

SCRUTINY REPORT

MEETING: **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

DATE: **6 February 2018**

SUBJECT: **Managing Parks and Countryside**

REPORT FROM: **Neil Long and Mike Bent**

REPORT STATUS: **FOR PUBLICATION**

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 This report will give an overview of how Parks and Countryside are being managed as well as future plans in moving this section forward positively.

The Parks and Countryside service has responsibility for the health and safety, management and development of all the Council's parks and countryside areas. The service manages land and buildings assets and facilitates the Asset Transfer Strategy, developing partnerships with local clubs and organisations to promote self-management of sports pitches, bowling greens and allotments.

The service encourages and facilitates local communities/organisations to be actively involved in parks and the countryside through volunteering and friends of the parks groups. The service looks to find innovative ways to involve local business and individuals through sponsorship and marketing, including North West and Britain in Bloom as well as the Green Flag Award International Standard.

1.2 Parks and Countryside Dashboard

PARKS & OPEN SPACES

- 14 urban and small parks, 14 recreation grounds and all open spaces.
- 40 countryside sites, including 3 country parks.
- 300+ Hectares of Countryside
- 25 woodlands covering an area of 177 hectares.
- 20 fishing waters.
- 90% of all Allotments, Sports Pitches and Bowling Greens are Self-Managed
- 6 Council led Allotment Sites
- 3 Cemeteries
- 566 event days

GREEN FLAG PARKS

- 2 Green Flag Parks 2003
- 1 Green Flag Park 2004
- 9 Green Flag Parks 2005
- 10 Green Flag Parks 2006
- 11 Green Flag parks 3 years (2007 – 2009)
- 12 Green Flag parks for the last 8 years (2010 -2017).

NORTH WEST IN BLOOM

- Bury – Best large town/small city (35,001-100,000 Pop), Winner 2004 to 2017 (14 years running).
- Radcliffe - large town (12,001 – 35,000 Pop) Silver Gilt 2011, 2015, 2016 and 2017 and Gold 2012, 2013 and 2014

BRITAIN IN BLOOM

- Bury - Silver gilt award in Britain in Bloom 2009, 2011 and 2017
- Bury – Gold Award in Britain in Bloom 2013, 2015
- Bury – Best in Category 2015

Staffing

Staffing consists of 5 members of staff with additional support from 2 grounds staff working on an Estate Team capacity.

1. Parks and Countryside Manager
2. Countryside Officer
3. Marketing and Sponsorship Officer
4. External Funding and Projects Officer (Currently on maternity leave)
5. Greenspaces Officer

Plus 2x Estate Team staff

Budgets

The total revenue budget and 5 year savings across parks and countryside

Service Area	2017/18 Budget	Budget savings 13/14 to 17/18 (5 years)
Parks and Open Spaces *	£1,545,500	£1,142,500
Countryside/Allotments	£216,700	£57,800
Sponsorship and Bedding	£104,200	£80,000
Cemeteries	£43,900	£57,500
Highway grass areas	£257,500	£10,000
Total	£2,167,800	£1,347,800

* includes maintenance and management parks, open spaces, play areas, outdoor sports facilities, buildings, trees, structures, landscaped areas, insurance and overheads

2.0 Managing Parks and Countryside

2.1 Health and safety

- There is a Visual Inspection Procedure in place and all Parks and Countryside sites receive a visual inspection (which are recorded and passed on for action should a hazard be found).
- There is a safe digging procedure in place.
- Spot checks across all members of staff are carried out
- Risk Assessments have been created for most work types and equipment used and are updated annually
- All of these together with risk assessments are recorded on a central SharePoint computer system which can be accessed by all member of Parks and Countryside
- Comprehensive health and safety procedures within grounds maintenance including play area inspections, safe tree maintenance, hand and arm vibration, risk assessment, grave digging and general operating procedures

2.2 Maintenance

- Parks and Countryside work closely with Grounds Maintenance who maintain all of the parks and open spaces. Cuts in the service means that parks are maintained as part of area rounds rather than park placed gardeners.
- Work to reduce maintenance on some countryside sites in terms of reduced grass cutting to once per years by a farmer free of charge for the silage in return have been made.
- Flower beds and shrub beds have been removed to reduce maintenance as well as introduce sustainable/permanent planting as well as wild flower planting in certain areas
- Other grass cutting regimes have reduced due to budget cut and grass banking above a certain gradient is no longer cut for health and safety reasons.
- The pressure here is that there is a fine balance when considering the Councils ambitions to maintain the Green Flag Standard in all 12 parks.

2.3 Individual Service Elements

- **Parks** – Managing continuous improvements through the use of Section 106 budgets and with successful bids to the capital programme, managing users and requests as well as managing safely the events programme.
Project management of various community led and Council led projects (e.g. Greenmount Village Green, Burrs Strategy, and St Mary's Park Access Road)
- **Countryside** – Managed with 2 Estate Team Officers, dealing with fly tipping, invasive weed control (Giant Hogweed, Japanese Knotweed etc.), estate repairs to bridges and other infrastructure, antisocial behaviour issues, land management and boundary issues.
- **Play Areas** – managed through regular inspection and repair as well as decommissioning defective equipment and refurbishing play areas through section 106 funding where available
- **Burrs Country Park** - Strategy to create a destination park, HLF bid for essential funding, managing the newly vacated Burrs Activity Centre and the expressions of interest relating to that.
- Allotments - management is admin heavy and time consuming on a small team of Officers.
- **Leisure land surplus strategy** – All sites have been assessed for community value and are now being rationalised through to other departments/sections of the Council or brought into the Asset Transfer Strategy or they could be disposed of if no alternative uses can be found and therefore bring in a capital receipt. Some successes have come from this by bidding for the capital receipts received to be reinvested mainly into parks in East Bury (Hoyles, Openshaw and Clarence parks)
- **Sponsorship and marketing** – Managing the hanging baskets, sponsored roundabouts, town centre and gateway signage as well as the North West in Bloom and Britain in Bloom campaigns.
- **Other key areas of parks and open space management**
 - Playing pitch strategy
 - Control of invasive weeds
 - Trees and woodlands policy
 - Cemetery regulations
 - Parks management plans
 - External funding
 - Building and facilities

2.4 Asset Transfer Strategy

This primarily refers to the Self-Management of local outdoor sports and recreation facilities with 90% of all allotments, bowling Greens and Football pitches now self-managed. We are also progressing clubs/associations onto 25 year (or more if possible) tenured Self-Management Agreements or in some cases Leases. This length of lease aids the clubs to seek large scale funding should it be required to improve facilities

Clubs with pitches in parks have a different issue as we cannot lease the pitches as they have to remain as public open space, so we have looked at leasing just the buildings with a self-management agreement on the pitches

As a pilot, we are also looking at area self-management and are working with the Friend of Huntfold Estate to hand over grass verges on their estate for the local community manage and maintain.

Persona manage 3 bowling greens and Bowling Green buildings (Clarence Park, Hoyles Park and Bolton Road Park)

Bury EST manage 2 bowling greens and 3 buildings out of one park (Manchester Road Park)

2.5 Community involvement (volunteers)

Support for Friends of groups, environmental groups (TWIGGS, Incredible Edible groups, St Mary's Flower Park gardening volunteers), Self-Managed clubs/associations, angling clubs, athletic clubs and increasing these groups to become independent self-managing groups moving into the future.

Bury and Radcliffe in Bloom is supported by community groups, residents, schools, hand on help from sponsors, friends of parks, sponsorship, self-managed clubs and allotments as well as various community projects throughout the year

2.6 Invasive Weed Control

There are three problem non-native invasive species of plant (NNIS) present in Bury. These are Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogweed and Himalayan Balsam. All three are widely distributed throughout the borough on both private and publicly owned land.

Over the last ten years Parks and Countryside have developed a treatment programme for plants on Council owned land. In 2017 this covered 88 locations over 47 sites. The majority of the sites are Parks and Countryside (38) with Highway Network Services (7) and Property Services (2). There are probably a further twenty Council owned sites that will need treatment once they have been assessed.

The decision to treat a site or not is made on an assessment of risk, cost and ecological/amenity value.

2.7 Chalara Fraxinea (Ash Dieback) Management

We propose that any infected stock of mature highway ash trees including parks trees and Six Town Housing be left in situ as they are likely to survive for some time and are essential for biodiversity. Any trees that show any signs of infection will be logged for future reference on the daily surveys/inspections by the Council's Tree Officer.

Any suggestion of sanitation/sterilisation of chainsaws and other cutting equipment also the segregation of leaves, logs and chippings from infected ash and also the burning of any infected material is futile and would provide very little benefit in the diseases containment to any given infected area. This became apparent with our Tree Officers involvement in the late 1970's outbreak of Dutch Elm Disease, the councils approach then was to climb every infected Elm and remove any infected limb and burn the material onsite in the hope of controlling the disease. This was a complete waste of time and money.

A scientific approach tells us we cannot currently eradicate Ash Die Back. The disease is spread by spores.

Proposals

1/Cease planting of Ash on any council owned land including education land and Social services.

2/Liaise with neighbouring councils for information exchange.

3/Ensure any plans/information by the F.C.A or the R.F.S for tackling the disease remain current and up to date.

4/Possibly put out a leaflet for the public on the disease.

2.8 Moving into the Future

1000 acre woodland - Bury Council and the Forestry Commission (FC) partnership

- The FC already lease a substantial amount of land from the Council on a 99 year lease – Waterdale and Drinkwater Park (minus the football pitches)
 - Investment has been put in by the FC to raise the quality of these sites in terms of signage, access, tree coverage, wildlife habitats etc.
- This project is to potentially transfer an additional tranche of land extending towards Radcliffe to establish a 1000 acre woodland for Greater Manchester, which will also bring investment and security and continued access to these sites with a likeminded environmental partner.
 - Phillips Park
 - Prestwich Clough
 - Outwood Country Park
- The Council is looking into a partnership with the Forestry Commission, City of Trees and Salford Council to develop this project with a view to a memorandum of understanding (MOU) committing the Council and the FC to seeing if it feasible to go ahead. This will be subject to a programme of local consultation throughout the borough
- A joint statement has been now drawn up and accepted by both the FC and Bury Council, this will be put into the public domain together with the FAQs
- Work on the detail of the sites, the boundaries etc has begun and Laura Charles (Forestry Commission) is spending time in the Parks and Countryside Office to drive this project forward
- Information roadshows about the project will go ahead in Prestwich, Whitefield and Radcliffe after the election in May 2018

The Burrs Strategy and Burrs Activity Centre

- The Burrs strategy was created and was adopted at Cabinet on 10 June 2015; it runs from 2015 – 2029 and didn't have any funding identified for its realization at that time.
- The strategy in essence is to create a regional destination park in Bury.
- One of the key issues/opportunities identified in the Burrs Strategy was to secure the involvement of the voluntary sector and other key partners in Burrs' future.
- In the 28 months since it was adopted, we have worked hard to strengthen the friends group.
- The friends group established the Burrs Strategic Development group who report directly to the friends group as a way of driving the strategy forward.
- The Strategic Development Group is independently chaired with considerable experience, knowledge and leadership through the chair of this group.
- Actions are progressing to secure a bright and long term sustainable future for the activity centre, caravan site and overall park management
- The opening of the ELR halt has added a significant attraction and strategic link to Burrs
- The entry system will be installed 21st March 2018 to enable Bury canoe and kayak to use part of the buildings showers and toilets allowing them to continue with their activities
- The HLF "Resilient Heritage" bid was submitted 15th March 2018 this is worth £100k
- There were 8 expressions of interest for the café part of the building, these have been invited to an open day for Thursday 22nd to look around the building to assist them in creating their proposal. They will be interviewed on Thursday 5th April to present their proposal and answer questions on it
- Proffitts consultancy have been appointed by the friends of Burrs Country Park together with the Burrs Strategic Development group to continue working on the Burrs Strategy, in particularly the HLF and Sport England Bids

3.0 CONCLUSION

- Parks and countryside sites covers a significant area of the borough dealing with a wide range of issues managed by a small parks and countryside team
 - Green Flag and 'in-bloom' standards have been maintained for up to 14 years with the help of a dedicated workforce, volunteers and local communities. However this is becoming increasingly challenging as a result of budget cuts over a number of years
 - In the past 5 years the budget has been cut by £1,347,800 (38% of the total budget)
 - Asset transfer, self-management and partnership working will continue to be a key element of managing the service going forward
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