groups or front line staff creating a more inclusive and grounded feel.

The council will develop a comprehensive approach to promoting green spaces and green space services.

### **Awareness & Participation**

As set out earlier, the events and activities secure the involvement of tens of thousands of people every year what is needed is a more comprehensive approach to evaluating the success of these in attracting new audiences or diversifying or widening existing audiences. There is no service wide collation or analysis of the numbers or types of people participating in schools activities, family fundays, community consultation or Friends groups.

Green spaces also provide a venue for other people's events – other service areas, external organisations, voluntary and community based organisations all run events on parks yet little is done to promote this as a service in itself.

There is little doubt that events are a good thing, as one resident stated it was the first event on their estate in 38 years! But there are also negative aspects in terms of the impact that the programme has by drawing staff away from key sites whilst events are running.

The council will review its green spaces events and activities programme from the perspective of resource impact

The council will establish a comprehensive system of data collection and analysis to assess visitor satisfaction with events in parks and green spaces and use this research to inform its approach to marketing.

## Listening to and engaging with people

*We want to aspire to consulting and involving all sections of our diverse community*

### Introduction

We provide a range of ways and levels for people to become involved in their local green space, from community fun days to friends groups, from consultation to health walks.

Green spaces have a key role to play in bringing people together on common ground – they can unite 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”<sup>34</sup>*

Green spaces also can 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.

Recent national research has shown that

- Well managed events can have positive effects, drawing the community together and providing financial, social and environmental benefits
- A green and pleasant space is generally a well used space
- Well designed, high quality spaces provide good opportunities for social cohesion. “Public spaces are not empty voids . . . what we put into our spaces is just as important as the space itself”

Walsall Council has a long track record in working with local communities, indeed it was at the forefront of community involvement in urban green space in the mid 1990s. It now has

- an active network of community based organisations (friends groups) some of whom have been around for over 10 years
- a range of staff who support the groups
- regular site specific consultation exercises
- an annual events programme involving over 65,000 people
- a regular programme of schools projects and education activities
- a significant volunteer contribution is made to practical management work through the countryside service

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<sup>34</sup> CABE Space (2005) The Public Value of Urban Parks

## Equality

Walsall borough has a great cultural diversity and green spaces can be a shared and common space for all cultures to enjoy and appreciate. The green space service has worked on some innovative projects that have reached out to traditionally marginalised groups and has also been working towards an improved equality standard as part of a wider council approach. Where there is a need to improve is around information, consultation and engagement with minority groups. This was discussed earlier in the section 'Raising the Standard' but is worth re-iterating in this context.

Access and accessibility also need to be considered, people with disabilities represent a large potential audience for green spaces as identified in the access audit.

The council will develop a planned approach to engaging with marginalised groups to identify wider barriers to use of green spaces.

## Partnerships

The green space service has a good track record with working across a wide range of organisations at what could be described as an operational level often in connection with short term projects. Where it has lacked input is in forming partnerships at a strategic level and over the long term.

An important current initiative is the Black Country Urban Park being developed through the Black Country Consortium. This initiative seeks to develop the concept of a "living landscape", investing in and improving environmental assets across the Black Country. Central to this is the aim to address *"increased management, visitor and tourism attractions, improved residents health and educational benefits"*.<sup>35</sup> The Black Country Urban Park concept has the potential to raise the profile of green spaces in the borough and regionally and provide new sources of funding for landscape improvements, biodiversity and visitor facilities. Walsall Council is a partner in the development of this project, however, the greenspaces service has not been fully engaged in this process.

The council will ensure that all service areas involved in greenspace management support the development and delivery of the Black Country Urban Park.

At a borough level, there are key bodies or groups that have significant influence over the future direction of resources including elected members and the Local Strategic Partnership.

The council will ensure that there is effective dialogue between the WBSP, LNPs and service areas regarding green space issues.

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<sup>35</sup> Black Country Consortium (2006) Living Landscape

At another level, friends groups were asked if they felt that they were able to influence decisions about their park or green space – 3 said “yes”, 6 said “sometimes” and 3 said “no”. Much of this was influenced by lack of clear lines of communication, a lack of accountability and a lack of feedback on issues raised. The Walsall Friends Group Network is one of the oldest established groups of its kind in the country but it does not appear to have links to the LSP and the LNPs. The Friends Group Network needs to assess how it can influence the borough and LNP agendas.

Staff consultation showed concerns about the level of support that they were able to give to friends groups and not being able to provide enough opportunities for community involvement.

The council will review how it works with community based organisations concerned with green spaces in order to provide a more comprehensive and consistent service.

The council will produce clear service standards so that friends groups and local people know what to expect from grounds maintenance works and also levels of support in developing new projects.

### **Listening and Acting**

Walsall had one of the most innovative approaches to community consultation even before the introduction of Best Value or any external influences. It led the field nationally and quietly continues to engage with people around key projects.

There is however, no overall vision or direction to community consultation and engagement across the service to provide a common understanding and a coordinated level of service to groups. Similarly as the responsibilities for delivering services in green spaces is split across different service areas this causes a lack of clarity in terms of responsibilities.

This was reflected through consultation with friends groups who whilst very positive about the council’s approach to involving the community were very concerned about communication with the authority and also between service areas – indeed when asked to rank statements that related closely to the key criteria of the Green Flag Award, they gave the statement “Walsall Council is a good manager of green spaces” the lowest score.

If the authority is to establish a sound base for community engagement it needs to address a few simple questions – for example

- How many friends groups should be established, where and why?
- Who should provide a service to friends groups?
- What level of service can friends groups reasonably expect?

The council will adopt a planned approach to consulting the community about green spaces at a more strategic level.

The council will coordinate its consultation activities so that comparable data is collected to aid in establishing a performance management framework.

The council will establish a feedback channel to friends groups and other community based organisations about issues they raise.

## Local Strategic Planning

As stated earlier, green space managers within the authority do not currently have any representation on the Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership. This is a common situation nationally with around half of all urban LSPs having no representation from green space managers.<sup>36</sup> The National Audit Office and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recommend that all LSPs should appoint a green space champion to ensure that green spaces are included at this strategic level. Currently within the authority green space issues are considered by the LSP Housing and Environment Theme group alongside housing, street scene and wider environmental issues.

At a more local level of political decision making Walsall's LNPs are all developing local action plans for their area. These plans will presumably include green spaces. There is a clear need here for the findings of the green space audit and the recommendations of this green space strategy to be embedded into the process of developing these area based plans.

The council and its partners need to ensure that the green space audit and strategy are key documents in guiding the formulation of any local area action plans.

The findings of the audit in terms of quality, quantity and accessibility also need to be considered at a local level with any development plans in terms of housing provision. Earlier we stated the need to work closely with the planning service to follow through the work on the Supplementary Planning Document and this point reinforces that objective. The strategic objectives linked to these issues are set out in "A Better Quality Environment".

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<sup>36</sup> National Audit Office (2006) Enhancing Urban Green Space

## Achieving Excellence

*We want to work across service areas and with key partners, organisations and services to create excellent green spaces and an excellent service.*

### Introduction

Throughout the analysis section we have referred to raising standards, creating good practice, improving quality – more than all of this we want to strive for excellence in everything we do. This ties in with the corporate vision to “transform Walsall into an excellent authority”.

It is not the sole responsibility of parks and green spaces service to deliver this strategy – many services and organisations have a role to play. Whilst this could be a strength it has been repeatedly highlighted as a weakness through Best Value reviews, friends group consultation, staff and member consultation. The situation has been worsened by repeated restructuring, which has taken place without an overall vision for green spaces. This restructuring has been both across and within services. On the latter, the parks and countryside service / green space service has seen a net loss of two thirds of its manager posts over the past 5 years creating a vacuum of leadership, strategic thinking and policy making.

This strategy creates a new vision around which to unite and move forward it will need championing across all service areas but it is deliverable as long as all stakeholders commit to this change.

We have to collectively raise our game if we are to deliver the vision and strategic objectives of the green space strategy. This will mean that we will have to develop new partnerships, strengthen existing relationships and set ourselves some challenging targets.

### Organisational Planning

As set out above there is a need to bring together all services that operate in and affect green spaces and fundamentally question what they do, what opportunities are there to develop new areas of work, what duplication exists even to the point of questioning who is best placed to deliver certain services.

Recent re-integration of grounds maintenance staff into the parks service has its advantages and disadvantages. The staff that have volunteered to take part are enthusiastic about improving quality but the financial and resource management appears to be lacking along with a complete lack of any measurement of improvement. This will be discussed later under the section “Business and Management Planning” but there does not appear to be any fully worked up plan regarding what sites are to be re-integrated nor any basis for the allocation of resources and as such the greenspaces service cannot be sure whether it is acquiring assets or liabilities. This is indicative of the need for greater cross service working.

The council will review the reintegration of grounds staff into parks and produce a forward plan based on the actual resource requirements linked to improving standards, driven by site specific management plans and maintenance schedules.

As well as links through structures there is a need to address linkages to other strategies and corporate documents. This should be a two way process with corporate policy reflecting the value of green spaces and stating its commitment to this area as well as green space policies showing how they can deliver corporate objectives.

The council will ensure that there is strong linkage between policy and strategy at all levels in relation to green spaces.

As set out above, restructuring has taken place creating a flatter organisational structure which effectively means that too many people report directly to the head of greenspaces, creating a vacuum of policy and strategic thinking. Service planning has been delegated down and there has been no challenge as to whether service plans are realistic – again there is no vision to set the framework for the service plans. The plans are produced to satisfy corporate outputs rather than driving the service forward.

The council will review the structure of the Greenspaces Service especially in relation to creating opportunities for development, policy and strategic planning.

A key area that the Greenspaces Service needs to continue to develop is its relationship with the planning service. Through the green space audit process and the subsequent production of the Supplementary Planning Document on Open Space, Sport and Recreation key links were established as well as a framework that could secure significant investment in green spaces.

The council will develop a strong working relationship between the greenspaces service, planning policy and development control which creates a clear framework for investment to address deficiencies in current provision

## **Business Planning**

Whilst the above issues relate to cross service / authority wide matters the green space service also needs to create an internal framework for achieving excellence. Whilst there are service plans in place there is a need to adopt some other approaches to planning the business and measuring its effectiveness. These include establishing a system of performance management, establishing clearer financial management, looking at the long term implications of capital projects and establishing clear schedules of work on which to base financial projections and resource allocation.

This is not a situation unique to Walsall, recent national research has shown that very few authorities can link spend and quality of green spaces. In addition



*“with no helpful data, they’re unable to make the case for more resources or allocate the resources they have in a proper, strategic way” (CABE 2006 Urban Parks – Do you know what you’re getting for your money)*

Furthermore it is impossible to know how effective the service is and whether money is being spent well without information to support the case.

The concept is being developed further by CABE Space and IDeA who are creating a performance management framework based on the Towards An Excellent Service model being used for cultural services. The action plan and monitoring and review sections later set out some key areas where the service could gather information to support an overall framework – some examples are

- Visitor numbers
- User satisfaction from annual user surveys
- Reduction in complaints
- Reduction of recorded incidents /crimes
- Perceptions of safety from annual user surveys
- Amount of green waste recycled
- Amount of peat and pesticide use
- Amount of peat use
- Amount of other waste recycled
- Number of species of flora and fauna recorded
- Number of events run
- Number and types of people attending events
- Number of schools worked with
- Number of pupils involved
- Diversity / types of users
- Amount of external funding secured (grants, donations, sponsorship etc)
- Performance against annual income targets
- Annual quality audit score

The council will establish a performance management framework for green spaces and within this establish a system for gathering, analysing and reporting base line data.

The above list focuses heavily on quantitative output driven measures but some creative thinking could be applied to devise more qualitative measures.

Also referred to earlier under ‘Raising the Standard’ was the need to create or develop good practice. This is inextricably linked to achieving excellence – this good practice might be through the accreditation performance management framework, i.e. service wide good practice, or it might be project or site specific. Whatever level it occurs at the service must make the most of it locally, regionally and nationally as part of creating a credible service worthy of investment and quality spaces worthy of visiting.

In terms of capital projects, there are other areas of the council that deliver regeneration projects on green spaces and that are more proactive than the green

space service in securing both political support and external funding. There is a need here for a closer working relationship and a redressing of the balance. There is also a need to review how development work is coordinated across green spaces, it is not clear what the future direction is for the current green space improvement team. The team has been successful at securing external funding but this is time limited with no clear succession strategy.

The council will create a focus for strategy, policy, research and 'business development' for green spaces.

Linked to the above issue about capital projects is the need to examine the long-term sustainability of the schemes once implemented. This is linked to management planning below but this consideration needs to take place early in the life cycle of project development. This has recently been recognised by grant giving organisations by tying in quality targets as part of award conditions and by requesting greater consideration of management and maintenance in any capital restoration scheme.

The council will consider management and maintenance planning at the earliest stage of developing new capital projects and it will do this with other partners, service providers and stakeholders.

A difficulty in delivering the above objective is the current lack of clear and up to date maintenance schedules. Not only does this affect the reintegration of grounds staff but it also makes assessing the impact of restoration or regeneration schemes virtually impossible. There is an inherent irony here in that certain funders will actually consider funding a percentage of the 'uplift' in maintenance costs arising from the restoration project. Also without clear guidelines the public and friends groups do not know what standards can be expected.

The council will produce clear maintenance schedules with demonstrable outputs and communicate these to staff, friends groups and the wider community

A final issue in business planning for green spaces is the people in the service themselves – Walsall has a great asset here that is lacking in investment. Whilst different aspects of the service have gained Investors In People staff consultation revealed that there are issues concerning the lack of funding for training. Broad learning needs have been identified in previous service plans but these have not been developed and translated into actual learning for staff.

The council will review the resources required to deliver the identified learning needs to support improving green spaces.

## **Management Planning**

The issue of site specific management planning has been mentioned above in the context of establishing the long term sustainability of capital projects but more than this it is now accepted good practice that an authority adopts a planned approach to managing its assets and that this takes the form of site specific documents. Such practice whilst relatively new in the field of urban parks has existed in countryside

management for over 20 years and indeed the countryside service in Walsall has many well developed plans. The parks service however has still to produce a single comprehensive management plan.

The council has aspirations to achieve the Green Flag Award – the national quality scheme for green spaces – but there is no plan in order to achieve this nor any full assessment of its current position in relation to the required standards. A pre-cursor to entering for the award is that the green space must have a (well developed) management plan, hence the authority’s aspirations are inextricably linked into its ability to deliver at least one plan.

This issue also relates to the need to create a focus for planning and development work within the service. Whilst the most successful plans have ownership across all stakeholders they still need a driving force to pull them together, deliver change and a system for monitoring their effectiveness.

In developing the thinking around this particular aspect of achieving excellence we have set some challenging targets. In the tables below we have set out a suggested timescale for Green Flag applications and production of management plans based on a number of factors and assessments carried out as part of developing the strategy. These factors include;

- The table of premier greenspaces set out earlier under ‘A Better Quality Environment’
- The highest scoring green space in each LNP area
- An equal distribution across different parts of the service (and their service areas) in line with their resources

Service Area	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	No. of new applications by service area
<b>Parks</b>	Palfrey Park (61)	Holland Park (51)	Willenhall Memorial Park (49)	King George Vth PF (49)	Arboretum (39 / 43)	<b>5</b>
<b>Countryside</b>		Cuckoos Nook & The Dingle (49)	Shire Oak Park (50)	Barr Beacon (48)	Pelsall North Common (44)	<b>4</b>
<b>Cemeteries</b>			Bentley Lawn Cemetery (49)			<b>1</b>
<b>No. of new applications by year</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>

Table 18 Proposed Green Flag application schedule

Service Area	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	No. of management plans
<b>Parks</b>	Palfrey Park Pleck Park Willenhall Memorial Park	Holland Park George Rose Park	Reedswood Park Blackwood Park	King George Vth PF Kings Hill Park, Doe Bank Park	Arboretum Leamore Park	Pelsall Common Leighswood Park	14
<b>Countryside</b>	Rough Wood*	Cuckoos Nook & The Dingle Hay Head Wood*	Shire Oak Park Park Lime Pits*	Barr Beacon Brownhills Common*	Pelsall North Common Merrions Wood*		9
<b>Cemeteries</b>			Bentley Lawn Cemetery				1
<b>No. of management plans by year</b>	4	4	5	5	4	2	24

Table 19 Proposed schedule for the production of site management plans

Green text denotes Green Flag application

\* Review & update existing management plans

# The Future Possibilities

## Introduction

This section of the strategy takes the aims and strategic objectives set out earlier in the strategy and puts them within an action plan framework. The strategic objectives are grouped within each of the five aims and the action plan describes the timescale for achieving each strategic objective, identifies the lead service and the outcome or performance measure to be achieved.

## Action Plan

The action plan is set out in tabular format below;

## Aim : A Better Quality Environment

Strategic Objective No.	Strategic Objective	Timescale	Lead	Performance Measure / Target
A1	The Council will review how grounds and infrastructure maintenance is delivered across all green spaces and develop and adopt new standards which are communicated to local communities.			
A2	The council will review its expenditure on green space maintenance linked to the management planning process			
A3	The council will review its resource allocation across different types of green space			
A4	The council will consider how new investment in parks and green spaces can be sustained in the long term to a high standard.			
A5	The council will adopt the principle and list of recommended premier green spaces			
A6	The council will review the primary purpose of non-premier sites, particularly low quality low value green spaces, and consider the opportunities for changing the primary purpose where appropriate.			
A7	The council will aim to improve the average quality score of its premier green spaces and at the end of the strategy period these sites should be of Green Flag standard.			
A8	The council will address the poor performance of green spaces against the 6 lowest scoring Green Flag criteria.			
A9	The council will deliver the management plans and Green Flag applications as set out in this strategy.			
A10	The authority will establish a cross directorate mechanism to review green space planning and the strategic provision of green space across the borough.			
A11	The authority will consider the opportunities for addressing deficiencies in green space provision through joint or shared use of community facilities.			
A12	The council will consider the provision new green space where it will address deficiencies in particular types of green space.			
A13	The council will put in place appropriate mechanisms to ensure that up to date and accurate GIS data is shared across directorates.			

## Aim : Healthy, Safe and Secure

Strategic Objective No.	Strategic Objective	Timescale	Lead	Performance Measure / Target
B1	The council and its partners will continue to promote green spaces as safe places for exercise, activity and sports			
B2	The council will continue to provide a range of opportunities for local people to take part in practical conservation activities that encourage participation and physical activity.			
B3	The council will continue to provide a wide range of events and activities that encourage all sections of the community to undertake physical activity.			
B4	The council and its partners will continue to promote the health benefits of allotments.			
B5	The council will provide equipped play areas across the borough on parks and other green spaces that are safe and accessible to all.			
B6	The council will ensure that green spaces are safe and attractive places for children and young people to play and socialise.			
B7	The council will review the role of frontline staff and their location.			
B8	The council will review the way in which it collects data regarding criminal damage and activity in its green spaces.			
B9	The council will work more closely with its partners to monitor and record criminal damage and activity and develop effective mechanisms for addressing such incidents.			
B10	The council should ensure that parks and green spaces are fully utilised as venues for delivering the Ready Steady Summer programme and other diversionary activities.			
B11	The council will review its inspection procedures for buildings and infrastructure and will in place a programme of regular inspections and planned maintenance.			
B12	The council will develop a programme of tree surveys linked to the programme of producing site specific management plans (see "Achieving Excellence").			
B13	The council will continue to provide dog bins and signage on green spaces and promote the message of responsible dog ownership and use it's powers to enforce the current legislation.			

B14	The council will continue to protect and enhance green spaces that are important for wildlife.			
B15	The council will continue to manage semi-natural green space in its ownership and influence other land managers to conserve and enhance biodiversity.			
B16	The council will review its environmental performance with regard to green space management and maintenance.			
B17	The council seeks to build the confidence amongst users with disabilities that reasonable access is being provided within a planned and progressive framework.			
B18	The council develops a Marketing Information System to enable staff to communicate with disabled people seeking to visit the green spaces in Walsall.			



## Aim : Raising the Standard

Strategic Objective No.	Strategic Objective	Timescale	Lead	Performance Measure / Target
C1	The council and the Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership will consider the appointment of a green space champion to the WBSP board and will ensure that green spaces and improvement plans are included in the Community Plan.			
C2	The council recognises the importance of green spaces in achieving its vision and will ensure that other policies and strategies take into account the cross cutting contribution of these assets.			
C3	The council will develop a robust framework to enable it to carry out regular market research to understand the needs and expectations of users and non-users of green spaces.			
C4	The council will develop a planned approach to engaging with marginalised groups to identify wider barriers to use of green spaces.			
C5	The council will develop models of good practice and make everyone aware of them.			
C6	The council will develop a comprehensive approach to signage, interpretation and information presented on site			
C7	The council will develop a comprehensive approach to promoting green spaces and green space services.			
C8	The council will review its green spaces events and activities programme from the perspective of resource impact			
C9	The council will establish a comprehensive system of data collection and analysis to assess visitor satisfaction with events in parks and green spaces and use this research to inform its approach to marketing.			

## Aim : Listening to and Engaging with People

Strategic Objective No.	Strategic Objective	Timescale	Lead	Performance Measure / Target
D1	The council will develop a planned approach to engaging with marginalised groups to identify wider barriers to use of green spaces.			
D2	The council will ensure that all service areas involved in greenspace management support the development and delivery of the Black Country Urban Park.			
D3	The council will ensure that there is effective dialogue between the WBSP, LNPs and service areas regarding green space issues.			
D4	The council will review how it works with community based organisations concerned with green spaces in order to provide a more comprehensive and consistent service.			
D5	The council will produce clear service standards so that friends groups and local people know what to expect from grounds maintenance works and also levels of support in developing new projects.			
D6	The council will adopt a planned approach to consulting the community about green spaces at a more strategic level.			
D7	The council will coordinate its consultation activities so that comparable data is collected to aid in establishing a performance management framework.			
D8	The council will establish a feedback channel to friends groups and other community based organisations about issues they raise.			
D9	The council and its partners need to ensure that the green space audit and strategy are key documents in guiding the formulation of any local area action plans.			

## Aim : Achieving Excellence

Strategic Objective No.	Strategic Objective	Timescale	Lead	Performance Measure / Target
E1	The council will review the reintegration of grounds staff into parks and produce a forward plan based on the actual resource requirements linked to improving standards, driven by site specific management plans and maintenance schedules.			
E2	The council will ensure that there is strong linkage between policy and strategy at all levels in relation to green spaces.			
E3	The council will review the structure of the Greenspaces Service especially in relation to creating opportunities for development, policy and strategic planning.			
E4	The council will develop a strong working relationship between the greenspaces service, planning policy and development control which creates a clear framework for investment to address deficiencies in current provision			
E5	The council will establish a performance management framework for green spaces and within this establish a system for gathering, analysing and reporting base line data.			
E6	The council will create a focus for strategy, policy, research and 'business development' for green spaces.			
E7	The council will consider management and maintenance planning at the earliest stage of developing new capital projects and it should do this with other partners, service providers and stakeholders.			
E8	The council will produce clear maintenance schedules with demonstrable outputs and communicate these to staff, friends groups and the wider community			
E9	The council will review the resources required to deliver the identified learning needs to support improving green spaces.			

## Monitoring & Review

The table below sets out some key performance measures and performance indicators based on the aims and strategic objectives set out earlier.

(To be completed following the consultation process with Staff / Members / LNPs / FGN)

It is suggested that the green space strategy action plan is monitored on a quarterly basis linked to the council's service planning process. Progress against the action plan should be reviewed on an annual basis.

The green space strategy should be reviewed in 2011.

## **Appendices**

**Appendix A**  
**Consultees & Contributors**

## **Walsall Green Space Strategy Contributors and Consultees**

The contributions and assistance of the following groups is gratefully acknowledged

Councillors	11
Officers	50
Friends Groups	12 groups / 30 people
LNPs	9 LNPs / 30 people
Stakeholders / Partners	7 user / specialist groups?
Household Survey	1420 responses

30 groups

100 people – direct contact

1500 residents responding to the household survey

**Appendix B**  
**List of Reintegrated Grounds Maintenance Sites**



## **Integration of Grounds Maintenance Play and Patrol Work in Key Parks**

### **List of key parks**

The Arboretum (including Golf Course)  
Grange Playing Fields  
Airport Playing Fields  
Palfrey Park  
Pleck Park  
Reedswood Park  
George Rose Park  
Willenhall Memorial Park  
Willenhall Radiator Playing Fields  
King George Vth Playing Fields  
Leamore Park  
Blackwood Park  
Holland Park