

Meeting:	Executive
Meeting date:	15/07/2025
Report of:	Patrick Looker – Assistant Director Finance
Portfolio of:	Executive Member for the Environment and Climate Emergency (Cllr J Kent)

Decision Report: £500k Parks Investment Fund

Subject of Report

1. At Budget Council in February 2025 £500k investment was approved into the Councils parks. The Executive is now being asked to approve the criteria together with a recommended weighting which will be used to shortlist investment projects.
2. This decision will allow officers to apply the criteria to a range of possible schemes and projects in the summer and to report back to the Executive in September where approval will be sought on which should proceed.

Benefits and Challenges

3. This fund was established to improve our communities and ensure that residents can enjoy accessible parks, play areas and green spaces fit for all. The fund also aligns with our Pride in Place values and will support improvement of community wellbeing, encouraging more people of all ages and abilities to spend time outdoors.
4. This initiative marks the first major investment in York's public spaces in several years and is part of the strategic ambitions laid out in the Council Plan 2023–2027, with widespread resident support. A key focus is ensuring accessible and sustainable outdoor environments that enhance biodiversity, wellbeing, and social inclusion.

5. There are numerous benefits of investment into green spaces are best illustrated by The National Lottery Report *Space to Thrive* (2019). This was produced by researchers from Sheffield Hallam University and The University of Sheffield and identified
- *Physical health, mental wellbeing and life satisfaction are all enhanced through access to and use of parks and green spaces.*
 - *Parks create important opportunities for social integration.*
 - *Parks provide opportunities for community engagement and local residents value the chance to be involved in designing and improving their green spaces (e.g., through volunteering)*
 - *Parks and green spaces highlight inequalities in society.*
 - *There are economic benefits of parks and green spaces in terms of creating employment, hosting economic activities (such as cafes or events) and encouraging inward investment*

Full details can be found at

https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/attachments/Space%20to%20thrive_2019-A%20rapid%20evidence%20review%2014102019-a11y.pdf

6. It is recognised that regular use of our green spaces is not consistent across York's communities. In selecting projects and designing schemes both users' and non-users' views will be sought to ensure best use is made of the investment, with the desired outcome that this programme of investment will seek to ensure our green spaces are inclusive and enjoyed by a wide variety of people.
7. In managing York's green spaces Public Realm work closely with the Environment and Community Officers, Friends Of and with many volunteer groups across the city. Several thousand hours of volunteer activity supplement the maintenance and upkeep of our green spaces. This investment will promote and encourage our communities to help with the ongoing and future involvement in York's green spaces.
8. The opportunity exists to link this programme to the work of the Public Health and Communities team. They will review the impact of a proposed scheme or project and seek to maximise its benefits. This could be through seeking additional community or 3rd party involvement in planting, future maintenance or contributing to cost, in cash or kind.

9. The biggest challenge that has been identified is that there is insufficient capacity within the current workforce to deliver this greatly expanded programme. To address this problem, work has started on the recruitment of a project officer who will be in place until 31st March 2027.

Policy Basis for Decision

10. The prioritisation of investment based on the weighting supports two of the Council's Core commitments:

Equalities and Human Rights- Equality of opportunity. We will create opportunities for all, providing equal opportunity and balancing the human rights of everyone to ensure residents and visitors alike can benefit from the city and its strengths.

Health- Health and wellbeing - We will improve health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities.

Financial Strategy Implications

11. Budget Council (February 2025) approved a £500k capital budget to be spent over two years to fund improvements to City Council parks, green spaces and play areas.
12. The aim of this project is to make a real difference to our parks, green spaces and play areas. The amount of investment will vary between sites or project depending on need and how the site meets the criteria. The smallest investments are likely to be in the region of £10-£15k per project.
13. The council also holds developer Section 106 contributions for parks and open space infrastructure. The S106 funding available is up to an additional £500k to support the capital funding. Where S106 Agreements allow, funding will be pooled to provide an enhanced scheme; where funding is stand alone, projects will be delivered in parallel with the core Council programme of work.
14. It should be noted that a proportion of the S106 money is committed to 3rd parties as part of the planning agreements and will be distributed in parallel with this programme of work.

Recommendation and Reasons

15. Members are recommended to:

1. Accept the criteria detailed in Paragraphs 21 to 31.

Reason: to guide the investment of £500k in the city parks, play areas and open spaces

2. Accept the weighting approach detailed in Paragraph 32 to 35.

Reason: to prioritise investment on sites with high levels of IMD that have old play equipment and / or key infrastructure issues.

Background

16. The Council Plan 2023-2027 which sets a clear vision for the council - *by working with the city we will establish the conditions that would make the city healthier, fairer, more affordable, more sustainable and more accessible*. As part of delivering this Plan, Budget Council in February 2025 approved a two year £500k investment into the Council parks.

17. Consideration of how the fund will be used commenced at the April meeting of the Executive Member for the Environment and Climate Emergency. It was stated in the report *“that improving green spaces, parks and play-areas that are freely available, whilst enhancing the biodiversity and increasing pollinators to ensure the spaces are more sustainable, is directly aligned to the council’s vision. In addition, residents have told the Council in petitions, the development of the Local Plan, and throughout consultations that they value the city’s unique character and how it is enhanced through well-maintained green spaces. Investing in the protection and development of public spaces leaves a lasting and positive impression of a city residents are justifiably proud of”*.

18. It is several years since the last significant capital Council investment into parks, play areas and green spaces. For example, there are in the region of 90 equipped play areas across the city, with around half provided by the city council. The rest are provided by a mix of parish and town councils, housing association, Ministry of Defence and estate management companies. The age of the equipment is generally new to 15 years old due to successive national and local funding rounds, S106 driven investment, local

fund raising and the construction of new play areas within recent housing developments. Despite this there remain a few play areas where a proportion of the equipment is 20 or more years old and several sites which have specific pieces of equipment which are even older.

Consultation Analysis

19. This project was first reported in Public Realm Service update presented at Executive Member for the Environment and Climate Emergency decision session in April 2025. No specific comments on this aspect of the report were received.
20. The views of the Place Scrutiny Committee were sought on 24th June 2025. The draft Minutes and a response are provided below
 - i. To recommend that accessibility be added as a criteria and as part of the scope of works to understand where spend is allocated.

Response: Improved accessibility is a desired outcome of the whole project. It is recommended therefore that rather than have accessibility as a standalone criterion, every project identified through the application of the 5 recommended criteria will be subject to its own accessibility assessment.

For example, if a play area is identified in need of a rebuild then how you get into site will be considered, along with how you move round it and what is on offer or will be offered when you are there. This will be done in consultation with specialist officers within the council, appropriate external organisations, Wards and Friends groups for example.

- ii. To recommend that the radius of a park [play area] expanded [from the 300m IMD] in cases where it is the only park available to residents and there are poorer public transport options offering the ability to get to other parks.

Response: The City of York Local Plan evidence base contains location details for the city's green spaces including play areas. The Plan aims for communities to be within 480m of a play area, accordingly, gaps in provision are known. These include areas of the city centre, parts of the urban fringe, two small villages and several outlying areas within villages.

It is proposed that where a site or project is selected through the application of the 5 recommended criteria that this is mapped against the Local Plan Evidence base and known planning applications. If the site serves a community greater than the Local Plan catchment of 480 metres this will be highlighted in future reports.

- iii. To recommend that officers work with Business Intelligence to map how “destination” parks (*e.g., Rowntree Park, West Bank Park*) which attract residents from a wider catchment area should be measured when considering criteria such as deprivation.

Response: It is proposed that the IMD data for all sites is expanded to cover a radius of 500 metres, this more closely aligns with the catchment areas set in the Local Plan for play areas of 480 metres.

Where a project is suggested for a “destination” park following the application of the 5 criteria, this will be highlighted in future reports.

Options Analysis and Evidential Basis

21. It is recommended that 5 criteria are used to determine which sites and projects come forward. The recommended criteria are detailed A to E below. Some sites and projects are likely to qualify under more than one criterion.

A. Sites within communities which score higher on Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).

22. IMD are a composite score of a range of separate indicators, grouped into seven distinct domains: Income, Employment, Education, Skills and Training, Health and Disability, Crime, Barriers to Housing and Services, Living Environment. Each Index represents a different aspect of deprivation.
23. The Council’s Business Intelligence Unit can provide IMD scores for the area within a 500m radius surrounding York’s open spaces and play areas. The higher the score the higher the level deprivation. Use of this criterion is likely to mean sites or projects in the following communities will score high and be prioritised: *Westfield, Clifton, Heworth, Hull Road, Acomb and Clifton Without.*

B. Projects which address long standing maintenance issues to key infrastructure.

24. Key infrastructure includes such assets as footpaths, buildings and play area safety surfacing. Investment that will extend the life of the existing asset for several years or decades. Whilst it is possible to fund such work from the revenue budget, the scale of the work required means that some schemes are just too large for this funding source. Footpath and bridge work projects would contribute to Council's Active Travel ambitions.

C. Investment into play areas with a priority to improving those sites with the oldest equipment or which would benefit from relandscaping

25. Despite previous investment there remain a few play areas where a large proportion of the equipment is 20 or more years old and several sites which have specific pieces of equipment which are even older. It is recommended that priority be given to investing into these sites.
26. Not all sites are laid out in a coherent way due to historical land ownership issues and piecemeal development around the site. By removing old fencing, improving paths or creating more open aspects the opportunity exists to create a greater sense of wellbeing and security

D. Support the expansion and retention of Green Flag Award standard

27. Over the last 20 years a range of Council parks have achieved the Green Flag award standard – see <https://www.greenflagaward.org/>. Sites are generally assessed every two years and at present Clarence Gardens, Glen Gardens and West Bank Park hold the award. Rowntree Park is awaiting the outcome of this year's judging (having missed last year due to repeated flooding) and Rawcliffe County Park is on hold pending the completion of the Environment Agency flood protection work the local area.
28. Work has been under way at Hull Road Park this last few years to improve the quality of the site (for more detail see <https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=870&MId=145> 99 Item 27 Paragraph 85), and this park currently has the

most potential for achieving additional Green Flag status. Investment over the next 18 months would put the park in a good position to enter for the award.

29. The fund could also be used to support the retention of the award at existing sites. Clarence Gardens pavilion for example needs internal rearrangement and upgrading so that it can accommodate community uses now that it is no longer needed as a bowls pavilion. Community involvement is one of the themes the Green Flag judges consider when assessing a site for the award.

E. Projects which have or have the potential for 3rd party funding contributions

30. In support of the fund the Council will seek to maximise other funding opportunities and use the fund to leverage external assistance in both cash and kind. This will include exploring National Lottery or other grant opportunities and partnership work with other York organisations and networks.
31. Best use will be made of Section 106 development payments in accordance with the Planning Obligations. This may include delivery of fully funded projects from S106 payments to topping up schemes to maximise the value of the project.
32. To aid decision making it is suggested that the criteria are weighted to develop a scoring matrix to rank sites and projects in most need of investment. The recommended criteria target investment at those communities in most need, as defined by IMD, and enable schemes from across the city to be considered. It recognises that there are some key infrastructure issues which could be addressed and that there are opportunities to invest in those play areas where the equipment is some of the oldest to be found in the city. In some cases, best use of the fund could be through partnering with other city organisations or seeking an external contribution towards a scheme. Finally, there is the opportunity to expand the number of council sites which hold the Green Flag.
33. The recommended approach would allocate points based on this order of priority.
 1. Sites with higher IMD
 2. Replacing play equipment over 20 years old
 3. Key infrastructure

Then equal weight to
 4. = Green Flag award
 4. = Availability of external funds

34. A worked example of this approach is provided below

	Location A	Location B	Location C	Location D
IMD Score	High	Medium	Medium	Low
Age of play equipment	Old	newer	newer	Nil
Infrastructure issue	No	Nil	Yes	Low
Green Flag location	No	Yes	No	No
External funds	Low	Good potential	No	limited
Rank	1	3	2	4

35. In this example Location A would score highest as it is an area of high IMD, has old equipment, and little access to external funds. Location C is next due to the high infrastructure needs, with locations B and D ranked lower.
36. An alternative approach would be to select one criterion as a driver for investment, for example, expenditure would be restricted to play areas. This is not recommended as investment would not address the wide range of issues identified in the report.
37. Some of York's parks and green spaces are War Memorials in themselves or contain Memorials. Honouring and remembering our fallen residents is very important to our communities and our War Memorials are an important part of this. They are part of our city heritage, and as such do not fit into the Parks criteria outlined above. Conservation needs will be assessed separately, and Officers will work with partners to ensure any improvement work is done sensitively and appropriately.

Delivery

38. A Project Officer role will be created to deliver the schemes, for the duration of the programme. This will create new capacity to maximise best use of all funding opportunities to deliver the desired outcome.
39. As part of our plans to redevelop parks and play areas, we are committed to making them accessible and inclusive for everyone. We will work closely with the equalities team and partner with relevant external organisations to ensure that accessibility and inclusivity are at the heart of the design and delivery process.
40. Where possible, we will aim to make environmental improvements as part of or in parallel with the scheme or project, seeking to embed a sense of Pride in Place, improve planting for climate resilience and support Nature in our City. Records will be kept of before and after work takes place to illustrate this journey.

Organisational Impact and Implications

41. The implications are as follows:
 - **Financial**, are contained within the main body of the report.
 - **Human Resources (HR)** The additional resource referred to in paragraph 36 deliver this programme will be established and resourced in accordance with council policy. There are no other HR implications contained within this report.
 - **Legal** the Council does not have a statutory duty to maintain parks. However, the Council does have a duty of care to ensure the safety of public play areas and has a statutory duty under the Highways Act 1980 to maintain footpaths, and certain bridges, in a safe condition and fit for the type of traffic which is ordinarily expected to use it. Under the War Memorials (Local Authorities' Powers) Act 1923, the Council has the power, but not a duty, to maintain, repair and protect war memorials within its district The Councils policy approach to the management of parks should take into account all relevant considerations, as set out in this report. There is a growing body of case law which emphasises the

importance of public bodies taking proportionate steps to combat climate change.

- ***Procurement.*** Whilst there are no direct procurement implications relating this report itself, procurement will be a main tool used to deliver some of works if this report is approved. Future procurements for all works and/or services must be procured via a compliant, open, transparent, and fair process in accordance with the council's Contract Procedure Rules and where applicable, the Procurement Act 2023. Further advice regarding the procurement process and development of procurement strategies must be sought from the Commercial Procurement team.
- ***Health and Wellbeing*** As highlighted earlier in this report, well maintained parks and play infrastructure support physical activity, but also encourage social interaction and community engagement, all of which are beneficial for health. Prioritising funding for open spaces and play areas for those living in less affluent areas is welcome. We would also encourage development of these areas to take into account local need and views of residents including children moving forward as evidence suggests this is key to maximising use of such spaces. Finally, we urge consideration to be given to groups currently less likely to access, or facing barriers to accessing, the city's open spaces and play areas such as those with disabilities or from BME backgrounds.
- ***Environment and Climate action*** Enhancement of the city's parks and green spaces can make an important contribution to tackling the challenges of climate change. The York Climate Change Strategy sets objectives for increased tree planting, increased carbon storage and sustainable land management. These objectives should be considered in the assessment of potential investment. Capital works have the potential to increase carbon emissions, and these should be mitigated and minimised wherever possible. Opportunities for biodiversity enhancement and climate adaptation could be considered as part of the assessment for potential investment.
- ***Affordability,*** Investment in green spaces and play areas supports activities which are free at the point of participation.

- ***Equalities and Human Rights***, An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) is not required at this stage but will be required for the proposed work package to be presented later to Members. Specific comments on the proposed way forward are contained within the main body of the report.
- ***Data Protection and Privacy*** The completion of data protection impact assessment (DPIA) screening questions evidenced there would be no processing of personal data, special categories of personal data or criminal offence data processed, so there is no requirement to complete a DPIA.
- ***Communications*** Local engagement in – and understanding of - this work will help the council to deliver this objective with the support of people in the areas affected. It is part of a wider story of support for communities across the city and information about this investment will be presented within the context of the range of activities making a difference on the ground. This will help council to explain how the different strands of work, including this investment, work together for the places where they live and work.
- ***Economy***, None.

Risks and Mitigations

42. Risks associated to this report, are that the criteria are not agreed and therefore causes a delay to the future report that will identify the areas for investment. This would likely result in the possibility of the funds not being invested in a timely manner or by the project planned end date risking negative reputational impact.

Wards Impacted

43. At this stage it cannot be determined which or if all Wards will be impacted, this will be identified in the following report currently expected in September 2025.

Contact details

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Background Papers

Budget Council 27th February 2025

<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=331&MId=15004>

Meeting of the Executive Member for the Environment and Climate
Emergency 29th April 2025

<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=870&MId=14599>

Meeting of the Place Scrutiny Committee 24th June 2025

<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1122&MId=15314>

Annexes None

Abbreviations IMD - Indices of Multiple Deprivation