

## Open Space Development Priorities (Community Services, Chris Swatridge)

### Synopsis of report:

**This report provides the Committee with an overview and update on the priorities identified for the Open Spaces and Community Development Team.**

### Recommendation(s):

**None. This report is for information.**

## 1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 The Open Space and Community Development team is responsible for the strategy and associated development of the Council's Parks and Open Spaces, as well as projects to develop and support the community.
- 1.2 The above work strand works closely with colleagues in Environmental Services who lead on the operational day to day management and maintenance of the Council's Parks & Open Spaces. However, the structure allows for the protection of Officer resources to focus on the areas of development identified and required.
- 1.3 In recent months the Council's new Open Spaces and Community Development Manager has been working to identify the issues facing the Borough's open spaces and this report sets out the priorities over the year ahead for open space development, as previously approved as part of the Business Unit plan.
- 1.4 Priority areas include the following:
  - The creation of new Site Management Plans for the Council's Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGS)
  - Ensuring all expenditure relating to SANGS is appropriate and in accordance with the new site management plans
  - Undertaking key repairs to play areas in the borough following the undertaking of an annual inspection, as previously approved by Community Services Committee
  - Considering a forward plan for the replacement of play areas in the borough, considering the financial implications of doing so
  - Installation of new skate park facility at Heathervale Park
  - The procurement of water play facilities, replacing existing paddling pool sites that are currently out of commission or which have a limited life span.
  - Supporting the work of colleagues in the planning business unit, in relation to Green and Blue Infrastructure plans, biodiversity net gain etc.
- 1.5 In addition, whilst planned to be completed over a longer timescale, a site development/management plan for each Park/Open Space is intended to be produced, covering a range of areas.
- 1.6 This report provides a summary of the priority areas and the work that is required within each, to ensure that members of Community Services Committee have oversight of the immediate work facing the Open Space Development team.

## 2. **Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended**

### **Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs) Management Plans**

- 2.1 Runnymede Borough Council has seven Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs). These are open spaces in Borough management which act as mitigation for the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA) from new residential development. The aim of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace is to divert visitors away from the Special Protection Area. A Special Protection Area is part of the National Site Network (formerly Natura 2000) of sites of international importance for nature conservation established under the European Community Wild Birds and Habitat directives.
- 2.2 In 2009, the Thames Basin Heaths Delivery Framework was agreed by Natural England and all 11 local authorities affected by the Special Protection Area. The Framework established buffer zones around the Special Protection Area in which new residential development is constrained and which must contribute funding towards Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces mitigation.
- 2.3 Each Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces site should have a specific management plan approved by Natural England to identify enhancement needs such as car parks, surfaced paths and other improvements to encourage visitors. Of the seven Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces managed by the Council, only one has an up-to-date management plan (Chertsey Meads). These management plans should set out expenditure to maintain them in perpetuity (125 years). Only objectives identified in the plans that are approved by Natural England are allowed expenditure to be made against them.
- 2.4 Currently, governance on expenditure for Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace is ad-hoc and current management plans (with the exception of Chertsey Meads) are out of date and require details as to how to manage them in perpetuity. This currently restricts how the Borough should be managing its Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces portfolio and offers little direction and assurance over how these sites will deliver their primary objectives towards mitigation, conservation, and recreation for the future.
- 2.5 The amounts determined by the management plans for each site correspond to the charges set out by the Planning Business Unit for Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace provision in the Borough. When first introduced, the Council charged developers a financial contribution of £2,000 per net additional dwelling, the lowest rate of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces contribution in the Surrey area. This has now been converted to a per occupant charge of £903.50 per occupant to better reflect the impact of differently sized households on the Special Protection Area. The Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace charge was based on costs of works to a number of SANG sites over a short time period and based on an estimate of the number of dwellings coming forward in that period. As such, calculations previously given to justify expenditure are out of date.
- 2.6 A priority will be to get the remaining six Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace sites furnished with a management plan approved by Natural England. These plans would be written in conjunction with colleagues within the Council to allow enhancements to take place on these sites and for them to be managed in perpetuity for the benefit of residents. Members are advised that this may also in turn, identify a

need to review SANG charges and possibly raise them to allow sites to be maintained in perpetuity.

### **Play Areas Replacement Programme**

- 2.7 Within its Green Spaces and Housing areas, Runnymede Borough Council currently provides and maintains 43 play areas. The Council is committed to providing well-designed, exciting, and accessible play areas for the enjoyment of their users/residents.
- 2.8 At the meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Member Working Party on 26 September 2022, a report was presented which provided an outline of how Officers intended to deliver on the Parks and Recreational Spaces priority. Members of the Working Party were provided with information on the play areas within the Borough, both RBC owned and non-owned and were advised that Officers had identified three key issues which needed to be rectified, which are:
1. A need to ensure all facilities are compliant with health and safety, with identified defects and risks addressed.
  2. A need to implement a planned replacement schedule for playgrounds in the borough, given their age and condition.
  3. Consideration of whether the rationalisation of play spaces needed to be considered to support the replacement programme.
- 2.9 An audit was undertaken by the Borough contractor for carrying out annual safety inspections but did not meet our full requirements in relation to the matters identified.
- 2.10 Therefore, it is currently felt that officer experience to identify the priorities for the play area replacement programme would be appropriate to utilise. However, with recent changes in personnel, it may be that a return to the originally approved and budget use of consultancy is decided upon.
- 2.11 Member support for the future approach to this matter will be sought initially via the Health and Wellbeing Member Working Group, with initial priority sites identified and potential sources of funding identified. In doing so, the Housing Business Unit has engaged in discussions, given their responsibility for specific play area sites and a collaborative approach to this work priority achieved.

### **Installation of Heathervale Skate Park**

- 2.12 Part of the capital programme for 2023/24 is the replacement of the wheeled sports facility at Heathervale park. The procurement for this is already underway and completion is expected in early 2024.

### **Water Play**

- 2.13 In November 2022, capital funding was approved for the replacement of the four paddling pools within the Borough over three years. It was agreed that the works to the pool at Runnymede Pleasure Grounds (RPG) be sourced from the Trust's budget. The further three sites at Chertsey Recreation Ground, Heathervale Park and Victory Park are to be funded via the Council's capital programme, subject to affordability and approval of final budgets required, when all works required are identified.

- 2.14 The operational parks team (Green Spaces) within Environmental Services have, through their review of existing facilities, determined the viability of reopening three of the paddling pools. They confirmed that they are unable to do so owing to a combination of maintenance and infrastructure issues. Therefore, any replacement facility will need to focus on wholesale changes and will likely focus on splash pads rather than paddling pools.
- 2.15 Working with Assets and Regeneration, Officers have had repair works completed to the paddling pool facility at Runnymede Pleasure Grounds, which is intended to be open during the summer of 2023. However, this is a short-term solution and an alternative is also required on this site, funded by the Runnymede Pleasure Grounds Trust budget, subject to the approval of Trustees.

### **Biodiversity Net Gain**

- 2.16 Section 98 and Schedule 14 of the Environment Act 2021 introduce schedule 7 into the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which will require developments to deliver a 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) (anticipated) from November 2023. In the first instance this should be delivered on-site, but if this is not possible, delivery can be off-site on other land the developer owns or by contributing financially towards sites the Council owns and manages for Biodiversity Net Gain. As a last resort if on or off-site Biodiversity Net Gain cannot be provided, developers can pay into a national credits system to deliver Biodiversity Net Gain anywhere across England. It must be stressed that the latter is a last resort and Officers will endeavour to keep Biodiversity Net Gain contributions within the Borough as much as possible.
- 2.17 To ensure developers meet 10% Biodiversity Net Gain where they cannot provide this on-site and to ensure Biodiversity Net Gain is provided locally rather than to a national credits system, Runnymede Borough Council will need to identify sites from the current portfolio which have the potential to provide biodiversity improvements. This will require a survey of a site's existing biodiversity value and include costed proposals to uplift this so that developers can contribute towards the uplift. Some of this is being administered by Surrey County Council, but holding local data will be of paramount importance to comply with legislation.
- 2.18 A collaborative approach on this agenda has already been established between Open Space Development and Planning colleagues, which is already recognised as strengthening the initial conversations that are being held and in planning the future approach in Runnymede in relation to Biodiversity Net Gain.

### **Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy**

- 2.19 Currently, the Planning department is writing the Borough's first Green and Blue Infrastructure (GBI) Strategy. This strategy will set out the Council's priorities for Green and Blue Infrastructure (provision of parks and open spaces as well as water bodies associated with them) across the Borough and include opportunities to improve, enhance and/or maintain the Green and Blue Infrastructure network in Runnymede. For example, the provision and management of green spaces, biodiversity, climate change, recreation are all likely to feature in the strategy. Therefore, it would be expected that it would be within the Open Spaces Development objectives to feed into this strategy and support its development and implementation.

- 2.20 The Council has already adopted a Green and Blue Infrastructure Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) which sets out guidance on how the Council wishes natural elements to be incorporated into developments.

**Connecting communities through green spaces - cycling routes (Member Working Group priority)**

- 2.21 A priority has been identified to connect current green spaces within the Borough and this will also form part of the GBI strategy. This forms part of the Community Services Service Area Plan for 2023/24.

**Committees Supported**

- 2.22 As part of the above-listed objectives, the Open Spaces Development Team will support the Committees governing the Cabrera Trust Management Committee, Chertsey Meads Management Liaison Group, working with Officers from within the operational team. Englefield Green Committee will also be supported as and when required, although in the main this Committee will be attended by colleagues in Environmental Services.

**Working with others**

- 2.23 All of the objectives listed above require collaboration with other departments. Including the operational Green Spaces team and colleagues across Law & Governance, Finance, Planning and Assets and Regeneration. A Parks and Open Spaces Strategy Group has already been established internally, led by the Open Spaces and Community Development Manager to promote collaboration in taking forward future priorities of the Council.

**3. Policy framework implications**

- 3.1 The work around these priorities aligns with the Corporate Business Plan, particularly around the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and the role this will play in providing residents with leisure and recreational spaces.
- 3.2 By utilising open spaces residents, in particular young people, will benefit from being able to lead an active lifestyle, which in turn is anticipated to result in positive health outcomes for those residents; individuals who have an active lifestyle have, on average, been shown to require fewer medical interventions throughout their lifetime than those who have not.
- 3.3 The Health and Wellbeing Strategy Objective 2 - Healthy Communities has the action “for all residents to be able to engage and participate in their community, access services, facilities, amenities, leisure, and recreational opportunities locally”.
- 3.4 The proposals related to SANG management, GBI Strategy and Biodiversity Net Gain have major implications for delivering the vision and objectives of the 2030 Local Plan and determination of planning applications. In doing so, such areas of work are also intended to support the Council’s priorities in relation to Climate Change.

**4. Resource implications**

- 4.1 At present, the following posts are within the Open Spaces Development team:
- Open Spaces and Community Development Manager

- Open Spaces Project Manager (part-time)
- Open Spaces and Community Development Administrator

4.2 Currently, the Open Spaces Project Manager post is vacant. This presents a challenge towards the priorities outlined in this report.

4.3 Given the close link between Parks and Open Spaces and the Health and Wellbeing agenda, Open Spaces Development will work very closely with the Community Development team.

4.4 Prior to going out to advertise the post we are currently reviewing the staff structure with the Planning team Corporate Leadership Team. Work is being undertaken to ensure that the skills list complements the entire team.

## 5. **Legal implications**

5.1 There are no legal implications in relation to this report. However, it is possible there will be legal implications for specific objectives mentioned above and where these exist, collaboration with Legal will be sought.

5.2 Any proposals in respect of Runnymede Pleasure Ground will require the approval of the Trustees; a function delegated to the Community Services Committee.

## 6. **Equality implications**

6.1 Whilst this report does not have any specific equality implications, it is recognised that many of the priority areas do. Therefore, as priorities are developed, equalities impact assessments will be sought specifically in relation to each priority.

## 7. **Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications**

7.1 There are several implications linked to the environment and biodiversity. These are intrinsically linked to the writing of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces management plans and strategies for Green and Blue Infrastructure and Biodiversity Net Gain. The formulation of these strategies will increase the amount of focus on the environment and biodiversity through identified objectives linked to development within the Borough.

7.2 The principal intention for the Biodiversity Net Gain strategy will be to keep funds and resources within the Borough through the identification and surveys of current sites suitable for Biodiversity Net Gain projects. Without this focus, funds will have to be diverted to a nationally centred fund where they could be distributed anywhere in the Country.

7.3 The longer-term priority of developing site-specific development and management plans will incorporate environmental and biodiversity considerations as a standard area of consideration.

## 8. **Conclusions**

8.1 In recent months, since the appointment of the Council's new Open Spaces Development Manager, the breadth of the challenges facing the Council in the development of its Parks and Open Spaces has started to be realised. Therefore, this report highlights the priority areas that immediately face the Council as it works

towards achieving the environmental and physical infrastructure enhancements that are desired for Council owned Parks and Open Spaces.

- 8.2 Officers recognise that meeting all the ambitions for the new development function will take time, given the identified priorities, and the current situation regarding resources to work on these.
- 8.3 However, there is also opportunity, both within the immediate work and further into the future. There is opportunity to improve and enhance SANGs, improve and develop play facilities in parks and work collaboratively with colleagues from across the Council in response to the evolving requirements of the Council, particularly in relation to the work of Planning colleagues.

**(For Information)**

**Background papers**

None Stated.