

REPORT OF THE GREEN ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY TASK GROUP

Membership : Councillors Carthew, Cornwell (ex-officio), Elengorn (Chairman),
M.Jones, Orchard, Urquhart.

Supported by Frances Kavanagh – Principal Scrutiny Officer

Advisers : Eve Risbridger (Parks Manager – Environment Planning & Review)
Philip Wealthy (Principal Policy & Design Manager – Environment,
Planning & Review)
Wyn Williams (Principal Officer – Best Value and Business Planning)
Alison Quant (Director - Environment & Sustainability)

1. THE BRIEF

“To examine strategy, policy and plans relating to Council owned and managed green environment. To report on these in terms of their adequacy, internal consistency, application of resources and programmes and relationship to the UDP and related documents”

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 The Task Group met on a number of occasions and interviewed 9 witnesses:

Freda Hyde – Tree Warden.

Sara Bird – Garrick’s Temple Volunteer Group.

Philip West – Buildings and Development Officer (Education, Arts & Leisure).

Natasha Bradshaw – Cemeteries Manager (Environment, Planning & Review).

Peter Joyce – Consultant Parks Manager (Environment, Planning & Review).

Andy Pinder – Landscape & Technical Manager (Environment, Planning &
Review).

Tom Brown – Operations Manager (Environment, Planning & Review).

Kath Rosen – British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.

Kim Wilkie – Landscape Consultant.

Nick Pratt – Head of Cultural Strategy – London Borough of Hounslow.

2.2 Written evidence was also sought and received. The key documents included:

Parks and Open Spaces – Service Description

Policy Framework Analysis on the Council Owned Green Environment

Full list of Council owned and managed sites in the borough

Parks & Open Spaces & Cemeteries Service Best Value Improvement Plan.

Hounslow - Green Strategy – Nature Conservation

2.3 In addition to 2.1 and 2.2 the Task Group visited sites in the Heathfield, Whitton and Richmond Hill Wards:

Twickenham Cemetery, Heathfield Recreation Park, Edgar Road Estate, Hounslow Heath Open Space, Crane Park, Murray Park Recreation Area and Terrace Gardens and Terrace Field in Richmond. The Group was particularly impressed by London Wildlife Trust's work at Crane Park.

3. The Existing Policy Base

3.1 The existing policy base includes the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Unitary Development Plan, Conservation Area studies, Thames Landscape Strategy, Tree Strategy, Nature Conservation and Contract Management Plans, and Grounds Maintenance Plans. An initial appraisal suggested that the strategy documents had fundamental limitations – although the UDP provides a Borough-wide overview it is primarily concerned with 'retention and protection of open space from development' rather than management and improvement of spaces. Although the Nature Conservation and Contract Management Plans and Grounds Maintenance Plans provide specific management requirements in relation to specific sites these are not components of an integrated strategy.

3.2 In considering the Best Value Review of Parks, Open Spaces and Cemeteries, Leisure Services Committee on the 27th March 2001 recognised the need for a Strategy. In this context the conclusions of the Group are directed at informing the Strategy development process and content.

4. RECOMMENDATION - The need for a Borough-wide Strategy.

The evidence from a wide range of interests confirmed the importance of a comprehensive Strategy which at the broadest level would provide a basis for:

- attracting funding (e.g. Lottery, other agencies, planning benefits);
- allocating the limited resources available to reflect needs or priorities in specific locations;
- allocating land to different uses broadly – playing fields, nature conservation and amenity (historic views, formal gardens);
- establishing a dialogue with the public (including target groups) in relation to their needs and priorities

5. The Strategy Process

LB Hounslow and LB Bromley provide typical models of the stages in the development of a Parks Strategy, essential components are as follows:

- I. provision of basic Borough-wide information (e.g. Demand and usage of sports pitches/allotments/cemeteries), levels of use of parks and open spaces, charging structures, ecological survey, potential sources of resources – financial and people);
- II. categorisation of existing parks based on functions (e.g. ornamental park, multi purpose park, sports ground, linear park/walk, local open space);

- III. an audit of existing provision (e.g. size, access, state of facilities, events, ecology);
- IV. definition of minimum standards for different types of park;
- V. analysis of current balance within different areas and the need for any changes;
- VI. prioritising work – in LB Hounslow this was done with reference to level of social deprivation in the local catchments.

Public consultation would need to be integrated throughout the process.

6. Issues to be addressed

Based on the evidence heard the Group considered key issues to be addressed through a Strategy were;

6.1 Funding opportunities

- to what extent can additional resources be achieved from external sources? In this respect Richmond 2002 provides a unique opportunity – but are there more modest opportunities through the planning system or through other partnership arrangements;
- the work of volunteer groups is highly valued and consideration needs to be given to the potential for expansion including local management initiatives (e.g. allotments, fishing licensing) as well as routine grounds maintenance and general maintenance. It would need to recognise that voluntary action has to be initiated and supported by permanent staff and therefore appropriate resources would need to be available. . The Strategy also needs to review the role of the private sector (e.g. catering) to assess whether there could be potential savings or improvements in services. Opportunities for sponsorship (e.g. benches, trees) need to be maximised ;
- the group was opposed to any loss of any open space (bearing in mind the impracticalities of returning developed land to an open state). The emphasis should be on improving the quality and ecological value of open space. However, in view of the long-term shortfall in funding for essential work, the potential for limited release of land in order to generate resources for investment would need to be investigated;
- to what extent should demand for sports pitches be met and at what level of subsidy? It was recognised that more information was needed on level of under usage (understood to be relatively limited), level of subsidy compared to other activities (e.g. libraries, swimming), and usage by teams from outside the Borough.

6.2 Management issues

- the Group received some pertinent comments on the balance between formal park land/historic views and informality/nature conservation. It was suggested

that the context of parks had changed from one of formal spaces contrasting with the countryside to the current urban context where the informal provided a welcome contrast. In relation to historic views, the view that the removal of trees has an adverse impact on nature conservation is over simplistic as existing trees may provide limited habitats and new planting could ultimately lead to habitat diversification.

- the Strategy needs to take into account the contribution of open land irrespective of ownership including private open land, Richmond Housing Partnership land and school sites over which the Council has limited direct control;

6.3 Strategy towards open spaces

- the Strategy would need to recognise and develop a hierarchy of open space provision, with different types of park and open space serving different functions and providing different facilities;
- the Strategy needs to relate to the wider public realm and relate to urban design and walking strategies in seeking to enhance the links between spaces (UDP indicates strategic green chains). These should include more traditionally urban links such as Union Court in Richmond Town Centre where there is an attractive link between buildings and associated urban spaces.
- it is recognised that there remain significant areas deficient in local open space and that there are limited opportunities to address these. Opportunities for 'pocket parks' as promoted within LB Southwark need to be investigated;

6.4 Equality of opportunity

- the Strategy must address the needs of different groups including all the Council's target groups (black and ethnic minority people, refugees and asylum seekers, disabled people, older people and women). It was noted that Parks are particularly important to young children (play facilities) and to teenagers as places to meet and it is vital that the needs of these groups are taken into account;
- the need to provide a safe environment must be a key theme of the Strategy, and in this respect provision of cafes and other facilities will be important both to provide some 'point of contact' and in helping to attract people to the Park. Musicians, artists and other performers could also help in these respects.

7. Format of the Strategy

It was felt that any Strategy could include:

- a series of policy statements;
- a Borough-wide map showing key areas/linkages, designations and ownership;
- more detailed plans of specific areas at a larger scale (this would be likely to include all Parks).