
Smarter York: A New Approach to Informal Open Space

Summary

1. This report asks the Cabinet Member to agree to roll out the new Smarter York approach to the management of informal open space in the city and invite communities to become more involved in the management of their local spaces.

Background

2. The Cabinet launched a Smarter Charter at its March meeting. This is a key element of the Smarter York approach which aims to:
 - Create more responsive services
 - Engage ward members, the public, and key organisations such as Residents Associations, Parish Councils, business and voluntary sector organisations
 - Deliver budget savings through technological innovation, capacity building and supporting new ways of working
3. There are already many excellent examples of communities working together to manage or enhance their open spaces in York, such as:
 - Bishophill Senior Community Garden – a community garden created and maintained within the graveyard of St Mary’s Church which was demolished in the 1960s
 - Friends of Chapman’s Pond – a longstanding group with a recently agreed management plan for the area which comprises 7 acres of land with a fishing pond and woodland off Moor Lane
 - Greenfields, Haxby Road - a disused school playing field. In 2012, in response to the school’s request for help, local residents joined York Cares to launch a Big Community Challenge, resulting in donations from local businesses and the labour of 150 volunteers to create a community garden and

allotment. The field continues to be managed by local volunteers and is used by pupils as an outdoor classroom

- Danesmead Wood, Fishergate - a group of local residents approached the council in 2011 for help to improve and manage the woodland, as it was blighted by anti social behaviour. Two years on, a formal committee now cares for the land and through grants are creating a sustainable, open space shared by dog walkers and young people alike.
- In Wigginton, two Street buddies maintain the highway verges in their street.
- Woodthorpe Shops, Moorcroft Road - four raised flower beds owned by the local supermarket, has given rise to the 'Woodthorpe Hoppers' a small group of local residents and school pupils who are now maintaining the beds, seeking funding to improve them, and creating a sustainable, attractive focal point to the busy shopping area.
- Churchfields Committee, Wigginton – This group are working closely with the parish council to maintain and manage green space off Church Lane, providing open green space , play area and provision for dog walkers.

This initiative will build upon the success of existing examples such as these and will aim to share good practice.

4. It should be noted that although this report primarily concerns informal open spaces the initiative may cross over into areas within the portfolio of the Cabinet Member for Leisure, Culture, Tourism and Social Inclusion.

Proposals

5. It is proposed that we should now engage with each community through the Resident Forums in order to consider the potential for further community involvement. We will develop a workshop approach that we will invite ward members to use at future Resident Forum meetings. This will take a “planning for real” approach, identifying the informal open spaces in each ward, reviewing current arrangements, consulting residents on their views about their spaces and their aspirations for them, and assessing the appetite and potential for greater community involvement in management and maintenance. As well as individual residents, key consultees through the resident forum and ward team meeting structures will include:

- Parish Councils
- Resident associations
- Other community groups

In the case of parish councils we will also consult individually and through the Parish Council Liaison meetings.

6. The Council's Public Realm team will support this process by developing a support package in order to enable communities to take more of a role. The starting point will be an assessment against any land that a community identifies as having potential for greater community management to consider:
 - Any investment that might be needed, for example in the site or in appropriate tools or machinery
 - Practical support that the community might need e.g. in ensuring safe working
 - Training that may be required for example of volunteers
 - Any support that may be needed to establish a new community group where required
7. The Council will continue to play its role in grounds maintenance, notably in cutting open grass: highway verges, housing communal areas and leisure open grassed areas.
8. Historically in York this type of grass cutting has, since the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) in the mid 1980s, been monitored by using frequency monitoring standards. Up until 2003 these were 10 cuts a year on highway verges, and 14 cuts per year on housing communal areas and leisure open spaces. From 2003 they were aligned at 14 cuts on all three land types.
9. Due to climate changes the rate of grass growth throughout the year is not as predictable as in the past. This means that it is no longer appropriate to have fixed cutting dates. For example, we would normally have carried out a cut in mid March, but due to the prolonged winter conditions we were unable to do so and indeed in most locations a cut wasn't required anyway. Flexibility is now required to undertake cuts when needed. This approach of adopting performance monitoring standards is already used by other local authorities such as Sheffield City Council, East Riding of Yorkshire Council and North Yorkshire County Council. The performance measure standard on open areas grass cutting will be set to maintain the grass at between 25mm and 100mm.

Consultation

10. Consultation with communities and other agencies will take place regarding the roll out of Smarter York as set out above.
11. The Communities and Equalities team notified those parish councils that receive double taxation payments, last year, of the likelihood of a saving in the Council's grass cutting budgets.
12. Front line operational staff have been involved in the preparation of proposed amendments to grass cutting rounds. This has enabled a reduction in the number of rounds from eight down to seven which will facilitate the delivery of a saving.

Options

13. The principal options are:
 - a. Roll out the Smarter York approach described.
 - b. Maintain the status quo.

Analysis

14. Option a. is recommended because it will encourage greater community ownership of local open space leading to better, more appropriate land use and improved standards whilst potentially creating budget savings as required within the Council's budget process.
15. With regard to the Council's grass cutting investment will be made in new machinery and/or attachments to existing machinery to enable us to attain as high a standard of cut as possible. This investment will be funded from existing budgets, as part of the normal replacement and maintenance regime. Alternative maintenance regimes are being explored such as wild flowering of some rural verges and parts of open spaces.

Council Priorities

16. These proposals relate to the *Protect the Environment* section of the Council Plan: ensuring that we continue to maintain York's streets and public spaces within the available budget.

Implications

17. **Financial:** As part of the 13/14 budget process a saving of £300k was required from the budgets for the maintenance of green spaces

of which £34k was identified from this area of work. It is estimated that this saving can be delivered by cutting grass only when needed.

18. **Human Resources:** The proposal leads to the deletion of one FTE post which will be delivered through the Council's managing change procedure.
19. **Equalities:** The initial CIA screening shows that some communities of identity are less satisfied with their local areas and less well informed about how they can get involved in influencing decisions. A specific engagement plan will be developed to engage these communities and this will be the subject of consultation with EAG.
20. **Legal:** There are no additional legal, crime and disorder, information technology, property, or other implications.

Risk Management

21. There are no identified risks.

Recommendations

22. The Cabinet Member is recommended to agree to roll out the new Smarter York approach to the management of open spaces in the city and invite communities to become more involved in the management of their local spaces.

Reason: To make York an even better place to live.

Contacts

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	Report Approved	✓	Date 25.4.13.
Specialist Implications Officer(s)			
Wards Affected: <i>List wards or tick box to indicate all</i>		All	✓
For further information please contact the author of the report			

Background Papers:

Smarter York: A Smarter Charter - Report to Cabinet March 2013

Financial Strategy 2013-2018 - Report to Cabinet February 2013