

Working Group Parks & Green Spaces Strategy: Summary Note

Attendees:

Committee Members In Attendance	
Cllr Anderson	Cllr Brooks
Cllr Blackburn	Cllr Collins
Cllr Gabriel	Cllr Howley
Cllr Ritchie	Cllr Smith
Executive Member	
Cllr Arif	
Officers	
Emma Trickett (Senior Project Manager)	Sean Flesher (CO, Parks & Countryside)
Rebecca Atherton (Principal Scrutiny Advisor)	

Apologies: Cllrs Dobson, Finnigan, Midgley, Ragan, Charlwood, Akhtar, Grahame

Notes:

1. Cllr Anderson set out an introduction to the working group, noting that the discussions followed on from the Board's earlier consultation in September 2019.
2. Sean Flesher and Emma Trickett introduced the updated Parks and Green Spaces Strategy, outlining the methodology used to produce the strategy, an overview of the consultation process (with Leeds residents and in conjunction with Leeds University) and developments in the national context for the strategy.
3. Emma went on to highlight changes that had been made to the draft strategy in light of feedback from the scrutiny board and other stakeholders engaged in the consultation process.
4. Emma set out ways in which scrutiny's comments had been incorporated into the strategy – for example, ensuring consistency of format with other Council strategies and providing opportunities for members of the public to engage in the consultation outside the main digital format.
5. Emma set out the aim of the strategy and the actions that will be taken over the next 10 years to achieve that vision. She reiterated the distinction between planning for new green spaces via the Core Strategy and the proposed vision for maintaining parks and green spaces.
6. Emma updated members on the findings of the public consultation, the conclusions of research from the University of Leeds in 2018 about how people use parks and green spaces and national research into public use of green spaces, including changes in attitudes following the pandemic.
7. Attendees reflected on the feedback from their 2019 working group, including a request from members that the draft strategy should place stronger emphasis on the importance of these spaces in tackling climate change. Emma set out how these comments had help inform changes to the original document.

8. Emma provided an overview of how the proposed strategy is consistent with other Council strategies including the Best Council Plan, Health and Wellbeing Plan and the Leeds Children and Young People's Plan. Members were provided with an update of the plans that will be delivered or updated as a result of the implementation of the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy - e.g. Leeds Playing Pitches Strategy.
9. An overview of the consultation process was provided. Emma noted the request from Scrutiny in 2019 that the consultation should enable participation from wide range of people including those who may not be digitally engaged. Emma confirmed that alongside the digital promotion of the consultation the team carried out a series of workshops and promoted the consultation onsite at attractions, parks and cafes. It was noted that an online questionnaire specifically aimed at children specifically was also conducted.
10. Members were given an example of how the vision will be presented including the use of a 'plan on a page' to be consistent with other strategies, which is reflective of comments from scrutiny in 2019.
11. Emma outlined the 8 priorities that are included in the strategy – this includes a 'child friendly' priority which was not included when the Board looked at the original draft in 2019.
12. In 2019 members asked the green flag award scheme continued and Emma confirmed that would be case along with Leeds Quality Park scheme.
13. In 2019 members asked that the value of volunteers was highlighted in terms of the time and income they bring in – that is now referred to in the section of the report looking at working with communities.
14. In 2019 members asked that the strategy referred explicitly to the budget constraints the services is working within – this is referred to in the financial sustainability section of the strategy.
15. Emma explained that a 'child friendly' priority was added as a result of feedback from the public consultation about health and wellbeing benefits of spending time in parks and green spaces, and the way in which the strategy can support the Leeds Commitment to Children's Play.
16. Attendees considered the Key Performance Indicators included in the strategy, which have been built into the document since the Board reviewed the original draft in 2019.
17. Members noted the need to ensure the final strategy reflects the updated Vision being captured in the City Ambition proposals.
18. It was suggested that some of the images in the final strategy document should reflect the change in direction for the management of some green spaces – for example, including pictures of wild flower meadows rather than formal flower beds.
19. Accessible play for children with disabilities was highlighted as a priority in the context of the contribution of the strategy to Leeds' Commitment to Children's Play.

20. Attendees discussed the need for a site management plan so that members can communicate with residents about the change in approach – i.e. to highlight that reduced mowing is an environmental choice rather than simply a reduction in service.
21. Sean noted that the ‘plan on a page’ is a high-level aspiration over a ten-year period but that individual plans are in place already for some specific sites and further plans would be developed.
22. Sean further explained that the service is looking to take advantage of ‘biodiversity net gain’ – this would involve carrying out an audit of the biodiversity of parks and green spaces and setting out a plan as to how to improve the biodiversity of those sites by a minimum of 25%. This would enable access to additional funding.
23. Attendees were updated about plans to improve communication around natural habitat creation and wildflower meadows in what were previously regularly cut areas – e.g. improving public messaging about relaxed mowing to encourage pollinators, developing signage and linking with local businesses to promote biodiversity.
24. Members asked for clarification about the inclusion of information about site maintenance so that members can use this to inform discussions with concerned residents. Particular concern was expressed about maintenance of playgrounds and public perceptions of ‘disrepair’.
25. Members asked for clarification around staffing resources and potential to link to a volunteer recruitment strategy, noting the need to target volunteers in particular areas. It was noted that the financial sustainability section of the vision refers to links with communities and funding that can be accessed for capital projects often linked to planning (CIL, S106, biodiversity net gain). However, Sean set out the significant challenges around revenue funding required to pay gardeners and fund maintenance.
26. The service is very successful for engaging volunteers – 2,000 volunteers equivalent to 109 FTEs are currently engaging with the service – and this is referenced in the strategy. Volunteers usually like to be involved in conservation or environmental work, and less so in regular maintenance. Volunteers help greatly but the city needs a baseline of permanent staff to maintain general standards in parks and green spaces.
27. The challenge of local authority funding was noted. The service is looking to promote civic enterprise to generate further revenue to fund its activities – currently the service brings in £27m in income which means the service is performing well in comparison to authorities. Such income also allows investment in areas where there is very little planning gain.
28. Concern was expressed about the potential for relaxed mowing practices to lead to an increase in the rat populations. Officers confirmed that habitat creation would involve engaging experts to advise on such issues. The type of green space that is created will create different benefits and consequences that the service will manage appropriately.

29. The service looks after around 4,000 hectares of land, managing 1,500 hectares proactively (including formal gardens) and, 2,500 hectares reactively. Volunteers are particularly important in those areas of reactive maintenance - through conservation, beat ups, clean ups etc. Sean also highlighted the ways in which In Bloom groups complement this activity, often in urban areas like Beeston, thereby transforming community spaces. Middleton Park was cited as another good example of volunteer engagement through the Friends of Middleton Park.
30. Members sought clarity about third sector engagement, tree maintenance and access to S106 monies. It was suggested that there is currently £4.2m in S106 monies in various pots – could that money be used to employ a project co-ordinator to develop schemes with ward members, which could complement the strategy and also be income generating? This could also incorporate further in links with the In Bloom groups given their good level of volunteer engagement.
31. Members discussed references to planning gain in the strategy – with officers noting that this general reference was chosen to be more easily understood by the public than the technical terms such as Section 106 or CIL.
32. Members sought clarity about the employment and deployment of permanent gardeners, and the links between their work and community-based funding.
33. Concern was expressed about the number of vacancies for gardeners across Leeds and the need to have a baseline number of skilled gardeners regardless of the level of volunteers in the city.
34. Sean agreed that resources are challenging and noted that the pandemic led to a recruitment freeze. Staff were also redeployed to support the front-line pandemic response. The service is now in a recovery phase now and 9 apprentices have been taken on recently.
35. The service is looking to fill vacancies where budget allows but officers also reiterated that filling vacancies is proving challenging because of the current employment market. It was agreed this would be picked up in the Scrutiny Board’s budget discussions to understand the general direction in employment in this area as the year end approaches.
36. It was suggested that some additional KPIs could be included to demonstrate what is being achieved by the service – e.g. KPIs around relaxed mowing (which would help with communicating what we are trying to achieve), bees/butterflies, the success of tree planting.
37. Members proposed including a KPI about reducing weed killers that use glyphosates.
38. In response Sean confirmed there is a reference in the action plan to reducing the use of pesticides – although that doesn’t refer to glyphosates specifically.
39. Officers confirmed there are 29 KPIs behind the two high level references in the member presentation – linked to the further detail included in the Leeds Quality Parks standard. It was suggested that the 26 standards within LQP scheme should be listed in a table in the strategy document.

40. Members suggested that rather than a tree planting KPI the aim should relate to the success of the trees planted.
41. Sean informed members that tree planting is carried out on a density that allows an appropriate canopy to develop even where a proportion of trees don't take (and under normal tree planting circumstances officers would expect a certain percentage to be lost). All woodlands are managed to a UK Woodland Assurance quality. LCC also re-plants trees where there is less than 75% take up, alongside new planting activity. Most recent sites have required low amounts of beat-up, so officers are pleased with that result.
42. Disabled parking at parks was discussed including options around enforcement. The conflict between promoting accessibility and preventing anti-social behaviour through quad bikes access was explored. Officers confirmed they are working with various stakeholder groups to assess options around accessibility – the rights of way manager (Rob Buckingham) is leading on that work at the moment.
43. The new strategy also commits to a review of disabled parking to ensure there is enough at each park. Accessible entry points are important – where there is money for new developments the service uses the most up to date access furniture.
44. All cemeteries, crematoria and parks are aiming to score a 7 on access criteria.
45. Members discussed the ongoing maintenance of playgrounds and ensuring equipment is replaced. It was noted that some swings were removed following government advice during the pandemic.
46. The limited funding available for playground maintenance was discussed. Members were informed that playgrounds have a shelf life of around 10 years and a lot of playgrounds therefore now need a refurbishment, which will require capital investment, rather than a repair.
47. It was noted that where there is S106 funding available playgrounds tend to be well looked after but where such funding isn't available those areas currently have limited options for maintenance.
48. As Executive Member Cllr Arif has asked officers to look at how to ensure inner city areas can still access funding for playground maintenance where planning gain isn't available – officers confirmed the reference to disproportionate levels of funding in the strategy document is linked to this. Cllr Arif highlighted the importance of this in the context of wider concerns about health inequalities and she noted that many inner-city houses do not have access to a garden. Members discussed the use of 'commuted sums' to help fund the maintenance of new playgrounds over a ten-year period.
49. Members highlighted the need for litter picking to complement relaxed mowing strategies and the importance of this in ensuring the public are supportive of the new approach.
50. Members requested the results of the recent beat-up audits be circulated.

51. Sean outlined the 'next steps' for progressing the plan.

52. Members welcomed the strategy and highlighted the high quality of the work produced so far.

Resolved

Members agreed they are happy to endorse the plan subject to consideration being given to the comments provided at the working group and detailed above.