

# Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy

Date: 15 December 2021

Report of: Director of Communities 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

## What is this report about?

- This report relates to the *Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy*.
- The aim of the strategy is to set out a vision for Leeds City Council's Parks and Countryside Service, and the actions that will be undertaken by the service to deliver that vision over the next 10 years.
- The Parks and Countryside service manages over 4,000 hectares of local public green space including parks, nature reserves and cemeteries. The strategy focusses on how these existing public green spaces, and related facilities (such as playgrounds, tennis courts, zoos footpaths and cafes) will be managed going forward.
- A public consultation was undertaken between September 2019 and February 2020 with regards what the priorities of the Parks and Countryside Service should be for the next 10 years.
- In light of the findings of the consultation, along with extensive wider research, a Parks and Green Spaces Strategy has now been produced (appendix a) and requires approval ahead of implementation.
- The version of the strategy presented in appendix a is mainly plain text but once the content of the strategy is approved, it will be designed to make it more engaging and easy to read. A 'Plan on a Page' version will also be developed for easy reference (see appendix c for initial design ideas).

## Including how it contributes to the city's and council's ambitions

- The *Best Council Plan* was a key reference document during the development of the Parks and Green Spaces strategy with due consideration being given to how the Parks and Countryside Service could most effectively contribute to the delivery of the Best Council plan over the next 10 years.
- As a result, we believe that the implementation of the strategy will make a significant contribution to the city and council's ambitions, particularly with regards the joint priorities of *Health and Wellbeing*, *Child Friendly*, *Culture* and the *Climate Emergency*.
- The values of the council were also very much at the forefront of the development of the strategy, with *Working with communities*, *Treating people fairly* and *Spending money wisely* relating directly to the priorities set out in it.

## Recommendations

- a) It is requested that Executive Board approve the new Parks and Green Spaces Strategy for implementation by the Chief Officer, Parks and Countryside from January 2022.

### Why is the proposal being put forward?

- 1 Leeds City Council, Parks and Countryside Service manage over 4,000 hectares of public green space including parks, cemeteries, nature reserves, woodlands, public rights of way and sports pitches. These spaces are well used, with parks alone hosting over 45 million adult visits a year.
- 2 There are many benefits, for the city's residents, of having plenty of good quality, free to access parks and green spaces. In addition to offering a range of opportunities for recreation, relaxation and play, spending time in green space has been shown to have significant benefits for mental and physical health. They also provide opportunities for people to discover historically significant sites (at places like Temple Newsam, Middleton park and Kirkstall Abbey) and enjoy cultural activities such as the (700+) events that are held in parks every year. And as popular, shared public spaces they contribute to social cohesion.
- 3 Parks and green spaces are also great for the environment - they provide homes for wildlife, mitigate the impacts of climate change and can help clean the air.
- 4 The aim of the Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy is to set out a vision for the Parks and Countryside Service, and the actions that will be undertaken by the service, to deliver that vision over the next 10 years.
- 5 It focusses on how existing local public green spaces and related facilities (such as playgrounds, tennis courts, zoos, footpaths and cafes) will be managed going forward.
- 6 By producing and implementing the strategy, we believe the Parks and Countryside service will be better able to manage its resources for maximum public benefit.
- 7 National research undertaken by the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2014 and 2016 showed a link between councils with parks and green spaces strategies and local parks being in a good and improving condition. As a result, they recommend that all councils have such a strategy in place.
- 8 The outcomes of the current (and first) Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy also provide evidence for the benefit of having a strategy to establish priorities for the Parks and Countryside service. For example, as a result of identifying *Quality* has a key theme in the strategy, the number of community parks reaching the *Leeds Quality Park* standard increased dramatically from 22% to 70% in 10 years.
- 9 The strategy will contribute to the delivery of the *Best Council Plan* and is consistent with (and supportive of) other council strategies and plans such as *Leeds Children and Young Peoples' Plan*, *Leeds Culture Strategy*, *the Age Friendly Leeds Strategy*, *Leeds Adopted Local Plan* and *Leeds Health and Wellbeing Strategy*.
- 10 Plans and strategies that will be delivered as part of the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy are: *Leeds Playing Pitch Strategy*, *Leeds City Council Allotments Management Plan* and the *Rights of Way Improvement Plan*. The strategy also commits the Parks and Countryside Service to developing a plan for all 70 community and city parks.

### What impact will this proposal have?

**Wards affected:** All wards have public green spaces in them

Have ward members been consulted?

Yes

No

- 11 The vision set out in the strategy is for the council to provide the best parks and green spaces in the UK. By focussing on the priorities set out in the strategy, the Parks and Countryside Service aims to achieve this goal.
- 12 The aspirations and actions set out in the strategy will affect how public green spaces in all wards in Leeds are managed by the Parks and Countryside Service though the impact on the ground may vary. An example of where a change in site management, as a result of a new strategic approach, is already noticeable, is the aspiration to plant 50 hectares of woodland each year – members will be aware of, and have contributed to, the tree planting taking place in their local green spaces. At the same time, in some instances, for example where a park is already very popular and of high quality, very little change may be required. Ward members will be invited to comment on new management plans for city and community parks as they are developed over the period of the strategy.
- 13 Evidence shows that virtually everyone in the city uses parks and green spaces and ensuring that they are accessible to everyone is one of the stated priorities in the strategy, so the plan is that all Leeds residents will benefit from its implementation.

### **What consultation and engagement has taken place?**

- 14 An extensive public consultation was undertaken ahead of producing the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy.
- 15 Preceding this, in September 2019, proposals for the consultation and the draft consultation document, were presented to Scrutiny (Environment, Housing and Communities) for comment.
- 16 The consultation was widely promoted. Promotion and engagement took place online through social media, press releases, Leeds Citizens Panel and the council website (which have a combined reach of over 100,000 people). To ensure that no one was digitally excluded, the consultation was also promoted on posters in park noticeboards, cafes, museums and visitor attractions, and it was advertised in the Parks and Countryside events leaflet (20,000 copies of which were distributed across the city). 35 face to face workshops and meetings took place at a range of locations including community committee environment subcommittees, equality hubs, the Youth Council, Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Forum, and a large public event at the City Museum.
- 17 Over 2,000 people responded to the consultation, with 1,485 people being directly involved at workshops, meetings and events and 1,449 people filling in the online questionnaire. Respondents answered questions ranging from *‘What do you think the best the things about public parks and green spaces in Leeds are?’* to *‘Are there any issues with parks and green spaces in Leeds that you would like to see addressed?’*.
- 18 The consultation methodology and findings are outlined in appendix b, *‘Parks and Green Spaces Strategy, Findings of Public Consultation’*.
- 19 The findings of the consultation were used to inform the development of the Parks and Green Spaces strategy with the aim of ensuring that the priorities, needs and concerns of local residents (in relation to the management of the city’s public green space) were addressed within it.
- 20 For example, when asked in the consultation, *‘What positive changes would you like to see in our parks and green spaces over the next 10 years?’*, the top 5 themes that emerged in response were:
  - More wildlife, environment and climate-friendly site management
  - More visitor facilities (including play, sporting facilities and cafes)

- Improve access (to the sites and for disabled people at the sites)
- Tackle anti-social behaviour (particularly in relation to dogs and litter)
- Keep them clean and well maintained (with some acknowledgement that many already are).

These suggestions are all addressed in the strategy.

- 21 The results of the [Leeds Parks Survey](#), undertaken by the University of Leeds, were also used to inform the development of the strategy. That survey had 6,432 responses and explored use of, and satisfaction with Leeds parks.
- 22 Some of the key findings of the *Leeds Parks Survey* were that Leeds parks are very popular with 91% of Leeds residents having visited a park in the preceding year and 50% visiting a park at least once a week in the summer months. Satisfaction with the city's parks was found to be high with 90% of users being satisfied or very satisfied with their main park. Satisfaction was significantly higher for parks that had been judged a Leeds Quality Park than with those that had not passed that quality standard.
- 23 A draft of the strategy was considered by a Scrutiny ((Environment, Housing and Communities) working group in October 2021 where members agreed to endorse it.

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

- 24 In producing the strategy, the Parks and Countryside service has tried to balance our ambition to have the best parks and green spaces in the UK with a realistic assessment of the resources available to maintain and improve them over the next 10 years.
- 25 The service will continue to adopt the wider council approach to spending money wisely, for example, by regularly reviewing costs, fees and charges.
- 26 Also, as referenced in the 'Financial Sustainability' priority, the service will continue to explore, as part of our 'civic enterprise' approach, opportunities for the Parks and Countryside Service to generate funds to help achieve the aims of the strategy through enterprises such as shops, cafés, commercial events and sponsorship (whilst being mindful of the other priorities set out in the strategy).
- 27 The service will explore other external funding opportunities such as developer's contributions for recreation and biodiversity, and grants like the Heritage Lottery Fund, which has made such a difference at Roundhay park and Middleton park in the past.
- 28 The service has a good track record of working with communities and volunteers with over 100 established groups and thousands of volunteers. The strategy proposes to prioritise 'Working with Communities' – continuing our successful approach of collaborating with volunteers and other organisations to achieve shared goals more effectively than we could do alone.
- 29 Longer term, having a strategy for local parks and green spaces should improve value for money by helping identify priorities and the most effective way to allocate resources to public green space in Leeds.

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

- 30 There are no legal implications arising from the adoption of this strategy.

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

- 31 There is a risk that the Parks and Countryside Service will be unable to deliver elements of the strategy if the council's budget continues to decrease and results in fewer resources. The strategy will, however, still provide a useful tool to support decision making about how available resources are allocated and necessary savings are made.

## Does this proposal support the council's three Key Pillars?

Inclusive Growth

Health and Wellbeing

Climate Emergency

32 Yes, the strategy does support the council's three key pillars

### 33 Climate Emergency

34 Parks and green spaces contribute to mitigating the severity and impact of climate change in a number of ways, from storing carbon to reducing the impact of extreme weather events such as heat and flooding.

35 We believe that going forward, the Parks and Countryside service can do more, so we have proposed that *Climate and Biodiversity* is a priority in the strategy.

36 Our commitment to planting 50 hectares of trees a year for the next 10 years is included as part of this priority, along with establishing more wildflower meadows and grassland habitats, eliminating the use of peat and implementing other, council wide, climate-related initiatives such as using electric vehicles.

### 37 Health and Wellbeing

38 As outlined in the strategy document, there is now a great deal of evidence showing that spending time in green spaces has considerable benefits for peoples' mental and physical health.

39 This became particularly obvious during the recent coronavirus pandemic when parks became one of the few public spaces people could continue to enjoy safely. At the time, parks became increasingly popular and a great deal of appreciation was expressed by individuals and the national media regarding the immense benefits of spending time in parks and green spaces for peoples' health and wellbeing. Following the end of lockdown visitor numbers remain high.

40 As a result, we believe that the Parks and Countryside Service can make a significant contribution to the council's aim of 'supporting healthy, physically active lifestyles' and have proposed, in the strategy, that Health and Wellbeing is made a priority for the Parks and Countryside Service for the next 10 years.

41 As part of this priority, we are proposing to commit to providing and promoting a range of opportunities for people to be physically active in green spaces across the city (from accessible walking routes to football pitches, outdoor gyms to skate parks) so that everyone can enjoy being active outdoors, no matter what their level of ability or interests.

42 Providing good quality green spaces is also part of supporting Health and Wellbeing because people are more likely to use good quality green spaces and consequently get the health benefits of spending time in them. As highlighted by Public Health England, a likely outcome of all residents having access to good quality green space is a reduction in health inequalities.

### 43 Inclusive Growth

44 The strategy contains several elements that will contribute to the council's inclusive growth priority.

45 It proposes that the Parks and Countryside service provides high quality parks across the city and evidence shows that good quality parks have a beneficial impact on their local economy. For example, a study by Fields in Trust in 2018 estimated that parks have an equivalent economic value of £30.24 per person, per year based on several objective government measures of non-market goods including willingness to pay, life satisfaction and health.

46 Where it is currently proving difficult to secure funds to get parks to a high-quality standard (for example, in the inner city, where there are less S106 developer's contributions available), the

strategy proposes a dedicated strategic investment fund is established to ensure all areas of the city benefit from quality green spaces.

- 47 The strategy proposes to continue to improve our visitor offer through the development of a range of new attractions including indoor play at Tropical World and cycling facilities and a café at Temple Newsam. As well as continuing to improve the cultural offer of the city, these facilities provide employment opportunities and generate a sustainable income to support the care of parks and green spaces in general. The strategy also proposes that income on new chargeable visitor attractions is top sliced to improve play facilities in areas where other funding is not available (often inner-city areas).
- 48 The strategy proposes to continue to host events in parks where appropriate (previous events have ranged from large scale, high profile pop concerts such as Ed Sheeran in Roundhay park to community galas in local parks). Again, these support and promote cultural activity and social cohesion whilst gaining the wider economic benefits of some of those activities (such as attracting visitors to the city). A framework for Delivering Major Events in Leeds (including in parks) is currently being considered by Executive Board.
- 49 The Parks and Countryside Service is supported by thousands of volunteers each year (including as part of *Friends* groups, *In Bloom* groups and corporate volunteering schemes) - many of whom gain valuable skills and work experience which can help them into work and better jobs. The strategy proposes that the service continues to prioritise 'working with communities' in this way.

## Options, timescales and measuring success

### What other options were considered?

41. The option of continuing to implement the current strategy was considered but dismissed because it is out of date, for example, it pre-dates the Climate Emergency declaration.
42. The option of not having a Parks and Green Spaces strategy at all was also ruled out because we feel that having a clear, agreed direction for the Parks and Countryside service, (based on a thorough public consultation) is essential for the ongoing effectiveness of the service.
43. Having produced the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy, we have become aware of the developing 'Best City Ambition.' We believe that the aims set out in the strategy are consistent with the City Ambition as it stands so far (for example, in relation to the 'three key pillars' outlined in the section above) and to ensure the Strategy contributes effectively to the Ambition longer term, we will review and update it as necessary once the City Ambition is published.

### How will success be measured?

44. The strategy proposes a vision to '*provide the best parks and green spaces in the UK.*'
45. Based on feedback from users and knowing the fantastic green spaces and related facilities we have in Leeds we believe this is an attainable goal which will make a significant contribution to the achievement of the council's ambition to be the 'Best City' in the UK.
46. Following the public consultation, eight priorities for the Parks and Countryside Service are outlined in the strategy:
  - i. Quality
  - ii. Climate and biodiversity
  - iii. Access for all
  - iv. Culture

- v. Child friendly
- vi. Working with communities
- vii. Financial sustainability
- viii. Health and wellbeing

47. For each priority, specific aspirations, and the actions that will be undertaken to achieve them, are identified in the strategy document. It is proposed that these will be delivered over the next 10 years.

48. *Success will be measured by whether the aspirations set out in the document have been achieved or not over the 10-year period.*

49. In particular, two Key Performance Indicators are identified for the Parks and Countryside Service in the document. These are:

- i. Number of city and community parks at, or above, Leeds Quality Park standard
- ii. Hectares of trees planted.

### **What is the timetable for implementation?**

50. The planned timetable is outlined below:

Dec 2021	Executive Board
January 2022	Design strategy document and plan on a page version (see appendix c)
February 2022	Public launch of strategy
2022 – 2032	Implementation of the strategy

### **Appendices**

- 51. Appendix a - Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy
- 52. Appendix b - Parks and Green Spaces Strategy, Findings of public consultation
- 53. Appendix c - Initial design ideas for the strategy
- 54. Appendix d - EDCI screening report

### **Background papers**

None