

Green Spaces Strategy

2015 - 2021

My Destination is the Park for me



Introduction

The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames sits in a unique location in South West London. The Borough is bounded by the River Thames to the west, with Bushy Park beyond, Richmond Park National Nature Reserve (NNR) and Ham Common to the north. On the northeastern boundary is the Beverley Brook and A3 which separates Kingston from Wimbledon Common Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Following the boundary south it arrives at Horton Country Park and Epsom Common SSSI and Ashted Common NNR.

It is therefore not surprising that Kingston is referred to as a 'green and leafy' suburb of Greater London, and is well served by the surrounding large open spaces.

The 'green and leafy' characterisation is given partly because of the diverse range of open spaces as described but also those within the borough boundaries. For example from the formal parkland of Canbury Gardens in Kingston Town to the informal hay meadows of Tolworth Court Farm Fields. There are many large and small parks, playing fields and wayside gardens in between. Other open spaces include large mature private gardens in the north of the Borough and the Green Belt farmland in the south. Many of the streets are lined with mature large trees in the Victorian and Edwardian areas and smaller ornamental species in the post-war and modern developments. A visitor would regard the 'green and leafy' description as accurate.

People use parks in many different ways, seek different experience from them and look for different facilities and features. All of these factors affect whether an individual feels that they are visiting a good quality green space.

Why do we need a strategy?

Residents and visitors alike value green open spaces, as was demonstrated in the 2014 'All in one' survey. 94% of all respondents to the survey thought that parks and open spaces are one of the most important aspects of the borough and 74% were satisfied with the service.

It would be easy to deliver a green spaces service using a reactive approach, but to do this money has to be no object. In the current financial climate that the public sector faces we have had to find increasing levels of savings whilst maintaining a high standard service. The challenge is to understand and appreciate what people see as special and important about the spaces and then translate this into action on the ground, especially in these times of reduced budgets. Therefore instead of accepting to do less with a smaller budget we want to build the service and do something different.

We now need think more imaginatively about sources of revenue and capital funding for green space. This might be achieved partly through existing channels of external funding but solutions will be found in innovative partnership working and by demonstrating the benefits of green spaces to the wider environmental and social ambitions such as the sport or health and wellbeing agenda.

Using a variety of innovative and different models for funding green space can result in better use of public money, and greater community involvement.

Kingston is a growing borough with plans to realise a significant amount of growth and regeneration. A proportion of this growth will be residential flats that have little or no private green or amenity space. This undoubtedly affects a person's quality of life and it is therefore essential to provide local green space that can be used as one would wish to. These close-to-home parks and open spaces are a critical component of the British recreation estate.

Public green space is a vital protected green infrastructure which is especially relevant for dealing with resilience to the climate challenges the country is experiencing such as flooding, and high temperature. Open space provide wildlife habitats for species that are a barometer for human environmental health. They provide connected routes between places for wildlife, recreation, walking and cycling, safer routes to school and recreational sporting facilities that go some way to addressing a range of health issues such as obesity and increasing or maintaining the range of physical movement into older age.

There is growing evidence of the physical and mental health benefits of green spaces. This evidence shows the role green spaces can play in measures to improve health outcomes and reduce health inequalities in a cost effective way that promotes health and active lifestyles (*PHE, Health Equity Briefing 8 September 2014*).

A strategy such as this cannot be successful on its own; it requires joint working across different parts of the council and beyond.

Within the Council this is particularly relevant to Public Health on the Healthy Weight and Physical Activity Strategy through the Community Sport and Physical Activity Network (CSPAN), and the social care agenda, sports development through the Playing Pitch Strategy and the Tennis Steering Group, planning through the Core Strategy and London Plan and transport linking into the Mini Holland programme.

Outside of the Council there is a groundswell of people who are really interested in the borough's parks and open spaces, and who want to get closer to the decision making process. Without a strategic promise and practical direction this exceptional resource will go untapped.



What is the vision and aim?

The vision is to have good quality, accessible and attractive green spaces that bring major benefits for health and well being to Kingston’s residents and visitors

The aim is to provide a framework for success by delivering the ten key themes identified in this strategy.

A range of consultation methods undertaken during 2014 and 2015 were used to inform this strategy. The results revealed that a quality experience is based a number of factors that captured the core elements of green spaces in Kingston. These factors have been translated into ten key themes.

The 10 Key Themes

1. Plan and manage the Green Spaces Service to maximise community benefit.

We must use resources efficiently, effectively and flexibly by planning a network of accessible, quality open spaces that meet the needs of Kingston’s communities and which the Council can afford to maintain.

Robust contract management is required to ensure that the council is getting value for money from the grounds maintenance contractor. This will be achieved through the actions of the Council and

Contractor Partnership Board. The Contractor will be brought to account through regular scrutiny of agreed Key Performances Indicators.

What will success look like?

There will be a high performing flexible contract that is value for money for the residents of Kingston.

2. Enable community and voluntary group participation in green space provision and management.

Friends of Parks' groups help create better open spaces across the borough. In partnership with the Council's Green Space Service, they can support their local community to have a greater say in what goes on in their parks.

Not-for-profit organisations and voluntary and community groups can contribute time and labour, and importantly have access to raise funds and encourage community development and local ownership of urban green space.

The new Community Group toolkit will provide groups with the information they need to make a sustainable success

What will success look like?

Vibrant, engaged groups that make things happen.

3. Make people feel safe and secure.

In Kingston crime is rare in the parks but there is sometimes a perception that parks are unsafe or the visit is unpleasant. Therefore we need to take measures to reduce anti-social behaviours such as dog fouling, and drunk and disorderly behaviours.

What will success look like?

Anybody can visit any space and have a safe and enjoyable experience

4. Improve play facilities.

Parks and open spaces have a vital role in helping children and young people learn a variety of skills through play and social interaction. Traditionally in Kingston, play in parks has been based on the provision of equipment in designated play spaces. These playgrounds are very important especially for younger children, but parks should provide facilities for older children offering a different play experience. We will seek external funding to improve our play facilities by working with local Community Groups and Resident Associations, as well as seeking to secure developers contributions and planning obligation money (under section 106) for play equipment improvements.

What will success look like?

We will have a range of exciting and diverse facilities that meet the need for play, both young and older children, of which many new facilities have been funded through external grants.

5. Encourage active and healthy lifestyles and promote social inclusion.

There is growing evidence of the health benefits of access to good quality green spaces including reduction of obesity levels, improved mental health and well-being and increased longevity. Increasing the use of good quality green space for all social groups is likely to improve health outcomes and reduce health inequalities.

There are a range of reasons why people visit a park such to sit and have a cup of tea, walk their dog, entertain their children, get some fresh air, etc. We will make sure parks are welcoming to all by removing barriers which they have identified as preventing them from accessing green space.

Events provide an opportunity to bring new audiences to parks and for generating revenue income, such as licensing and franchising, sponsorship, entry fees and antisocial behaviour fines. Some larger events will attract income, whereas other smaller community events provide an opportunity for people to come together for a variety of reasons and cost very little. We will adapt our events policy to cater for different size events.

What will success look like?

A visit to a park is a stimulating and rewarding experience for people of all ages and cultural background

What will success look like?

There will be a programme of income generating events on appropriate sites and community based events on local spaces.

What will success look like?

Increased accessibility of green spaces and improved engagement with local people

6. Provide sporting opportunities for all.

Green spaces provide the environment for organised sport such as football, cricket and personal training and also have an important role in providing opportunities for informal sports such as jogging, and general 'kickabouts'. Tennis provision could be improved on, so we are looking at ways to upgrade the existing courts and find alternative methods of managing them that take the funding pressure away from the Council and provide opportunities for people to be professionally coached as well as turn up and play.

What will success look like?

There will be a varied range of high quality sporting facilities.

7. Well maintained highway verges and wayside gardens

Many of the borough's roads are lined with grassed verges and dotted with wayside gardens. Quadron plan a cutting schedule for the verges and wayside garden management. The verge grass is cut several times a year. The start of the cutting season is determined by weather and resource (seasonal staff are employed from March to October) rather than by date, and the frequency also

dictated by weather conditions. The wayside garden maintenance is carried out according to location. Some waysides require just one pruning visit per year whereas others in more prominent locations are visited more regularly. When budget allows, or external funding has been sought wildflower verges will be implemented. These schemes encourage bees and butterflies as well as creating an attractive seasonal display.

[What will success look like?](#)

We will have safe and aesthetically pleasing transportation corridors.

8. Protect and enhance biodiversity and the natural environment.

Our network of green spaces protects the habitats and species that give us our rich ecological heritage. Kingston is fortunate to have committed network of wildlife groups working under the Kingston Biodiversity Network (KBN) banner. We will work with them to protect and enhanced our ecological networks by putting in place the Kingston Biodiversity Action Plan including the development of a set of robust biodiversity policies.

The continuation of the Higher Level stewardship grant from Natural England will develop some wild spaces that benefit both biodiversity and people.

[What will success look like?](#)

No further net loss of biodiversity and achieve positive gain.

9. Raise the standard of horticulture on priority sites.

Building on the success of the Green Flag parks, our grounds maintenance partner (Quadron Services Ltd) will continue to attract funding and will prioritise high profile sites across the borough for quality civic planting scheme. They will encourage community groups to get involved in both the practical and planning.

[What will success look like?](#)

There will be attractive planting schemes that add aesthetic value to the location.

10. Improve Housing Estate Communal Spaces Grounds Maintenance

By and large communal land on housing estates is a tenant's garden, and as such high standards are desired by the people that live there. Some residents enjoy creating small planting spaces within the communal space. This is to be encouraged under 'adopt a plot' scheme.

The housing element of the Quadron contract is run through an input based specification that has been agreed by the Residents Participation Panel that is supported by a Service Level Agreement. Regular contact is made with Housing Estate Managers to ensure that the contract is running true to specification. Quadron offer training to residents who wish to be part of the joint monitoring programme.

[What will success look like?](#)

We will have a well understood and delivered grounds maintenance service that makes tenants proud of their estate.

A new and different approach to parks management

Parks and open spaces are recognised as an important element in people's quality of life. It is also becoming increasingly accepted that they contribute to the sustainability of our towns and cities. It is essential that this re-found focus is neither lost again, nor used as an excuse to turn parks into late Victorian / early 20th century heritage features, but leads to a dynamic reappraisal of the societal place of parks in the 21st century.

Defining and creating good quality green space in an ever decreasing financial situation is challenging. Nevertheless, parks and open spaces are the strategic assets of any council and should be given priority when considering spending money.

Parks and open spaces in Kingston have historically been managed using grounds maintenance practices, they have had little capital investment to improve infrastructure hence, and they have remained largely the same for the past twenty years, and arguably are beginning to show significant signs of deterioration. Without a sea change in management approach this will continue so that all that's left will be large green rectangles without purpose or character.

When the Green Spaces Strategy was written in 2008 the grounds maintenance contract had been in place for two years. The vision at the time was to attempt to ensure all parks could fulfil a number of functions. However, by 2010 the expectation to reduce the parks budget year on year was in full force and therefore any improvement to reach the vision of several functions was fast fading.

With limited budgets it is not possible to manage each park for every purpose therefore the approach will be to identify the inherent strength of a space, accentuating its positive aspects and make it a *destination of choice* for a particular activity such as football, horticulture displays, tennis and personal recreation. This way we put scarce resources into specific activities rather than try to provide the broad range that currently exists and moving away from the 'one size fits all' historic philosophy of parks and grounds management.

That is not to say that all spaces will provide the essence of an open space and therefore serve the purpose for every visitor to enjoy the outdoors but some will have more of a focus on specific functions. This way, resources can be targeted more efficiently and effectively.

Here are some examples of what a *destination park* could be:

- football centre of excellence (King Georges Recreation Ground)
- cricket centre of excellence (Alexandra Recreation Ground))
- horticulture displays (Beverly Park)
- promenading (Queen Promenade and Canbury)
- families with preschool children (Fishponds)
- exercise a horse, access to wildlife and traditional farmland (Tolworth Court Farm Fields LNR)
- a park where people can have a pre-booked and deposit paid BBQ (brick built) and responsibly drink alcohol (location to be chosen)
- walk a dog on the lead (St Andrews Square)

- let the dog run free (Elmbridge Meadows)
- visit an ancient monument and walk in ancient woodland (Castle Hill LNR)
- recreational cycling (Elmbridge Meadows)
- play bowls, croquet (Alexandra Recreation Ground)
- enjoy spectacular views (Queen Promenade and Canbury Gardens)
- general exercise (any open space and park)

Changing the way the service is delivered will inevitably have an impact on the user, but this should not be negative. The approach will be to work up from grass roots level. During the first year of the strategy a small core group will regularly come together made up of interested members of the community, Quadron and Council officers to identify the destination parks and the range of service changes required to create these parks. This will include zero basing to re-profile the budget.

One example of service change will be to reduce the proportion of short amenity grass thus creating a transition area for better habitat value and make the boundaries easier (and cheaper) to manage. Another is to reduce the amount of time strimming around obstacles such as bollards, fences and trees and/or remove small straggly shrub beds that are hidden away and serve no purpose other than the monthly visit by the contractor to cut them back.

A Funding Approach

A key message winding throughout this document is that the financial situation of local authorities is unlikely to improve within the life of this strategy. Therefore, much has to be made, of seeking other ways of funding the necessary capital projects. Successful urban green space funding has to be underpinned by a strategic approach to funding and management that incorporates a portfolio of different funding sources, mechanisms and partnerships.

Arguably, the success of funding models is inextricably linked to the physical, political and social context within which the green space is located, and the assets and resources available. To fund urban green space effectively these factors must be taken into account in developing the funding strategy. To this end, the Council has recently taken a more dedicated professional approach to attract grants and funding opportunities. Green spaces will take every opportunity to use this resource to apply for grants and funds such as the Heritage lottery fund for large capital project that benefit the community and provide learning and volunteering opportunities.

Market-driven models are more applicable in areas of high housing demands which allows these areas greater flexibility to develop alternative approaches. As previously discussed the housing demand in Kingston, especially in the outer regions, is on the rise and therefore this creates planning and development funding opportunities for improving the spaces required to contribute people to living a healthy lifestyle.

How is the service resourced?

Parks and open spaces provision is a classic example of the public finance problem of knowing, defining and managing costs without being able to assess and define values. In the late 1990's grounds maintenance and management was outsourced to private contractors and has remained so. In 2006 Quadron Service Ltd was awarded a 10 year contract with an option to extend for a further

five years at the Council's discretion. The contract is managed internally by two Council officers who work in partnership with the QSL contract Manager to deliver the service. The annual value of the contract is £1.5million.

The contract will be extended on 1s February 2016 for five years until 2021. The 'in house' client side consists of two officers, Service Manager and Green Spaces Officer. Quadron employs 49 permanent staff and takes on seasonal staff as required during the busy summer period.

Spaces included in this strategy

Children and young people – spaces specifically designed to increase opportunity for children and young people to play or meet within equipped or unequipped environments (e.g. Elm Road Recreation Ground, Alexandra Recreation Ground)

Formal Green space – organised layout and features such as memorial statues (e.g. Canbury Gardens, Queens Promenade, Memorial Gardens)

Informal green space – informal in layout and character, where the emphasis is on informal recreation. They generally have few or no additional facilities (e.g. Churchfields Recreation Ground)

Natural green space – sites providing people with access to, and experience of wildlife. Includes woodland, grassland, scrub, hedgerows and wetland (e.g. Tolworth Court Farm Fields Local Nature Reserve)

Active sport space – areas which are used for a variety of organised and competitive sports (e.g. King George's recreation Ground, King Edwards Recreation Ground)

Housing Estate Communal Spaces – specification is specific to Housing, resourced by Housing Revenue Account

Verges/Wayside/Closed Churchyard – although not accessible for recreational use, the land is maintained with the service area and so, is included for the purpose of this strategy.

Spaces not included

Private space that's not freely accessible to the public. This includes allotments, school grounds or Sites Important for Nature Conservation in private ownership, street trees.

However, it is recognised that the contribution of all these spaces to the urban green infrastructure is important and therefore some have their own dedicated strategy: Allotment Strategy and Tree Strategy.

Facilities maintenance and management of the buildings, paths, boundaries, gates, lighting, is not part of the green spaces service but the process for selecting appropriate leaseholders does remain with the service.

Communication

The website offers an opportunity to promote the green space service and provide interactive information about the facilities found there. Work will be done to improve information and provide regular updates.

What will success look like? We will have easily accessible interesting and informative information

ANNEXES

Annex 1 - Map and list of parks and open spaces

Annex 2 - Year 1 Action Plan

Annex 3 - Good Practice Guide (GPG) Biodiversity and the Planning Process

Annex 4 - Kingston Biodiversity Network Habitat Action Plans (available at end of year one)

Annex 5 - Community Group Toolkit (Friends of Parks)

Annex 6 - Housing Specification and Service Level Agreement

Annex 7 - Neighbourhood verge schedules

Annex 8 - Wayside list and schedules

Annex 9 - Link to the outcome of the consultation:

http://kingston-consult.objective.co.uk/portal/ew/gs/green_spaces_consultation_1

Annex 10 - The Open Space Assessment Key Findings