

**Decision Session - Cabinet Member for  
Leisure, Culture and Tourism**

15<sup>th</sup> July 2013

Report of the Assistant Director (Communities, Culture and Public Realm)

**Future Direction and Vision for York's Parks and Gardens**

**Summary**

1. This report seeks the approval of the Cabinet Member to a refreshed vision for York's parks and gardens in light of the changing resources available to the Council to operate and maintain these key assets.

**Background**

2. The Council has over 200 green spaces in its care. These range in size from the Knavesmire to small street corner spaces, and cover a diverse range of landscapes from lakes, nature reserves and woods, to allotments, sports pitches and play areas.
3. Within this portfolio there are five traditional formal parks and gardens: Rowntree Park, West Bank Park, Hull Road Park, Clarence Gardens and Glen Gardens. For the last 10 years it has been the ambition of the service to have each of these sites maintained and operated to Green Flag standards. Green Flag is the national benchmark for quality for green spaces; the scheme is operated on behalf of the Government by Keep Britain Tidy. Each year sites are inspected by independent judges or mystery shoppers to ensure that standards are being met. See <http://greenflag.keepbritaintidy.org>
4. Four sites have consistently met the standard: Rowntree Park, West Bank Park, Clarence Gardens and Glen Gardens, with significant progress made in Hull Road Park towards meeting the standard. Rawcliffe Country Park which has a more informal landscape and a greater emphasis on nature conservation also holds the award.

5. The ability to maintain a blanket approach to standards is now under pressure following the government's reduction in funding for local authorities. As part of the 2013/14 and 2014/15 budget round some £20m has been cut from the Council budget, with public realm budgets which include parks and open spaces, contributing £750k to this. Changes of this magnitude inevitably require a different approach to the operation of parks. In the case of West Bank Park, Hull Road Park, Clarence Gardens and Glen Gardens, for example, the Council can no longer afford to staff these sites at all times and can no longer lock them overnight.
6. If our parks and gardens are to continue to flourish in the face of these challenges a greater level of community involvement in the management and operation of the parks will be essential. The community can play a critical role in ensuring that their parks are developed and animated in ways that meet their needs and in providing input through volunteering to add to the quality of the environment.
7. Community involvement in York's green spaces is not new: the friends groups at Rowntree Park and West Bank Park have been in existence for nearly 20 years. More recently Tang Hall Residents Association have invested estate improvement money in Hull Road Park, the bowlers at Clarence and West Bank have invested their funds into the sites, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust have instigated community food growing projects at Glen Gardens and Hull Road Park. Across the public realm Community Payback carry out maintenance work and York Cares facilitate company team challenge events. This is a strong base to build upon.

### **A Vision for York Parks and Gardens**

8. The Council Plan sets out an ambition to engage the community and the voluntary sector in the provision of Council services. Co-production is a new vision for public services where, recognising people as assets, services deliver alongside users, their families and their neighbours in partnership, harnessing their capabilities and involving the community more deeply in service form and delivery.
9. To deliver this there is a need for a fundamentally different approach to leading the way parks and gardens are planned, looked after, and animated.

The traditional delivery model has to be reversed with the community taking a leading role supported by the Council.

10. For parks and gardens the following is proposed:
11. What is the vision? York's parks and gardens will be quality green spaces with a strong sense of community "ownership" and management to ensure that they meet the needs of local communities. They will be well used and animated with a wide range of activity.
12. What will it look like? Each site will have a Green Flag flying under-pinned by strong community leadership.
13. Who is going to make it happen?
  - The Council's Public Realm service will:
    - Provide the strategic overview and agree with the community the management plan for each site.
    - Ensure that the sites are safe e.g. inspecting and caring for trees, playgrounds, power supplies, water quality. Providing building and infrastructure maintenance e.g. drainage, footpaths.
    - Allocate section 106 funds to increase access to and capacity of sites
    - Deploy a mobile team to undertake core horticultural maintenance tasks e.g. grass cutting, hedge maintenance, shrub and flower beds
    - Provide seasonal bedding and replacement planting
    - Use the skills of Smarter York officers to support the community to become more involved and self-confident so they take a lead in the management of the sites and carry out more task themselves
    - Use the skills of the horticultural team to train users and the community in gardening skills – turf maintenance, planting, pruning, etc.
    - Provide support to the community in tackling issues such as anti-social behaviour
  - Other Council teams who will assist:

- The Communities and Equalities team will provide links into local Resident Forums, associations and other community groups to help get all sections of the community involved
- The Play Officer will commission free holiday activities in parks that i) the children and young people will be able to carry on, on their own, afterwards thus creating more long-term activity in parks ii) that get the participants involved in improving the park before and after their events
- The Sport & Active Leisure team will generate activities in the parks to showcase what is on offer and act as links to local communities and sports clubs.
- Libraries will provide information services, Wi-Fi and catering options
- Arts and Events Team will encourage appropriate events and festivals to take place that bring the parks to life
- Partners who will assist:
  - Community Payback will undertake simple maintenance tasks
  - York Cares will broker company and big team challenge days
  - Wildlife charities will bring specialist skills and access to funding opportunities
- The community will:
  - Take an overview of how the park is managed and developed
  - Fund-raise for specific projects and community lead developments
  - Find new uses for the spaces such as food growing
  - Manage and maintain specific facilities e.g. tennis courts, bowling greens and buildings by taking bookings, providing caretakers and key holders, and funding improvements
  - Maintain specific sections or areas of the site by gardening, planting, weeding, edging off

- Carry out work as volunteers across a range of functions – management, events, maintenance
  - Run events such as summer fairs
  - Involve all user groups in order to create a sense of “ownership” and tackle anti-social behaviour
14. It is suggested that this vision is not restricted to the five formal parks and gardens. This approach can be developed for smaller sites that in themselves do not qualify for the Green Flag award as they do not have the range of facilities required, but would benefit from the adoption of this aspiration.

### **Consultation**

15. In light of the above a series of councillor briefings, discussions with local community representatives, and meetings with friends groups and key users has taken place over the last few months.
16. Two principles were endorsed through this process:
- That the community needs to take a lead role in the future development of parks and gardens to ensure that these facilities continue to flourish and to develop in line with the needs of communities.
  - That the quality of the sites will continue to be judged through the Green Flag award.
17. West Bank Park The key action points were:
- That the Summer Fair of the 30<sup>th</sup> June be used to raise the issues facing the park, seek new members for the Friends and interest in the community running 2014 Summer Fair.
  - That the former parks property at 14 New Lane has the potential to be come a community hub and heritage centre from which greater community ownership and activity within the park would be possible. Two local residents are leading this with the support from appropriate council officers. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3Ha1I7PBwE>
  - Additional security measures may be required for the parks buildings and the views of the Police Architectural Liaison officer be sought.

18. Hull Road Park The key action points were:

- That the Tang Hall Residents Association will take the lead in exploring a community management model for the park.
- That the former park ranger pavilion be the focus of investment and effort this summer using Tang Hall Residents Association and section 106 funds to deliver a community hub.
- Community input into the improvement programme will focus on the pavilion, re-use of the bowling greens, additional footpaths, improvements to the beck, possible lighting and formalised, cycle path.
- That the Summer Fair of the 3rd August be used to promote the role of Tang Hall Residents Association and the improvement programme.
- The Residents' Association offered to take responsibility for talking further to local residents (especially those whose houses front onto the park) about their views of the local community locking / unlocking the park.
- The park should be integral to the delivery of Big Local lottery programme for Tang Hall.

19. Clarence Gardens The key action points were:

- That the two local residents association can act as a gateway into the local community, and that the York St John University can also contribute to the debate about the Gardens.
- A starting point for greater community input into the improvement programme could be a refresh of the play area (much of the equipment is now looking dated and is getting towards the end of its economic life).
- That the further work is required to test out the local community's interest in locking / unlocking of the Garden.
- Additional security measures may be required for the buildings and bowling greens and the views of the Police Architectural Liaison officer be sought.

20. Glen Gardens The key action points were:

- That the potential exists to create a "friends of" or community panel based on the work by Yorkshire Wildlife Trust to establish a food growing programme in the Gardens.

- A starting point for greater community input into the improvement programme will focus on the play area.
- That the further work is required to test out the communities' interest in locking / unlocking of the Garden, and / or solely the play area.
- Additional security measures may be required for the buildings and bowling green and the views of the Police Architectural Liaison officer be sought.
- That the further work is required to support the bowls community to come together to form an association to manage the greens in 2014.
- That Heworth Tennis Club is interested in managing the two courts on behalf of the Council and is prepared to upgrade the courts in return for a suitably long lease e.g. 10 years.

### **Next Steps**

21. In order to progress the vision the first step will be to get the necessary community structures and organisation in place, working with and through existing organisations such as the Tang Hall Residents Association, as appropriate. The first things to talk about will be responding to the challenges and issues identified above including exploring community interest in locking and unlocking of sites, any additional security requirements, external funding opportunities and community maintenance, events and activities.

### **Options**

22. The options available to the Cabinet Member are:
  - Option 1: Agree to the vision and work plan set out above
  - Option 2: Suggest further and/or alternative proposals for inclusion in the work plan

### **Analysis**

23. Option 1 is recommended as it will provides a comprehensive response to the challenges that the service is facing, it sets out a refreshed vision within which the service can be judged and provides a way to meet community need whilst delivering the savings required through the Council's budget process.

## **Bowls**

24. A petition of 568 signatures has been presented to officers on behalf of Clarence Gardens Bowling Association objecting to the Council's decision to charge £2,000 rental per green from April 2014. There have also been a number of representations in writing on this issue.
25. The key points about bowls are:
  - Each green costs the Council around £7k per annum to maintain. The Council has had to make some extremely difficult financial decisions in the face of the enormous savings that we have to make. Under the circumstances, a charge of £2,000 is more than reasonable. It is the norm for other outdoor sports clubs to pay their own way in terms of the costs of their facilities whereas with bowls the Council will continue to provide a very large subsidy. In addition, a number of clubs enjoy use of additional facilities such as pavilions at no charge.
  - The charge will be introduced next year and will be the only charge for use of the green. Clubs have the choice of doing their own maintenance and using the green at no charge if they prefer.
  - For a club with a healthy level of membership a charge of £2,000 would represent a very modest charge per person for a season's bowling (late April to mid September) when divided amongst the membership. The real issue, however, is that the sport is in serious decline. Many clubs have folded in recent years, (and several greens have closed) and some remaining clubs have dwindled to only a handful of active members.
  - Clearly it is important that we have healthy bowls clubs in the city capable of managing their affairs and promoting the sport to future generations. To assist with this our Sport and Active Leisure Team have recently run a session for our bowls clubs covering club development issues such as recruitment of members and fundraising. We will continue to offer a support package for clubs covering training and development on governance, development of facilities, membership recruitment and retention, and, via the national governing body, funding opportunities.



- In addition the Public Realm team are able to provide support to clubs through horticultural training including grass cutting, machinery use and specialist fine turf operations.
- Clearly a number of clubs now face a decision: either to get themselves into a viable state, to merge with other clubs, or to fold. Where clubs choose to fold we will use the land for other leisure facilities for which there is real demand and which do not place an unreasonable demand on the Council Tax payer. An example of this would be creating additional allotments for which we currently have long waiting lists.
- Associations and Clubs will be asked to confirm their intentions for the 2014 season this September; this will determine what winter maintenance is undertaken.

### **Council Plan**

26. The actions set out in the report contribute to the following corporate priorities as set out in the Council Plan 2011-15:
- Building stronger communities - by encouraging and involving residents and users in green space design and management. And, by supporting the voluntary sector and creating volunteering opportunities.
  - Protecting the environment by enhancing green space for public, wildlife and habitat benefit and making spaces more accessible

### **Implications**

27. **Financial** – The approaches outlined in this paper will contribute to savings as outlined in paragraph 5 above. Site based investments will be reported through the annual work plan and Section 106 updates. Should additional security measures be required this will be considered as part of the Council's annual capital allocation (CRAM) process this autumn.
28. **Legal and Property** - Where specific projects have property implications e.g. lease or lettings Legal and Property Services will be involved in any arrangements.
29. **Equalities** - The initial community impact assessment indicates that key equalities issues will concern ensuring that all parts of the community are enabled to participate in community led initiatives.

These issues will be addressed in conjunction with the action plan for neighbourhood engagement and in respect of each initiative where relevant.

30. There are no additional Human Resources, Crime and Disorder, or Information Technology implications over and above those outlined in the body of the report.

### **Risk Management**

31. There are no identified risks associated with the work plan in the report. Any changes to site operations are likely to be within the normal bounds of open space management and no different from other area of public land in the city.

### **Recommendations**

32. The Cabinet Member is asked to approve the vision set out in paragraphs 11 to 14.

Reason: To deliver excellent parks and gardens in York.

### **Contact Details**

<b>Author:</b>	<b>Chief Officer Responsible for the report:</b>			
Dave Meigh Operations Manager – Public Realm Tel No. 01904 553386	Charlie Croft Assistant Director (Communities, Culture and Public Realm)			
	<b>Report Approved</b>	✓	<b>Date</b>	2.7.13.
<b>Specialist Implications Officer(s):</b> N/A				
<b>Wards Affected:</b>			<b>All</b>	✓
<b>For further information please contact the author of the report</b>				

**Background Papers: None**