

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Subject: REVIEW OF THE OPEN SPACE STRATEGY AND PARKS DEVELOPMENT PLAN
Meeting: EXECUTIVE
Date: 20 OCTOBER 2015
Author: DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In August 2014 the Executive established a Policy Development Panel (the Panel) with the remit to review the Falkirk Council Open Space Strategy and Parks Development Plan and instructed officers to progress an update of the Parks Development Plan within the context of the review of the Falkirk Council Open Space Strategy. This report summarises the work of the Panel and presents a draft strategy for public consultation.

2. POLICY DEVELOPMENT PANEL

- 2.1 The Panel comprised Councillors Adrian Mahoney (Chair), Jim Blackwood and John McLuckie. It was supported by Danny Thallon (Planning Officer); Claire Mennim (Parks and Sustainability Team Leader [Falkirk Community Trust]); David Crighton (Estates Manager); and Antonia Sobieraj (Committee Officer). David Crighton's supporting role was replaced by Wraight Shepherd (Area Estates Coordinator) following his departure from Council employment in early 2015.
- 2.2 The Panel first met on 23rd October 2014 to set out the scope of its review. The Panel established a programme of pre- consultative draft strategy consultation including: a seminar for elected Members; a seminar for organisations with an interest in parks and open spaces; a survey of officers involved in the management and maintenance of parks and open spaces; and a questionnaire about attitudes to and use of parks and open spaces which was distributed to the Citizens' Panel. A report on this programme of consultation is included at appendix 4 of the consultative draft Open Space Strategy and Parks Development Plan (the Strategy).
- 2.3 The findings of the exercise were presented to the Panel on 12th February 2015. Following discussion of the findings, the Panel instructed officers to prepare the Strategy to be presented to them for further scrutiny.
- 2.4 Three separate meetings of the Panel were held on 8th April, 5th June and 23rd September 2015 where the latest iteration of the Strategy was examined and changes identified. Significant changes were requested, primarily to address the challenging budgetary circumstances the Council currently finds itself in. These included:

- Increasing the proposed accessibility standard to open spaces containing a playspace from 600m to 800m (10 minute walk);
- Increasing the proposed accessibility standard to open spaces containing a sports area from 600m to 1200m (15 minute walk); and
- Changing the proposed quality target for national and regional level open spaces from a score of 3.5 in the fitness for purpose assessment to 3.0

2.5 Other changes requested included:

- A restructuring of the Strategy to remove its more technical and discursive parts to dedicated appendices in an effort to enhance its readability;
- A redrafting of various sections of the “standards and policies” chapter to:
 - highlight the need to establish an appropriate scheme of charging for the use of our parks and open spaces by small businesses or commercial organisations;
 - highlight the role that communities can have in helping to deliver change in their parks and open spaces;
 - indicate that, in accordance with the Community Empowerment Act, the Council will allow qualifying communities to apply to them to take ownership of and take over responsibility for the management and maintenance of playspaces which have been identified as potentially surplus.
 - emphasise the important role our national level open spaces play in shaping perceptions of the Falkirk area.
- The addition of a dedicated section on “signage within parks and open spaces” within the “standards and policies” chapter;
- Re-categorising Kinneil Estate as a national level open space to reflect the importance it is given in other related Council strategies.

2.6 At the last meeting of the Panel on 23rd September 2015, subject to some minor drafting changes, the Panel recommended that the consultative draft be presented to the Council’s Executive seeking approval to publish the document for public consultation.

3. CONTENT OF THE STRATEGY

3.1 The Strategy which is attached at Appendix 1 presents a new vision for the parks and open spaces across the Council area building on the vision of the Council’s 1st Open Space Strategy:

“Our parks and open spaces will be high quality, well used and well connected and will provide a modern, sustainable and diverse resource which will:

- *improve the health and enrich the lives of the communities at the heart of them;*
- *be of significant ecological value; and*
- *help to mitigate the effects of climate change”*

3.2 The strategy considers the approaches the Council could take to deliver this vision under the four key themes which emerged from the initial programme of consultation:

- Modernising our parks and open spaces;
- Addressing inequality and fostering community through open space investment;
- Working and investing more efficiently; and
- Generating capital and revenue for investment in parks and open space.

3.3 Fourteen strategic proposals are made under these four key themes as follows. The delivery of these proposals would be subject to the availability of resources:

Modernising our parks and open spaces

1. We will invest in our poorer quality parks and open spaces where there is no better quality alternative provision nearby;
2. We will invest in the parks and open spaces which are particularly valued by the local community;
3. We will maintain investment and revenue budgets in the higher level open spaces which serve a more strategic function and raise the tourism profile of the Council area;
4. We will invest in a rationalised, more modern portfolio of play and sports facilities to improve overall play and sports development value;
5. We will make investment decisions which encourage people to improve their health by:
 - increasing their use of parks and open spaces; and
 - walking or cycling to parks and open spaces.
6. We will change the management of the parks and open space resource to:
 - exploit opportunities to further the conservation of biodiversity; and
 - reduce overall flood risk
7. We will promote improvement projects which help to develop a high quality, multi-functional green network which will provide a range of benefits for people, businesses and wildlife and to the ecological status of water bodies across our area.

Addressing inequality and fostering community through open space investment

8. We will give investment priority to those areas and open spaces which need improving the most (as identified within the various area strategies)
9. Building on recent work in establishing “friends” groups, we will actively encourage the increased involvement of community groups in the management and improvement of parks and open spaces

Working and investing more efficiently

10. We will identify those parks and open spaces where: high intensity maintenance regimes are necessary to maintain an appropriate image; and lower intensity maintenance regimes would be more appropriate to save money and enhance value for wildlife.

11. To ensure that investment can be focussed on providing good quality local provision within a reasonable walking distance, we will revise minimum walking distance standards to the different functions of open space (public park or amenity space, playspace, sports area, natural/semi natural open space).
12. Where an area is not within the minimum walking distances to the different functions of open space (park or amenity space, playspace, sports area, natural/ semi natural open space), we will:
 - promote the provision of new open space within new development sites.
 - encourage wider unrestricted public access to privately managed sports facilities (where possible this could be funded through developer contributions.)
 - create new entrances to existing open spaces which shorten travel time and;
 - create missing links in the local path network which shorten travel time.
13. We will develop a set of projects and priorities help to:
 - deliver the vision of the Open Space Strategy and Parks Development Plan;
 - deliver the aims of other related Council strategies; and
 - align with the priorities of external funding partners.

Generating capital and revenue for investment in parks and open space

14. We will explore opportunities to generate money for investment in park and open space improvement and maintenance through:
 - seeking appropriate alternative uses for parks and open spaces which are no longer needed;
 - building on our impressive track record of partnership working to lever grant funding from other organisations;
 - charging for the commercial use of parks and open space whilst safeguarding their free use by community groups;
 - developing a business case to commercialise appropriate parts of the park and open space resource
 - using innovative fund raising methods.

3.4 A suite of open space standards and policies are presented which will assist in delivering the vision of the strategy. Standards and policies relate to:

- Park and Open Space Quantity, Quality and Accessibility
- Play Provision
- Sports Pitches and Sports Development
- High Profile Parks and Open Spaces
- Promoting Community Involvement in Parks and Open Spaces
- Commercial Use of Parks and Open Space
- Surplus Parks and Open Spaces
- Reducing Flood Risk
- Council Ownership Details

- Signage within Parks and Open Spaces

3.5 Area strategies are presented for the 9 distinct settlement areas which have traditionally formed the sub divisions of the Council area for land use planning purposes. The area strategies spatially present the following information for each settlement area:

- The findings of the open space audit;
- Which of the ten strategic objectives for improvement of open space are relevant to that area. The ten strategic objectives are:
 1. Investing in the parks and open spaces that are particularly valued by the local community
 2. Raising the quality standard of our national and regional level open spaces
 3. Investing in poorer quality parks and open spaces where there is no better quality alternative provision
 4. Developing new play facilities in areas of identified need
 5. Developing new sports areas in areas of identified need
 6. Developing new park or amenity open space in areas of identified need
 7. Developing new semi natural space in areas of identified need
 8. Improve the green network in and around the Council area by improving open space sites, corridors and connectivity.
 9. Rationalise our portfolio of playspaces and sports areas to improve overall quality
 10. Provide new open space where the rate of open space provision is below the 5ha/1000 people standard
- The specific actions needed achieve the relevant strategic objectives of the Open Space Strategy; and
- An indicative spatial strategy comprising a map showing the location of the actions for each area.

4. IMPLICATIONS

4.1 **Policy:** The strategy directly addresses the themes of the Strategic Community Plan 2010-15 and several of the outcomes of the Council's Single Outcome Agreement. The strategy will inform the determination of planning applications. The strategy complies with the Local Development Plan and will inform its future review. It will also provide a robust evidence base to inform any future leisure related strategies.

4.2 **Equality and Poverty:** An Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment of the consultative draft Strategy has been carried out. It found that in general the negative effects of the consultative draft Strategy can be suitably mitigated, however it also found that the proposal to increase walking distance standards to playspaces and sports areas will have an adverse impact on: very young people and their parents and guardians; older people who are less able to walk longer distances due to health related reasons; people who are less able to walk longer distances due to disability related reasons; and pregnant women and mothers with very young children.

- 4.3 Changing the walking distance thresholds will allow the Council to concentrate investment on improving the quality of a smaller number of playspaces and sports areas. This should improve overall play/ sports development value and have regard to financial constraints. This is considered to be sufficient justification for the identified negative impact on diverse communities.
- 4.4 **Environmental:** In accordance with the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005, an Environmental Report has been prepared alongside the consultative draft Strategy which sets out the likely environmental effects of its implementation together with those of its reasonable alternatives. The likely significant positive environmental effects of implementing the consultative draft Strategy are:
- the ecological value of our parks and open spaces should improve;
 - the number of households within an acceptable walking distance of different types of open space should improve;
 - the number of households within an acceptable walking distance of “fit for purpose” open space should improve;
 - participation in outdoor recreation should increase;
 - the health and wellbeing quality of our parks and open spaces should improve;
 - the connectivity of the open space network and the active travel network should improve;
 - our ability to mitigate increased flood risk caused by a changing climate should improve; and
 - the design and aesthetic quality of our parks and open spaces should improve.
- 4.5 The likely significant negative effects of implementing the consultative draft Strategy are:
- The overall rate of open space provision across the Council area (which is measured as the number of hectares per 1000 people) is likely to reduce;
 - The average walking distance to open spaces containing a playspace or a sports area may increase; and
 - The overall quality of regional, settlement and neighbourhood level open spaces could decrease.
- 4.6 **Financial:** Resources to implement the Strategy will come from existing capital and revenue budgets (which are constrained) as well as from developer contributions and external partnership funding.
- 4.7 **Legal:** Scottish Planning Policy strongly encourages the preparation of relevant, up to date audits, strategies and actions plans covering green infrastructure’s multiple functions. The preparation of the Strategy fulfils this requirement. The Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005 requires that an environmental report be prepared alongside the consultative draft Strategy, this has been done.
- 4.8 **Personnel:** Whilst much can be achieved with existing resources there may be discrete projects which will require temporary additional resources.

5. CONSULTATION

- 5.1 We expect that members of the public will have great interest in the consultative draft Strategy. In particular, consultation provides an opportunity to get the public's views on: whether the suite of actions within each area strategy meets with their aspirations for improving the parks and open space resource in their area; and which actions in their view should be priorities for investment. In addition to the Council's usual consultation processes, schools, Community Councils and other local organisations could have a particularly important role in publicising the consultative draft Strategy and helping to gather and collate the views of the communities they represent.
- 5.2 As the Strategy covers all open space, not just Council owned open space, other open space landowners such as Scottish Canals, Forestry Commission Scotland, NHS Forth Valley and Callendar Estates will also have a keen interest. We propose to bring the consultative draft Strategy to the attention of a wide range of local landowners and national and local stakeholding organisations to seek their views.
- 5.3 To facilitate a wide ranging consultation we propose a twelve week consultation period. This is longer than the usual eight week consultation period traditionally operated by the Council.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 It is recommended that the Executive:-
- a) **instructs officers to publish the consultative draft Open Space Strategy and Parks Development Plan and to carry out public consultation on it; and**
 - b) **instructs officers to report back the findings of the public consultation and present a finalised Open Space Strategy and Parks Development Plan which has been amended to address issues raised during the consultation to a future meeting of the Executive.**

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Director of Development Services

Date: 8th October, 2015

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LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. Open Space Strategy and Parks Development Plan – Environmental Report
2. Open Space Strategy and Parks Development Plan – Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment

Any person wishing to inspect the background paper listed should contact Danny Thallon on 01324 504927.