Agenda item 17

Cabinet – 12 September 2012

Green Space Strategy

Portfolio: Councillor Harris – Leisure and Culture

Related Portfolio: The Leader of the Council – Public Health

Service: Green Space Services

Wards: All

Key decision: Yes

Forward plan: Yes

1. Summary

1.1 This report seeks Cabinet approval for the adoption and implementation of Walsall's second Green Space Strategy which updates and replaces the earlier one.

1.2 In November 2006, Cabinet approved Walsall's first Green Space Strategy. This 5-year strategy effectively started in April 2007 and finished in March 2012 and was a milestone in the management and development of the service. It lead directly to the successful achievement of many service delivery improvements and initiatives and gained national and Government recognition with the Green Service being cited as an example of good practice by CABE Space and Green Space.

1.3 Independent analysis of the first Green Space Strategy concluded that 95% of the 5-year action plan was delivered by the end of the life of the plan which saw an increase in the quality and value of Walsall parks and green spaces, improved customer satisfaction, the achievement of ongoing external investment such as the nearly completed restoration of Walsall Arboretum, increased usage figures of over 21m visitors per year and the achievement and retention of three Green Flag Awards in Palfrey Park, Willenhall Memorial Park and Merrion's Wood.

1.4 The positive contribution parks and other green spaces make towards people's overall physical and mental wellbeing and the quality of their environment is well evidenced nationally along with the economic benefits they attract. This link is referenced in the Black Country Core Strategy.

1.5 The importance of providing a strategic framework in the management of this valued asset and in the delivery of the Green Space service has been well recognised. It provides a framework for establishing the quality and level of green space provision and a mechanism for improved service delivery and community participation. Most importantly, it identifies priorities, sets the vision

and enables the focusing of limited resources where it really matters during the 5-year life time of the plan.

1.6 The new strategy provides additional value compared to the previous one. It not only updates the data on green space changes over the last 5 years, but accounts also for policy changes, recent planning changes, the PPG 17 audit of 2010, the new Playing Pitch Strategy and draft Play Strategy. It reflects wider consultation than the previous strategy with marginalised social groups. It introduces a new hierarchy of green spaces based on their strategic values and management needs. It identifies a range of sites available to be redefined in terms of their primary use in order to balance deficiencies of some types of green space and others potentially available for disposal. Finally, the Strategy envisages appointment of a (non-political) Green Space Champion and of a partnership Board to oversee delivery of the strategy.

1.7 The comprehensive work carried out by the cross-party Green Space Strategy Working Group (including representation by the Walsall Parks Friends Group Network) as part of the Council's Scrutiny process provided a number of key priorities and recommendations which have been incorporated within the strategy, its vision and 5-year action plan.

1.8 In the development of the new strategy, extensive consultation was undertaken with a wide range of stakeholders and organisations both within the Council and externally, including the various Friends and User Groups, local residents, key partners such as the NHS and children and young people.

1.9 The evidence gathered from this extensive consultation, along with baseline data arising from an independent quality assessment using Green Flag Award criteria, as well as a quantity analysis of existing green space, has resulted in a prioritised action plan which has been developed under a number of clear strategic headings to be achieved over the next 5 years.

1.10 A full copy of the Green Space Strategy is available in each of the Political Group Rooms. A summary of the strategy is set out in paragraph 3 of this report.

2. Recommendation

That Cabinet:

2.1 Approves the adoption of the Green Space Strategy.

3. Report Detail

3.1 The analysis and findings of the strategy have been structured around seven strategic aims with corresponding actions to be achieved over the 5-year life time of the plan:

- Green Spaces that make the Borough an Attractive Place to Live, Work and Socialise
- Safer and More Secure Places

- Green Spaces Contributing to Greater Health & Well-Being
- Well-Maintained and Accessible Green Spaces
- Conserving and Enhancing Biodiversity and Geodiversity
- More Engaged Communities & Neighbourhoods
- Stronger Partnerships and Innovation

3.2 Green Spaces that make the Borough an Attractive Place to Live, Work and Socialise

3.2.1 The review of green space found that nearly 25% of the borough land area was green space. Of the 505 individual green spaces assessed, only 315 offered unrestricted access to community use covering 1258 hectares. This level of provision equates to 4.96 hectares per 1,000 population. There are however, considerable variations in the levels of green space provision with some clear areas of deficiency and limited levels of access to both green space and facilities, particularly in the west of the borough. The strategy concludes that it is important that existing green space levels are maintained and that deficiencies are addressed where possible through planning policy and the need to ensure that corporate development frameworks and planning proposals recognise the importance of green space and are considered at the outset.

3.2.2 A strategic hierarchy for green spaces has been developed as part of the strategy which will provide a focus and justification for future investment and standards of maintenance. This will see a focusing of resources towards green space of wider community importance which have most potential, where real improvements can be made and sustained and allow ongoing maintenance at the required level whilst rationalising and standardising the maintenance requirements on other less significant spaces. It will also allow communities to have access to high quality green space within reasonable walking times.

3.3 Safer and More Secure Places

3.3.1 In all the consultation exercises undertaken in the development of the strategy, anti-social behaviour and issues of personal safety were identified as key concerns and were seen as a barrier to the use of green spaces particularly by young people. This reflects other consultation exercises carried out in the past. Tackling anti-social behaviour and providing safe and secure green spaces were identified as high priorities through the development of the strategy and, therefore, a number of actions are focused around this theme including acknowledgment that a number of partners and services need to be involved.

3.3.2 The strategy proposes that the Green Space Service will continue to promote and increase the positive use of green spaces and further develop its partnership working with other enforcement agencies in tackling and recording incidents. The service will also take a very proactive approach, in conjunction with Regulatory Services, in implementing enforcement action and undertaking educational measures in dealing with issues of dog fouling and littering. Enforcement action will be supported by solutions to design out crime and, where appropriate, change maintenance regimes to improve community safety.

3.4 Green Spaces Contributing to Greater Health & Well-Being

3.4.1 The well-being of residents in the borough presents some of the most significant challenges to the Council and its partners. Research has identified that Walsall suffers from a wide range of health and deprivation issues with dramatic variations such as life expectancy between different areas of the borough. The strategy and feedback from partners, including the NHS, identifies that high quality green spaces can contribute positively to improving health and well-being and this outcome is a priority for the Green Space Strategy. The strategy recognises that health issues require a multi-agency approach and acknowledges that there are many examples of good joint working practice for Green Spaces to build upon in partnership.

3.4.2 Research drawn from the Playing Pitch Strategy has identified a deficiency in junior football pitches and associated facilities and an overall poor level of quality suppressing demand. It also recognised a need to increase female participation in sport. The recent London Olympics have generated considerable enthusiasm and interest in sport and have inspired a whole generation into participation with many people turning to clubs, schools and local facilities to take up their desired sport. It is important that the Council is prepared in providing the opportunities to meet this surge in participation, particularly around sports pitch provision and supporting amenities.

3.4.3 The Strategy recognises that encouraging greater participation and attracting new people to sport and recreation will depend on providing the right facilities, a safe and well maintained environment and good promotion.

3.5 Well-Maintained and Accessible Green Spaces

3.5.1 The Green Space Service has been successful in securing capital investment from a range of both internal and external sources in developing and improving green spaces and in the implementation of the earlier strategy. This funding has exceeded £10 million over the past 5 years.

3.5.2 This process needs to continue and recent consultation results and independent quality assessments have demonstrated that further investment is still needed to ensure that green spaces meet their potential. The strategy proposes the development of a capital programme for future investment in strategic green spaces. This will be centred around the ongoing creation of site management and development plans and site specific Improvement Masterplans in partnership with the local community, partners and Friends and User Groups. The Strategy identifies that this is key to justifying and securing funding and ensuring resources are focused where it really matters.

3.5.3 A key area of concern and frustration reflected through the consultation results and identified by the Green Space Strategy Working Group and Walsall's Greenspace Friends Group Network is fragmentation of service delivery in relation to green spaces. The Green Space Service is the largest land manager within the Council and is responsible for the overall management, strategic development and planning of green spaces as well as undertaking a number of operational areas.

3.5.4 Until recently, Street Pride undertook grounds maintenance operations within green spaces sites on behalf of Green Spaces. It was recognised that this fragmentation of service makes management planning and service improvement difficult.

3.5.5 After considering evidence gathered from a range of service areas and review of national good practice guidance, the Green Space Strategy Working Group has recommended that a single holistic service be created to deliver the strategic planning, management and maintenance of all green spaces across the borough.

3.5.6 The strategy therefore, proposes as a key year 1 action, that the grounds maintenance and green spaces functions should be combined within a single service. This integration should be followed by a review of grounds maintenance operations linked to the new strategic hierarchy.

3.5.6 With effect from 13 August 2012, the Green Space Service transferred from Leisure and Community Health to Street Pride, effectively bringing both green space management and grounds maintenance operations within the same service area. This will be subject to a Working Smarter service review into the delivery of green space management and maintenance in line with Vanguard principles.

3.6 Conserving and Enhancing Biodiversity and Geodiversity

3.6.1 Walsall enjoys a unique and special biodiversity and geological diversity of national and global significance which needs to be fully recognised. Although the Green Space Service has an excellent track record of securing funding to raise awareness and develop these sites, the strategy identifies that the Service must continue to secure the future of these resources by working in partnership with other organisations and funding bodies to deliver projects which recognise, enhance and protect our natural and cultural heritage.

3.6.2 The Strategy proposes that the service should continue to designate local nature reserves protecting and enhancing key habitats and species and provide opportunities for events and environmental education activities and programmes encouraging residents to participate in protecting and enhancing the natural environment.

3.7 More Engaged Communities & Neighbourhoods

3.7.1 The Green Space Service has over 20 years experience of establishing and supporting Parks Friends' Groups and other community-based organisations working in partnership in the development and improvement of parks and open spaces. At present, the service supports over 20 Friends and Users Groups as well as the umbrella Friends Group Network and a range of community groups. However, as the number of groups has grown, the ability of the Service to effectively support and service the network has become more difficult. The strategy identifies that it is important for the Service to continue to develop, involve and empower community groups in the management and improvement of green spaces and develop a range of opportunities for greater participation by volunteers.

3.7.2 Over the past few years, there has been a resurgence of interest in allotments. The Green Space Service provides 37 individual allotment sites, 27 of which are managed through 5 Local Management Associations, with the remaining managed directly by the Service. Across all sites there is varying evidence of high waiting lists, deficiencies in food growing space across the east of the borough, low income generation and a need to review the lease arrangements with the Allotment Associations, allotments grants and rents. The Strategy identifies that there is considerable potential to improve access to allotments and the Service will look towards establishing a borough-wide allotment and community gardening forum. This will support networking, sharing of good practice, promote allotments and community gardening and encourage the uptake of vacant plots where these exist.

3.7.3 Consultation found that, although there was still a high level of involvement by Friends Groups in the umbrella Friends Group Network, there was a general view that the Network needed refreshing. The Strategy proposes that the opportunity exists to establish a wider, more inclusive Green Space Forum offering an arena for all community organisations involved in green management and development to come together. This should include the appointment of a lead person to act as an independent Green Space Champion, promoting green spaces and influencing a range of policy agendas locally and regionally.

3.7.4 Walsall parks and open spaces offer an excellent and unparalleled resource for education and learning and many programmes and events are run or supported by the Green Space Service. The Strategy identifies that it is important that the Service continues to work in collaboration with partners in supporting delivering community events and activities which bring in new visitors and make more vibrant and exciting spaces. Green space sites will be effectively promoted and marketed as venues for events with marketing plans produced during the delivery of the strategy which capitalise on the use of social media.

3.8 <u>Stronger Partnerships and Innovation</u>

3.8.1 The Strategy recognises that it is important that the Green Space Service continues to build on its past success in establishing stronger and effective partnerships in the delivery of this Strategy with a range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations as well as developing stronger relationships with local businesses and the private sector. This will be particularly important in delivering events, activities and the realisation of commercial opportunities.

3.8.2 There are a large number of buildings associated with green spaces such as park lodges, pavilions, sports changing or other structures and it is clear that many of the buildings are not fulfilling their full potential in terms of both use and income potential. A review of lease and other agreements will be undertaken to widen use, generate increased income and where possible provide toilet facilities which is a high priority amongst park users.

3.8.3 There is evidence to suggest that the poor condition of some sports facilities, including pitches and changing accommodation, is suppressing demand. Investment is required to achieve better quality provision. The Council heavily subsidises sports provision as the cost greatly exceeds any income received. It is important that future pricing structures reflect market rates more closely.

3.8.4 As mentioned earlier, green spaces provide an excellent venue for the holding of events and this use should be encouraged and promoted although any intensification of use needs to be balanced alongside resident community expectations. There is only a limited number of green space sites suitable for holding large scale events and investment will be needed to improve conditions to support events although there are considerable opportunities for smaller scale events and programmes delivered internally or externally particularly around the health agenda which need to be pursued. A policy is recommended to consider the scale, frequency, locations, costs and benefits of further developing medium to large green space events.

3.8.5 The role and importance of the third sector in the future delivery of the service and Strategy has been well recognised and the strategy identifies that it is important that the necessary skills are developed to support this change including community engagement and development, leadership, management planning and business planning. It is also important to ensure that volunteers and community groups have the right skill levels. The proposed Green Space Forum will play an important role in that respect.

3.8.6 The proposed review and reorganisation of green space management and grounds maintenance services will result in improved service delivery through the effective integration of operational functions, monitoring and reporting, together with better financial information at a site specific level. It will also lead to improved learning and skills sharing and opportunities. Apprenticeship and training placements should be developed with appropriate training providers to ensure that appropriate skills are developed for the future.

4. Council Priorities

4.1. The Green Space Strategy and its 5-year action plan are both consistent with, and support, the achievement of the Council's priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan namely, economy; communities; and health and wellbeing.

4.2. This report is relevant to Public Health as high quality green spaces can contribute positively to improving health and well-being

5. Risk Management

5.1 Risk 1 - Failure to obtain support for the Strategy

5.1.1 This is considered to be a low risk considering the level of consultation undertaken with staff, the local community, user groups and Elected Members during the production of the strategy. The draft Strategy and action plan were also made available for consultation and comment.

5.2 Risk 2 - Failure to attract sufficient resources to fund the implementation of the Strategy

5.2.1 This risk is considered to be medium. The Strategy sets out a 5-year action plan with annual targets. Several targets are identified as having revenue and capital

resource implications for the Council. A capital programme already exists for the development of the strategy and it is recommended this and future programmes be focused on strategic green spaces. The Council will also work in partnership with the community, user groups and other organisations to secure external resources. The adoption of the strategic hierarchy will provide a focus and justification for future investment and align revenue with defined maintenance standards.

5.2.2 Many of the targets contained within the Action Plan can be met by utilising existing staff and financial resources.

5.3 Risk 3 - Failure to resource the maintenance of new facilities

5.3.1 This risk is considered low/medium on the basis that resources to guarantee the long-term sustainability of new investment will be identified before the investment takes place. The Strategy also recommends that long-term commuted sums be secured from developers towards the maintenance of green space that is needed as a result of, or would be impacted upon by, new development. At present, this should be done where through the use of Section 106 planning obligations and, in the future, through the use of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), which the Council is beginning to work on.

5.4 Risk 4 – Failure to effectively direct limited resources

5.4.1 This risk is considered low on the basis that the Green Space Strategy will enable limited resources to be managed and utilised more efficiently and effectively by focusing them directly in line with customer needs. The strategic process identifies what is most important to the community and enables the use of decreasing resources to be directly aimed on what really matters. In addition, the integration of grounds maintenance operations and the Green Space Service will ensure a more co-ordinated service, a unifying of strategic direction and much more effective utilisation of resources towards green spaces and, in so doing, minimising the impact of reduced resources on service delivery.

6. Financial implications

6.1 The Council is facing a severe reduction in resources over the next four years which will inevitably impact on the scale of services which can be delivered. The Green Space Strategy and the delivery of its 5-year action plan will be undertaken from within the resources which will be available to the Green Space Service or through external funding agencies and partners.

6.2 The Strategy has recognised that, if Green Spaces are to meet the needs and expectations of the borough's communities, further investment is needed. This will be delivered through the capital programme and supported through planning contributions such as Section 106 funding, CIL and regeneration initiatives along with other external funding sources. It must be recognised however, that such funding will be dependent on new development and that it will be limited and be the subject of competing demands (including for other environmental improvements, infrastructure funding and flood risk mitigation, and for education, health and community facilities). In most cases a balance will have to be struck

between the competing demands of local circumstances, including the evidence on green spaces provided through the Strategy.

6.3 The establishment of the strategic hierarchy of space as recommended within the strategy will focus capital investment on the strategic sites. The hierarchy will also align revenue funding between the differing maintenance standards for each of the four defined types of open space within the strategic hierarchy. This provides the flexibility to move sites within the strategic hierarchy to reflect the resources available over time. The reintegration of the Green Space Service and grounds maintenance functions will also allow great flexibility and use of combined finances and resources to deliver key changes.

6.4 These changes will help facilitate the development of individual site maintenance schedules for inclusion within master plans and for the establishment of site maintenance cost (particularly for grounds maintenance) providing the golden thread of strategic management.

7. Legal implications

7.1 There are no legal implications.

8. Property implications

8.1 As mentioned earlier in the report, there are a large number of buildings which fall within the portfolio of green spaces. These include offices, lodges, pavilions, toilet facilities, sports changing rooms or other structures in addition to the green space assets themselves.

8.2 Key actions around the ongoing development and regeneration of Walsall's parks and green spaces will both improve the quality and value of these assets and its associated infrastructure and facilities and encourage wider use and opportunities.

8.3 In the development of the Strategy, it has been recognised that many buildings are under-utilised and do not generate the level of income which could potentially be achieved. A review of lease and other agreements is proposed to widen use and generate increased income. In addition, the poor condition of buildings, particularly those associated with sports uses, have been recognised as suppressing participation in sport and in much need of capital investment to improve the quality of provision.

9. Staffing implications

9.1 The Strategy has recognised that the creation of a single service area to manage and maintain all green spaces will place greater emphasis on a broad range of skills including community engagement and development, leadership, management planning and business planning. It will also provide the opportunity for structured training in horticulture and provide the framework for more formal apprenticeships and training placements to meet existing and future skill needs.

9.2 Alongside the development of staff, there is a need to assess the skills levels of volunteers and provide opportunities and support for skills development and learning increasing volunteer and community partnership contribution in the management, development and operational support of green spaces.

10. Equality implications

10.1 The Green Space Strategy recognises that the Council provides 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.

10.2 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.

10.3 Green spaces also 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.

10.4 The Strategy identifies the need to develop a planned approach to engaging with groups to identify wider barriers to the use of green spaces.

10.5 It also recognises the need to provide a safe environment and one in which people, particularly young confident in through effective enforcement, visible presence and joint working with other enforcement agencies and partners.

10.6 Local equality partners have been consulted during the development of the strategy and a quality impact assessment undertaken.

11. Consultation

11.1 In the development of the Strategy, an extensive consultation exercise was carried out including a household survey distributed to a random sample of 10,000 households across the borough. This generated 1,258 responses, a return rate of 12.6%. A determined effort was made to seek the views of young people and an on-line survey targeted at children and young people was promoted through schools and cluster groups. This generated 579 responses and represented the largest consultation process with young people regarding green spaces. In the development of the Strategy and evidence gathering, a series of interviews were undertaken with key internal and external partners and services as well as workshops including attendance by representatives from the NHS, Planning Policy and Services, Regeneration, Sport and Leisure, Neighbourhood Management Partnership, schools, Ward Members, etc.

11.2 Questionnaires were distributed to Friends Groups, community and voluntary groups, the cross-party Green Space Strategy Scrutiny Working Group, sports organisations, third sector organisations, elected Members, Area Managers amongst other stakeholders to discuss key issues affecting green space, identify

priorities and to inform the development of the strategy. Meetings were also held with key staff and stakeholders to identify key issues, challenges and priorities.

11.3 The consultation results have been reflected in the Strategy determining the use and accessibility to green spaces, identifying needs and deficiencies, barriers and issues of concern. The results have also been used to establish the strategic headings and the strategic objectives.

Background papers

- Green Space Strategy Report (Cabinet) 2006
- Green Space Strategy Report (Communities Scrutiny and Performance Panel) 2011

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