

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK - EVIDENCE BASE – OPEN SPACE AUDIT

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report informs Members of the results of the Open Space Audit, produced by consultants Strategic Leisure on behalf of the Council as part of the Cultural Facilities Development Plan. The Audit is required to provide part of the evidence base for the emerging Local Development Framework and to establish the future strategy for the management of the Council's parks and open spaces. This report summarises the initial findings of the Audit and recommends that public consultation is undertaken and that the finalised Audit, which takes into consideration responses to the consultation, be reported to a further stage of Cabinet for consideration, before the assessment is finalised to inform the content of the emerging Local Development Framework.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Director of Regeneration reported to Cabinet on 24 January 2007 on the preparation of a Cultural Facilities Development Plan (Minute 232 refers). Cabinet on 15 March 2007 resolved that the findings of the Audit also be used to provide an up-to-date evidence base for the preparation of a Core Strategy Development Plan Document for Wirral (Minute 284 refers). Cabinet on 7th February 2008 approved additional funding to widen the scope of the Audit to include sites outside the direct control of the Director of Regeneration such as land held by the Director of Technical Services, Registered Social Landlords such as Wirral Partnership Homes and other bodies such as the Woodland Trust, the National Trust and the Port Sunlight Village Trust (Minute 502 refers).
- 2.2 Some of the information from the emerging Audit has already been included in the Spatial Options Report for the Core Strategy for the Borough, approved for public consultation in November 2009 (Cabinet 26th November, 2009 – Minute 200 refers).

3. SUMMARY OF STUDY CONTENTS

- 3.1 The Open Space Audit contains a main report and two associated appendices detailing the site audit data and study maps:
- Section 1 of the main report defines "open space" and introduces the classification of different types of open space into individual types, in line with national guidance contained in Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 (PPG17). It also demonstrates the importance of public open space to issues such as health, civic pride, education, the environment and the economy;
 - Section 2 details the methodology that was used to assess the quantity, quality and accessibility of the Borough's public open space. This includes the development of a mapping system to identify site boundaries and record the

different types of open space; the development of a scoring system for measuring the quality of individual sites; and the measurement of accessibility through the use of distance thresholds;

- Section 3 details the pattern of existing provision by type of open space. Data is presented on the quantity, quality and the accessibility of each type of space, Borough wide and by Electoral Ward. The data is used to generate recommended local standards which are then applied to indicate areas of deficiency;
- Section 4 identifies a range of funding mechanisms, in addition to the Council's current budget for maintenance of open space, to help improve the Borough's open spaces. The Audit recommends a coordinated approach to securing such funds, by the Council, its partners and communities. The section also addresses the issue of developer contributions;
- Section 5 identifies a range of principles taken from best practice to indicate what would be necessary to secure the long term sustainability, value and management of open space across the Borough. It also includes recommendations for the use of the information gathered as part of the Audit, both generally and for the different types of space identified;
- Appendix 1 comprises a data spreadsheet, recording information on the sites contained within the Audit (typology, site size, Ward, ownership etc);
- Appendix 2 comprises a series of maps showing open space provision across the Borough by quantity, quality and accessibility.

4. KEY FINDINGS

Section 1 – Definition of Open Space

- 4.1 Section 1, which defines open space and sets out the requirements of national policy, is intended to provide the framework for the rest of the Audit and is essentially factual. It sets out that open space, for the purpose of the report, is the collective term that pulls together the provision of parks and gardens; natural and semi natural green space (including nature reserves and public woodlands); amenity green spaces; outdoor sports facilities; provision for children and young people; allotments; and cemeteries and churchyards. In relation to national guidance, contained within Planning Policy Guidance Note 17, each of the different types of open space provision has been developed into a local typology for the Borough.
- 4.2 The Audit included all open space across the Borough to which there was legitimate public access. The majority of sites were found to be under the ownership and management of Wirral Council but the Audit also included the privately owned land with public access and land held and managed for open space and recreation by other bodies such as Registered Social Landlords, the National Trust, The Woodland Trust and the Port Sunlight Village Trust.

Section 3 – Current Provision

- 4.3 This section summarises the findings of the Audit and identifies the key issues that have emerged for the quantity, quality and accessibility of provision for each of the typologies. Each open space has been identified from information contained on the

Council's mapping data and management databases, confirmed by a site to provide a comprehensive factual assessment.

- 4.4 The Audit states that the majority of Wirral's open space is provided as Parks and Gardens, Natural and Semi Natural Green Space and Outdoor Sports Facilities.
- 4.5 Data on the quality of provision has been gathered through a detailed site assessment undertaken during each site visit. Key criteria for each typology provide each site with a score between 1 and 100. A low score means that a site does not have essential facilities and physical infrastructure that would be expected to be present on a site of that type, such as benches, bins, gates, signage etc. A high score indicates that that a site is providing these features and is considered well maintained, clean, safe and accessible. The analysis of these scores indicates that the general quality of provision across the Borough is lower than 50%, with lower quality scores concentrated in Wards associated with poorer areas in the East of the Borough. The Audit states that this indicates a general need for existing open spaces to be improved where resources can be made available and may justify the drawing down of monies for site specific improvements through section 106 legal agreements.
- 4.6 Members will notice that in assessing quality of sites, different criteria have been applied to different types of space. The standard required for a Park and Garden is, for example, far higher than the standard required for an Amenity Green Space. Quality will inevitably vary; site by site as any set of criteria will be unable to fully reflect the wide range of type of site available in Wirral. As expected the type and quality of site available across the Borough also varies with the type of place that they are located within. For example, urban sites are often of a different type and quality to sites set in largely semi-urban and rural areas.
- 4.7 Accessibility has been considered using national guidance on recommended thresholds for specific types of open space. The Audit suggests further work is required through additional public consultation to establish whether these standards are appropriate or whether alternative standards are required to ensure local needs are taken into account.
- 4.8 The Audit then identifies the key issues, in terms of the quantity, quality and accessibility of provision for each individual type of open space:

Parks and Gardens:

- 4.9 In terms of quantity, five wards out of six, with provision ahead of the Borough average, have Country Parks within their boundaries. The Borough wide average without the Country Parks included, would be significantly lower, underlining their significance in the provision of accessible open space for Wirral residents. In terms of quality, the average score for the quality of Parks and Garden sites was 48%, at the top end of the lower-middle range of potential scores. 8 Wards scored above the average score for the Borough. There was a variation in the range of quality scores – from 15% (very low) to 81% (very high). With regard to accessibility, 10 Wards scored higher than the average of 48% of households within 400m of a Parks and Garden.

Natural and Semi Natural Green Space:

- 4.10 In terms of quantity, 5 Wards have a provision over the average quantity score of Natural and Semi Natural Green Space. The number of Wards with a low number of sites underlines the uneven distribution of this type of open space across the

Borough. With regard to quality, the Borough wide average score for Natural and Semi Natural Green Space sites was 29%, rating within the lowest band width range of potential scores. 9 Wards achieved a score above the average quality score. There is a variation in the range of quality scores achieved – from 2% (very low) to 65% (high). In terms of accessibility, 12 Wards scored higher than the current average of 67% of households within 400m of a Natural and Semi Natural Green Space.

Outdoor Sports Facilities:

- 4.11 In terms of quantity, there are currently 10 wards with a provision level above the Borough average for Outdoor Sports provision. With regard to quality of provision, across Wirral as a whole, publicly accessible sites scored an average of 36% - a lower middle level score. 2 Wards obtained an upper middle or very high score. There is a range of quality, from 9% (very low) to 77% (very high). In terms of accessibility, 7 Wards have all their households within 1000m of an Outdoor Sports Facility. 7 Wards fall below the current Borough average of 93% of households within the distance threshold.

Amenity Green Space

- 4.12 The Audit found that the average overall size for such space is 0.87ha, which provides a reasonably sized site, likely to be useful to local people and to function strongly as Amenity Green Space close to where people live. 6 Wards provide above average provision against the quantity standard identified. In terms of quality, there was an average quality score of 38%. No Wards scored a very low overall rating and 14 Wards scored above the quality standard for this type of provision. The variation in the quality scores for individual sites ranges from 5% (very low) to 72% (high). In terms of accessibility, 12 Wards have a higher percentage of households within 400m of an Amenity Green Space than the Borough average of 56%.

Provision for Children and Young People:

- 4.13 In terms of quantity the average number of sites per Ward is 5. With regard to quality, across Wirral as a whole, provision for Children and Young People scored an average of 32%, in the lower middle range of possible scores. There is a variation in the quality of provision – from 12% (very low) to 49% (middle range). In terms of accessibility, 11 Wards have a higher than average percentage of households within 400m than the identified average of 56% of households. 10 Wards fall below this average for the percentage of households within 400m of a facility for Children and Young People.

Allotments:

- 4.14 With regard to quantity of provision, the Audit identifies that while 3 Wards contain no allotments, there are 4 Wards with 4 or more allotment sites. In terms of quality of provision, across the Borough as a whole, the average quality score for allotments was classified as low. The variation in the quality scores is from 4% (very low) to 52% (upper middle) but the majority of allotments fall towards a lower range of scores. 12 Wards obtained a low score with the remaining seven obtaining lower middle scores. In terms of accessibility only 2 Wards have all their households within 1000m of an allotment site. 12 Wards have a higher percentage of households within the defined catchment than the Borough wide average.

Cemeteries and Churchyards:

- 4.15 As the primary function of cemeteries is not as public open space, no further quantitative analysis was undertaken as part of the Audit. The overall average in terms of quality was found to be 65% (high quality).

Section 4: Resourcing the Borough's Green Space

- 4.16 The Audit recognises that the Council maintains its open spaces within cash limited budgets. The Audit highlights the fact that rising maintenance costs and sustained lack of capital investment is beginning to have a detrimental effect on the condition of the Borough's open spaces, particularly on the condition of the associated infrastructure, including buildings, walls, fences, paths, benches, bins and playground equipment. The range and diversity of open space provided across the Borough means that it is essential that resourcing and financial planning follow a strategic framework of priorities.
- 4.17 The Audit highlights the fact that the capital resources necessary to improve the infrastructure within the Borough's open spaces is not within the financial resources of the Council alone. There is a need for the Council to maximise the capital opportunities held by national governing bodies and government agencies. The report states that, in order to deliver a vision for a network of good quality, accessible, clean, and safe open spaces across the Borough, it will be essential to direct financial support at both external and internal funding sources to secure the improvement of new and existing provision.
- 4.18 This could be achieved through the increased development of partnerships. The Council has already entered into partnership working with various Friends groups and other interested organisations. The Audit suggests partnership working with the private sector could also bring benefits and funding to improve the Boroughs' open spaces.
- 4.19 The Audit concludes that a range of funding mechanisms are available to develop and improve open space across the Borough. It states that drawing down these monies will require time and effort supported by robust evidence and reasoning. A co-ordinated approach is needed to secure these funds, by the Council, its partners and communities.
- 4.20 The Audit also covers the issue of developer contributions. Success will require internal commitment to support Section 106 funding and developer contributions linked to the growth or regeneration aspirations for the Borough. Ensuring that appropriate revenue funding is in place to sustain capital investment in open space should be a key long term management objective.
- 4.21 The Audit states that the evidence on the quantity, quality, and accessibility of publicly accessible open space across the Borough needs to be used to strengthen existing planning policies and support the emerging Local Development Framework through the development of appropriate Development Plan policies and Supplementary Planning Documents and to generate clear and transparent negotiation with developers to generate investment. The Audit states that the Council should ensure

that developers with permission for new developments make contributions both towards the capital expenditure required to provide and enhance provision and towards the ongoing revenue costs of maintaining that provision.

Section 5: Generic Recommendations for Consideration

- 4.22 The principles contained within this section of the Audit have been derived from examples of good practice and help to indicate what is necessary to ensure the long term sustainability, value and management of open spaces. In particular, open space should be accessible to all members of the community; provide facilities which are similarly accessible; be part of a wider network, providing traffic free routes and links to other areas via bus stops and cycle ways; facilitate high quality and effective management and maintenance; facilitate local community involvement in new or future provision; minimise the opportunity for anti-social behaviour and design out opportunities for crime and; be designed and managed to benefit wildlife.
- 4.23 In order to identify the series of actions that should be taken by the Council, the Audit makes a number of recommendations. These recommendations include the use of the information gathered as part of the assessment and the further development of the analysis in the future.
- 4.24 The Audit recommends that; the data be reviewed every 5 years, allowing improvements to be tracked; that the findings are published to enable stakeholders to track progress; a central record of all open space should be created including mapping; a central consultation database should be developed using the data and contacts gathered as a result of the assessment; the Council should address the current fragmented responsibilities for the management, development, and future provision of open space across the Borough through the establishment of a consultative Steering Group involving representatives from sport and leisure, planning and grounds maintenance, from both the public, voluntary and private sector to consider specific site development proposals relating to existing, former and proposed sport and leisure provision; continue to develop the marketing information produced for parks and open space facilities, key activities accommodated and access arrangements; develop an access standard regarding physical access for users and potential users with limited mobility; review maintenance standards in consultation with local people; report on performance annually; develop and fund a programme of up-to-date signage installation; continue to work towards reducing the effects of crime and anti social behaviour.
- 4.25 Specific recommendations for each of the typologies are set out on pages 56 and 57 of the Audit. These have been drawn up in response to the assessment undertaken and need to be viewed as complementary to any further policies developed. The recommendations are focused on addressing facility deficiencies as the first priority.

5. NEXT STEPS

- 5.1 The Annexe to Planning Policy Guidance notes 17 (Assessing Needs and Opportunities) states that “it is impossible to identify local needs properly without involving local communities”. The standards contained within the Audit are required to be the subject of further public consultation to ensure that they meet the requirements of the local community and to ensure the Open Space Audit is compliant with the requirements of Planning Policy Guidance Note 17.

- 5.2 It is therefore recommended that public consultation is undertaken on the findings of the Audit to support the Council's assessment of local needs and the development of local standards for the quantity, quality and accessibility of open space.
- 5.3 Subject to approval by Cabinet, it is recommended that consultation begin as soon as possible and that the finalised Audit, which takes into account the findings of the consultation exercise, will be the subject of a further report to Members.
- 5.4 The consultation proposed will be designed to comply with the requirements of the Council's Statement of Community Involvement (adopted December 2006). A consultation questionnaire will be used to ask the public how far they travel to their nearest open space; whether they think this distance is acceptable; which types of public open space they use and how regularly; whether they think there is enough accessible open space within their area; invite them to comment on the quality of local provision and to identify any additional local needs.
- 5.5 Paper copies of the Audit and questionnaire will be made available for public inspection at public libraries and at the public counter of the Technical Services Department at the Cheshire Lines Building during normal opening hours. The document will also be available online on the Council's website.
- 5.6 Notification letters will be sent to all the Council's normal contacts on the Local Development Framework consultation database including the members of the Friends of the Parks Forum and other local interest and amenity groups. A press release and web based questionnaire will also allow a wider cross section of the public to be contacted and involved.

6. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The Open Space Audit provides an important Borough-wide assessment of the current provision of publicly accessible open space and identifies recommended local standards for the quantity, quality and accessibility of that provision in line with the requirements of national planning policies. Public consultation is now needed to further strengthen the validity of the Council's approach in accordance with the adopted Statement of Community Involvement (December 2006).
- 6.2 The completed assessment will form an essential part of the evidence base for the Council's emerging Local Development Framework for the Borough.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The Cultural Facilities Development Plan was completed with a budget of £100,000, approved by Cabinet on 24 January 2007 (Minute 232 refers).
- 7.2 The additional survey work to include sites outside the direct control of the Director of Regeneration was completed with a budget of £7,000 approved by Cabinet on 7 February 2008 (Minute 502 refers).
- 7.3 The additional required public consultation work will be undertaken by officers within the Corporate Services and Regeneration departments from existing resources.

8. STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The public consultation proposed will be carried out by officers within the Corporate Services and Regeneration Departments.

9. EQUAL OPPORTUNITES / EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report. The Cultural Facilities Development Plan is intended to include issues related to the accessibility of public open space to all sectors of the community.

10. COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report. The quality of provision has been assessed as part of the Audit undertaken by Strategic Leisure.

11. LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

12. PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report. The findings of the Audit will, however, be used as part of the evidence base of the Council's emerging Local Development Framework.

13. ANTI-POVERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

14. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

15. SOCIAL INCLUSION IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1 Provision of accessible, quality open space will promote social inclusion.

16. LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS

- 16.1 The report will have implications for all Ward Members.

17. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 17.1 Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation (PPG17, ODPM 2002) can be viewed at:
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/planningpolicyguidance17>
- 17.2 Assessing Needs and Opportunities: A companion Guide to PPG17 (ODPM, 2002) can be viewed at:
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/assessingneeds>

- 17.3 The Council's Statement of Community Involvement (December 2006) can be viewed at:
http://www.wirral.gov.uk/LGCL/100006/200074/856/content_0000733.html
- 17.4 Cabinet Report - Cultural Facilities Development Plan – 24 January 2007 (Minute 232 refers) can be viewed at:
<http://www.wirral.gov.uk/minute/viewmins.asp?mtg=1959#232>
- 17.5 Cabinet Report - Local Development Framework for Wirral – Evidence Base – 15 March 2007 (Minute 282 refers) can be viewed at:
<http://www.wirral.gov.uk/minute/viewmins.asp?mtg=1972#284>
- 17.6 Cabinet Report - Amended Financial Provisions of the Evidence Base for the Wirral Local Development Framework – 7 February 2008 (Minute 502 refers) can be viewed at: <http://www.wirral.gov.uk/minute/viewmins.asp?mtg=2284#502>
- 17.7 Cabinet Report - Core Strategy Development Plan Document – Public Consultation on Spatial Options - 26 November 2009 (Minute 200 refers) can be viewed at:
<http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=121&MId=732&Ver=4>

18. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 18.1 That public consultation be undertaken along the lines set out in section 5 of this report.
- 18.2 That the finalised Audit, which takes into account the findings of the public consultation, be reported back to Cabinet for consideration and approval before the findings are included in the emerging Local Development Framework for Wirral.

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