

ROTHERHAM GREEN SPACES STRATEGY

Summary

June 2010

Rotherham's Green Spaces

Rotherham has a wealth of green spaces for the enjoyment and health of local people. They are also important places for wildlife, and can help to make Rotherham an attractive place to live and invest in.

The Council has done much in recent years to improve green spaces. For example, it has worked with parks' friends groups across the borough to draw up masterplans for the improvement of some of our larger green spaces, and good progress has been made in delivering the improvements in these plans. It has secured £4.5 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund and BIG Lottery towards an exciting £8.5 million scheme to restore Clifton Park in the town centre, due for completion within the next few months. Rangers have been introduced into town parks in response to public requests for a greater staff presence. Improved management and maintenance of Rotherham's country parks has resulted in all three achieving the nationally recognised 'Green Flag' award. However, there are still challenges including changing demand for parks and open spaces, limited resources and the need to provide land for new housing.

The Green Spaces Strategy allows us to take stock of the parks and open spaces we have across the borough, and to think about what we need to do to them to meet the needs of local people, businesses and the environment. It is not just about the green spaces provided by Rotherham Borough Council, but all sites over half an acre (0.2 hectares) that the public can access. This summary outlines the main points contained in the Strategy.

Our Vision and Aims for Green Spaces

We believe that green spaces should play a full role in supporting Rotherham's Community Strategy priorities of Learning, Achieving, Alive, Safe and Proud, as well as the themes of Fairness and Sustainability. The following vision is proposed to guide the way we develop our green spaces.

"Rotherham: a place where people's lives are improved by having access to a network of safe, well-used Green Spaces offering a wide range of recreational and learning opportunities in high quality, sustainable environments".

Four strategic aims are proposed to help us to achieve our vision:-

- 1:** To increase the number of people living within easy walking distance of good quality green spaces.
- 2:** To increase the number of people who regularly visit green spaces.
- 3:** To increase the number of people who are satisfied with green spaces in Rotherham.

4: To increase the number of people participating as volunteers within green spaces.

We also believe that consideration must be given to the following themes throughout the Strategy:-

Sustainability: We want to make sure that any improvements are long-lasting, and that they protect our environment.

Fairness: Green spaces should be enjoyed by people across the borough equally, regardless of age, sex, ability and ethnicity.

Community involvement: Local people should be able to understand and influence the way that green spaces are developed and managed.

What do we need to do?

We have looked for evidence that will help us to decide how we can improve green space provision in Rotherham. This evidence has included

- the views of local residents and users of green spaces.
- a survey of more than 400 of Rotherham's main green spaces to record their type (e.g. park, sports field, natural site), quality, size and value.
- national and local strategies and policies.
- comparison with other local authority areas.

Consequently, we have the following eight objectives that we believe we need to pursue to help us achieve our vision for green spaces in Rotherham:

Objective 1: Provide enough green spaces in the right places to meet the needs of local people now and in the future

We found that:

- National organisations say people need to be able to reach green spaces on foot.
- Local people say that they prefer to use green spaces that are easy to get to, with most journeys to green spaces made on foot and taking less than 15 minutes.
- Rotherham has a large amount of accessible green space per person compared with some other districts.
- Local people say they are mainly happy with the amount of green space in Rotherham.
- Some parts of Rotherham have more green space per person than others, and the amounts of different types of green space varies also.
- Land is needed for housing and other development, but this must be balanced against the need for open space and recreation.

Recommendations

1a. All new homes should be within five minutes walking distance of a local green space providing space for informal recreation, and fifteen minutes walk of a larger green space providing a wider range of facilities and services. Where new green space is required, 16 square metres per person is proposed. This can be achieved through new policies within the Local Development Framework which will guide how planning applications are dealt with in future. They should also prevent development that would mean that people can no longer get to green spaces within these distances from their homes.

1b. Identify areas where people are not served by green spaces within walking distance of their homes, and look for ways to deal with this. This might include providing new green spaces, or improving access to existing green spaces.

1c. Where there is limited variety of green space types decide whether anything needs to be done to change the character and function of some sites. This might involve local consultation to find out if people want change to increase the range of green space types in the area.

1d. Protect green spaces that could meet future demand for playing pitches. Sites which are large and level enough for playing pitches should be safeguarded if they are in areas where current supply is inadequate to meet future demand.

1e. Consider whether less valuable green spaces in areas with plentiful supply could be used in a different way. Savings resulting from such changes could be used to help pay for improvements at more valuable green spaces. However, this should only happen where the loss of open space is outweighed by improvements to other sites in the area and after careful consideration of local factors.

Objective 2: Make sure that green spaces are safe, clean and well designed, managed and maintained

We found that:

- National organisations say that green spaces should be safe, attractive and welcoming.
- Local satisfaction with design, appearance and maintenance of green spaces is below the national average, and disrepair and lack of facilities are amongst the main reasons people give for not visiting them.
- Safety and security are amongst local people's top priorities, and can be addressed through joint working with Safer Neighbourhood Teams, staff presence on site, CCTV, revised by-laws and new control orders, and careful site design; the Council has already provided additional funding in this area.
- Other priorities for improvement include toilets, park rangers, better maintenance, litter removal, play facilities, shelter, cafes and more events.
- Quality standards do not currently exist, but are needed to guide site improvement.

- The national Green Flag Award Scheme provides quality standards to aim for when improving green spaces.
- It is easier to achieve high standards when all aspects of site operation, maintenance and development are brought under a single manager, although most green spaces in Rotherham are not currently managed in this way.

Recommendations:

2a. Green spaces should be graded depending on their size and function. This will help us to decide how to use our resources most effectively to benefit local people. The proposed grades of green space are shown in the box below.

Proposed Green Space Grades

Grade and main function	Typical size	Typical characteristics
Local Green Spaces Regular use mainly by pedestrian users, includes preferred routes to school, shops, work etc	0.2 hectare and more	Appropriately maintained site providing safe and clean areas for walking, informal recreation and play, sitting out areas
Neighbourhood Green Spaces Weekend, early morning, after school and evening visits by foot, cycle, car and short bus trips	3 hectares and more	Well maintained landscape with a variety of features and facilities providing a range of activities, e.g. outdoor sports, children's play and informal recreation pursuits. Regular staff (ranger) visits and occasional events
Borough Green Spaces Weekend and other occasional visits mainly by car or public transport	25 hectares and more	Large sites with intrinsic special interest, e.g. heritage, landscape, wildlife, children's activities, sports. Good level of visitor facilities. Appropriate on-site staff levels to manage site and visitor numbers. Several events each year

2b. Agree which green spaces are priorities for improvement. Things to consider include:-

- Sites which have been judged to be potentially valuable to local people, but which are currently of poor quality.
- Sites where local consultation has already resulted in a masterplan that can be used to attract funding.
- Availability of external funding targeting a specific theme, for example children's play, or a geographical area or community.
- Emergencies or other issues of concern, for example dealing with the effects of flooding
The resulting improvement programme should be reviewed regularly to take into account changing circumstances.

2c. Introduce quality standards for design, management and maintenance.

Proposed quality standards have been developed and are outlined in the box below. Further details are shown in the full version of the Strategy document. Standards are

based on consultation, site surveys and national guidelines such as Green Flag Award criteria. They are meant as minimum standards; at Neighbourhood and Borough Green Spaces, masterplans can help to identify special requirements appropriate to each site.

Proposed Green Space Quality Standards

Local	Neighbourhood	Borough
<i>Image, facilities, activities and information</i>		
Welcoming	Welcoming	Welcoming
Safe and Clean	Safe and Clean	Safe and Clean
	Seating	Seating
	Dog and litter bins	Dog and litter bins
	Children's play area	Children's play area
	Sign/notice board	Sign/notice board
	Directional signs	Brown road signs
	Formal community involvement	Formal community involvement
	At least 3 activities/ facilities	At least 5 activities/ facilities
	At least 1 event per year	At least 3 events per year
		Toilets
		Catering
<i>Management and development</i>		
Maintenance statement including objectives and main processes	Management Plan to Green Flag standard	Management Plan to Green Flag standard
At least one site inspection every two weeks	At least one site inspection every day	Staff based on site during normal facility opening hours
	Masterplan showing site improvement proposals	Masterplan showing site improvement proposals
<i>Conservation, biodiversity, landscape and heritage</i>		
Best practice followed for conservation	Best practice followed for conservation	Best practice followed for conservation
	Assessment of biodiversity value in management plan	Assessment of biodiversity value in management plan
	Masterplan considers landscape and heritage	Masterplan considers landscape and heritage
<i>Access</i>		
Restrict access by unauthorised vehicles	Restrict access by unauthorised vehicles	Restrict access by unauthorised vehicles
DDA compliant improvements	DDA compliant improvements	DDA compliant improvements
	Car park or suitable on-street parking	Car park
	Cycle storage	Cycle storage
	Signed footpaths on site	Signed footpaths on site
		Public transport information on site and directional signs to bus stop etc.
		Link to strategic public rights of way network as approp.

2d. Continue to enter selected green spaces annually for Green Flag awards. This provides a means of assessing local parks against national standards.

2e. Review and simplify the ownership of Council green spaces. Bringing together more important parks and recreation grounds within a single department could help to deliver consistent standards, backed up by specialist knowledge and resources.

2f. Bring together grounds maintenance and management of major recreational green spaces. This can help to make management more accountable and responsive to customers, and allow staff and budgets to be used more flexibly to meet changing needs. The current grounds maintenance contract is due to finish in November 2009, providing an opportunity to review how the service might best be delivered, and to create a more joined-up approach to the management of this important work.

2g. Increase staff presence in green spaces. This could be achieved by expanding ranger teams, changing existing work patterns, and by training other staff such as grounds maintenance staff to monitor sites during their regular visits and report safety and security issues.

2h. Revise green space by-laws and create new control orders. Orders should be introduced where they would provide a more effective means to deal with common problems. The by-laws should be revised so that they are relevant to today's needs.

2i. Ensure that all green space improvements consider safety and security. This might involve the Police's 'Secured by Design' scheme where appropriate to ensure best practice is followed.

<p>Objective 3: Make better use of our existing resources and find new funding to improve the most valuable green spaces</p>

We found that:

- Lack of investment over recent decades has led to worn out facilities that can put people off using green spaces.
- The Council has a successful track history of getting external funding for green space improvement, and has provided match funding where necessary.
- Total revenue budgets for green spaces in Rotherham have fallen to low levels compared to other metropolitan districts, and this could make it difficult to maintain improvements in good condition.
- Parks income can help us to pay for higher quality services, and therefore needs to be maximised and re-invested in green spaces.
- Opportunities exist to obtain funding from housing developers through planning agreements. However, in the past this has not been sufficient to cover the long term cost to the Council of maintaining new open spaces to acceptable standards.

Recommendations

3a. Develop a green space investment programme. This should be based on priorities identified through this Strategy, and will help to support the case for bids to the Council's capital programme and to external funding bodies.

3b. Ensure all capital investment is matched by appropriate revenue budgets. This will help to ensure that we can keep improved sites and facilities in good condition.

3c. Explore opportunities for increased income generation. These must not spoil the character of green spaces, and might include investment in new or improved customer services. Any resulting income must supplement rather than replace existing budgets.

3d. Introduce planning policy to help achieve agreed standards of green space provision in new developments. This should include a green space contribution from developers, in line with the following principles:-

- New green spaces should only be provided where they are needed to ensure that homes will be within agreed walking distances of them.
- Where new homes are served by existing green spaces, then there should be a financial contribution, based on the number of homes being developed, to enhance those green spaces in line with proposed quality standards.
- Contributions should also include an amount equivalent to the cost of maintaining new green space or improvements to existing green space for a period of thirty years.

Objective 4: Different organisations who provide green spaces and related services to work together to improve them

We found that:

- Green spaces just outside the borough are likely to be used by people living in Rotherham and need to be taken into account in the implementation of this Strategy.
- There are several organisations that are responsible for the ownership, management and maintenance of accessible green spaces leading to inconsistent standards.
- Achievement of many of the aims of this Strategy requires a more co-ordinated and collaborative approach by different green space providers.
- Opportunities to access external funding can be improved through partnership working and community involvement.

Recommendations

4a. Establish a Green Spaces Panel. This should include all relevant Council departments and their partners (e.g. Rotherham 2010), and others who provide accessible green space. The main aims of this body would be to:-

- co-ordinate actions within the Green Space Strategy
- discuss best practice
- review standards and priorities
- jointly monitor progress

4b. Consult with neighbouring local authorities. The aim of this should be to ensure that developments in one area can take account of what is happening over the border.

4c. Promote partnership working. Organisations such as Groundwork Trusts, funding bodies, NHS Trusts, and Safer Neighbourhood Teams can help green space providers to improve green spaces and increase the numbers of people using them.

Objective 5: Help communities to get involved in the development and management of green spaces to meet local needs

We found that:

- Green spaces are an ideal environment for volunteer activity, and there are significant opportunities to expand this.
- Opportunities to access external funding can be improved through partnership working and community involvement.

Recommendations

5a. Create new opportunities for volunteering. Existing volunteer development plans should be expanded to cover all principal green spaces, in partnership with Voluntary Action Rotherham and other volunteering organisations. These plans should be inclusive, catering for people of different abilities, ages and social backgrounds.

5b. Maintain support for Friends Groups. The Council and other green space providers should work in partnership with representative groups, for example to improve sites and increase public events and activities in green spaces. Existing friends groups can also advise new groups to help them become successfully established.

5c. Explore the creation of properly resourced Community Trusts or similar bodies as an alternative way to manage and maintain green spaces where sufficient local interest and capacity is present.

Objective 6: Promote people's enjoyment of green spaces by making them accessible and attractive to all

We found that:

- Green spaces across Rotherham attract a high number of visits, are the most visited cultural facility for adults and one of the top four activities for young people.
- Local people need more complete and up-to-date information about green space sites and activities within them.
- Some people use green spaces only occasionally or not at all, and marketing should target them to encourage greater use.
- More information needs to be gathered about how people use green spaces.

Recommendations

6a. Regularly obtain and analyse information about green space users and non-users. This could include questionnaires, people counters and feedback from events.

6b. Introduce a Green Spaces Marketing plan. This would use evidence from surveys to: find ways of increasing usage and satisfaction; raise awareness of the benefits of green space; and ensure equality of access for all. The plan would need to be regularly reviewed to ensure it achieves its aims.

6c. Provide clear, helpful information about green spaces. This should include printed and web-based information, and notice-boards at larger sites. This information should be monitored to ensure that it is effective in reaching all sections of the community.

Objective 7: Improve Rotherham's environment by looking after places that support wildlife, protecting the landscape, and other measures

We found that:

- Nationally, green spaces are receiving a lot of attention because of the way that they can make the environment more sustainable.
- A separate Local Wildlife Site System identifies green spaces in Rotherham that are important for biodiversity, but further work is needed to assess their landscape and wider environmental value.

Recommendations

7a. Use the Local Wildlife Site System. This will help biodiversity importance to be taken into account when considering developments that would change the character of existing green spaces, and also to minimise damage to wildlife habitats.

7b. Refer to a borough landscape character assessment. Green spaces are important in giving different parts of Rotherham their distinctive quality. A landscape character assessment would make it easier to identify and protect green spaces of high landscape value.

7c. Consider and protect the wider environmental value of green spaces. A system should be developed that takes into account climatic, drainage and other environmental effects of developments affecting green spaces. Again, this will help to protect more valuable sites.

Objective 8: Link green spaces to develop a green network across the borough

We found that:

- The value of green spaces can be enhanced by linking them together to provide recreational walking and cycling routes, wildlife corridors, and high quality landscape belts.
- Further work needs to be done to identify where opportunities exist to link green spaces.

Recommendations

8a. Protect and improve existing green links. This will include green spaces that are easily accessible from main routes identified in Rotherham's Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan, and those that connect with one or more neighbouring green spaces to form a linear feature.

8b. Create new green links between existing green spaces. This may be difficult to achieve where a green space is surrounded on all sides by built up areas. However, opportunities can arise when new developments take place. The possibility of creating or extending green links should be considered at an early stage in discussions between the Planning Service and developers about proposed schemes.

8c. Review Green Space by-laws on cycling and horse riding where this would encourage use of green links without conflicting with other users.

What happens next?

The Council will prepare and consult on an action plan for green spaces in Rotherham based on this strategy.