

Report to Cabinet

Wednesday, 26 June 2024

By the Cabinet Member for Leisure, Culture and
Greenspaces

DECISION REQUIRED



**Horsham
District
Council**

Not Exempt

Adoption of the Greenspaces Strategy

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to seek approval for the adoption of an updated Greenspaces Strategy (2024-2029) for the management of Council's Parks and Countryside estate owned land. The previous Strategy ran from 2013 to 2023. The Strategy forms an appendix to this report.

The Strategy sets the strategic priorities for managing approximately 400 ha of Parks and Countryside sites owned by the Council. This includes a diverse range of land from formal parks and recreation grounds to cemeteries, allotments, and playgrounds. It contains a vision and five strategic priorities. There are strategic and operational outputs associated with each of the priorities and an Action Plan that will be refreshed annually. This will ensure that the document is up to date.

Some of the strategic priorities reflect aspects of the previous Strategy, such as ensuring that existing greenspaces are maintained to a high standard, that there are a range of opportunities to use these spaces for all sectors of society and that the role of volunteers is valued, supported, and encouraged. However, new challenges have been included in the Strategy. These are the pressure from population increases, as well as from climate change and the need to enhance biodiversity.

The Strategy was sent to all Parish and Neighbourhood Councils for consultation, as well as the many "friends of" groups and local environmental community groups. The Strategy has been amended as a result of this consultation process.

Recommendations

That the Cabinet is recommended to:

- i) Adopt the updated Greenspaces Strategy 2024-2029 which forms the appendix to this report.

- ii) Delegate minor amendments to the Strategy and updates to the accompanying annual action plan to the Director of Communities, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces

Reasons for Recommendations

- i) To provide an approved strategic framework for the management of Council owned Greenspaces
- ii) To allow minor changes to the Strategy which do not significantly change its vision and objectives without needing to return to Cabinet for further approval.

Background Papers

Greenspace Strategy 2013 – 2023. Approved in November 2013

Wards affected: All

Contact: Helen Peacock, Head of Sustainability and Greenspaces, .

Background Information

1 Introduction and Background

- 1.1 The current Greenspace Strategy ran until 2023. This document set out the Council's objectives for managing existing Greenspace within its ownership which includes parks, countryside sites and cemeteries. It included a vision and nine aims, and each of these included a list of objectives and actions. It also included information on the financial implications of each of the actions.
- 1.2 The previous comprehensive Strategy needed to be reviewed and updated. The new Strategy contains many of the elements of the previous version, such as ensuring that the Council's land is maintained to a high standard, the importance of Greenspaces for health and well-being and recognising the importance of volunteers. However, some aspects that impact on the Council's land management have evolved since the last Strategy was produced.
- 1.3 A consultation process has been undertaken with Parish and Neighbourhood Councils, as well as the many community groups associated with Greenspaces across the district, such as Friends of Horsham Park, and those that the Council works with, such as Billigreen.
- 1.4 This report seeks Cabinet approval to adopt the new Greenspaces Strategy which forms the appendix to this report.

2 Relevant Council policy

- 2.1 The Greenspace Strategy links to several of the themes in the Council Plan 2023-2027, including Inspiring greener futures, Supporting people and communities, and Always listening, learning, and improving. Specific priorities within these themes include creating safe spaces for our children to grow and play and creating nature diverse places for people to live in, and to review existing strategies and policies, and address any gaps identified. The review and update of the Council's Greenspaces Strategy was one of the projects listed under the latter actions in the 2023-24 Annual Plan. The consultation process has meant that adopting the Strategy has slipped into 2024-25.

3 Details

- 3.1 The updated Greenspace Strategy relates to the approximately 400 ha of greenspace that the Council manages. This includes formal parks and recreation grounds, cemeteries, allotments, and playgrounds, as well as countryside sites with a range of habitats. The Strategy sets out the strategic priorities for managing all of these diverse spaces. Although this was also the purpose of the previous Strategy, there are some significant changes that impact on the management of the Council's Greenspaces since the previous Strategy was developed.
- 3.2 In June 2023 the Council declared a climate and ecological emergency. Climate change, both reducing carbon emissions and the link between Greenspaces and resilience to extreme weather, has, therefore, greater strategic significance for the

Council. Extremes in weather, from increased rainfall in the winter and hotter drier summers, are already having an impact, such as waterlogged sports pitches and surface run-off onto neighbouring land.

3.3 The need to enhance biodiversity at a larger landscape scale, rather than just on individual sites, has also gained greater prominence. New legislation relating to the creation of Nature Recovery Networks and Biodiversity Net Gain has implications for the management of Parks and Countryside sites, as does the Wilder Horsham District initiative which started in 2020. Another consideration is the growth in the population of the district, with a 15% increase projected to 2037. This will place more demand on Council owned Parks and Countryside sites.

3.4 The vision for the Strategy is: -

To ensure that Horsham District Council's Greenspaces are protected for future generations and managed to provide good quality public greenspace for amenity and leisure use, as well as maximising its value for biodiversity, climate mitigation and adaptation.

3.5 This will be delivered by five strategic priorities: -

- Protect, maintain, and enhance existing greenspaces to a good standard.
- Provide a range of opportunities for amenity and leisure use for all sectors of society.
- Sites will be managed sustainably and seek to enhance biodiversity and climate resilience.
- Greenspace and facilities in new developments should meet the principles for amenity and biodiversity value.
- Volunteer groups' input into the Council's greenspaces is valued, supported, and encouraged.

3.6 Information is included for each of these priorities to explain the background and why these issues are important. There is also a detailed action plan which includes strategic and operational initiatives. This will be updated annually, allowing the Strategy to be flexible.

3.7 The Greenspace Strategy links to several Council documents, reflecting the many benefits and opportunities from Council owned Greenspaces. These are: -

- Green Infrastructure Strategy and Guide (2024); evidence base for the Local Plan
- Open Space, Sports, and Recreation Review (2021)
- Play Strategy 2017-2027
- Playing Pitch Strategy 2018-2031

4 Next Steps

4.1 The Strategy has an accompanying annual action plan. This will be updated annually giving flexibility to delivering the Strategy and will also ensure that relevant objectives/actions are reflected in the Councils Annual Plan. Some of these are on-going actions, such as annual play and infrastructure inspections, working with

colleagues to promote the health and wellbeing benefits from Greenspaces, using natural processes to manage sites and securing external funding to improve the biodiversity of countryside sites. However, others have specific deadlines. These include carrying out a review of livestock grazing, a phased programme of improvements to play and youth facilities at four sites, and review the use of pesticides, herbicides, and peat, and implement the findings from these.

5 Views of the Policy Development Advisory Group and Outcome of Consultations

- 5.1 Parish and Neighbourhood Councils and community groups with a connection to land managed by the Parks and Countryside Team have been consulted on the Strategy and action plan. This consultation ran from 25 April to 7 June 2024.
- 5.2 As a result of the consultation, nine Parish and Neighbourhood Councils provided a response, but three of these gave no comments, and a further nine responses were received from environmental groups or individuals from those groups.
- 5.3 There was general broad support for the Strategy, although a couple of respondents felt it was too cautious and needed to be more ambitious. Suggestions of additional strategic priorities included acquisition of more land for the public good, more tree planting and educating the public as to the value of greenspace on their health and wellbeing.
- 5.4 Various amendments have been made to the Strategy including:
 - a statement that managing public open space has to be a compromise between competing demands;
 - priority three was expanded to show work on climate resilience would focus upon both drought and water management;
 - a clarification that the strategy covered land managed by the Parks & Countryside team only and so didn't include Rookwood golf course.
- 5.5 Other suggestions made, but deemed to have been adequately covered by the existing wording or not appropriate to the Strategic approach included:
 - that the Strategy should state that peat use was to be ceased and chemical use minimised, rather than just promising a review;
 - ensuring that every resident has a role to play in increasing biodiversity through wildlife gardening, volunteering etc,
 - the need to ensure that biodiversity of greenspaces is safeguarded, and increase should be a stand-alone action;
 - ensuring the Parks and Countryside team as well as the volunteer groups have the resources needed to deliver the Strategy;
 - better defining where the balance between biodiversity and amenity is drawn and making clear the evidence used to support those decisions;
 - the need for more public engagement to ensure support for changes to the management of greenspaces for the benefit of wildlife,
 - dogs should be on leads on Council owned land;
 - some points of detail, such as log piles for stag beetles, were raised that are not appropriate for a strategic document.

- 5.6 The Policy Development Advisory Group (PDAG) for Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces, as well as the PDAG for Climate Action and Nature Recovery, were consulted on the Strategy at its meeting on 12 March 2024 and the changes to the Strategy following the consultation process on Monday 3 June 2024. The Group supported the content of the Strategy and the proposed amendments following the comments that had been received up to the date of the meeting.
- 5.7 The Monitoring Officer and the Director of Resources have been consulted to ensure financial and legal probity and their comments have been incorporated into this report.

6 Other Courses of Action Considered but Rejected

- 6.1 The main alternative action was not producing an updated Greenspace Strategy. However, given the importance of the Council's green open spaces and the many benefits that are derived from these, the option of not producing such a strategy was discounted. It is important to set out the strategic priorities and actions relating to these spaces and that the accompanying action plan ensures that financial resources are available for implementation.

7 Resource Consequences

- 7.1 Most of the projects in the Action Plan (2024-25) which accompanies the Strategy involve staff time. Those that require revenue or capital budget have already been included in the Parks and Countryside budgets for the 2024/25 financial year. These include the improvements to the play and youth facilities, improvements to the Southwater Country Park toilet block and signage for the Denne Cemetery trail.
- 7.2 The financial implications from individual projects where the outcome is not known yet will be considered when they are implemented. This principally relates to the review of the use of pesticides, herbicides, and peat, as well as the review of grazing livestock. Future revenue and capital budgets will be requested and approved accordingly.
- 7.3 There are staff implications for delivering the Strategy and action plan. However, current staff resources are sufficient for implementing these.

8 Legal Considerations and Implications

- 8.1 The Cabinet has the authority to adopt this strategy and any projects detailed in the accompanying Action Plan will be undertaken so as to apply with all statutory and other requirements.

9 Risk Assessment

- 9.1 As the Strategy does not represent a change in strategic direction a full risk assessment has not been completed. The main risk associated with the Strategy

and Action Plan is that there are insufficient staff and financial resources to implement these. The strength of having a separate annual Action Plan is that the initiatives that are included in this can be changed to reflect the resources that are available. Full risk assessments will be completed for new initiatives in the Action Plan before they are implemented.

10 Procurement implications

- 10.1 There are projects within the action plan that will have procurement implications and all such projects will be undertaken in compliance with the Council's procurement regime.

11. Equalities and Human Rights implications / Public Sector Equality Duty

- 11.1 The Equalities Act 2010 challenges organisations to know how residents with protected characteristics could be impacted by proposed changes to service and new policies and procedures. It defines protected characteristics as age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion/belief, and sex and sexual orientation. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed of the new Strategy. Residents with protected characteristics relating to age, gender and disability could be impacted by the priorities and actions in the Strategy. For example, where possible parks and countryside sites should be accessible for those with a disability. It is important that provision is made for older teenage girls in terms of play space provision which has traditionally had more focus on younger age groups and boys. These aspects are addressed in the Strategy with the following strategic priority;

“Greenspaces have a significant value for public health and wellbeing and should provide a range of opportunities for amenity and leisure use for all sectors of society”.

- 11.2 The text associated with this priority states that new spaces are designed to be inclusive for all and that as play spaces are renewed the Council seeks to ensure that there is good distribution of play equipment which is accessible for children with disabilities across the district. It will be important to ensure that new and refurbished play spaces consider equalities from the outset. Public consultation takes place before making significant changes to sites which helps inform these considerations.

12 Environmental Implications

- 12.1 The Strategy contains many objectives and actions that will have positive environmental implications. These include managing existing sites to enhance biodiversity and climate resilience, ensuring that the Council's Greenspaces are incorporated in the district wide Nature Recovery Network, using natural processes to enhance biodiversity, and reducing the environmental impact of the way the Council's land is managed, such as potentially reducing the use of pesticides, herbicides, and peat.

13 Other Considerations

- 13.1 The Strategy does not have any direct implications for Data Protection and crime and disorder. These aspects will be taken into account when projects in the annual Action Plan are implemented.