



NORWICH City Council

Committee name: Scrutiny

Committee date: 21/03/2024

Report title: A Parks and Green Spaces Strategy for Norwich – An Update

Portfolio: Councillor Giles, Cabinet member for communities and social inclusion

Report from: Head of environment services

Wards: All wards

OPEN PUBLIC ITEM

Purpose

To provide an update to Scrutiny on the progress of developing a new Parks and Green Spaces Strategy prior to it going to Cabinet and wider public consultation.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that Scrutiny note the contents of the report and provide feedback on progress prior to the strategy going to Cabinet and for wider public consultation.

Policy framework

The council has five corporate priorities, which are:

- People live independently and well in a diverse and safe city.
- Norwich is a sustainable and healthy city.
- Norwich has the infrastructure and housing it needs to be a successful city.
- The city has an inclusive economy in which residents have equal opportunity to flourish.
- Norwich City Council is in good shape to serve the city.

This report meets the “*Norwich is a sustainable and healthy city*” corporate priority.

This report addresses to “*Publish, adopt and implement a new Parks and Open Spaces Strategy*” priority or action in the Corporate Plan.

Introduction and why we are doing this.

1. The Council's previous Corporate Plan 2022-2026 stated that Norwich should be a 'Liveable City' that 'takes pride in being a place with a great local environment that people value' as well as a 'healthy and sustainable city'. At the heart of that vision, lay one of its greatest assets – its parks and green spaces. The Corporate Plan stated that it would 'Protect and invest in our parks, green spaces and biodiversity'.

Throughout the lifespan of the previous Corporate Plan, there were many successes and challenges faced in achieving this. The Council has a significant green estate including many historic parks and gardens (including Eaton Park, Waterloo Park, Wensum Park, Earlham Park, Mile Cross Gardens, Heigham Park, Ketts Heights, Chapelfield Gardens, Rosary Cemetery, Earlham Cemetery); areas of significant natural green space (including Mousehold Heath, the river corridors and areas managed by the Norwich Fringe Project and Norfolk Wildlife Trust), playing fields (including Sloughbottom Park and Eaton Park), children's play areas, allotments and community gardens, woodlands and cemeteries.

With pressures on budgets, increased usage of our parks and open spaces, particularly during and post the Covid-19 pandemic and the considerable concerns with pressures on biodiversity and climate change, it is timely to review our short, medium and longer-term strategic priorities for our parks and green spaces. This is fully reflected in the consultation for the new Corporate Plan 2024-2029 which highlighted that parks and green spaces are the service that residents most value. The Corporate Plan therefore has stated that the council will have '*Vibrant parks and open spaces for all*' with success as '*Our parks and green spaces have increased usage across all communities, with improved recreation, sport and leisure opportunities, evidenced by a higher take up in sport and physical activity, contributing to better mental and physical wellbeing. The biodiversity value of our open spaces is increased and supports thriving wildlife*'.

2. A Parks and Green Spaces Strategy offers a major opportunity to improve the quality and value of our parks and green spaces. Government guidance as well as best practice continues to emphasise the need for a more strategic approach to green space management. What a strategy will achieve is: -
 - To generate political and inter-departmental support for parks and green spaces in Norwich and establish clear lines of responsibility.
 - To develop a vision shared by all politicians, officers, key partners, stakeholders, and communities.
 - To define the value and role of parks and green spaces in meeting corporate and community aims.
 - To create a comprehensive policy framework for the protection, enhancement, accessibility and use of parks and green spaces.
 - To make sure that our parks and green spaces enhance the quality and diversity of the city's environment, the life of our local communities and promote civic pride and social inclusion.
 - To ensure that the parks and green spaces strategic network meets the needs of local people and our visitors, now and in the future.
 - To provide a framework for resource allocation that maximises funding to

support regeneration initiatives from internal revenue budgets and external funding; and

- To create a framework for voluntary and community groups to participate in parks and green space provision and management.

How we are going about developing a new strategy and developing a new vision for our Parks and Green Spaces

3. A vision is proposed as follows:-

A Parks and Green Spaces Vision for the City of Norwich

Norwich will have a network of accessible, high quality and highly valued parks and green spaces to be proud of, promoting sustainability, enhancing health and wellbeing, supporting biodiversity, protecting their heritage, and extensively contributing to the economic, social and environmental aspirations of the city.

4. As part of this strategy development, we have assessed the quality and value of all our parks and green spaces using a comprehensive on-site audit and analysis which is currently being mapped onto a Geographical Information System (GIS). These audits covered many issues such as maintenance, cleanliness, biodiversity, usage, recreational value, facilities available and management regimes. A tried and tested methodology over many years, this has given us the evidence we needed to build up a picture, identifying what we have and allowing us to prioritise what investment or management changes are required. It is also important to define what quality and value mean as part of any on site audit.
5. **Quality** relates to the range of facilities or features on a site. The quality audit covers factors such as site accessibility, safety and security, management and maintenance and the presence of planting, trees, seats, and other facilities.
6. **Value** relates to the contribution the site makes to local amenity, recreation, health, and well-being, biodiversity, cultural heritage, community, or other strategic objectives.
7. These audits have included parks, gardens and recreation grounds, allotments, play areas, council managed cemeteries, and sports facilities. The quality of natural green spaces has been captured through the Biodiversity Baseline Study carried out by Norfolk County Council (and will form part of the strategy). We categorised each space as to whether it was high or low quality or high or low value. The results will be summarised within the strategy but the overall results indicate that the quality and value of parks and green spaces across Norwich is generally mixed, with some excellent examples such as the 3 Green Flag parks.
8. There are, however, issues and emerging concerns with the declining infrastructure of several our parks and green spaces, especially in some of the

heritage parks that Norwich is so well-known for. This includes sites such as Mile Cross Gardens, Riverside Walk and Wensum Park. Many community parks are also of lower quality and include sites such as Sewell Park, Gildencroft and Lakenham Recreation Ground. Sites have also been identified that could be delivering greater value through enhanced biodiversity, such as Anderson's Meadow, Heartsease Park, Pilling Park and Sloughbottom Park, along with many others. The results of the audit will of course stimulate wider debate but do give a 'snapshot' in time of their current condition and contribution to local communities.

9. There will always also be a view from some residents that "there is never enough green space". However, there are very few green space deficiencies in the city. The 2007 Open Space Needs Assessment, although produced many years ago indicated good provision of parks and gardens across the city as well as excellent access to natural and semi-natural green spaces. Distribution of play areas was also cited as acceptable. However, it also stated that: 'The variety in urban form across the city is reflected in the contrasting size, characteristics, and quality of open space provision in different areas. The city has a heritage of high-quality parks, but in some areas open space is noticeable only by its absence. Other areas seem to be awash with space, although sometimes it is bland and in need of more imaginative treatment and use.'
10. Whilst it is often difficult to create new spaces to meet deficiencies where they exist, it becomes more important to ensure that those spaces that are present within these areas, are high quality and meet the needs of the surrounding community i.e. of high value.
11. We are therefore proposing to focus and concentrate on those sites that are most important to us and our communities, which need to be protected at all costs as well as enhanced and managed to an acceptable standard. This allows the council and its partners to deliver change through improving the quality, value, and accessibility of our parks and green spaces network, making Norwich a better place to work, live and visit. A strategic network of parks and green spaces is proposed and will consist of CITY, COMMUNITY and LOCAL parks, along with strategic sports hubs and green links and a greater emphasis on green infrastructure. There will be more prominence on enhancement, accessibility, protection and increasing community and stakeholder involvement in these sites and we will build on the work of the existing Outdoor Projects Network.
12. But what about those sites which do not perform well and are deemed low quality and/or low value? Several sites fall into this category. There is a clear policy defined in this strategy on how we treat these sites. We will look at enhancing the quality of many of these green spaces if it is possible to improve and enhance the value of them.
13. As part of this strategy, we are also proposing a challenging vision based on the principles of *stewardship* (how we will manage our parks and green spaces in the interests of the whole community), *management* (acknowledging they are community assets and require continued investment), *use* (Ensuring they are available for use by all sections of the local community) and *environmental protection* (how we develop green spaces to ensure that they remain "living spaces"). These will underpin this strategy.

14. As the elected representatives of the city, we will manage our parks and open spaces in the interests of the whole community. As steward, we own them in trust, now and for future generations. We will seek to protect and preserve the historic, architectural and landscape heritage.
15. We have identified that because we cannot do everything, we need to work in partnership with local stakeholders and other organisations. We currently do this in many of our parks and green spaces and communities through the Outdoor Projects Network and Norwich Fringe Project, but there are significant opportunities to develop these further and build new partnerships across Norwich, increasing the opportunities for volunteers to get involved. This will of course require further investment. This may range from community tidy ups in green spaces with a Friends group or collaborations with major organisations such as Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Norfolk County Gardens Trust, and Norfolk County Council. We also need to develop stronger relationships with funding bodies such as the Greater Norwich Growth Board, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Sport England, the Arts Council and Historic England.
16. Funding is a significant issue, and we need to identify new ways we can make changes, particularly through: income generation; sensitive commercialisation; and where appropriate, taking into account localised consultation and engagement, partnering with others (eg The Wildlife Trust), and developing self-management option. We will explore, again after localised consultation and engagement, and respecting amenity uses and landscape heritage, making sensitive changes to management and maintenance regimes to enhance biodiversity. An 'Investment Plan' forms part of the Action Plan of this strategy with identified costs required over the 10-year period and highlights potential funding sources such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund, GNGB, and Neighbourhood CIL.
17. We will continue to ensure universal access to our parks and open spaces, seeking to maximise inclusivity. We will work in partnership to design out crime and anti-social behaviour within our parks, recognising that increased legitimate usage and community involvement often crowds out illegitimate uses. We will seek to support our green spaces being important centres of civic and environmental education, and community assets to celebrate our rich cultural diversity. We will continue to invest in accessible and affordable play, sport, and recreation, recognising the vital role our parks play in combating inequalities in health and wellbeing.
18. We will work in partnership with Friends groups and local communities to enhance biodiversity, seeking opportunities to implement recommendations from the Biodiversity Baseline Study. Our river valleys, heathland, and ancient woodland play particularly critical roles as Biodiversity Character Areas. However the creation and management of wildlife ponds, Miyawaki forests, wildflower meadows, and orchards all have a critical role to play in nature recovery.
19. How will we know if we are continuing to make a difference? We continue to see the Green Flag Award as the key performance indicator, and we are very proud of our current awards. However, we know there is potential for many more in the city, highlighting quality parks and green spaces as well as continued and sustained improvement. We are already working on this with

applications submitted in 2024 for Ketts Heights, Heigham Park, Wensum Park and Jenny Lind Park and further applications planned in 2025 and beyond.

20. We acknowledge that the point of any strategy is to get things done and the most important aspect of ours is the 'Action Plan' and we have developed a comprehensive, challenging, yet stretched series of actions to ensure this strategy actually "makes a difference".

So where have we got to?

21. Progress has been considerable and includes the following: -

- a. A review of all national, regional, and local policies including:
 - i. The Environment Act 2021.
 - ii. Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
 - iii. Climate Change Act 2008.
 - iv. The National Planning Policy Framework.
 - v. Biodiversity 2020: A Strategy for England's Wildlife and Ecosystem Services.
 - vi. Natural England's Green Infrastructure Guidance.
 - vii. DEFRA's Green Infrastructure Partnership; and
 - viii. DEFRA's Environment Plan: A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment 2018.
 - ix. Norwich City Council Corporate Plan 2022-2026
 - x. Norwich Environmental Strategy 2020-2025
 - xi. Strategic Asset Management Framework 2022
 - xii. Biodiversity Strategy – Creating a city for nature 2022-2032
 - xiii. Emerging Greater Norwich Green Infrastructure Strategy
 - xiv. Draft Norwich Trees Strategy
 - xv. Norwich Heritage Investment Strategy 2014 and Norwich's Historic Parks
 - xvi. Norwich Local Plan Development management policies plan 2014
 - xvii. Norwich Health and Well-Being Strategic Plan 2023-25
 - xviii. The Greater Norwich Physical Activity and Sports Strategy (PASS)
 - xix. Greater Norwich - Playing Pitch Strategy 2022
 - xx. The Biodiversity Baseline Study 2024 carried out by Norfolk County Council of sites in Norwich and potential for Biodiversity Net Gain.
- b. A review of all consultation carried out on parks and green spaces including that carried out as part of the emerging Green Infrastructure Strategy in 2023. This is summarised in the new strategy and has been invaluable.
- c. An away day held at Norwich City Football Club with over 120 delegates representing 60 public organisations including the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Norfolk County Gardens Trust, Norwich BID, Friends Groups and Residents Associations, Norfolk County Council, and many other environmental organisations.

- d. An all-day site visit with officers from Historic England (HE) to view our historic parks and to discuss our long-term ambitions. HE was praiseworthy of current locations such as Waterloo and Eaton Parks but had concerns with regards to Mile Cross Gardens, Chapelfield Gardens and Wensum Park.
- e. A review of several national policies on parks and green spaces affecting groups such as women and girls, children and young people, and ethnic minority groups. Eg [About Us \(makespaceforgirls.co.uk\)](https://www.makespaceforgirls.co.uk)
- f. Quality and value audits completed on over 100 sites across the city including all parks and 50% of all play areas. [Note all audit work will be completed by the end of March 2024].
- g. An accessibility study of all 81 play areas completed.
- h. Discussions with funding organisations such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and GNGB.
- i. Presentation to the Norfolk Green Care Network.

So, what's next?

- 22. The strategy is evolving into a first iteration which will be completed once all audits have been accomplished at the end of March 2024. This first draft is expected to be drafted by mid-April for internal consultation with departments and service areas, and in particular planning, property, leisure, and communities and NCSL. Feedback will be considered for the first presentation of the strategy to Cabinet in June 2024 with a recommendation to then engage and consult with the wider community.
- 23. Continue discussions with the National Lottery Heritage Fund, UEA, Norfolk County Gardens Trust, Historic England around conservation and enhancement of our historic parks and green spaces.
- 24. Identify funding opportunities and develop projects based on the proposed Strategic Green Space Network, and with the GNGB.
- 25. Develop a consultation programme on the strategy utilising Get Talking Norwich. See below for further details.

Consultation

- 26. Members, officers, stakeholders, and residents should have an opportunity to shape the final strategy. The away day at Norwich City FC was invaluable in gauging the views of the many organisations involved in volunteering, the management, protection, use and enhancement of our parks and green spaces. The review of the wider city-wide consultation for the emerging Greater Norwich Green Infrastructure Strategy was also very useful giving details of usage of many of our green spaces – most popular sites, length of stays, activities etc. However, the strategy findings and proposed 'direction of travel' requires considerable consultation and from June 2024, we will consult widely within communities with a series of roadshows across the city. This will include libraries, community centres, friends' groups where will present our findings in

a usable format and ask for feedback. This will be used to update the strategy for final presentation to Cabinet.

27. We will also identify those 'hard to reach' groups and engage with them as to what matters to them when using our parks and green spaces. This will include children and young people.

Implications

Financial and resources

28. Any decision to reduce or increase resources or alternatively increase income must be made within the context of the council's stated priorities, as set out in its Corporate Plan 2022-26 and budget.
29. The impact on resources in delivering this strategy is significant and the strategy sets out as an appendix an investment plan, stating sites and locations requiring investment, indicating potential costs and sources. Delivery will be through several means and will include: -
- a. National Lottery Heritage Fund which currently funds the restoration of historic parks and landscapes. Their Heritage 2033 strategy is centred around a simplified framework of four investment principles: saving heritage; protecting the environment; inclusion, access, and participation; and organisational sustainability. All four principles must be considered in any application. The council is keen to progress a significant lottery funded project that will embrace opportunities for its network of historic parks and natural green spaces.
 - b. The Greater Norwich Growth Board which allocates funding from the Infrastructure Investment Fund.
 - c. Biodiversity Net Gain - BNG is an approach to development. It makes sure that habitats for wildlife are left in a measurably better state than they were before the development. In England, BNG is mandatory under Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as inserted by Schedule 14 of the Environment Act 2021), as detailed in subsequent statutory instruments. The Norwich BNG Guidance Note sets out further detail. Developers must deliver a BNG of 10%. This means a development will result in more or better-quality natural habitat than there was before development.
 - d. Public Health funding where appropriate, expanding on the health and wellbeing agenda with significant evidence indicating that parks and green spaces are beneficial to our physical and mental health.
 - e. Capital allocations from the council's capital programme, funded by capital receipts, S106, or neighbourhood CIL.
 - f. Increasing revenue opportunities whether through fees and charges, other commercial opportunities, and neighbourhood CIL.
 - g. Increasing the opportunities for volunteers to become involved in their local green spaces.

Legal

30. There are no legal implications associated with this report.

Statutory considerations

Consideration	Details of any implications and proposed measures to address:
Equality and diversity	An Equality Impact Assessment will be required for the final strategy.
Health, social and economic impact	The benefits of high quality and high value parks and green spaces is highlighted within the report and forms a major part of the strategy.
Crime and disorder	It is highlighted in the strategy that one of the wider benefits of good quality parks and green spaces is a reduction in crime and disorder within parks and green spaces.
Children and adults safeguarding	This is relevant when promoting opportunities for volunteering which is highlighted in the strategy and what the benefits are.
Environmental impact	The strategy highlights throughout the positive environmental impact of having high quality and high value parks and green spaces.

Risk management

Risk	Consequence	Controls required
Not applicable at this stage		

Other options considered.

31. Not applicable

Reasons for the recommendation

The recommendation is to note the contents of the report and provide feedback on progress prior to the strategy going to Cabinet and for wider public consultation. Scrutiny have identified that the provision and management of parks and open spaces is not a statutory service and thus the medium-term financial pressures on the General Fund could threaten its vitality. What pots of developer/grant funding do become available are unpredictable in nature, and often require short lead-in times for officers to put schemes together to secure funding. A strong amount of public responses would be anticipated from consultation on the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, and this will require officer resource to read, reflect and respond to consultation responses.

Background papers: [List those papers referred to in compiling the report and provide links where possible (only those that do not contain exempt information).]

Appendices:

Appendix ONE – Quality and Value assessments for parks and recreation grounds

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Appendix ONE - Quality and Value assessments for parks and recreation grounds

NAME	SIZE (Ha)	QUALITY	VALUE	CATEGORY	STATUS
Parks, Gardens, Recs Grounds (PGRG)		65%	65%	HQHV	
Alderman Walker Park	0.93	56	50	LQLV	
Bowthorpe Park	9.08	54	45	LQLV	
Britannia Barracks Park	2.21	49	70	LQHV	Heritage
Castle Gardens	1.06	51	46	LQLV	Heritage
Castle Green	1.54				Heritage
Chapelfield Gardens	3.17	69	67	HQHV	Heritage
Earlham Park	26.4	91	68	HQHV	Heritage
Eaton Park	32.1	88	97	HQHV	Heritage
Harford Park	4.1	66	69	HQHV	
Heartsease Towers Park	5.02	72	72	HQHV	
Heigham Park	2.4	77	78	HQHV	Heritage
James Stuart Gardens	0.21	64	56	LQLV	Heritage
Jenny Lind Park	1.72	77	73	HQHV	
Jubilee Park	1.78	71	55	HQLV	
Lakenham Recreation Ground	0.72	54	44	LQLV	
Lea Bridges Park	4.11	60	70	LQHV	
Mile Cross Gardens	0.78	55	61	LQLV	Heritage
Sewell Park	1.35	62	56	LQLV	Heritage
Sloughbottom Park	12.4	71	72	HQHV	Heritage
St Clements Park	2.3	76	78	HQHV	
Waterloo Park	7.41	89	84	HQHV	Heritage
Wensum Park	3.08	67	69	HQHV	Heritage
Woodrow Pilling Park	4.81	73	72	HQHV	