

DUE Scrutiny Committee –29th October 2013

Report of the Director of The Urban Environment

Parks, Nature Reserves & Open Spaces Strategy

Purpose of Report

- 1 To update members on the development of a strategy and a hierarchy to guide both future investment and inform re-alignment of future revenue budgets.

Background

- 2 As explained in the report to Committee in September, whilst there have been significant improvements to a number of parks, resulting in the attainment of Green Flag status for several, there is still an aspiration for further improvements against a challenging backdrop of major reductions in core Council funding and greater competition for external funding.
- 3 At the same time, pressure on the Council's revenue budgets, especially for non statutory functions such as grounds maintenance will be intense and therefore any future improvements must take into consideration the implications on long and short-term maintenance costs. Existing revenue spend in this area is already being challenged and decisions need to be taken within an agreed strategic context.
- 4 Whilst the Unitary Development Plan and the Green Spaces Strategy (adopted June 2009) provide a strategic policy context, it is now proposed to create an additional document which could specifically be used to direct future parks improvements & associated funding bids, together with any decisions around re-alignment of existing maintenance regimes.
- 5 Policies within Dudley Council's Unitary Development Plan (UDP) are currently being reviewed for Dudley Council's emerging Development Strategy Development Plan Document (DPD) (Site Allocations DPD) which is approaching 6-weeks public consultation on a Preferred Options Stage document during Spring 2014. 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 **Development of a hierarchy**

In general terms the fundamental aspiration underlying the parks policies in the UDP and the Green Spaces Strategy is that all residents in the borough should have access to parks, nature reserves and open spaces.

- 7 Following public consultation in June 2008 related to the Green Space Strategy, we established that people are prepared to walk up to 15minutes, to parks, play areas and outdoor sports facilities, but will travel further, 30minutes, to historic parks and nature reserves. Using this information it is possible to plot a walk-time buffer around identified parks and nature reserves and review the adequacy of provision, across the borough, based upon how much the buffers are overlapping, or not. It is proposed to expand on this in the presentation at the meeting.
- 8 But accessibility and quantity has to be balanced by quality and functionality, which is delivered through good design and sustained by good management and maintenance. Since both the UDP and Green Spaces Strategy were adopted, over £14million of improvements have been carried out in many parks and nature reserves resulting in the number and nature of their facilities changing considerably. In addition, over the last 10 years, public expectation has developed and community engagement has increased. So it would be appropriate to update the categorisation of our greens spaces at this time.
- 9 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. APSE is an industry standard which allows participating authorities to compare their performance against a very wide range of services, but as a quality assessment for parks we consider it to have limitations. We consider the list of facilities used, to be rather dated, but this could be addressed by creating a “Dudley version”, for the purposes of this exercise, by introducing additional facilities which we consider to be more appropriate to current parks provision and public expectation. In addition APSE does not have a specific element to assess quality of nature conservation sites, so it would be necessary, for the purposes of this exercise to create some. It is proposed to expand on this in the presentation at the meeting and we have attached the APSE list as Appendix A to this report.
- 10 It would be possible to map the quantity and location of various categories of green space and analyse their respective quality “scores” and it is proposed to present preliminary findings at the meeting. This process would inevitably start to establish a hierarchy of types of green spaces and identify where there are gaps in provision or even a need for improvements to certain sites in order to bring them up to the standard of others.
- 11 Equally such mapping could identify areas of over-supply in certain categories and raise questions about the possibility of finding alternative uses to address the unmet demand for additional allotment and grazing land which was highlighted at the last meeting.

12 At the meeting on 9th September 2013 Members raised questions about the implications of future reductions in funding, on service levels, in addition to alternative service delivery models, benchmarking of services and opportunities for increased income generation all of which will be discussed at the evening's presentation. This review of green spaces and the establishment of a hierarchy could ultimately inform not only future improvement programmes, but also priorities for future management and maintenance.

13 **Public Engagement**

At the last meeting we detailed the significant levels of public engagement with parks, nature reserves and open spaces which has been established over the last 10 years and highlighted the involvement of Friends Groups in the delivery of all the major improvement projects (Transforming Your Space, Liveability and Healthy Towns). To support the work we are doing for this Committee we propose to seek the views of the Friends Groups on the future of parks in the borough, this will shadow a national survey which Heritage Lottery Fund have just completed, and discuss how they see their role in the management of parks developing in the future. We will provide verbal feedback from this exercise at the meeting.

Finance

14 The services detailed in the body of the report are funded by budgets held by the Street & Green Care Division of Environmental Management.

Law

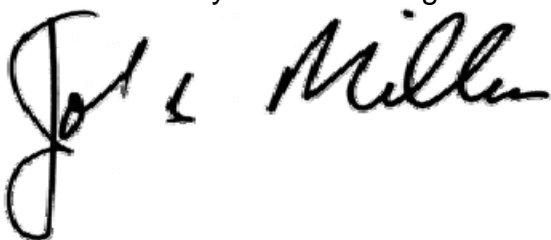
15 Under Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972 the Council is empowered to do anything which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive to, or incidental to the discharge of its functions

Equality Impact

16. 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 Greenspaces Access Design Guidelines/ Standards

Recommendation

17. That Members note the contents of this report and the information presented verbally at the meeting.



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List of Background Papers

The Greenspace Strategy

<http://www.dudley.gov.uk/resident/planning/planning-policy/local-development-framework/adopted-parks-and-green-space-strategy/>

and the UDP

<http://www.dudley.gov.uk/resident/planning/planning-policy/unitary-development-plan/>