

Part A

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: Monday, 2 March 2020

Report author: Head of Parks, Heritage and Culture

Title: A Green Spaces Strategy for Watford - progress report

1.0 Summary

1.1 In 2013, the council adopted a new 10 year Green Spaces Strategy. The Action Plan proposed and adopted was challenging and as we approach the last 3 years of the strategy, it was felt that an update was due noting progress, successes, challenges for the future and suggestions for future priorities. This report highlights these for consideration by Cabinet.

1.2 There is now a need to consider the next stages of the strategic management of our valuable green spaces in light of wider planning policies and guidance.

2.0 Risks

2.1 No risks identified

3.0 Recommendations

3.1 To note the contents of the report

Further information:

Paul Rabbitts

paul.rabbitts@watford.gov.uk

Report approved by: Alan Gough, Group Head of Service, Community and Environmental Services

4.0 Detailed proposal

4.1 Watford adopted a new Green Spaces Strategy in November 2013 and this was a far reaching and challenging requirement for the council. A vision was adopted that stated:-

Watford will have a network of accessible, high quality and highly valued green spaces to be proud of, promoting sustainability, supporting bio-diversity and

extensively contributing to the economic, social and environmental aspirations of the town.

- 4.2 However, what is a Green Spaces Strategy and what is its purpose? It sets out how a local authority will invest in and manage the open space in its area. This is exactly what this 10 year strategy set out to do when it was adopted in 2013. It applied to all open space in Watford (excluding spaces within housing estates) and applied primarily to parks and open spaces, squares, play space, allotments and our natural green space assets, especially valuable in an urban community such as ours. It provided the evidence, set the direction and helped secure funds for continued investment in open space. In 2018, we re-assessed our Green Space priorities and re-visited our Action Plan to assess our achievements and our plans moving forward in an ever changing environment and further re-assessed this in late 2019 / early 2020.
- 4.3 Our 10 year strategy still remains ambitious despite continued challenging economic times that we all face and Watford is not alone in embracing these challenges head on. When it was written and adopted, it recognised and acknowledged the benefits of green spaces to Watford as a town as well as those that live, work and visit. As a town, we continue to grow and the last census indicated substantial growth in our population and changes in the demographic make-up of it. Involving communities is an important aspect of how we manage and provide green spaces and the strategy advocates strong community engagement, from children and young people, to minority groups across the town.
- 4.4 Ongoing research and changes in policy direction at a national level are recognised, in particular, the importance of the National Planning Policy Framework Guidance on open space, sports and recreation facilities, public rights of way and local green space and the importance of Green Infrastructure as set out in the 2016 guidance on the Natural environment, and more locally, our Corporate Plan to 2020, where our vision is to create a bold and progressive future for Watford. The important messages from these and others is that green spaces still matter and must deliver clear benefits for local people, wildlife and the long term sustainability of Watford.
- 4.5 The original evidence that was provided through a range of green spaces audits, where we assessed quality, quantity and accessibility through a comprehensive on site audit and analysis was subsequently 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, this gave us the evidence we needed to build up a picture, identifying what we have and allowing us to prioritise. We have reassessed these audits and updated them within the current strategy.

As a reminder, we assessed the quality and value of our green spaces, how good were they and what contribution they were making to local amenity, looking at a

range of typologies, which included parks, gardens and recreation grounds, allotments, play areas, natural green space, cemeteries and sports facilities. We categorised each space as to whether it was high or low quality or high or low community value. The updated results are summarised within the updated strategy but the overall result in 2013 was that the quality and value of open spaces across Watford was mixed, with some good examples such as the three Green Flag parks at that time and play areas in particular, reflected in the significant investment over the last few years. In 2019/20, the picture is very different, with most of our parks and open spaces now high quality and of high value. In 2019, the Council had obtained 12 Green Flag awards, compared to 3 in 2013.

- 4.6 There is still often a perception among residents that “there is never enough green space”, but when we assessed the amount of green space over the range of typologies, as a town, Watford is in fact very well endowed, and many of our wards have excellent provision of green space over a range of typologies. Some small deficiencies do still occur, especially with regards to natural green space, but overall, we are well provided for. However, accessibility is an issue for many and the strategy continues to advocate adopting green infrastructure principles and developing a strategic green space network for the town. By setting standards of provision we would expect to maintain in Watford, we can concentrate on those sites that are most important to us which need to be protected at all costs as well as continually enhanced. This allows the council to deliver change through improving the quality, value and accessibility of our green space network, making Watford a better place to live. The network proposed was formed of regional, community and local parks, along with a network of strategic sports hubs and green links with an emphasis on enhancement, accessibility, protection and increasing community and stakeholder involvement. This still remains the case in 2019/20.
- 4.7 But what about those sites which do not perform well and are deemed low quality and/or low value? Originally 50 sites fell into this category including some of our most important parks. There is a clear policy on how we treat these sites. We looked at enhancing the quality of many of these green spaces as long as it was possible to improve and enhance the value of them. If this was not possible, we would consider the space surplus to requirements in terms of its current use if the value cannot be improved and consider alternative uses. However, this must still be considered in the light of wider planning policies such as the need to determine other typology deficiencies in the area within distance thresholds, whether enhancement is realistic and determine community value by local consultation. In 2019/20, only 35 sites now fall into the category of low quality and low value with many of these outside council ownership. Significantly, none of our main parks, allotments or play areas now fall into this category.
- 4.8 The Council continues to set a challenging vision with a number of key components, based on stewardship, management, use and environmental protection. We identified that because we cannot do it all, we need to work in partnership with

local stakeholders. We currently do this in many of our green spaces and communities, but there are significant opportunities to develop further partnerships across Watford. This may range from community tidy ups in open spaces with a Friends group or a joint working arrangement with a major organisation such as Groundwork, Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust or the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Funding continues to be a significant issue, and we need to identify further ways we can make changes, particularly through income generation, or partnering, developing self-management options or by altering management and maintenance regimes.

- 4.9 How will we know if we are continuing to make a difference? We continue to see Green Flag as the key performance indicator and we are very proud of the increase from the 3 that we had originally to the 12 (2019 figures) that we now hold, but we want to build on this further and seek further Green Flags for Watford. These include Green Flags for Garston Park, King George V Playing Fields, Watford Heath with Oxhey Grange Playing Fields and Harebreaks Recreation Ground. We have reassessed the quality and value scores of every site to assess what progress has been made, and will continue to do so.
- 4.10 The point of any strategy is to get things done and the most important aspect of this is the Action Plan and we developed a comprehensive, challenging, yet stretched series of actions to ensure this strategy actually “gets things done”. We have refreshed this in 2019/20 and have updated what Action Plans have been achieved.
- 4.11 Progress over the last 7 years of the strategy has been excellent and Watford’s green spaces are well considered, much loved and the improvements are there to be seen. This updated Green Spaces Strategy, however, continues to provide a realistic, yet challenging target for continued improvement for the remaining 3 years.
- 4.12 Officers have now commenced discussions for the strategic direction of our green spaces for the future in light of changes to planning policy. As part of the development of the current Local Plan, new assessments will be required for our open spaces to meet future requirements and needs. These will follow Green Infrastructure principles and be based on a new Open Spaces Needs Assessment.

5.0 **Implications**

5.1 **Financial**

- 5.1.1 The Shared Director of Finance comments that any initiatives that are not currently contained in existing budgets will require growth bids as part of the budget process.

5.2 **Legal Issues** (Monitoring Officer)

5.2.1 The Group Head of Democracy and Governance comments that there are no legal implications in this report.

5.3 **Equalities, Human Rights and Data Protection**

5.3.1 Having had regard to the council's obligations under s149, it is considered that no EqIA is required as this is an update and progress report only and has no change of policy included.

Having had regard to the council's obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018, it is considered that officers are not required to undertake a Data Processing Impact Assessment (DPIA) for this report.

5.4 **Staffing**

5.4.1 Not applicable

5.5 **Accommodation**

5.5.1 Not applicable

5.6 **Community Safety/Crime and Disorder**

5.6.1 Community safety considerations are important in all our parks and open spaces. Anti-social behaviour is tackled firmly and the role of Friends Groups assists hugely in identifying and reporting issues.

5.7 **Sustainability**

5.7.1 The adoption of a strategy to manage our green spaces adds to the Councils wider sustainability agenda and Climate Change Emergency. The importance of retaining, managing and increasing our tree cover is essential to this wider agenda as well as increasing the biodiversity of our green spaces.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Updated Green Spaces Strategy - Service Update 2020

Background papers

No papers were used in the preparation of this report.