

Scrutiny Board: Health – 15 December 2009

Source: Parks and Green Space Strategy (extracts)

Theme: Creating a Healthier City

The Aim of this Theme is: *To promote parks and green spaces as places to improve health and well-being and prevent disease through physical activity, play, relaxation and contemplation*

There is increasing evidence to show that regular access to the natural environment is important for children's development by encouraging outdoor play and improving concentration and behaviour. For adults too, one in six of whom is diagnosed as suffering from anxiety or depression each year, natural space has a restorative effect, improving the ability to cope with stressful situations and improved concentration and work output. (Natural England Health Campaign).

This is further supported by research carried out by Bristol University for The Countryside Recreation Network in February 2005. The research demonstrated that contact with the natural world can benefit mental and physical health. Access to a quality green environment not only benefits health in preventative terms, but speeds recovery and plays a vital part in our mental well-being. The research identified that nature can be enjoyed at 3 different levels – by viewing it as from a window, by being in the presence of nearby nature, or through active participation. Our parks and green spaces provide this contact where it is needed most, in our cities, and therefore everyone benefits. Imagine what our cities would be like in the absence of trees, natural areas, wildlife, and places for recreation. This should help us realise the importance that parks and green space play in our lives, often without us being conscious of it.

There are around 60 million resident visits to parks. The number one reason people visit is to exercise and in 2005, this represented over 30 million visits. Around 25 million visits are to contemplate or relax. The majority of people get there by healthy means - 57% either by walking or cycling.

Keeping active reduces the risk of death from coronary heart disease, of developing diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity and certain cancers and helps maintain health and independence in older adults. Dr William Bird¹ in particular highlights the importance of walking as an accessible and effective means of moderate exercise and the following points help demonstrate this:

- Walking to parks and green spaces is an important form of exercise
- Initiatives around getting people active (particularly in Scandinavia and Australia) have demonstrated that walking has been the most successful means of achieving this
- Public rights of way are of key importance, but often stiles can be a real physical barrier to the elderly and there is therefore a design issue
- As an illustration of the impact of physical activity, if 60 men, 61 years or older were encouraged to be physically active then 1 life would be saved each year as a result
- For children, simply having access to the outdoors and informal play space can significantly increase levels of physical activity

¹ Natural Fit: Can Green Space and Biodiversity Increase Levels of Physical Activity? Dr William Bird Oct. 2004

- Safety is a greater issue for women in green space and therefore initiatives need to be aware of this

The Strategy supports active travel and recognises the opportunity that could be provided by sustainable travel routes through parks and green spaces. A good example of this is the West Leeds Country Park and Green Gateways Initiative. The initiative has mapped out and is developing parks, countryside and public rights of way that encircle the conurbation of West Leeds with a view to joining these areas, providing route ways, information, interpretation and leaflets.

The Parks and Countryside Service developed a series of 'Health Walk' routes at Roundhay Park and Temple Newsam for people of all ages to enjoy and was launched in October 2005 to coincide with Leeds Fitness Week. Information boards detailing the walks have been put in place, as well as leaflets and markings to signify the routes. Since then the scheme has been extended to 5 community parks; Armley Park; Horsforth Hall Park; Micklefield; Western Flatts; and Woodhouse Moor, with plans underway to extend the scheme to a number of other parks and green spaces.

In addition to this, the Ranger Service contributes towards the Health and Well Being agenda by organising various activities such as themed walks and practical tasks such as shrub clearing to encourage people to take a greater interest in their natural surroundings.

Summary of Proposals

- We will promote and publicise the health and well-being benefits of parks and green spaces
- We will contribute to the West Yorkshire Local Transport Plan by providing sustainable transport routes in parks and green spaces
- We will promote the health messages of walking and seek to develop health walk routes in our parks and green spaces
- We will provide opportunities for active recreation within parks and green spaces

Source: Parks and Countryside Service Plan

Strategic outcome: **Health and Wellbeing** - Reduced health inequalities through the promotion of healthy life choices and improved access to services.

Strategic outcome: **Health and Wellbeing** - Improved quality of life through maximising the potential of vulnerable people by promoting independence, dignity and respect.

Strategic outcome: **Health and Wellbeing** - Enhanced safety and support for vulnerable people through preventative and protective action to minimise risks and wellbeing.

We contribute to these outcomes by:

- the general benefits of parks and green spaces to health, fitness and wellbeing that are well understood
- providing health walk routes and guided walks
- ranger led activities
- outdoor recreation opportunities including fixed play, playing pitches, bowling greens and golf courses
- allotment provision

APPENDIX 7

The 'Out and About' leaflet highlights various events and activities organised by Parks and Countryside which will be carried out over autumn/winter and include the following:

- 16 guided health walks which range from 4 to 7 miles
- Events to learn about the environment and carry out practical conservation tasks, which often include a guided walk
- Opportunities for volunteering