

**DUE Scrutiny Committee - 27<sup>th</sup> November 2013**

**Report of the Director of the Urban Environment**

**Parks, Nature Reserves & Open Spaces Scrutiny**

**Purpose of Report**

- 1 To acknowledge the findings of the Parks, Nature Reserves and Open Spaces Scrutiny and for the committee to make appropriate recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Environment and Culture that will help guide future strategic direction and investment.

**Background**

**Scope of services related to Parks, Nature Reserves and Open Spaces**

- 2 Following in depth presentations to this Committee in September and October it has been established that services related to our rich stock of Parks, Nature Reserves and Open Spaces cover a wide range of activities which can be summarised under the following categories:
  - **Habitat management and day-to-day maintenance** of staffed nature reserves.
  - **Management and day-to-day grounds maintenance** of land and facilities.
  - **Management and day-to-day maintenance** of the Borough's tree stock.
  - **Long-term development and community engagement** of the Borough's parks and green spaces.

**Management and day-to-day grounds maintenance**

- 3 Members have also been presented with data relating to the performance of Green Care Services relative to other authorities across the Country, in terms of both cost and external accreditation. In addition, the October meeting went into considerable detail about the need for an appropriate options appraisal for the delivery of this service area and members were made aware of the ongoing Corporate Review.

## Long-term development and community engagement

- 4 The September and October scrutiny meetings highlighted the significant improvements in parks infrastructure over the previous 10 years and the need to address continuing aspirations for further improvements against a challenging backdrop of major reductions in Council resources and greater competition for external funding.
- 5 Policies within Dudley Council's Unitary Development Plan (UDP) are currently being reviewed for the emerging planning policy **Development Strategy Document**. This provides an unprecedented opportunity for the existing UDP policies relating to Parks, Nature Reserves and Open Spaces to be reviewed and any proposed changes to be included in the formal consultation for this new document.
- 6 In particular, it would be appropriate to review the existing UDP differentiation between Town and Local Parks as £15 million of investment over the last 10 years has meant that many parks have improved in quality and facilities beyond their original designation. In addition the importance and role of Parks, Nature Reserves and Open Spaces to all the borough's communities cannot be under estimated in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- 7 It is proposed that a new document, the **Green Spaces Asset Management Plan (GSAMP)** will be developed to help define the status and value of our green spaces in future linking them to access corridors and recognising they are at the heart of our communities .This document will also support and inform the emerging planning policy Development Strategy Document replacing the UDP.
- 8 One way of doing this would be to utilise a national benchmarking tool: the **Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) performance network for parks, open spaces and horticultural services**. Within this there is a parks category which assesses individual sites against a range of facilities and then attributes them to categories A, B, C and D. By utilising the APSE criteria this allows participating authorities to compare their performance against a very wide range of services, but as a quality assessment tool for parks it has some limitations.
- 9 Identified gaps with the APSE assessment tool could be addressed by creating an enhanced "**Dudley version**" of the APSE benchmarking tool for the purpose of categorising and comparing our facilities which we consider to be more appropriate to current parks provision and public expectation. In addition, further criteria could be included in order to allow the same methodology to be employed when evaluating Nature Reserves and sites of nature conservation interest.
- 10 As part of this review Members were asked to support the concept of parks provision being based upon the underlying principle, within both the Green Spaces Strategy and the UDP, that all residents should have access to formal parks within a 15 minute walk time which equates to approx 1000 m in a straight line.

## Nature Reserves and Historic Parks

- 11 The GSAMP will recognise Dudley's **Nature Reserves and Historic Parks have both local and in some cases national policy status**. They also have significance in terms of nature conservation, heritage and fundamentally as valuable 'green' assets accessible to our diverse communities borough wide. The GSAMP will seek to achieve an even geographic distribution of designated Local Nature Reserves based upon the Natural England's standards for catchment.

The GSAMP will seek to define an even quality of provision based upon the Natural England, and European, designations together with the Council's own policy designations.

- 12 The policies which would support this would be as follows:
- Declaration of additional LNRs to fill in the gaps in coverage where practical.
  - Considering priority funding to those Nature Reserves which fall below the APSE Category A level.
  - Re-evaluation of the SINC and SLINC local layer of sites and the 30 woodlands, to supplement provision.

## Community Parks ( Formerly Town and Local Parks)

- 13 The GSAMP will contain a similar evaluation for **Community Parks** adopting the following principles:
- To recognise the transition of the parks previously designated as town parks under the UDP by re-designating these parks as **Community Parks** and by also re-designating many of the previous local parks as Community Parks.
  - Identifying alternate uses for those parks and open spaces not recognised as Community Parks such as meeting demand for additional allotments, burial land and grazing subject to proper consultation.
  - Defining an even geographic distribution of designated Community Parks based upon the 15 minute walking distance criteria so that residents of the borough have equal access to this type of facility.
  - Seeking to achieve consistent quality standards for the designated **Community Parks**, based upon evaluation against the APSE model complimented by additional criteria related to Dudley's specific circumstances.

14 The actions which would support this would be as follows:

- Prioritisation of grounds maintenance within the Council's resource capacity to the designated **Community Parks**.
- Priority for future capital funding for those **Community Parks** which fall below the APSE Cat A level subject to local variations associated with regeneration or community focused opportunities.
- Aspiration for the **Community Parks** to achieve the Green Flag award status as an external accreditation of their standard with due regard to resources.

**Other open space not designated a Nature Reserve, Historic park or Community Park**

- 15 Officers have highlighted to Scrutiny Committee that there is unmet demand for additional allotments, burial land and grazing land. Therefore, once the Nature Reserves, Historic Parks and Community Parks have been established within the GSAMP, it is proposed that a more detailed evaluation is carried out on **the land not included in the designated** Nature Reserves, Historic Parks and Community Parks to **determine if they could be used to address shortfalls in land for allotments, burial land and grazing.**
- 16 In addition, there are currently in the region of **a thousand other green space sites** (greater than 0.2ha) and **several thousand green space sites** (less than 0.2ha) which could be identified in the GSAMP and evaluated through established consultation processes for change of use or in **some cases there may be disposal opportunities** which could create the opportunity for reinvestment and efficiency savings.

**Local and sub regional connection of green space and access corridors**

- 17 It is proposed that this network of selected sites should be interconnected by a system of non-car corridors in effect a **'Green Landscape Web' which would help make greater use of our cycle ways, canals, river corridors, disused railway lines, footways etc.)** There are also opportunities to link to the developing Black Country **Geopark** project and wider links across the sub region more generally in terms of green infrastructure.

**Community Engagement**

- 18 The development of the parks infrastructure across the borough over the last 10 years has gone hand in hand with the development of strong community engagement resulting in a legacy of in **excess of 30 Parks and Nature Reserve, Friends Groups**. Members will be aware of a meeting of the Green Space Forum on 22<sup>nd</sup> October where, as part of the scrutiny process, the views of these groups about the future development of Parks and Nature reserves were sought in addition to their role in such development.

19 Thirteen groups were represented by 33 attendees on the night. The aims and objectives of the groups varied depending on the group and the nature of the site and included:

- Enhancement and development of the site.
- Protecting and monitoring the site.
- Organising community involvement and events.
- Supporting on-site staff with specific tasks.
- Projects such as creation of master plans and improvement projects.

20 Groups highlighted the following support which they continued to require from the local authority:

- General advice and attendance at meetings.
- Support for funding bids.
- Improvements to the Council web site and promotional literature, in order to attract more visitors.

21 Very few groups indicated support towards building management or such as opening and closing facilities, many thought that they already do a lot towards site management and couldn't do any more. However, the groups described the following ways in which they could support the Council in the future:

- Assist with/organise events and activities.
- About 50% of those at the meeting were prepared to collect litter or patrol sites, the other 50% confirmed that they already did this.

22 The future development of nature reserves and parks in the borough against such a challenging economic climate will only be possible by working in partnership with others and not least the people who visit the sites such as Friends Groups, Ward members and other organisations that often have access to funding streams which are not available to Local Authorities. It is important that the Council's continued support of these groups is designed to ensure their long-term sustainability and wider representation of their individual Nature reserves and Parks.

23 It is hoped that the Friends Groups could be developed and constitute themselves as a "Borough Green Spaces Forum", along the lines of others across the West Midlands which would give them a formal voice on green space issues and provide the Council with a consultation body for future developments in this service area.

## **Finance**

- 24 The services detailed in the body of the report are funded by budgets held by the Street & Green Care Division of Environmental Management.
- 25 Attracting external funding linked to a strategic approach to our wealth of green space will be critical in future years.

## **Law**

- 26 Under Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972 the Council is empowered to do anything which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive to, or incidental to the discharge of its functions.

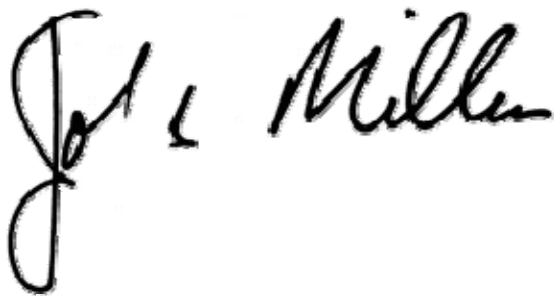
## **Equality Impact**

- 27 The project is borough wide, inclusive and accessible to all in line with the Council's equality and diversity policies. Most major parks and nature reserves have been audited for physical accessibility and new developments are always designed in line with the Green Spaces Access Design Guidelines/ Standards.
- 28 The Strategy being developed and detailed within the Green Spaces Asset Management Plan (GSAMP) will be subjected to an Equality Impact Assessment in accordance with Council policy.

## **Recommendations**

29 That DUE Scrutiny Committee Members support the contents of this report and the following scrutiny outcomes are recommended to the Cabinet Member for the Environment.

- A) A **Green Spaces Asset Management Plan (GSAMP)** is developed to incorporate the outcomes from this scrutiny process.
- B) The GSAMP should recognise our **Nature Reserves, Historic Parks** and designated **Community Parks** which will help inform the production of the emerging planning policy Development Strategy Document.
- C) The GSAMP should identify potential **alternate uses** for some of those parks and open spaces not recognised as Community Parks such as meeting demand for **additional allotments, burial land and grazing** subject to proper consultation.
- D) The GSAMP should identify **smaller parcels of land and open space** which could be considered for disposal where there is a no amenity value. Capital receipts from which could be used for reinvestment into our Community Parks or for other demands subject to proper consultation. .
- E) The GSAMP would support and promote the introduction of **corridors to encourage cycling, walking and boating** across the borough between selected green space linking them together to develop a Green Landscape Web of cycle ways, canals, river corridors, disused railway lines and footways unique within an urban area.
- F) The GSAMP supports the **ongoing development of Friends Groups** and explores the possibility of developing the existing Green Spaces Forum into an independent consultative body building on the community led focus for our green spaces
- G) That future **capital funding** is prioritised in supporting our designated Nature Reserves, Historic Parks and Community Parks to attain APSE Category A level standards subject to local variations associated with regeneration and community focussed opportunities.
- H) That **revenue support** is aligned as far as practical to support the ongoing maintenance of Nature Reserves, Historic Parks and Community Parks.
- I) That **Green Care service delivery options** are included as part of the Council's corporate review of service delivery options.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Millar'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'John' written more compactly than the last name 'Millar'.

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**John Millar**  
**Director of Urban Environment**

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**List of Background Papers**