



Enterprise and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

Scrutiny Project Group

report on Parks and Open Spaces Strategy

Date : 2 December 2014

PROJECT GROUP MEMBERS:

Councillors:

Lead	Keith Miles
Group Members	Avis Murphy Gordon Simmons Mark Rayner Andy Slack David Stone Helen Elliott Sharon Blank

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW AIMS

- 1.1 This review aims to contribute to the development of the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy with a view to develop and contribute to the Council's overarching Health and Wellbeing strategic portfolio.
- 1.2 The Project Group had hoped to deliver a more in depth review, but to co-ordinate this report alongside sport and leisure and their demands on the timeframe from planning review requirements, we have investigated and reported only on the key issues to enable the early implementation of this important report.

BACKGROUND

- 1.3 The Council's Parks and Open Spaces Strategy was adopted in 2003 and had not been revised until now.
- 1.4 The Council's Local Plan Core Strategy has recently been developed and the refreshed Parks and Open Spaces Strategy is needed to support this as a basis on which to avoid inappropriate developments on designated playing fields and to maximise and direct investment to support new development.
- 1.5 It is recognised that the availability of green space within the Borough has an essential part to play in contributing to improving the health and quality of life for all our communities.
- 1.6 The Public Health England's 2014 Health Profile for Chesterfield demonstrates a number of areas of concern regarding the health of

people in Chesterfield including lower than average life expectancy in the most deprived areas, and higher rates of diabetes and cardiovascular problems than the national average. Rates of smoking-related deaths and hospital stays for alcohol-related harm are also above the national average.

- 1.7 There are also many areas of deprivation within the Borough indicated in the map attached at Appendix 1, which shows the various measures of deprivation including income, employment, health and disability etc.
- 1.8 Various studies have shown that green space can benefit health through physical activity, relief from stress and fatigue and facilitation of social contact. Many of these studies have been summarised in a report by the Public Health Department, Derbyshire County Council, '*Green Space, Health Benefits and Chesterfield*' (Appendix 2) to this report.
- 1.9 It is reported that the use of green space can be impacted by the distance from which it is accessible to residents and also by physical boundaries such as busy roads, fences, poorly visible paths and signs.
- 1.10 There is evidence that the lack of good quality green space has a disproportionate effect on people from lower socio-economic groups. This is why the Project Group has taken a focus on the promotion of the health benefits in the use of parks and open spaces in the areas of the Borough that are more deprived.
- 1.11 Research also identifies that well-maintained facilities and organised activities are necessary to encourage the use of green spaces for physical activity and social contact. It is therefore suggested in the proposed strategy that a focus should be placed on investment in the quality of many areas, whilst considering the disposal of other low-quality areas of limited recreational potential. Promotion of community activities such as walks is also a key element.
- 1.12 An audit of the quality and availability of the parks and open spaces within the Borough was carried out by the Council as part of the strategy development. This data combined with information on the deprived areas of the Borough identified specific areas of combined multiple deprivation, low quality and deficiency of open space within wards Old Whittington, Dunston, St Helen's, and Hollingwood and Inkersall. A map that illustrates this data is attached at Appendix 3.

1.13 This review focuses on the areas of Dunston and Old Whittington as a small sample of the issues within the Borough to consider the principles and application the Strategy on these areas.

1.14 The main objectives of this review are:

- a) to ensure the strategic plan for Chesterfield Borough is based on robust needs and evidence.
- b) to ensure there are sustainable value for money and quality services, future-proofed for community need.
- c) to ensure the strategy meets the strategic needs identified to meet statutory Planning obligations.

2.0 REASONS FOR THE REVIEW AND LINK TO PRIORITIES

2.1 This strategy was required to support the Council's Local Plan and Core Strategy adopted in July 2013 as it had been identified that the previous strategy was out-of-date.

2.2 The review of the strategy was to develop and contribute to the Council's overarching Health and Wellbeing strategic portfolio.

2.3 The review was linked to the priority 'to improve the quality of life for local people' and the aim 'to encourage people to lead healthy and active lifestyles.'

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Project Group recommends:

3.1 That consultation is carried out with local residents and community groups when proposals are put forward for investment in a park or open space, in conjunction with promoting awareness of the health benefits.

Such consultation should be in line with the Council's Community Engagement Strategy and regard should be given to the community engagement model produced by students from University of Nottingham's masters in public health course in partnership with Derbyshire County Council's Public Health Department.

- 3.2 That disability access should be prioritised when proposals are developed for investment in parks and open spaces.
- 3.3 That the Play Strategy be reviewed within the next 12 months in order to rationalise the provision of equipped play areas, taking into account the age profiles of the surrounding areas.
- 3.4 That the Council's website should be used more effectively to promote parks and open spaces with maps and details of community events and activities.

4.0 REVIEW APPROACH

- 4.1 The review was carried out with three key aspects:
 - a) Review of the strategy document in principle
 - b) Site visits to consider the application of the strategy in priority areas
 - c) Review of the feedback to the consultation responses from members of the public, Community Assemblies, the Equalities and Diversity Forum and the 'Friends Of' group.
- 4.2 Site visits were conducted at four areas of open space within Dunston and Old Whittington, identified as priority focus areas. Ward Members were invited to attend the site visits and to contribute to the review. A site visit was also conducted by a member of the Project Group at Hasland Hall Park to look at play equipment.
- 4.3 Consideration was also given to the report of the Public Health Department at Derbyshire County Council, which also focussed on Dunston and Old Whittington as priority areas.

5.0 EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH

- 5.1 A study of the research into the benefits of green space, and the impact of proximity and the quality of facilities on the use of green space was provided in the report of the Public Health Department at Derbyshire County Council.
- 5.2 Site visits by the project group and ward members were carried out at green spaces at:
 - a) Coniston Road, Dunston
 - b) Windermere Road in Dunston
 - c) Roecar Close, Old Whittington

d) Hilltop Road, Old Whittington

Satellite photos from Google Maps of the sites are attached at Appendix 4.

- 5.3 The public responses to the consultation questionnaire were considered, as were the notes of the meetings of the Equality and Diversity Forum, Community Assemblies and the 'Friends of' Group.

6.0 REVIEW FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

- 6.1 The Project Group were not able to carry out extensive site visits and carry out consultation with all community groups and residents within the priority areas proposed within the strategy and only a small sample of areas were visited. The project group's assessments from the site visits identified that while there can be various options for investment, not all will be suitable for the local community.
- 6.2 It was considered essential that any future investment be tailored to the needs of the local residents in the catchment area of a park or green space and that thorough consultation should be carried out with community groups to ensure this goal is met.
- 6.3 It is also hoped that by developing green space in a way that allows all members of society to get involved, social exclusion can be reduced.
- 6.4 Derbyshire County Council Public Health Department has recently started a project with students from the University of Nottingham studying Masters in Public Health to look into this issue of community engagement. Their project is to develop a model that engages with the community with a focus on promoting the health benefits of the use of the park or open space. Their model is being developed using Rother ward as a basis but a framework will be created that can be replicated in other areas.
- 6.5 The Project Group has not had opportunity to see the model that is being developed but believe it could offer fresh ideas that the Council should have regard to when carrying out consultation on investment in parks and open spaces.
- 6.6 The Council's Community Engagement Strategy should also be used as the framework for any such consultation.

Recommendation: That consultation is carried out with local residents and community groups when any proposals are put forward for investment in a park or open space, in conjunction with promoting awareness of the health benefits.

Such consultation should follow the Council's Community Engagement Strategy and regard should be given to the community engagement model produced by students from University of Nottingham's masters in public health course in partnership with Derbyshire County Council's Public Health Department

Strategic Objectives and Priority Areas in Proposed Strategy

- 6.7 The Strategic Objectives set out in the proposed strategy are supported by the Project Group:
- Prioritise Investment in Parks and Open Spaces
 - Use Resources Effectively and Sustainably
 - Increase the use of Parks and Open Spaces
 - Engage with our community and partners effectively
- 6.8 The list of priority wards for the targeting of resources set out in the proposed strategy is supported by the Project Group. This places Middlecroft and Poolsbrook and Rother as the highest priorities, with a second priority group of Hollingwood and Inkersall, Dunston, St Helens, Loundsley Green and Old Whittington.
- 6.9 The areas of Dunston and Old Whittington that were visited by the Project Group demonstrate the limited use that these low quality green areas have.
- 6.10 The Project Group also supports the principle that some low-value green space could be disposed of in order to rationalise the maintenance that is required and also seek re-investment in other areas through the sale or development of such land. It was clearly identified that many areas do not have much potential for recreation even with investment in new facilities.

Findings from site visits

- 6.11 In the Dunston ward, whilst there is a large green space along Coniston road, this is not considered suitable for development or the investment of new facilities. The site runs along busy roads and is too narrow in places.
- 6.12 It is considered that the area behind Newbold Working Men's Club could benefit from some areas for benches and shelter. This would provide for greater opportunity for social contact within the green space. Paths that also allow access for disabled people would also promote the use of the area. The possibility for provision of leisure facilities for older children/teenagers was also suggested as there is an area with play equipment for younger children nearby.
- 6.13 In the Old Whittington ward, the green space in the area of Roecar Close is not considered suitable for investment in leisure facilities as it is on a gradient making sports activities difficult. Use of the site for car parking or other development could be considered.
- 6.14 The location of Old Whittington Park at Hilltop Road is considered essential as there are no other comparable areas in the vicinity. The limited access is identified as priority for improvement as there are no paths and disability access is restricted.
- 6.15 The addition of shelter and benches is suggested to facilitate greater use of the park for social contact and would also provide somewhere for people to sit whilst accompanying children playing on the park. It is also suggested that the areas for shelter and seating be located away from the houses that surround the edge of the park so as to limit any noise or anti-social behaviour that may occur from disturbing the local residents.
- 6.16 Other facilities such as an outdoor/natural gym were suggested for all of the sites other than Roecar Close as a way to promote the health benefits to a wider age-range of the community.

Disability Access

- 6.17 The Project Group considered that the use of the sites could be improved and there could be greater equality in such use if access was easier for those with disabilities. Whilst it was difficult to define 'disability access', in some cases this was clearly restricted by gates that could not be used by wheelchair users. In other cases the lack

of level paths and benches or seating areas caused restrictions for those with difficulty walking.

- 6.18 It was recognised that some restrictions on access on parks may be required to prevent access by vehicle, bike etc that could be disruptive and cause damage. There should be a balance drawn and adjustments should be made where reasonable to ensure access is possible for people with disabilities.
- 6.19 There could be many other features or facilities that could be developed to make parks usable by everyone, such as sensory gardens with fragrant plants or herbs and interesting textures.

Recommendation: That disability access should be prioritised when proposals are developed for investment in parks and open spaces.

Play Equipment

- 6.20 In addition to the site visits carried out in Dunston and Old Whittington, a small sample of play areas in Hasland Hall Park were visited by a member of the Project Group. An outline of the findings based on this is attached at Appendix 5.
- 6.21 The provision of play facilities across the Borough needs rationalising. There are areas such as Hasland Hall Park where there are many single pieces of play equipment spread out that are not regularly used, some areas with play equipment only for very young children and other areas with very limited provision for any age range.
- 6.22 From the site visits it was clear that the demographics of the community surrounding the park or open space will be a factor in determining the suitability of the play equipment. The needs of older children as well as toddlers should be considered.

Recommendation: That the Play Strategy be reviewed within the next 12 months, in order to rationalise the provision of equipped play areas, taking into account the age profiles of the surrounding areas.

Promotion/Marketing to increase use

- 6.23 The proposed strategy contains provisions aimed at increasing the use of the parks and open spaces through partnership working as well as promoting the benefits for health, learning and wildlife.
- 6.24 Many open spaces owned by the Council do not have signs or notice boards informing the public that the areas are available for public use or giving details of forthcoming events or activities. These would be a straightforward way of encouraging increased use of these areas.
- 6.25 There are also many community groups, including sports clubs, that regularly use the Borough's parks and open spaces but it is not always easy to find out about what is happening in any local area.
- 6.26 The Council's website contains some information on the parks and green spaces in the Borough and there are A-Z lists of the parks and play areas. It is suggested in the '*Green Space, Health Benefits and Chesterfield*' report that it would be easier for residents to identify their local parks and nearby green spaces if the website provided a map, ideally interactive. This could also be done for allotments and gardens. Using existing search engine tools and maps, such as Google, could also be used to identify these areas.
- 6.27 The website could also be used as a central portal for members of the public and community groups wanting to promote their events in local parks – such as nature walks, bird watching, games or sports etc. A web-form that could be completed would help to simplify the process of promoting an event and provide a central place for members of the public to find out about events and activities in their area.

Recommendation: That the Council's website should be used more effectively to promote parks and open spaces with maps and details of community events and activities.

7.0 REVIEW CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 The Project Group supports the proposed Parks and Open Strategy in principle. It is agreed that there are many areas which need investment and it is hoped that the implementation of the strategy will lead to improvements in the quality of the provision of parks and

open spaces in the long term when appropriate resources are identified.

- 7.2 The parks and open spaces should be accessible to all members of the public so that the benefits of their use can be wide reaching. This will involve improving the facilities that are on offer within a reasonable distance, promoting the activities and events taking place and increasing the community's sense of ownership of public spaces.
- 7.3 The Project Group note there are a number of ways this is already being achieved. A wide range of examples in Chesterfield is listed in the Public Health Department report. It is also suggested that engaging with the public and partners will be key to continuing this success.

APPENDICES:

1. Map showing areas of deprivation within Chesterfield Borough
2. Public Health Department, Derbyshire County Council, '*Green Space, Health Benefits and Chesterfield*'
3. Map showing areas of combined multiple deprivation, low quality and deficiency of open space within Chesterfield Borough.
4. Satellite photos from Google Maps of site visit locations
5. Hasland Hall Park findings on equipped play areas.

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