

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY – 13 SEPTEMBER 2011

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR HEALTH, HOUSING
AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

7. PARKS AND OPEN SPACES DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME –
PROGRESS REPORT

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

Purpose/Summary of Report:

- Members have requested regular updates on the progress of the 'Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme'. This report details progress made from the last report to Committee in March 2009. It also provides information on the 'Play Area Development Programme' and details other significant achievements and improvements made since the last report.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DECISION: that	
(A)	That the Committee review progress with the 'Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme 2007 - 2012', and The 'Play Area Development Programme 2007 - 2012' and
(B)	A review of the 'Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2007 – 2012' be undertaken and submitted to Committee in 2012.

1.0 Background

- .1 East Herts Council owns and maintains approximately 120 public open spaces of all kinds, including 40 main parks and 56 play areas. In 2007 the Council agreed a 5 year Parks & Open Spaces Strategy, with the objective of ensuring that the parks and open spaces under its control, as a valuable natural resource, are managed and developed in a responsible and effective way.
- .2 In addition to the adoption of the Strategy, 'a High Level Action Plan was produced which identified the future actions to be taken within the 'Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme'. This included a thorough audit of all Council owned and managed open spaces and play areas, the development of a framework for the production of management plans for significant parks and open spaces and information on the selection of parks for Green Flag bids. See Report to Executive – 'Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2007 and Status Report on Current Projects' - 4 September 2007
- .3 This has resulted in significant improvements and developments in the last few years and progress reports on these programmes were subsequently reported to the Environment Scrutiny Committee as requested.
- .4 In 2008 a report was presented to Environment Scrutiny Committee to explain the methodology and initial results of the Parks and Open Space Audit and Development Programme. Detailed information was also provided on the methodology behind the Play Area Development Programme, which has provided a structured framework for improving the play areas according to need and suitability. See Report to Environment Scrutiny Committee – 'Progress Report on Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme' - 10 June 2008
- .5 A further progress report was presented to Environment Scrutiny Committee in 2009 to provide update information within the Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme and detailed the framework for Management Plans. See Report to Environment Scrutiny Committee – 'Progress Report on Parks and Open Spaces Development

Programme' - 3 March 2009.

- .6 Further progress reports have been requested by the Environment Scrutiny Committee. Consequently an update for the Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme and an insight into the major improvements undertaken since the last report are provided below.

Report

- .1 This report firstly provides information for works undertaken as part of the 'Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme' from Spring 2009 to Autumn 2011, including the production of management plans, the ongoing 'Play Area Development Programme' and new projects developed with external funding.
- .2 'Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme' - A framework for the production of management plans was considered by the Environment Scrutiny Committee on 3 March 2009. The parks listed below are the five major East Herts owned parks along with three others that have featured prominently in development activity:
 - Southern Country Park, Bishop's Stortford
 - The Ridgeway Local Park, Hertford
 - Hartham Common, Hertford
 - Grange Paddocks / Red, White and Blue, Bishop's Stortford
 - Pishiobury Park, Sawbridgeworth
 - Hertford Castle Gardens
 - Bishop's Stortford Castle Gardens
 - King George V Recreation Ground, Ware.
- .3 There have been many improvements to each of these sites as they have been focussed upon through the programme. A prime objective has been to explore the needs of each site through consultation culminating in the creation of a working management plan. Currently two management plans have been completed, with a third out to consultation, four have been produced in draft and one is due later in the programme.
- .4 Each development / management plan is a dynamic

document and timescales for specific projects have been adjusted to take advantage of external funding opportunities where these have arisen and to respond to residents' needs, expressed through consultation exercises. This has resulted in a re-prioritisation in some cases to make maximum use of grant funding to deliver better value for money for the Council. Details of this external funding can be found in the table in paragraph 2.18

- .5 A summary of the developments at these parks is as follows:
- .6 Southern Country Park, Bishop's Stortford – since the Council took over ownership of the park in 2001 significant improvements have taken place. The Council has completed many successful projects to greatly improve the whole park for both the public and wildlife. The five year management plan, completed in 2008, has provided the basis for this programme of improvement works, enabled Officers to successfully seek additional external funding opportunities and helped win the prestigious Green Flag Award in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011. The Friends Group formed in 2009 is a great asset to the park and has undertaken many tasks, such as hedgelaying and woodland management, with the support and guidance of the Council and the Countryside Management Service. The annual 'Get Park Active' event (held in July since 2008 as part of the national Love Parks week) is very well attended - with over 500 attendees in 2011. Southern Country Park is now one of the most popular parks in the District, and has strong community involvement.
- .7 The Ridgeway Local Park, Hertford – the park has successfully been transformed into a Green Flag Award winning open space. The five year management plan produced in 2009 has guided significant development projects on the site and allowed Officers to bid for external funding. A new play area and open space has been created in the previously derelict overgrown hollow at the rear of the park and is now known as the Dell. Interest and support from the local community has helped to guide these projects to successful outcomes. The park is now a well used and valued asset to the local area and community.

- .8 Hartham Common, Hertford – Officers have collaborated with partners, such as the County Council, Environment Agency and Groundwork, to undertake many improvements across the park and attract additional external funding. The redevelopment of the Leisure Centre, improvements to the play areas and football pitches and landscaping works have had a significant positive effect on the visual amenity of the open space. The initial public consultation has helped shape the draft management plan and further consultation with stakeholders will soon commence.
- .9 Grange Paddocks / Red, White & Blue, Bishop's Stortford – Although the initial plans to create a new play area and BMX track as part of the Play Builder scheme will not now go ahead, due to the cancellation of the funding scheme, work has continued with the Countryside Management Service on the draft management plan. The possibility of creating a 'green finger' to link from the town centre out to the Red, White and Blue open space is being explored. Officers continue to seek opportunities for external funding with a view to future development of both parks. The grazing of long horned cattle has been introduced at Red, White and Blue to improve the flora and fauna of the open space. A very successful 'Meet the Animals' event was held in July 2010 (as part of the Council events organised for Love Parks Week) to explain the importance of grazing within the park and introduce the park to new users.
- .10 Pishiobury Park, Sawbridgeworth – the Historic Landscape Restoration Plan has informed the design considerations for the major improvements undertaken in the park over the last few years. Significant work has been undertaken to improve the car park and entrances to the park, create a new picnic area, reintroduce grazing of historic cattle breeds and make the park a more welcoming place. Events organised by the newly formed Friends group, and the 'Meet the Animals' events, held annually in July since 2010 as part of Love Parks Week, have greatly increased the public's awareness of the park. Feedback from residents has been extremely positive and visitor numbers have increased.
- .11 Hertford Castle Gardens – following transfer of the lease of the buildings and surrounding land to the Town Council, Officers are now discussing the future management of the

site and proposed joint working practices to produce a management plan for the whole site. This will not only secure the public's regard for the historic park but also allow continued and sustained enhancement through planned development.

- .12 Bishop's Stortford Castle Gardens – work has been undertaken to redesign the bedding schemes to improve value for money and allow town centre planting improvements. Initial aims for the management plan have been identified and the basic draft is being produced, supported by an archaeological report commissioned by Conservation Officers in Development Control.
- .13 King George V Recreation Ground, Ware – the open space has been greatly transformed with two new play areas created with additional external funding, new planting and the clearance of overgrown scrub backing onto the fences around the edge of the park. The local community, and especially local children, have been very committed to working with the Council on these projects, and continue to support initiatives such as community litter picks and the July 'Community Fun Day'. The park is now highly valued and well used, and has won a prestigious Town Award from The Ware Society.
- .14 Work will continue to finalise the remaining "major" park management plans and to undertake the specific improvement works as outlined in the operational action plans developed for each individual site.
- .15 Further information of the specific improvements to these parks is detailed in Appendix 1 – 'Environment Scrutiny Report – Specific site information update - August 2011'.
- .16 'Play Area Development Programme' update – Since the 2007 /08 Audit and the subsequent formulation of the three year 'Play Area Development Plan 2007 - 2009', which provided a timetable for improvements to the play areas on a site by site basis, significant improvements have been made to 30 play areas. This includes 5 new ones developed with additional external funding and 2 created with section 106 funding.

- .17 Following on from the success of this original programme of works, a further 3 year programme - 'Play Area Development Programme 2010 – 2012'- has been devised for the next 14 play areas identified in the original audit as benefiting from improvements to increase their play value. These projects have been allocated Capital funding and wherever possible additional external funding will continue to be sought to increase the scope of the programme.
- .18 Information on the individual play areas improved under these Development Programmes on a year by year basis is shown in Appendix 2 – East Herts Play Area Development Programme - Progress Update August 2011.
- .19 External Funding – a key objective of the Parks & Open Spaces Strategy was to use the Council's Capital funding as 'pump priming' and match funding to lever in additional external funding to undertake some of the major projects identified within the Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme and the Play Area Development Programme.
- .20 It is worth noting that the funding achieved from external sources and under Section 106 agreements from 2007 to the present day has brought an additional sum of nearly 1 million pounds in to the Council.
- .21 Since the original audit and creation of the Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme in 2007 a total of sixteen projects have attracted additional external funding totalling £627,000. This has enabled the development of projects, such as the creation of new play areas, which would not have been possible within the Council's resources.
- .22 The following table provides a list of projects which have attracted external funding from 2007 to the present day:

Externally Funded Projects 2007 to 2011

Year of Work:	Site:	Works:	Amount of External Capital Funding:	Source of funding:
2007	The Ridgeway Local Park, Hertford	New Multi User games Area	£48,000	Section 106 funding
2008	Southern Country Park Play Area, Bishop's Stortford	New older children's play area	£75,000	Section 106 funding
2008	Turners Crescent Play Area, Bishop's Stortford	New younger children's play area	£45,000	Section 106 funding
2008	King George V Recreation Area, Ware	New Multi User games Area	£25,000	Riversmead Housing Association
2009	Bentley Road Play Area, Hertford	Redesign of original play area to provide an inclusive play area accessible to children of all abilities	£37,000	Big Lottery Funding
2009	King George V Recreation Area, Ware	New Adventure Play Area	£85,000	Big Lottery Funding
2009	The Dell Play Area at The Ridgeway, Hertford	New older children's play area	£53,000	Play Builder Funding
2009	The Ridgeway, Hertford	New access route into the Dell	£55,000	Lafarge Landfill Community Fund

2010	Southern Country Park, Bishop's Stortford	Wetland Restoration Project – further detailed information is in the Appendix	£46,000	Biffaward Landfill Community Fund
2010	Southern Country Park, Bishop's Stortford	Fishing Platforms around the balancing pond	£9,000	Environment Agency Funding
2010	Southern Country Park, Bishop's Stortford	New park signage and wildlife information boards	£10,000	Countryside Management Service
2010	Hartham Common, Hertford	Meadow Restoration Project – further detailed information is available in the Appendix	(£90,000 anticipated funding)	Environment Agency Funded Project
2011	Vantorts Open Space, Sawbridge-worth	Contribution to the 'Vantorts Open Space Revamp Project' – redesign of original play area with a new wheeled sports and ball court area on the decommissioned tennis court	Up to £40,000 Subject to STC decision pending final tender details	Sawbridge-worth Town Council
2011	Vantorts Open Space, Sawbridge-worth	Additional contribution to the 'Vantorts Open Space Revamp Project'	£7,500	Joint Action Group Funding
2010	Buryfields, Ware	Interpretation Plinth in the open	£1,000	Ware In Bloom /GSK

		space		
2011	Kibes Lane, Ware	Contribution to the redesign and landscaping of the Quaker Burial Ground	£500	Ware Society
TOTAL:			£627,000	

.23 Section 106 Projects - In addition the Council has adopted 4 new play areas and adjacent open spaces under Section 106 Planning Obligation agreements funded by developers since 2007. These represent an external funding contribution of approximately £250,000 Capital (had the Council created the play areas) and £72,700 in Revenue to fund the maintenance of these adopted areas over 10 years.

.24 The table below provides information on location, age range and adoption date for each of these new play areas and open spaces:

SECTION 106 Play Areas - designed and built by developers, then formally adopted by East Herts Council				
Adopted by EHC:	Site:	Works:	Revenue received as part of Section 106 Agreements	Source of funding:
Adopted 2007	Lilbourne Drive Play Area, Hertford	New younger children's play area	£10,000	Section 106 funded
Adopted 2008	Millmead Road Hertford	Two new younger children's play areas and surrounding wooded open	£30,000	Section 106 funded

		space		
Adopted 2009	Yearlings Close, Gt Amwell	New younger children's play area and surrounding open space	£32,700	Section 106 funded
TOTAL approximate revenue income contributions to Section 106 Funded Play Areas:			£72,700	

- .25 Other significant works undertaken since the last report to Scrutiny Committee include:
- .26 The Safety of Closed Churchyards - Operational Management Plan June 2010 - The Council manages three closed churchyards as part of its open space provision. There has been some national attention on the way in which Local Authorities have dealt with the risk of injury from unstable memorial stones. This Operational Management Plan provides procedures to minimise these risks using a sensitive and proportionate approach. It is the result of considerable research and comprehensive consultation. Further information is available on the Councils' website.
- .27 'Grazing Cattle in our Parks' – a document has been produced to provide a comprehensive guide as to how and why we graze cattle and sheep in our parks. It provides helpful guidance to residents should they have concerns about sharing the park with these animals. This information is available in the parks and open spaces section of the councils' website.
- .28 Quaker Burial Ground at Kibes Lane, Ware - a major restoration project has been completed to redesign and replant this historic site in conjunction with the Society of Friends (Quakers), Ware Town Council, Ware Civic Society and the Ware In Bloom Group. An official opening of the site is planned.
- .29 Grounds Contract Development Projects - The digital mapping data that provides information to determine the

contract value and to control works output has been reviewed to ensure that all relevant quantities are now linked in to a planned programme of works. Previously a significant proportion of “scrub” areas and features that had not featured in the grounds contract core works, such as woodland areas, had been managed in an adhoc way. All areas have now been carefully categorised to create a new set of work descriptions and items have been prioritised to create a long term programme of winter works. This ensures that budgets are controlled more closely and that areas less prominent in terms of contract maintenance but potentially troublesome to local residents are inspected and maintained on a rotational basis. This new system still allows flexibility to minimise expenditure, but has reduced customer complaints relating to “adhoc” areas.

Implications/Consultations

- .1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within **Essential Reference Paper ‘A’**.
- .2 The appendices mentioned in the report and listed below are attached as **Essential Reference Paper B**.
 - Appendix 1– Parks and Open Spaces Achievements
 - Appendix 2 – East Herts Play Area Development Programme 2007 – 2012 - Progress Update August 2011.

Background Papers:

- Report to Environment Scrutiny Committee – ‘Progress Report on Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme’ - 3 March 2009.
- Report to Executive – ‘Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme’ - 1 July 2008.
- Report to Environment Scrutiny Committee – ‘Progress Report on Parks and Open Spaces Development Programme’ - 10 June 2008.

- Report to Executive – ‘Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2007 and Status Report on Current Projects’ - 4 September 2007.
- Report to Policy Development Scrutiny Committee – ‘Parks and Open Spaces Strategy and Green Flag Award Accreditation’ - 20 March 2007.

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ESSENTIAL REFERENCE PAPER 'A'

<p>Contribution to the Council's Corporate Priorities/ Objectives <i>(delete as appropriate):</i></p>	<p>Promoting prosperity and well-being; providing access and opportunities <i>Enhance the quality of life, health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities, particularly those who are vulnerable.</i></p> <p>Pride in East Herts <i>Improving standards of the built neighbourhood and environmental management in our towns and villages.</i></p>
<p>Consultation:</p>	<p>The Parks and Open Spaces team has worked closely with various departments across the Council in determining the strategy to improve the Council's parks and open spaces, including Community Development, Leisure Services, Community Safety, Environmental Health, Property Services and Planning and Building Control. The Service is working directly with the Countryside Management Service and also considers the views of other key stakeholders such as County Youth Services, Groundworks Hertfordshire and the Town and Parish Councils of East Herts. Public and stakeholder consultation is and continues to be a key element in the development of future management plans and subsequent developmental work.</p> <p>Public consultation exercises are carried out with local residents and young people to inform open space development prior to the design stage for any major projects.</p>
<p>Legal:</p>	<p>NONE.</p>
<p>Financial:</p>	<p>Capital projects detailed within this report were funded from the approved Capital Programme.</p>
<p>Human Resource:</p>	<p>There are none for this report.</p>
<p>Risk Management:</p>	<p>There is a risk that development aims identified within management plans may have implications, both positive</p>

and negative, for some residents and may raise expectations. This will be mitigated through careful and considered consultation to develop the management plans.

Green Flags are awarded on an annual basis, with each park having to apply each year to renew them. There is a risk that if parks fail to make planned improvements or to continue maintenance to a satisfactory level they may lose their Green Flag status with the resultant bad publicity this would entail. Therefore it is crucial that adequate resources are assigned to sustain the prestigious Green Flag award status.

Many sources of external Government funding have now ceased and it is much more difficult to lever in significant capital expenditure to improve the council's parks and play areas. Innovative approaches are being considered with the private and voluntary sectors to maximise available funding. It is essential that the Council continues to commit match funding through its Capital Programme to access these sources. Proposals for specific sites will be brought to Members for comment before proceeding.