

# Gloucester City Council

<b>Meeting:</b>	<b>Cabinet</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>10 February 2021</b>
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Open Space Strategy for Gloucester 2021-2026</b>		
<b>Report Of:</b>	<b>Cabinet Member for Environment</b>		
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	<b>All</b>		
<b>Key Decision:</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Budget/Policy Framework:</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	<b>Mark Graham, Open Space Strategy Officer</b>		
	<b>Email: mark.graham@gloucester.gov.uk</b>	<b>Tel: 396785</b>	
<b>Appendices:</b>	<b>1. Open Space Strategy for Gloucester 2021-2026</b>		
	<b>2. Open Space Strategy Consultation Response Report</b>		

## FOR GENERAL RELEASE

### 1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To present to Cabinet for formal approval an updated Open Space Strategy for the period 2021-2026, which sets out a robust assessment and strategic framework for managing open space resources in Gloucester.

### 2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Cabinet is asked to **RESOLVE** that:

- (1) the contents and conclusions of the Open Space Strategy Consultation Response Report, following public consultation in Summer 2020, be noted
- (2) the Open Space Strategy for Gloucester 2021-26 (including updated Allotment Strategy) be adopted
- (3) authority be delegated to the Head of Place and Cabinet Member for the Environment to develop a calculator setting out the levels of open space provision and financial contribution that the Council will seek from developers.

### 3.0 Background and Key Issues

- 3.1 Open spaces are a much-valued resource for people, providing places for informal enjoyment, sport and physical activity, reflection, relaxation and connection with nature and having ecological, landscape and urban value. In

short, open spaces contribute immeasurably to our health and wellbeing. They also provide an opportunity to help address the effects of climate change, in addressing flood risk, providing a cooling effect in urban areas and in supporting biodiversity.

- 3.2 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) recognises the importance of open spaces in local communities and recommends that local authorities undertake a robust assessment for the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities and opportunities for new provision in this area. Assessments should identify specific needs including qualitative and quantitative deficits or surpluses in the area, considering local circumstances. This evidence can then be used to ensure that open spaces are provided with the right level of protection through planning policy, that developers provide open spaces in new development where required and that existing open spaces are improved where needed.
- 3.3 In October 2019 the Government introduced a new Environment Bill which is currently making its way through the parliamentary process. This Bill will provide measures to address environmental governance gaps following withdrawal from the EU. The Bill will put into legislation a series of environmental principles and establish an Office for Environmental Protection, which would have scrutiny, advice and enforcement functions. It would also make provision for the setting of long-term, legally binding environmental targets in four “priority areas” of air quality, water, biodiversity, resource efficiency and waste reduction, along with the production of statutory Environmental Improvement Plans.
- 3.4 Once the Environment Bill is in place, the general biodiversity obligation placed on Local Authorities to ‘*conserve*’ biodiversity will be strengthened to include an obligation to conserve and enhance biodiversity. To this end local authorities will be required to ‘*determine such policies and specific objectives as it considers appropriate for taking action to further the general biodiversity objective, and take such action as it considers appropriate, in the light of those policies and objectives, to further that objective*’.
- 3.5 Furthermore, City Council places great importance in open spaces and the health and wellbeing benefits they bring. The Council Plan 2017 – 2020 includes a priority to maintain a safe and attractive city, and key actions around achieving Green Flag status for parks, refurbishing play areas, increasing the visitor experience at Robinswood Hill and increasing community involvement in the management of open space. In addition, the Council declared a ‘climate change emergency’ in 2019 and is committed to reducing the city’s impact on climate change and supporting the delivery of measures to adapt to its implications. Open spaces provide an opportunity to help deliver this.
- 3.6 The City Council’s previous Open Space Strategy (OSS) was adopted in 2014 and covered a period of five years. This OSS included a range of aims and objectives focussed on protecting and improving existing open spaces and securing new spaces through development where possible. Headline outcomes include an additional 15 hectares of public open space secured through new

development, over £1m of investment in upgrading the quality of open space facilities and three 'Green Flag Award' parks. Further details are available on page 8 of Appendix 1 (OSS).

- 3.7 The 2014 Open Space Strategy continued to utilise a Supplementary Planning Guidance document (SPG) - New Housing and Open Space (adopted 2001), which has been a successful tool for determining the levels of open space provision or financial contributions required within new housing developments. To date this has helped the council secure over 40 hectares of new open spaces and over £4million of developer contributions to invest in existing open spaces across the city. The 2001 SPG is now outdated and will not form part of the updated City Plan policy documents, so an updated method of providing the open space calculations has been included in the OSS at Appendix 6 (and is cross referenced in the emerging City Plan under Policy C3).
- 3.8 With the current Open Space Strategy now time-expired and requiring an update for the period 2021-2026, officers appointed a local consultancy to undertake the necessary assessments, evidence preparation and strategy recommendations. Public consultation on the updated draft strategy was undertaken in Summer 2020 (in line with Covid-19 restrictions), including an online survey. Sixty-eight formal responses were received from a variety of stakeholder organisations as well as local residents, and a Response Report has been prepared (see Appendix 2). The final draft of the Open Space Strategy has been updated to take into account the consultation responses and is provided at Appendix 1.
- 3.9 The new strategy sets out a Vision and Framework for the city's open spaces, drawing both on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of open spaces, and on policies, aims and aspirations of other City Council strategies and plans. The OSS identifies priorities for improvement and considers the need for future provision, in order to:
- Aid decision making by elected Members and Officers
  - Support external funding bids and applications
  - Inform planning decisions and support the delivery of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and S106 funds
  - Support joint working with neighbouring authorities; and
  - Provide an evidence base to support planning policy.
- 3.10 In total, there are over 555 hectares of public open space within the administrative area of Gloucester City. This amounts to 4.28 hectares per 1,000 people and approximately 14% of the city's total land area. Altogether, there are well over 200 individual public open spaces, including formal and informal green spaces, allotments and cemeteries, including the city's two largest open space assets at Robinswood Hill Country Park and Alney Island Nature Reserve. On these open spaces, there are 56 formal children's play areas, 41 of which are managed by the City Council. Two of the city's sports grounds serve at least a city-wide catchment; Oxstalls Sports Park and Blackbridge Jubilee Athletics Track.

3.11 The strategy assesses the quality of green space provision under eight standard typologies, and their comparison against a national benchmark for quantity, as set out in the table below. Please note that these calculations do not include several city centre/docks/quays areas which, whilst being open public areas (including some adopted highways) accessible by the public, perform a somewhat different function in providing a civic setting for events, markets, activities, processions and festivals. These spaces include the Cathedral precincts, Docks and Quays and are generally not spaces owned or managed by the city council.

Typology	GCC quantity (hectares)	GCC ratio per 1,000 population	National benchmark
<b>Parks and gardens</b>	54.64	0.42	0.80
<b>Natural/semi-natural green space</b>	278.56	2.16	1.8
<b>Amenity greenspace</b>	69.83	0.54	0.6
<b>Formal sport (outdoor)</b>	96.29	0.75	1.6
<b>Formal play/youth facilities</b>	7.39	0.06	0.25
<b>Allotments</b>	14.58	0.11	0.25
<b>Cemeteries</b>	27.80	-	N/A
<b>Civic Spaces</b>	3.62	-	N/A
<b>TOTAL</b>	552.71	4.28	-

3.12 The analysis shows that there are some areas where the city has greater than the recommended minimum **quantity** of green space, and others where it has less. This is unsurprising, when considering that many of the densely built-up areas of the city pre-date modern open space planning guidance. As a result, there are areas of the city that are better served by open space than others. That said, Gloucester is fortunate in being situated within a wider landscape of open countryside, with many opportunities available just outside the city's boundary for recreation and enjoyment using country parks, public rights of way and other accessible green spaces.

3.13 Each public open space has also been subject to a **quality** assessment. This provides a score against a basic expected level (high/medium/low) of quality/maintenance, community value and potential for biodiversity when considered against the city's overall open space provision. In line with good practice guidance, additional local factors were also considered, such as the number of similar spaces nearby and the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) for the locality, which generated a locally set assessment framework, allowing the function, quality and community value of the city's sites to be assessed against each other and analysed against the city's overall open space portfolio.

3.14 The results of the open space assessment of the city are as follows:

- Low quality: 20% - site falls short of expected standard and requires some improvement.
- Medium quality: 71% - site is in fair to good condition but may benefit from further improvement.

- High quality: 9% - site and facilities are of good quality and are generally well managed.
- 3.15 In terms of **accessibility**, there are recommended walking distances for the different typologies of open space. Overall, Gloucester has a relatively good level of accessibility for most residents to parks, gardens and larger areas of amenity greenspace. Many of the city's large amenity spaces provide similar functions to a park. However, there are a few areas where accessibility to a park or large amenity space is not possible within the recommended walking distances, for example, the north-west of Hucclecote ward, parts of central Longlevens, the south-east corner of Grange ward and a central block through Quedgeley Severnvale and Quedgeley Fieldcourt.
- 3.16 Formal **play space and youth facilities**, i.e., Locally Equipped Areas for Play (LEAP), Neighbourhood Equipped Areas for Play (NEAP), skateparks and Multi-use Games Areas (MUGA), are not evenly distributed throughout the city and there are some accessibility issues in places.
- 3.17 Finally, the strategy also provides an analysis of the current and potential **biodiversity value** and **community value** of each public open space, the latter being based on a variety of factors, such as the location, potential site uses, proximity and quality of other nearby spaces, and the local Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score.
- 3.18 Based on the analysis undertaken, the OSS sets out a Vision and Objectives which then feed into the wider recommendations. Fundamentally, the strategy recognises that opportunities to create new public open spaces are limited. In most cases, the locations where accessibility to spaces is limited do not correlate with the city's current land opportunities, where potentially new open spaces could be created. Furthermore, most of these opportunities are simply too small to accommodate any additional open space provision. Therefore, the primary focus of the strategy will be on protecting existing supply from redevelopment to alternative uses, and improving the quality, accessibility and 'natural capital' through biodiversity improvements.
- 3.19 The OSS provides a general site assessment for each public open space, along with individual assessments in relation to play areas, biodiversity value (and opportunity) and community value. These assessments are then combined to provide recommendations as to where the most effective priority, potential improvement, investment and interventions could be made.
- 3.20 Full details of the sites that sit under each of these recommendations is provided from page 104 of the OSS. They provide the framework through which decisions can be made on priorities and investment options, inform negotiations with developers, CIL or S.106 spending decisions and support community engagement.

## **4.0 Social Value Considerations**

- 4.1 Public open spaces make an extremely important contribution to the value of people's lives, being places for informal recreation, social gathering, sport and physical activity, reflection, relaxation, and connection with nature, as well as having ecological, landscape and urban value. In short, open spaces contribute immeasurably to health and wellbeing. They also provide an opportunity to help address the effects of climate change (see 5.1 below). The protection and improvement of existing public open spaces, and creation of new spaces where possible, help to maintain this social value.
- 4.2 The OSS also presents opportunities for the local community and stakeholders to support management and development of green spaces, for example through Friends and community groups. The support of Friends groups at Barnwood Arboretum, Saintbridge Nature Area and Robinswood Hill Country Park has enabled the Council to achieve the prestigious Green Flag award for these sites.

## **5.0 Environmental Implications**

- 5.1 Public open spaces provide an opportunity to support biodiversity and to address the impacts of climate change, being ecological havens, providing a cooling effect in urban areas during hot weather, restricting surface water run-off during times of heavy rain. Soil can also absorb carbon from the air.

## **6.0 Alternative Options Considered**

- 6.1 The only real alternative to the approach outlined is to not undertake an update to the OSS. However, this would have a detrimental effect on the protection and quality of open space and would adversely affect the ability of open space improvements to be secured through the planning process.

## **7.0 Reasons for Recommendations**

- 7.1 To provide the City Council with an up-to-date OSS in order to provide an up-to-date framework for the protection, improvement, and delivery of public open spaces in the city. The Open Space Strategy 2021 – 2026 has been informed by a full assessment of all public open spaces in the city and forms an appropriate basis for the next stage of the process, including further detailed site-by-site analysis and community and stakeholder consultation.

## **8.0 Future Work and Conclusions**

- 8.1 Once adopted, the OSS will move to the delivery phase, continuing the work being undertaken in line with the previously adopted strategy. Officers will seek to work with elected members, developers, stakeholders, and the community in order to deliver its aims and objectives. A contributions calculator will be developed by the Head of Place and Cabinet Member for the Environment, which will set out the levels of open space provision and/or financial contribution that the Council will seek from developers.

## **9.0 Financial Implications**

- 9.1 The OSS will be delivered through a variety of different mechanisms. Through the planning process, this will be either on-site provision through S106 legal agreements; where off-site contributions to improve existing open spaces is more appropriate, this can be secured through either S106 or the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Up to 15% of the S.106 funds can be used towards professional fees for procuring design and project management consultancy services for capital works. Other forms of capital funding are available through bidding opportunities. There is also an opportunity for improvements to the delivered through community and Friends groups.
- 9.2 The City Council's current contract with Amey PLC for the provision of grounds maintenance services expires in April 2022. At present no decision has been made about the future provision of these opportunities, but the re-negotiation of this contract creates an opportunity to carefully review the services provided.

(Financial Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report.)

## **10.0 Legal Implications**

- 10.1 Local Plans must be underpinned by a robust and proportionate evidence base, which include an up-to-date Open Space Strategy. Planning applications which impact on existing public open spaces must be considered against adopted planning policies. Equally, S106 (and CIL) funds can only be secured from new development where they are justified, reasonable and related in scale and kind to the proposal. With this in mind, it is important the City Council has an appropriate up-to-date open space assessment and documents in place.
- 10.2 Disposal of any land designated as public open space will require formal declaration and disposal using statutory legal procedures.
- 10.3 Potential impact of any community 'right to buy' or Community Asset Transfer of open spaces or facilities through The Localism Act will need consideration. The council adopted a Community Right to Bid procedure in July 2013, which may apply to open spaces and their associated facilities.
- 10.4 Potential for communities to apply to designate 'Local Green Space' through the National Planning Policy Framework would give such areas formal protection similar to Green Belt land.
- 10.5 The Environment Bill (as far as currently understood), will require certain outcomes from local authorities in terms of biodiversity net gain. The OSS therefore provides an assessment of the current level of biodiversity along with opportunities to improve.

## **11.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications**

- 11.1 Once adopted, the delivery of the Open Space Strategy represents some risk. Public funds are finite, and it is likely that S106 and CIL funds will reduce over

time as the city's remaining sites are developed. That said, the introduction of CIL creates an opportunity to add value to CIL funds, for example through crowdfunding or added value from the community. The City Council has already introduced something of a comparable nature to this via the Pitch Improvement Grant, which is already yielding results. However, put simply, some open space projects will not go ahead unless there are suitable funds available.

- 11.2 The strategy also represents an opportunity to engage the community in delivering improvements and managing open spaces through an Asset Based Community Development Approach (ABCD), moving away from the assumption that this is solely the responsibility of the local authority.

### **12.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA) and Safeguarding:**

- 12.1 Active and well used open spaces, with positive involvement of local residents helps to build strong communities.
- 12.2 The PIA Screening Stage was completed and did not identify any potential or actual negative impact; therefore, a full PIA was not required.

### **13.0 Community Safety Implications**

- 13.1 None

### **14.0 Staffing & Trade Union Implications**

- 14.1 None

**Background Documents:** None