

Meeting Date	30 th May 2018
Report Title	Open Spaces & Play Strategy 2018 – 2022
Cabinet Member	Cllr David Simmons, Cabinet Member for Environment and Rural Affairs
SMT Lead	Mark Radford, Chief Executive
Head of Service	Martyn Cassell, Head of Commissioning and Customer Contact
Lead Officer	Mike Marsh, Leisure and Technical Service Manager
Recommendations	1. To approve adoption of the Open Spaces & Play Strategy 2018-2022 as drafted in appendix I.

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Open Spaces and Play Strategy 2018-2022 (hereafter ‘the Strategy’) has been prepared to:
- Provide a sound body of evidence for supporting open space policies within the Local Plan.
 - Identify key opportunities and strategic imperatives, plan for the delivery of improvements to existing open spaces for the next four years and introduce a policy of declining Council adoption of new open spaces triggered by development unless there is a strategic value in doing so.
 - Provide a working document that sets standards for open space provision in terms of quantity, quality and accessibility.
 - Ensure the focus for the next four years is on enhancing the quality of existing open spaces through the minimum £1m of investment proposed across the strategy duration
- 1.2 This report sets out the processes undertaken to arrive at this final Strategy and what happens next.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Strategy (see Appendix I) focuses on what is important for Swale’s Open Space provision for the next 4 years, in consideration of previous studies and strategies, recent technical audits and the adopted Swale Borough Local Plan (2017).
- 2.2 To identify the Borough’s future needs and assess the quality and quantity of current open space and play areas, two technical assessment reports were commissioned from consultants, Knight, Kavanagh & Page Ltd who visited every

site in the Borough and worked with Leisure and Planning officers to compile the final technical report.

- 2.3 The first report addressed what open space provision exists in the Borough, its condition, distribution and overall quality by using standard assessment methodology developed for Planning Policy Guidance 17 (PPG17), aligned with the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
- 2.4 The second report aggregated the open space audit results and summarised the information by typology, identifying deficiencies by quality and value to enable a grading assessment for each open space as high, adequate or low. It also considered previous audits, studies and reviews such as the Open Space Study 2008 and the Play Review.
- 2.5 Leisure and Planning officers then pulled these findings and information together to form the Strategy and combining the two assessment reports into one technical document.
- 2.6 The Strategy is structured in a way that contains an 'overarching vision', a set of 'recommendations' on what should be done and then an 'action plan' stating how we will achieve this. The vision is to;
 1. Protect the Council's existing open space network
 2. Provide spaces to encourage a healthy community
 3. Focus on enhancing/improving the quality of the key open spaces
 4. Promote the benefits open space and wildlife have for people living and visiting Swale.
 5. Support the development of facilities in open spaces to recognise the needs of users with disabilities and the benefits of emotional and holistic approaches that open spaces can bring.
 6. Maximise the benefits of the open space and play facilities that comes with the increased housing development required under the Local Plan.
- 2.7 The strategy identifies the Council's financial constraints and is addressed in a number of the policies and recommendations that allow us to effectively cap expenditure for managing existing provision, where possible reduce open space provision that is of low quality and low value and decline proposals for the Council to adopt new open spaces.
- 2.8 The key conclusions are:
 - There is sufficient provision of Council owned and managed open spaces across the seven open space typologies for the current population, with the exception of cemetery capacity.
 - The provision of new spaces associated with development/housing sites as set out in the Local Plan will address the expected demand for the next four years, although this will be reviewed annually to reflect the increased housing allocation.

- The focus for the next four years is on enhancing the quality of existing open spaces that were assessed as low quality but provide high value to the community, with particular attention to play areas where 1 in 3 of all Council current play areas are of low quality.
- A rolling programme is proposed to refurbish play areas over the next 4 years, with new Council capital funds of £500,000.
- To invest at least £100,000 per year for 4 years on other existing open spaces through section 106 developer contributions held in reserves, supplemented where possible by securing grant funding.
- A small number of sites that were assessed of being low quality and low value should be considered as redundant and disposed of or repurposed.
- Additional public space provision associated with new developments across the Borough will not be adopted by the Council for ongoing maintenance and management, unless there is an overwhelming case to provide a strategic new open space or the protection of important natural habitat and biodiversity.

2.9 These proposals are embodied in seven recommendations as set out in the strategy section 2.4 'Open Space Assessment Recommendations' and the Strategy 'Action Plan' in section 2.5

3 Proposal

3.1 Members approve the adoption of the Open Spaces and Play Strategy 2018-2022 as drafted in appendix I.

4 Alternative Options

4.1 Members could choose not to have a Strategy. This is not a feasible way forward as to do so would mean that challenges could be made against the decisions of the planning committee and the Local Plan could be called into question. In turn this would reduce the possibility of securing developer contributions.

4.2 We could continue with the current out of date strategy. This would also open the Council up to challenge, given the Local Plan is required to be based on robust and up to date evidence bases.

4.3 The Council could consider a radical approach to generate ongoing revenue savings and possible one off capital receipts by heavily reducing the current open space provision through closure and disposal and a reduction in the overall level of maintenance undertaken. The recent Government review of Parks highlighted the fundamental role they play in building communities so this option would appear to contradict that and our Corporate plan.

5 Consultation Undertaken

5.1 The draft Strategy and combined technical assessment were posted on the Council's web site for an eight week public consultation period in Spring 2018

with an on line survey and comments section. This was publicised in the Council's 'Inside Swale' publication which is distributed to households in the Borough and on our social media platforms.

- 5.2 An invitation was also issued to stakeholder organisations such as local environmental agencies and Town and Parish Councils to submit their comments on the strategy.
- 5.3 The Strategy was also considered by Policy Development and Review committee and the final document reflects the Committee's comments and required amendments.
- 5.4 Appendix II shows a summary of the consultation results received. The results recognise the need for the investment we are proposing in order to increase satisfaction with our sites. The consultation comments have led to changes in the open spaces management policies and additions to the action plan.

6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	<p>Priority Theme One: A Borough To Be Proud of A borough which is noticeably clean and well maintained, in which the natural and built environments are respected, conserved, and enhanced for future generations. Facilities for residents and visitors alike.</p> <p>Priority Theme Two: A Community to be Proud of A community in which everyone plays their part in maintaining their own physical and mental wellbeing through healthy lifestyle choices, but where people have easy access to world-class healthcare when things go wrong</p>
Financial, Resource and Property	<p>The Grounds Maintenance Contract value for 2017/18 was £1,231,991.64 and is the main expenditure relating to maintaining the open spaces. The open spaces budget also covers the staffing required to manage the service and on-going investment/repairs and totals £496,880 for 2017-18.</p> <p>Council has approved a capital allocation of £500,000 for a rolling programme of play area improvements over a four year period.</p> <p>The proposals in the strategy will be managed within the existing staff resource.</p>
Legal and Statutory	<p>The provision of Parks and open spaces is not a statutory function but the service helps to contribute to many other statutory functions.</p> <p>The Local Plan is a statutory document covered by The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 and Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (and subsequent</p>

	revisions). The Open Spaces and Play Strategy provides an important evidence base for the Local Plan on which planning decisions are made.
Crime and Disorder	Open spaces and the assets within them are increasingly susceptible to vandalism adding to the annual maintenance costs. Improving quality and encouraging community ownership of these spaces through volunteering will help to reduce this.
Environmental Sustainability	Allotments provide production of local produce reducing food air miles. The Strategy encourages important habitat and biodiversity. Open Spaces and woodland reduce CO2 emissions and are particularly important for protected species including migrating birds.
Health and Wellbeing	The provision of open spaces provides proven health benefits for both physical and mental well-being. There are a wide array of community groups accessing open spaces such as sports and recreation facilities, outdoor gyms, multi-use games areas
Risk Management and Health and Safety	The Council is required to meet its obligations on Health and Safety. Insurance claims relating to trips and falls in open spaces or accidents relating to faulty play equipment would be at risk of increasing if we reduced maintenance or left sites to decline in quality.
Equality and Diversity	The Strategy aims to provide facilities for all residents in the Borough. Improving the variety and quality of open spaces will allow more people to use them. Any individual decisions to reduce or remove open spaces/playgrounds will have a separate equality impact assessment done prior to decision.
Privacy and Data Protection	No implications at this stage

7 Appendices

The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report

- *Appendix I: Open Spaces and Play Strategy 2018-2022*
- *Appendix II: Results of the Strategy consultation*

8 Background Papers

Technical Assessment Report 2017 available to View at:
<https://swale.gov.uk/draft-open-spaces-strategy/>