

<b>Environment &amp; Climate Change Committee</b>	
<b>Meeting Date</b>	10 July 2025
<b>Report Title</b>	Open Spaces Strategy Update
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<b>Classification</b>	<b>Open</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	1. To note the update report

## **1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary**

- 1.1 Following agreement by Policy and Resource Committee, the Council started work last year on a strategy that encapsulates all the information required to enable the Borough Council to make informed decisions on the provision, management and development of the Borough's Open Spaces. The previous strategy also included a specific section on the provision and maintenance of children's play areas across the Borough. This report updates on that work to date.
- 1.2 The objective of this is to ensure the Borough Council is furnished with an evidence base and resulting strategy document that is compliant with the National Planning Policy Framework.
- 1.3 The Strategy is being developed with the assistance of independent consultants Knight, Kavanagh & Page (KKP) and uses the recommended guidance and methodology to ensure it provides robust evidence to support the Local Plan process.
- 1.4 This update report considers the current position regarding the Open Spaces Strategy and the different typologies, apart from Provision for Children and Young People (Play Provision) which is considered by the Housing, Health and Communities Committee.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 The new strategy is planned to meet the emerging Local Plan evidence timetable. New updated National Planning Policy Framework and the associated standard method for calculating housing need, has been incorporated to ensure that the strategy will be compliant with this new guidance.
- 2.2 KKP have completed the initial audit having gathered evidence of existing provision and have presented the initial report. However, with the unknown spatial allocations resulting from the Highsted enquiry, it is proposed to pause the second stage of the strategy development pending the outcome and clarity on

where future housing development may be located and how much will be required.

2.3 A total of 416 sites are identified and included in the evidence (includes play areas). The table below provides a breakdown of these.

- Hectares are broadly in keeping with 2017 study.
- There is a noticeable difference in the 2025 current provision level for Parks & Gardens and Natural & Semi-Natural Greenspace provision. This is due to Milton Creek Country Park being included as a park in 2017 but now as a natural/semi-natural greenspace and South Swale Nature Reserve was included as a Natural & Semi-Natural Greenspace site but has now been removed.

<b>Typology</b>	<b>Number of sites 2017</b>	<b>Hectares 2017</b>	<b>Number of sites 2025</b>	<b>Hectares 2025</b>
Allotments	28	25	25	25
Amenity Greenspace	88	69	89	70
Cemeteries/Churchyards	23	25	30	27
Natural & Semi Natural Greenspace	17	591	20	224
Parks and Gardens	28	191	26	133

2.4 Quantity Evaluation – The table below shows that due to population increases since the last study, the current provision levels (hectares per 1000 population) have decreased slightly e.g. hectares have stayed similar, but population has increased.

<b>Typology</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2025</b>
Allotments	0.18	0.16
Amenity greenspace	0.49	0.45
Natural and semi-natural greenspace	4.20	1.45
Parks and gardens	1.36	0.86

2.5 Quality Evaluation - The table below summarises the results of the quality assessment (where applicable) for open spaces across Swale.

- There is generally positive quality of open space across all typologies. This is reflected in over half (60%) of assessed sites scoring above their set threshold for quality.

Typology	Lowest score	Average score	Highest score	Sites below typology threshold	Sites above typology threshold
Amenity greenspace	34%	53%	79%	17	25
Natural & semi-natural greenspace	40%	53%	74%	6	14
Park and gardens	37%	56%	89%	8	18

## 2.6 Summary Findings by Typology

### Parks & Gardens:

- There are 26 sites identified as parks and gardens. An equivalent to 133 hectares.
- Swale has a current provision level of 0.86 ha per 1,000 population. This is above the Fields in Trust suggested standard of 0.80 ha per 1,000 population. The Sheppey Analysis Area (1.72) is above this, with Faversham (0.47) and Sittingbourne (0.50) both below.
- Minor gaps in catchment mapping are highlighted. It is noted that other forms of provision exist within these areas and may help/have an important role in ensuring access to open space.
- Quality and value are generally positive with high scoring sites such as Oare Gunpowder Works, Faversham Recreation Ground and Bartons Point Coastal Park highlighted. No significant quality/value concerns are identified.

### Natural and Semi-Natural Greenspace:

- There are 20 sites identified as natural greenspace. An equivalent to 224 hectares.
- South Swale Nature Reserve, at 420 hectares, is omitted from the figures due to its significant size. Beaches are also not included in terms of quantity.
- Swale has a current provision level of 1.45 ha per 1,000 population. This is below the Fields in Trust suggested standard of 1.80 ha per 1,000 population. If South Swale Nature Reserve is included, a current provision level of 4.16 ha per 1,000 population is noted.
- There are three designated Local Nature Reserves. Consequently, LNR provision in Swale is sufficient against the cited Natural England standard.
- Gaps in catchment mapping are highlighted. It is noted that other forms of provision exist within these areas and may help/have an important role in ensuring access to open space.

- Quality and value are generally positive with high scoring sites such as Milton Creek Country Park, Minster Cliffs and Thistle hill Community Woodland highlighted. No significant quality/value concerns are identified.

### **Amenity Greenspace:**

- There are 89 sites identified as amenity greenspace. An equivalent to 70 hectares.
- Swale has a current provision level of 0.45 ha per 1,000 population. This is below the Fields in Trust suggested standard of 0.80 ha per 1,000 population.
- Minor gaps in catchment mapping are highlighted. It is noted that other forms of provision exist within these areas and may help/have an important role in ensuring access to open space remembering that all sites under 0.2 hectares have not been included.
- Quality of assessed sites is mixed; however, value is generally positive. Lower scoring sites tends to reflect a lack of ancillary facilities at a site.

### **Allotments**

- There are 25 sites classified as allotments, equating to almost 25 hectares.
- Swale based on its current population (154,619) is below the NSALG standard. Using this suggested standard, the minimum amount of allotment provision is 38 hectares. Existing provision of 25 hectares therefore does not meet this guideline.
- For allotments no quality/value assessments have taken place. Allotments are often difficult to assess due to being accessible for plot members only. However, allotments should generally be considered as highly valued as they are often identified by the local community as important forms of open space provision.

### **Cemeteries**

- There are 30 sites classified as cemeteries/churchyards, equating to over 27 hectares of provision in Swale. No site size threshold has been applied and as such all known provision is included within the audit.
- No accessibility standard is set for this typology and there is no realistic requirement to set such standards. Provision should be based on burial demand.
- For cemeteries no quality/value assessments have taken place. The role of cemeteries is unique in comparison to other types of open space; one which is difficult to assess in terms of quality and value.

- 2.7 The provision standards used to determine deficiencies and surpluses for open space are set in terms of quality, accessibility, and quantity. The table below sets out the figures for existing quantity standards, current provision levels identified and national benchmarks.

<b>Typology</b>	<b>Current provision (2025)</b>	<b>National benchmarks</b>	<b>Previous standards provision (2017)</b>
Parks & gardens	0.86	0.80	1.36
Natural & semi-natural greenspace <sup>1</sup>	1.45	1.80	4.20
Amenity greenspace	0.45	0.60	0.49
Allotment	0.16	0.25	0.18

<sup>4</sup>. 4.16 hectares per 1,000 population if South Swale National Reserve were included

The difference in previous standards for parks is due to Milton Creek Country Park previously being classified as a park, but now as natural greenspace and in the Natural & Semi-natural greenspace typology, South Swale National Nature Reserve being removed in this study.

In summary, the following quantity standards are recommended based on current provision levels and trying to achieve the national benchmark.

<b>Typology</b>	<b>Recommended Quantity Standard</b>
Parks & gardens	0.86
Natural & semi-natural greenspace	1.80
Amenity greenspace	0.60
Allotment	0.25

- 2.8 Report Recommendations - The following provides a summary of what the Consultants feel should be seeking to achieve to help address the issues identified on the key findings and through the application of the standards. These need to be further developed over the next few months with input from Swale Officers and Members, followed by public consultation.

1. Sites helping, or with the potential to help, serve areas identified as having gaps in catchment mapping should be prioritised as opportunities for enhancement.
2. Ensure low quality/value sites helping to serve potential gaps in accessibility catchments are prioritised for enhancement.

3. Review areas with sufficient provision in open space and consider how they may be able to meet other areas of need.
  4. Keep data, reports and supporting evidence base up to date to reflect changes.
  5. Recommended standards to inform future growth requirements.
- 2.9 As soon as the Highsted Park Planning Enquiry is complete and a decision made on future location of development allocations, the second stage of the process can be developed, essentially expanding upon Recommendation 5 to produce the actual strategy.
- 2.10 The strategy document will summarise some of the existing elements such as fully setting the standards, identified shortfalls etc at the front end. It will also explore the Open Space requirements based on housing numbers and the allocation locations, providing what the provision requirement is for each and exploring if there any potential options around offsite contributions/enhancements (if for example there is an existing site/shortfall in the area).
- 2.11 This update report does not include anything on play areas as that function remains the responsibility of Housing, Health and Community Committee. Given this and the differences between play area typology and open spaces, a separate play area strategy is being developed.

### **3 Proposals**

- 3.1 To note the update report.

### **4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected**

- 4.1 Failure to adopt an Open Spaces Strategy is not a feasible option given the evidence base that this robust assessment will give to the developing Local Plan.
- 4.2 Proceed with the next stage without considering the implications of Highsted Park Planning Enquiry. This is not recommended as it will mean several assumptions on location and demand for open spaces, which may in turn affect the strategies compliance with the NPPF.

### **5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed**

- 5.1 Consultation will be undertaken with stakeholders and community following approval of the initial draft of the full strategy.

## 6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	<p>Community: To enable our residents to live, work and enjoy their leisure time safely in our borough and to support community resilience.</p> <p>Environment: To provide a cleaner, healthier, more sustainable and enjoyable environment and to prepare our Borough for the challenges ahead.</p>
Financial, Resource and Property	<p>This Strategy will ensure that the Council is providing cost-effective services and are making best use of the appropriate resources and property.</p> <p>By adopting a robust Open Spaces Strategy, the authority will stand a better chance of being successful with external grants and developer contributions to assist in delivery of the action plan. At this stage, no additional costs to the Council have been identified. However, there may be requests for contributory funding for individual projects as they are developed, and which will go through the usual budget request process.</p>
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	<p>The Strategy will underpin key sections of the Local Plan relating to Open Space. This is a required element of the Local Plan process, providing a robust evidence base for decisions. It will therefore assist in the Planning Inspectorate process.</p> <p>By providing a robust strategy that is compliant with National Planning Policy Framework, the Council will be better placed to defend any challenges which may be presented by developers.</p>
Crime and Disorder	<p>The provision and good management of a broad range of playing pitches and changing rooms can make a positive contribution to managing issues of crime and disorder by providing diversionary activities and encouraging community cohesion.</p>
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	<p>The strategy will guide and influence the future provision and management of valuable open space facilities and promote sensitive quality management to support biodiversity. In addition, it has a role supporting sustainable urban drainage and carbon reduction through the provision of grassland and planting.</p>
Health and Wellbeing	<p>By providing and supporting a broad range of quality open space and facilities across Swale, there will be greater opportunities for people to participate in healthy activities.</p>
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and	<p>None identified</p>

Vulnerable Adults	
Risk Management and Health and Safety	Without a strategy that is compliant, the Borough will be at risk of not having the Local Plan agreed, missing funding opportunities, losing challenges to planning applications by developers, and not providing high quality facilities for its residents. By maintaining and inspecting its own facilities to agreed standards, the Council will ensure their facilities are safe and fit for purpose.
Equality and Diversity	Issues of equal opportunity will be addressed through applications for any changes to existing or new developments, ensuring that all open space and such facilities are compliant and fit for purpose.
Privacy and Data Protection	None identified

## **7 Appendices**

7.1 None.

## **8 Background Documents**

8.1 None.