

## Parks and Green Spaces Overview

Date: 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2024

Report of: Director of Communities, Housing and Environment

Report to: Executive Board

Will the decision be open for call in?  Yes  No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?  Yes  No

### Brief summary

This report has been brought to reflect on the key deliverables in 2023 across Green Spaces as well as to respond to the scrutiny statement and recommendations that were issued following the meeting of the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities) on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

In response to the scrutiny statement, the Green Spaces service will liaise with ward members to refresh the classification of parks across the city against the criteria set out within the report. The service has also proposed how it will work alongside the neighbourhood planning process when developing plans on a page and how we will continue to work with Parish and Town Councils.

The report details the positive feedback received as part of our Green Flag assessment for our city parks as well as flagging that 77% of our community parks now pass the equivalent Leeds Quality Park standard. It sets out some of the new funding streams and developments, including the popular Arium playground, the new butterfly conservation work at Tropical World and Roundhay park and the introduction of much improved farm interpretation at Temple Newsam.

### Recommendations

Executive Board is recommended to:

- a) Note the Statement of Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities) attached as appendix 1 and approve the response as detailed in section 17 of this report, and;
- b) Approve the reduction in frequency of the Leeds Quality Park Assessment to once every three years, more in line with how Green Flag assessments are undertaken.
- c) Confirm their continued support for community food growing in areas of land managed by the Green Spaces Service, building on the approach as set out in paragraph 14.
- d) Note that the Director of Communities, Housing and Environment will be responsible for implementation of the recommendations agreed.

## What is this report about?

1. The report provides an overview of some of the highlights of the Green Spaces Service over the last 12 months.
2. It provides an overview of the Leeds Quality Park assessment results and a proposed change to how frequently assessments are carried out moving forward.
3. It also provides a response to the Scrutiny report statement and recommendations that were issued following the meeting of the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities) on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

## What impact will this proposal have?

### 4. Highlights of Green Spaces Service

5. The service manages 4000 hectares of a variety of green space, 859 km of public rights of way network, a farm, two zoos, three crematoria, 24 cemeteries, 170 playgrounds, 101 allotment sites and over 200 sports pitches.
6. In November 2023, the seven city parks had a full Green Flag assessment, receiving resoundingly positive feedback that concluded: *“Overall it was a great pleasure to see so many great, well managed Green Flag Award parks, both urban and rural in context. It shows the importance of the parks for a city, providing not just areas for people to enjoy but also the green links and networks for active travel and wildlife corridors.”*
7. 77% of the city’s community parks are now meeting the Leeds Quality Park (LQP) Standard, against 22% in 2010. Progress is also being made on undertaking accessibility audits and completing plans on a page for our community parks, all of which contribute to ensuring that the city’s green spaces are effectively monitored and meet the needs of our local communities.
8. Approximately 1,500 events (such as Parkruns, community events, funfairs, fitness groups etc) were facilitated by the Green Spaces service in our parks during 2023 with around 650k people participating in them overall. This included the Leeds West Indian Carnival, which is Europe’s longest running Caribbean carnival parade, with 2023 being its 56th year.
9. In 2023, several new funding streams have been identified that will allow work in very specific areas such as £7.3 million for Holbeck public realm and environment (including Holbeck Moor) through the recently awarded Levelling up Fund and £2.5 million through Biodiversity Net Gain funding. In addition, the council has received £608,880 to support the protection and development of its extensive public rights of way network.
10. S106 developer’s contributions through Planning continue to provide significant external funding for green space improvements with over £2.7million of S106 (and match funding from grants such as WBI, Wellbeing, Veolia, CIL and MICE) being committed to green space schemes such as playground, soft landscaping, path improvements and the installation of benches, bins and fences on a number of sites in 2023.
11. There have also been some exciting new developments across the city parks managed by the council, with the opening of the fantastic new playground at the Arium and the introduction of new animals, including porcupines and pygmy marmosets, at Tropical World. The *Butterfly and Wildflower Meadows Conservation Project* was launched at Tropical World and Roundhay Park during 2023 and we’re looking to build on this in the year ahead by working with Butterfly

Conservation on a 'Wild Spaces' project across Leeds, which aims to provide a simple and easy way for people to get involved in helping butterflies and moths to thrive.

12. At Lotherton, over the summer, you could go on a highly rated deer tour or you can now adopt a penguin, supporting their conservation internationally. In 2024 you will also be able to get up close to our penguins, with one of our new animal experiences. Some development works will be undertaken at the zoo during 2024 to refresh the site and enable it to house new collections, which will enhance the visitor experience.
13. Unfortunately, Temple Newsam experienced a set back with a serious fire at the new play barn, but the rebuild is underway and in 2024 we should see both the opening of the play barn and the new learn to ride centre. In early 2024 a new interpretation scheme at the working rare breeds farm and visitor attraction at Home Farm will be completed. The scheme will significantly improve the visitor experience by telling stories of how the farm functioned as part of the wider Temple Newsam Estate and bring farm workers' stories to life in a fun and creative way through a range of media, including audio-visual content, role play, physical interactivity and graphic interpretation.
14. There has recently been a resurgence of interest in community food growing in Leeds, so we would like to confirm that, in line with the actions in the [Leeds Food Strategy](#) relating to promoting 'grow your own', community and urban growing, and working with partners to raise awareness of, and support, cutting-edge innovative food production, we continue to support local food growing, both through the provision of allotments and through identifying other areas of land within 4000 hectares managed by the Green Spaces service that are suitable for community food growing (e.g. for orchards, of which there are over 35 on Council green spaces, or raised vegetable beds). Successful examples of community food growing projects include the 'edible beds' at Grove Road recreation ground which were installed and managed by Halton in Bloom and the orchards at Burley and Kirkstall Abbey parks that were developed by park Friends groups. Going forward, we will work with Food Strategy partners and community groups to promote further opportunities to grow food on our sites.

#### 15. Leeds Quality Parks Assessment 2023

- 15.1. The [Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy](#) sets out a goal for all community parks and cemeteries and crematoria in the city to reach the Leeds Quality Park (LQP) standard in the lifetime of the Strategy.
- 15.2. LQP assessments involve using criteria such as 'welcoming', 'clean and well maintained' and 'healthy, safe and secure' to rate the quality of green spaces. The assessment process is based on the international measure of a good quality park which is called [Green Flag](#).
- 15.3. The Green Spaces Service have been assessing community parks against to LQP standard since 2010 when 22% of the sites passed.
- 15.4. In 2023, 50 of the 65 community parks (77%) that were judged, passed LQP. This is an increase on the 46 (70%) parks that passed last year. This means the number of community parks reaching the LQP standard has increased year on year since 2010 and that we continue to get closer to our goal for all community parks to reach the standard.
- 15.5. Cemeteries and crematoria have been assessed against the LQP standard since last year (2022). 14 (56%) of the 25 cemeteries/crematoria passed LQP this year which is the same proportion as in 2022.
- 15.6. See appendix 2 for details of which sites passed and failed LQP this year.
- 15.7. LQP was originally set up to provide a standard that was comparable to Green Flag but that could be assessed using internal resource rather than commissioning an external body.

- 15.8. Given the current budget pressures, it is recommended that the frequency of the LQP assessment is amended so that not every park is assessed every year and that, going forward, a third of parks are assessed each year on a rota basis. The parks that have scored the lowest will be prioritised in 2024.
- 15.9. By reducing the time spent on LQP assessments, more resource can be dedicated to level 1 tree inspections, which are required across our parks to ensure that we have a robust tree management plan for health and safety purposes.

## 16. Plan on a Page

- 16.1. The Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy (2022) commits the Green Spaces service to producing 'plans on a page' for all 65 community parks in the city because it will help the Council achieve the goal of providing the best parks and green spaces in the UK by 2032.
- 16.2. Having a *Plan on a Page* for each community park will provide the direction required to get each park to LQP standard (the measure of a good quality park) and achieve many of the other goals set out in the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy.
- 16.3. An example of a *Plan on a Page* is provided in appendix 3. The plans are set out on two sides of A3 paper with one side showing the park as it is now and the other side showing a vision for the park's future.
- 16.4. The content of the plans is based around the LQP criteria and the priorities set out in the *Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy* (such as *Access for All* and *Health and Wellbeing*). They incorporate all elements of park design including:
  - Natural habitats like woodlands, orchards, wildflower meadows, hedges and ponds;
  - Horticultural features such as flower beds and specialist gardens;
  - Infrastructure such as paths, benches, bins, entrances and fences;
  - Recreational facilities such as play equipment, tennis courts, sports pitches, outdoor gyms, bowling greens, multi-use games areas and skate parks;
  - Historic features such as bandstands and war memorials, and;
  - Signage and interpretation.
- 16.5. To ensure the vision set out in the plans provides the kind of park that local people want and need, they are created in partnership with ward councillors and local communities through an extensive public consultation process.
- 16.6. The plans contain elements that are essential to get the parks to LQP standard, for example, accessible paths. They also contain aspirational elements that will contribute to the aim of the Council to provide the best parks and green spaces in the UK. These might be things like restoring heritage features such as band stands or installing flagship play facilities.
- 16.7. Once the Plans on a Page are completed, an action plan will be developed for each park setting out what needs doing and by whom – this will involve a range of officers, including the Technical team (who focus on identifying funding), the Rangers (who work with volunteers) and the Operational teams (who might change their management approach e.g. by reducing mowing) to help deliver the plans.
- 16.8. We aim to produce plans for a minimum of 12 parks a year so that all parks will have a plan in place within 5 years (by end of 2028).
- 16.9. So far, 16 plans have been produced, 2 are nearly finished and 12 are in development. See appendix 4 for progress on the Plans for each park currently designated as a community park. Completed plans will be updated on an ongoing basis as necessary.
- 16.10. In line with the goals set out in the parks and green spaces strategy, the plans will be produced in order of need and positive impact by prioritising sites as follows:

- Parks that are failing LQP;
- Parks in areas with less public green space;
- Parks in areas of deprivation where, evidence shows, the health benefits of free, quality public green space are greater;
- Parks in densely populated areas which tend to get used by more people, and;
- Parks where having a plan in place is required to take advantage of a funding opportunity.

## **17. Scrutiny Board Statement and Response**

On 12th October 2023, Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing & Communities) considered the current approach to developing a 'plan on a page' for each community park in Leeds, with particular focus on 'access for all' and the safety of women and girls. The Executive Board has been asked to consider the recommendations of the meeting. In line with the Scrutiny Board Procedure Rules, the Executive is asked to provide a response to the Scrutiny Board indicating what action (if any) it proposes to take and to publish its response.

### **17.1. Scrutiny Statement - Conclusion 1**

***Ward members should be consulted about the classification of greenspaces within their respective areas to identify whether any designations need to be amended or updated.***

The Green Spaces service's approach to park site hierarchy or classification is in relation to size, the range of visitor facilities that they have, and the typical area served:

- City Parks are large in area and would normally be expected to attract visitors from across the city (and wider region) and have an extensive range of features such as fixed play, formal gardens and planting, routes for walking and recreation as well as areas of tree cover and open grass – they also often have extra visitor facilities such as toilets, cafes, museums and zoos e.g. Temple Newsam and Roundhay Park. There are seven city parks in Leeds and they are independently judged against the Green Flag criteria annually.
- Community Parks are usually on a smaller scale than City Parks, but still reasonably large and would be expected to attract visitors from multiple surrounding communities (but would not normally see residents travel across the city to visit). They have multiple features such as fixed play, formal gardens and planting, multi-use games areas, areas of tree cover as well as open grass, and often sporting features such as pitches, tennis courts or bowling greens. There are currently 65 sites defined as community parks in Leeds and they are judged annually by Green Spaces colleagues against the Leeds Quality Park criteria.
- Recreation grounds tend to attract only visitors from the immediate area and have one or two notable features from those described above e.g. a playground or a football pitch.
- Other types of green space managed by the service include nature reserves, wildlife sites, public rights of way, allotments and cemeteries and crematoria.

In line with the Parks and Green Spaces strategy, we undertake both Leeds Quality Parks and accessibility assessments at community parks as well as having a commitment to undertake a plan on a page at each of them.

However, the current designation of community parks means that some wards do not have a community park and there are some sites designated as community parks that are more like nature reserves or recreation grounds. It is proposed that a review is undertaken and that ward

members are consulted on the classification of green spaces (particularly in relation to sites defined as community parks) in their wards.

#### **17.2. Scrutiny Statement - Conclusion 2**

***Where formal neighbourhood plans have been adopted by localities in Leeds, further engagement should take place with neighbourhood planning colleagues to ensure that plans for community parks align with the relevant neighbourhood plan.***

Neighbourhood plans will be referenced when developing the Plans on a Page to ensure the two documents are consistent and we will ensure park plans are in line with the Vision and Objectives set out in the local Neighbourhood Plan. For example, plans for community parks in Headingley can aim to contribute to the vision in the Headingley Neighbourhood plan, for the area to be 'vibrant, inclusive and sustainable, designed to maximise everyone's physical and mental health and wellbeing, committed to reducing climate change and a place where the heritage and local character of the area is respected and a good place to walk, cycle, exercise and play'.

#### **17.3. Scrutiny Statement - Conclusion 3**

***Consideration should be given as to how the city council can work in partnership with Town and Parish Councils in future to support communities in delivering improvements to greenspaces potentially through the use of monies received via the Community Infrastructure Levy.***

The Green Spaces team work with Town and Parish Councils such as Morley, Harewood, Horsforth and Kippax to deliver improvements to parks and other green spaces in their areas and this does sometimes involve the use of CIL monies to fund the improvements. Recent examples of improvements funded by Parish and Town Councils and CIL include bench installation, path repairs and playground refurbishments.

#### **17.4. Scrutiny Statement - Conclusion 4**

***Local influence over funding mechanisms should be an integral part of the community committee review— with members using the funding of greenspace improvements as an illustrative example of what that may look like in practice as they engage with the review.***

Currently members can already influence what is spent on their green spaces through their use of funding such as S106 and WBI. Any discretionary capital that is available to invest in our green spaces has to be prioritised based on health and safety need and will be primarily spent on repairing play equipment or other infrastructure deemed as unsafe such as paths or football poles.

#### **17.5. Scrutiny Statement - Conclusion 5**

***Guidance about improving the safety of women and girls in parks and greenspaces should be shared with Parish and Town Councils to inform the development of greenspaces for which they have responsibility.***

The guidance was shared with Parish and Town Councils on 26 October 2023.

#### **17.6. Scrutiny Statement - Conclusion 6**

***Where a policy of reduced maintenance of foliage or other natural features is proposed an equality impact assessment should be carried out, which involves users of each park affected. In addition, a commitment should be made to later review the original equality***

***impact assessment to ensure this is updated to reflect the lived experience of local people using, or wishing to use, the park.***

Going forward, Equality Screening will be undertaken when:

- a plan on a page is being developed;
- a new Biodiversity Net Gain scheme involving changing the way a site is managed is proposed;
- a new area of woodland creation is proposed, and;
- a new playground is designed.

### **17.7. Scrutiny Statement - Conclusion 7**

***To accelerate the delivery of accessibility audits the Scrutiny Board recommends exploring options to enable community groups to conduct accessibility audits.***

The Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy commits to undertaking accessibility audits for all city and community parks within the 10-year lifespan of the Strategy to help achieve the Council's aim for parks and green spaces in Leeds to be 'accessible for everyone who wants to use them'.

Accessibility audits are designed to identify how accessible each park is and what would need to be done to make them as accessible as possible to anyone who wants to use them. They take into account a range of considerations such as how easy the site is to enter and move around, how safe it feels and the range of facilities available for different users. Key areas for improvement identified through the audit process will be fed into the park plans.

A number of community organisations have been contacted and consulted about the accessibility audit process and an invitation for community members to get involved with the scheme has been shared. Feedback on the scheme has been received from the Leeds Disability Hub, the Council's Disability and Wellbeing Network and the Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Forum and comments taken on board. Leeds City Council colleagues including the Access Officer, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Officer and the Council's Disability Champion have also been involved in and commented on the audit process and are aware that support from community members would be welcomed. To date there haven't been any volunteers to undertake accessibility audits but the service would be happy to work with anyone who would like to volunteer and would welcome member's help to identify volunteers.

An equality screening is provided in appendix 5 to consider the impact of the proposed changes to the frequency of the LQP assessments and the review of green spaces classification.

### **How does this proposal impact the three pillars of the Best City Ambition?**

Health and Wellbeing

Inclusive Growth

Zero Carbon

18. The recommendations from Scrutiny focus on how the Green Spaces service works with ward members and communities to plan for and provide high quality, welcoming and accessible community parks in line with the priorities set out in the Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy.
19. There is a great deal of evidence to show that spending time in green spaces is good for mental and physical health with positive impacts on a range of health issues including heart disease, obesity, stress, anxiety and depression having been demonstrated.
20. There is also evidence that better quality parks are more popular and well-used than those of poorer quality, so by focussing on the quality and accessibility of our parks and green spaces,

we can ensure that the maximum number of people can get the health and wellbeing benefits of spending time in them.

21. Producing a Plan on a Page for community parks contributes to Inclusive Growth through developing a vision for each park with local communities, that reflects and supports a positive local identity, culture, heritage and pride.
22. The park plans will also contribute to Zero Carbon by including proposals such as tree planting and less intensive site-management like replacing annual flower beds with wildflower meadows and reducing mowing in appropriate locations.

### What consultation and engagement has taken place?

Wards affected:

Have ward members been consulted?       Yes       No

### 23. Plan on a Page consultations

- 23.1. For each park, the production of a plan on a page involves an extensive consultation process as follows:
- 23.2. Initial proposals are worked up by specialist Green Spaces officers including the site manager, landscape architects and Technical Officers who work regularly with ward members and local communities so have a good knowledge of the sites, how they are used and any key strengths and weaknesses.
- 23.3. Then, the proposals are sent to ward members for comment.
- 23.4. Next, the first draft is finalised and published on the Council's *Smart Survey* consultation web pages. It will remain open for comment for 3 months.
- 23.5. At this point, the consultation is widely promoted through social media, posters on site, contacting community committees, local community groups (such as Friends of, sports clubs, In Bloom groups, parish councils) and direct mailing of households nearby.
- 23.6. Contact details are provided so people who want a paper copy of the survey can get one without having to use the internet or can discuss the proposals with an officer over the phone.
- 23.7. Our lead Plan on a Page officer also advertises times when he'll be available in the park, to talk to people directly about what they think about the site. He will be available on site on at least 2 occasions. If there are any events being held in the park during the timescale of the consultation (for example, Breeze), he will endeavour to attend them as part of the consultation process.
- 23.8. Children and young people will be approached through local schools, youth clubs and family events.
- 23.9. To ensure the consultation also reaches people who don't use the park and find out the reasons why, an in-person consultation session will also take place in a local community hub as well.
- 23.10. Following the consultation process, a report is produced outlining who responded to the consultation and what the findings were. These will be shared with ward members, interested community groups, key colleagues and consultees.
- 23.11. The findings of the consultation are then fed into the final version of the Plan on a Page which will be available to view online and on site.
- 23.12. The plans will be updated regularly as necessary (for example, if an issue arises with anti-social behaviour that requires a change to one of the plans).



## 24. Classification of green spaces

- 24.1. In relation to the first Scrutiny recommendation above, ward members will be consulted on the classification of green spaces (with regards sites defined as community parks as discussed at Scrutiny) in their wards.

### **What are the resource implications?**

25. Given the current financial position of the council, investment into parks is limited to funding via S106 or equivalent, grant funding and the limited discretionary capital is focused on health and safety priorities.
26. It is envisaged that good quality parks will be delivered through a combination of day-to-day maintenance, community engagement such as volunteer days, funding via developer's contributions like S106 and external grant funding such as Levelling Up, Safer Parks and grants from national sporting organisations like the Lawn Tennis Association and the Football Foundation.
27. The Green Spaces Service works with hundreds of volunteers every year from corporate groups to Friends of and the Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Forum. These volunteers and community groups undertake a wide range of work from tree planting to path construction and make a real positive difference at many of our sites. Many of the community groups also do fundraising of their own, with recent initiatives successfully sourcing funding for facilities like play equipment and benches.
28. We also work with several other Council services such as Regeneration, Active Leeds and Safer, Stronger Communities and partner organisations such as Love Leeds Parks, Groundwork West Yorkshire and The Conservation Volunteers (TCV), all of whom make valuable contributions to local parks and green spaces through various community engagement and externally funded schemes. In fact, *Love Leeds Parks* are currently advertising a match funding opportunity available to community groups to animate and improve community parks in the city.
29. Plans on a Page produced in consultation with local communities have successfully been included in funding bids such as for the Morley Towns Bid and Levelling Up which will lead to investment in several parks across the city.
30. Three community parks have also recently benefited from the Mayor of West Yorkshire's Safer Communities Fund with the aim of making the sites safer and more welcoming for girls and women. Following local consultations, improvements at Holbeck Moor, Woodhouse Moor and Lewisham park have included bench installation, replacing old and damaged park furniture such as bins, refurbishing a multi-use games area and installing social seating and swings. There will be more investment in parks through the Safer Communities fund in 2024.
31. The council has also been awarded £608,880 from the City Regional Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) fund allocated from West Yorkshire Combined Authority to spend on improving its public rights of way network.
32. The service continues to look for ways to raise income across its parks and estates in order to ensure it can continue to maintain the green space to the standard required. In 2023 the new Arium playground attracted numerous new visitors to the site and helped to increase sales through both the kiosk, shop and café. In 2024, the new playbarn and learn to ride centre will open at Temple Newsam, alongside new café spaces. The service continue to explore opportunities to grow new products at the Arium as well as other sites for concessions.
33. S106 developer's contributions through Planning continue to provide significant external funding for green space improvements with over £2.7million of S106 (and match funding from grants such as WBI, Wellbeing, Veolia, CIL and MICE) being committed to green space

schemes such as playground, soft landscaping and path improvements and the installation of benches, bins and fences on a number of sites in 2023.

34. The new Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) planning condition also presents an opportunity for significant investment in green spaces in the city for the benefit wildlife through habitat improvements such as wildflower meadow creation and woodland management. The scheme, which has so far been non-mandatory has raised £2.5 million to date. Once it becomes mandatory (on 12 Feb 2024) there is an increased likelihood that developers will pay private environment banks to deliver BNG on private green space, possibly outside the city, but working with the Planning team to get the right systems in place for managing and delivering BNG, we are optimistic that we will be able to continue to draw down significant investment in Council green spaces going forward.

### **What are the key risks and how are they being managed?**

35. The Green Spaces service has recently held a risk workshop that identified operational risks that will be reported to the Service Leadership Team. Any risks arising from the management of the city's Green Spaces can be raised for reporting and escalation via the new service risk management arrangements shortly to be implemented.
36. The current budget pressures make it challenging to make substantial improvements across our green spaces. The work with volunteers provide a vital additional resource to help ensure our green spaces are well maintained. The team continue to seek out commercial opportunities to increase income as well as exploring alternative funding streams such as Biodiversity Net Gain funding.
37. Unfortunately, anti-social behaviour continues to present challenges for the service with littering, graffiti and arson still being relatively regular occurrences. The damage is rarely covered by insurance and therefore creates a real financial pressure for the council.

### **What are the legal implications?**

38. There are no legal implications.

### **Options, timescales and measuring success**

#### **What other options were considered?**

39. Continuing with LQP assessments on an annual basis was considered but ruled out due to the resource intensity of making no changes and the requirement to find a way to resource additional tree surveys without creating a new budget pressure.

#### **How will success be measured?**

40. Robust consultation with ward members to determine the future classification of green spaces.
41. An increase in the number of parks that pass the LQP standard.
42. Completion of plans on a page by 2030 for all parks.
43. Accessibility audits will be completed by 2032.

#### **What is the timetable and who will be responsible for implementation?**

44. The Chief Officer, Climate, Energy and Green Spaces will be responsible for implementation.

45. The liaison with ward member about the classification of green spaces will start in February and will be completed by the end of April.

### **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 – Scrutiny Statement
- Appendix 2 - LQP Results
- Appendix 3 – Example of a Plan on a Page
- Appendix 4 – Plans on a page and accessibility audit progress
- Appendix 5 – EDCI Screening Document

### **Background papers**

- None