

DRAFT BRAINTREE GREEN SPACES STRATEGY

Agenda Item 2.1

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Background Papers:- Draft Braintree Green Spaces Strategy (BGSS)
Report on the Audit of Open Spaces within Braintree District

These are available for inspection on the Council's website and two paper copies are available in the Members Room.

Financial Implications:- Cost of consultation to be met from existing budgets
Implementation of strategy will have financial implications

Equalities Implications:- Accessibility issues

Legal Implications:- None

Options:

1. To endorse the draft BGSS as the basis for sustainability appraisal and community involvement
2. To endorse draft BGSS with amendments as the basis for sustainability appraisal and community involvement
3. Not to endorse the draft BGSS as the basis for sustainability appraisal and community involvement

Risks: The main risk in the preparation of the BGSS is that any delay will have a knock on effect on the preparation of the Open Spaces Supplementary Planning Document, for which the timetable for preparation is set out in the Local Development Scheme.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Braintree Green Spaces Strategy (BGSS) aims to provide accessible high quality green spaces and outdoor sports facilities which meet the recreational needs of all sections of the community; to engage the local community to participate in their improvement; to raise their profile and to promote their benefit to the District.

It draws on the results of the PPG17* open space audit and the household, user and sports club surveys that provide the basis for setting provision, quality and accessibility standards. The Strategy makes recommendations for the provision and improvement of green spaces, and provides a basis for developing planning policies and proposals for improving the management and maintenance of green spaces.

The Strategy has been developed with the assistance of a Strategy Development Group including representatives from the Council, parish councils, CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), Essex Wildlife Trust and the Braintree and Bocking Civic Society. The Group approved the Strategy on 9th January and referred it to the Area Committees for comment and endorsement prior to public consultation.

The attached report provides an overview of both the audit report and the Draft BGSS. Copies are available in the members Room and the documents are available on the Council's website. The three Local Committees are being asked to endorse the Draft BGSS for the purposes of public consultation, following which document, together with any proposed amendments arising from the consultation, will be considered by the Local Development Framework Panel for adoption of the final BGSS by the Council.

A similar report is being considered by the Braintree and Halstead Local Committees.

**Planning Policy Guidance Note 17: Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation (ODPM, July 2002) recognises the importance of open space, and advocates that planning policies for open space, including playing fields, should be based upon local standards that are derived from a robust assessment of local need. It also encourages the principle of negotiating commuted sums for off-site open space provision from new housing developments.*

DECISION

Members are invited to COMMENT on the Braintree Green Spaces Strategy and to ENDORSE it as the basis of sustainability appraisal and community involvement.

DRAFT BRAINTREE GREEN SPACES STRATEGY

1. The Council is committed to producing an Open Spaces Supplementary Planning Document as detailed in the Local Development Scheme. As a prerequisite it is necessary to ensure that an up-to-date evidence base is available. An audit of open space in the District was therefore undertaken in 2006-07, broadly in keeping with guidance given in PPG17. The audit, together with household, user and sports club questionnaire surveys, provided the basis for the BGSS. The Strategy examines the quantity, quality and accessibility of the District's green spaces and highlights areas of deficiency measured against open space standards for a number of different typologies.

Open Space Audit

2. The audit aims to provide an updated, clear picture of existing and future needs for open space, sport and recreation in Braintree and the extent to which those needs are met in terms of quality, quantity and accessibility. The focus of the study is to:
 - Identify local demand for various types of open space
 - Set local standards based on assessments of local needs
 - Identify specific needs, surpluses or deficiencies both now and in the future
 - Provide a strategic focus for the Council, enabling the best use of existing and future open spaces
 - Provide a basis for future planning policies and management/maintenance policies for Council-owned land

Methodology

3. The audit was broadly in accordance with guidance provided in Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 *Planning for Open Spaces, Sport and Recreation* (July 2002) and its *Companion Guide* (September 2002), but with a number of limitations. Eight different types of open space were quantified – parks and gardens, natural and semi-natural greenspaces, green corridors, outdoor sports facilities, amenity greenspaces, provision for children and young persons, allotments and cemeteries and other burial grounds. All of these spaces were subject to a quantitative audit and were mapped using the Council's GIS. Because of the large number of green spaces in the District (1,120), many of which are very small, the qualitative audits were limited by the following:
 - Allotments and burial grounds were excluded.
 - Private parks and gardens in rural areas were excluded.
 - Natural and semi-natural greenspaces were only included where they are within or adjacent to urban areas or villages.
 - School playing fields were only included where they are used by the community.
 - Amenity greenspace quality audits were restricted to a minimum size of 0.2 hectares.

In total 347 sites covering 841 ha were audited.

- 4 The spaces were assessed for:
- the quality of the landscape, accessibility, entrances, signage
 - health, safety and security
 - cleanliness and maintenance of open areas, furniture and buildings
 - sports facilities
 - play equipment
 - natural, historic and cultural heritage
 - community involvement

For each space 89 elements were scored, normally on a scale of 1 to 4 (very poor, poor, good, very good) and overall scores shown as a percentage of the maximum score possible for that space.

Analysis Areas

- 5 Braintree District covers an area of 1,300 square miles and has over 60 parishes and 22 wards. For the purposes of undertaking the assessment of the open spaces audited, the District was split into six analysis sub-areas, based on the Local Committee structure. Although using identifiable neighbourhoods within the main urban areas, larger parishes and an amalgamation of smaller parish areas would have been preferred, the study would have become over-complicated, requiring many more sub-areas in the report. The six sub-areas are:

- Braintree Urban Area
- Halstead Urban Area
- Witham Urban Area
- Braintree Rural Area
- Halstead Rural Area
- Witham Rural Area

Open Space Needs

- 6 The audit reveals the following areas of deficiency:

- Parks and Gardens
Within Braintree Urban Area there are deficiencies of parks and gardens in Braintree East, Bocking North, and within Witham Urban Area there are deficiencies in Witham North and Witham South. In the larger rural settlements, there is a deficiency of parks and gardens at Coggeshall, Hatfield Peverel and Kelvedon.
- Natural and Semi-Natural Greenspace
The distribution of natural or semi-natural greenspace reflects the landscape and the impacts of human activity on it. Much of the District is quite wooded and this is reflected in the average rural density of over 34 ha. of natural and semi-natural greenspace per thousand rural population. Within the urban areas there is little of this type of space in Bocking North, Witham North and Halstead Trinity wards, although they all have access to river valleys that run through the three main towns.

- Green Corridors
Green corridors have an important role in recreation and the movement of wildlife, particularly where they form linkages between other types of open space. Following mostly man-made features such as railways and green lanes, their distribution is sporadic, although opportunities do exist to extend the network. They are absent from the Witham Rural and much of Braintree Rural sub-areas, as well as Bocking South, Braintree East, Braintree South, Halstead Trinity and Witham North wards.
- Outdoor Sports Facilities
There is a fairly even distribution of outdoor sports facilities throughout Braintree District, within both rural and urban areas. All rural wards have at least one playing field used for sporting activities, primarily cricket and association football. Deficiencies can be identified in Braintree Central and Halstead Trinity, but these areas are within a reasonable travelling distance of a sports facility.
- Amenity Greenspace
Amenity greenspace has a valuable role in providing a visual amenity in what would otherwise be a hard urban landscape. The District Council acknowledges the importance of these spaces and most housing developments of the past twenty years have incorporated amenity green spaces within them. The wards with the lowest densities of amenity greenspace are Braintree East, Bocking North, Bocking Blackwater and Rayne.
- Provision for Children and Young People
All wards have at least one play area, although the distribution and quality of provision is variable. Provision is generally good in the rural areas, with the three main towns being reasonably well provided with play spaces, varying from 1 space per 353 population to one space per 2,163 population, whilst no community under 765 population is without a play area. Coggeshall, Rayne and Stour Valley North wards have the lowest provision per head.
- The play provision in the urban areas serve much larger populations, ranging from 1 space per 1,054 population to 1 space per 6,502 population; Braintree Central, Braintree South, Halstead St. Andrews and Bocking Blackwater have the lowest provision per head. The report also highlights a number of sites of poor quality, which need to be re-equipped or otherwise improved.
- Allotments
Although the District is reasonably well served by allotments, there is a notable deficiency in Witham, where the only allotment garden is in Witham North ward near to the railway station. Other urban wards deficient in allotments are Great Notley/Braintree West, Braintree East, Braintree South and Bocking Blackwater. Most rural wards have allotments, although none are to be found in Panfield and Three Fields, and there are deficiencies in Bumpstead and Black Notley.
- Cemeteries and Burial Grounds
In the past burial grounds were much smaller and localised, mostly being found in churchyards. In the late twentieth century the trend was towards large municipal crematoriums and cemeteries to cater for a local authority's needs. All the rural areas have churchyards or other burial grounds. Within the main urban wards there is an absence of burial grounds in Bocking

Blackwater, Braintree East, Braintree South, Great Notley/Braintree West, Witham South and Witham West, but generally there are burial grounds within easy reach of most people. In any event new provision will only be related to the needs of the community and not as a means of securing additional open space for recreational use.

- 7 The Green Spaces Strategy will seek to address deficiencies in open space provision, set against identified future needs and the standards to be adopted by the District Council.

Quality

- 8 Although the community surveys generally reflect the audit findings, there are several instances where the surveys do not reflect the quality recorded in the audit. The surveys revealed the contribution that open spaces make to people's quality of life, and that there is almost universal acknowledgement of their importance, even though they may not always meet people's expectations. The most significant findings are:
- Nearly a quarter of the 34 parks and gardens averaged a score of 75% or more (see paragraph 4 above).
 - The importance of an open space is enhanced by being multifunctional. 43% of parks and gardens have sports pitches, ball courts or children's play areas and 45% of outdoor sports facilities have playgrounds.
 - 75% of household respondents were satisfied with the overall quality of parks and gardens, and although users were generally more critical of them, 18% were nevertheless satisfied with their quality.
 - The overall quality of natural and semi-natural greenspaces reflects the extent of planting and maintenance, although where sites have no or poor maintenance they may have a nature conservation value.
 - 28% of respondents use natural and semi-natural greenspaces more frequently than other types of open space.
 - Whilst many natural and semi-natural open spaces are managed for nature conservation, few of them have good interpretive media.
 - 55% of respondents rated amenity spaces as good or very good, and they are usually well maintained. Many people would like to see more litterbins, dog bins and seats on the larger amenity spaces.
 - The range, location and condition of play equipment are generally good. Most are clean and well maintained, and there is rarely any evidence of problems. Most are very accessible and well used, although a number of individual play areas do suffer from vandalism and anti-social behaviour.
 - The most common complaints about parks and gardens are the absence or poor quality of toilet provision, too much litter and inadequate lighting.
 - Although the audit suggests that natural and semi-natural spaces have few problems, respondents frequently complained about litter.
 - Green corridors suffer most from dog fouling; this is because they are frequently used for exercising of dogs and too many owners fail to remove faeces.

- Outdoor sports facilities also score well for quality and maintenance, but community surveys show dissatisfaction with the number of seats and the number and quality of toilet provision.

Green Spaces Strategy

9 The Braintree Green Spaces Strategy supports the Council's aims and objectives for the District's green spaces, including:

- Improving the *quality* of green spaces in Braintree District.
- Establishing an effective strategy for the *delivery* of green spaces and sport and recreation facilities.
- Improving the *awareness and use* of Braintree's green spaces and the facilities available within them.
- Informing future *planning, management and maintenance policies* for green spaces, including the emerging Local Development Documents for the period to 2021 and beyond.
- Providing a *community resource* for education and cultural activities and to encourage community involvement in the planning and management of green spaces.
- Conserving and enhancing the *natural environment* and encouraging biodiversity.
- Moving towards more *sustainable grounds maintenance* and reducing the need for chemical pesticides and herbicides.
- Maximising *funding* opportunities.

10. In furtherance of these aims the Strategy has the following objectives:

- To provide accessible, high quality green spaces and sport and recreation facilities which meet the recreational needs of all sections of the community.
- To use external awards and accreditations to raise standards of our green spaces.
- To make green spaces accessible to all.
- To make information and facilities available to all.
- To engage the local community, local user groups and other stakeholders to participate in the improvement of green spaces.
- To raise the profile of green spaces and to promote their benefit to the District and secure greater use and involvement by the local community.
- To consult regularly with the local community and user groups to ensure that the green spaces and facilities remain appropriate to their needs and are well used.

Developing Standards

11. The following provision standards were recommended by The Green Spaces Strategy Development Group in August 2007 and endorsed by the Local Committees as the basis for assessing the requirements for green space provision:

	<u>hectares per thousand population</u>
Parks and gardens	1.2 ha in urban sub-areas & rural settlements with a population of over 3,000.
Outdoor sports provision	2.0 ha
Amenity greenspaces	0.8 ha
Provision for children and young people	0.2 ha
Total	4.2 ha

12. The accessibility standards recommended by the Strategy Development Group are:

Parks and gardens	12.5 min. walk (1 km distance)
Natural and semi-natural greenspace	15 min. walk (1.2 km)
Green corridors	15 min. walk (1.2 km)
Amenity greenspace	5-10 min. walk (400-800m)
Children's play provision:	
- toddler/junior	5 min. walk (400m)
- teenage	10 min. walk (800m)
Outdoor sports provision	10-15 min. drive (4-6 km.)
Allotments	No standards
Cemeteries and burial grounds	No standards

13. The Strategy Development Group decided not to have prescriptive quality standards. A level of quality for each type of green space was set by taking the top quartile of sites within each typology, with the lowest overall quality score in that quartile taken as the minimum standard for each typology. The intention would be to improve the quality of sites outside the top quartile by focussing improvements on specific features that had a low score.

Application of Provision standards

14. The main conclusions arising from applying these standards to the projected population in 2011 in the six sub-areas are:

Braintree Urban Sub-Area

- The urban area is deficient in outdoor sports provision and amenity greenspaces; generally new provision can only be achieved through the planning process when there are development or redevelopment opportunities.
- 77 ha of parks and gardens meet the standard, but only 52% of households were satisfied with the level of provision. This may be because Great Notley Country Park (40 ha) is included in this typology. Existing local plan proposals for informal open space in Bocking North and along the River Brain would help to redress the imbalance within the sub-area.

- Notwithstanding recent improvements and additions to existing play areas, there is a need for greater provision, particularly in Bocking Blackwater and Bocking South wards.

Braintree Rural Sub-Area

- Coggeshall is the only settlement over 3,000 and it has minimal provision of just 0.7 ha. The deficiency would be met by the Local Plan Review proposal for the use of Vicarage Field for formal recreation.
- Overall there is a small surplus of outdoor sports provision, although this masks under-provision at Rayne and Black Notley.
- There is a deficiency of amenity greenspace, although the presence of green corridors and natural or semi-natural greenspaces could be said to make up for this deficiency.
- Most villages have inadequate provision for children and young people. To meet the standards additional play spaces are needed at Black Notley, Coggeshall, Cressing and Stisted and in each of the Three Fields villages.

Halstead Urban Sub-Area

- There is an under-provision of 11 ha in parks and gardens, which will not be met by the Local Plan Review proposal for 1 ha of informal open space at Tidings Hill.
- The small shortfall in outdoor sports provision will be met by the Local Plan Review proposal at Sudbury Road.
- There is an under-provision in amenity greenspaces of nearly 5 ha.
- Provision of children's play spaces falls just short of the standard, equivalent to a small, equipped play area; any further provision should be in St Andrews Ward.
- With 35 ha of green corridors in and around Halstead used as informal open space, the sub-area has sufficient open space on its doorstep to compensate for the deficiencies in all typologies.

Halstead Rural Sub-Area

- Of the two settlements over 3,000, Sible Hedingham has an adequate provision of parks and gardens, whilst Earls Colne has a 2 ha shortfall. Any new provision would have to be by way of a new land allocation.
- There is an overprovision of outdoor sports facilities, largely due to the use by the community of school playing fields at Gosfield and Sible Hedingham. This masks shortfalls of 3.4 ha in Three Colnes and 1.9 ha at Great Yeldham. Any new provision would have to be by way of a new land allocation.
- There are also shortfalls in provision for children and young people and in amenity greenspace. There will be opportunities to secure additional provision at Sible Hedingham through development opportunities and existing open space proposals in the Local Plan Review.

Witham Urban Sub-Area

- There will be a 24 ha deficiency in parks and gardens. This will be partly met by informal recreation areas in the Maltings Lane development. Witham also

has over 35ha of green corridors, including the riverside park running through the centre of Witham, and 18 ha of natural and semi-natural greenspaces.

- The deficiency of 21ha in outdoor sports provision is exaggerated because Rickstones School playing field (almost 9 ha) is located in Rivenhall parish. Future provision of 2.1 ha at Maltings Lane will leave a need for up to 10 ha to be provided.
- Has the largest amount of amenity greenspace in the District, with nearly 15 ha more than the standard would require. Much of this is in small sites in residential streets, and not therefore capable of any other function.
- There is a need for greater provision for children and young people. The Maltings Lane neighbourhood will provide a further 7 playspaces, of which only one will be equipped, and there is still a need for further provision in South and West wards.

Witham Rural Sub-Area

- Three settlements have inadequate provision of parks and gardens – Kelvedon, Hatfield Peverel and Silver End – although there are no obvious locations for new provision.
- The overprovision in outdoor sports provision is due to the inclusion of Rickstones School playing field. There is a significant shortfall at Kelvedon, which would be met by the Local Plan Review proposal at London Road.
- The sub-area is generally lacking in amenity greenspaces; new provision can only be achieved in conjunction with new development.
- There are deficiencies in provision for children and young people in all wards, but the greatest need is in the three main settlements of at Hatfield Peverel, Kelvedon and Silver End

Strategic locations for new green spaces.

15. In some areas deficiencies in green space provision can only be met through new land use allocations. The Local Plan Review includes allocations for public open space, and the following should be carried forward into the Local Development Framework as part of the Green Spaces Strategy:

Tidings Hill/Oak Road, Halstead (1 hectare; formal open space)
Sudbury Road, Halstead (6 hectares; sports provision)
London Road, Kelvedon (sports provision)

16. Land for the following additional spaces should be identified in the Allocations Document:

Up to 10 hectares of playing fields at Witham.
Vicarage Field, West Street, Coggeshall
Up to 2 hectares of parks and gardens in Earls Colne
Up to 3 hectares of outdoor sports provision in Three Colnes ward
Up to 2 hectares of outdoor sports provision in Yeldham ward
Up to 5 hectares of parks and gardens in Hatfield Peverel
Up to 4 hectares of parks and gardens at Kelvedon

17. It is anticipated that most of the additional play provision required can be located within existing open spaces in the District. In some areas of deficiency there are no obvious locations within existing open spaces, and new sites may need to be found. These are most likely to be met developer contributions arising from new housing developments.
18. The river valleys and former rail corridors in the District provide the best opportunities for linkages between green spaces. Where the river valleys run through the centres of the main urban areas they already provide a significant amount of public open space, but opportunities remain to complete or extend these corridors at Braintree, Bocking, Halstead and Witham. There is still a need to bridge the river Brain to complete the Blackwater Rail Trail in Witham, and there are Local Plan Review proposals to open up the dismantled Colne Valley Railway route at Halstead.
19. Braintree Council is committed to extending the cycleway network through the main towns. There are opportunities to promote new cycleways and footpaths links by improving some of the existing green corridors, and re-opening new lengths of corridor in features such as dismantled railways.

Raising the Quality of Green Spaces

20. The Green Spaces Strategy will raise the overall quality of green spaces in the following ways:
 - Improving quality ratings through a *phased quality improvement programme* based on a quality-value matrix.
 - Preparing *improvement plans* for each site in the improvement programme.
 - Preparing *management and maintenance plans* for selected sites, including where appropriate nature conservation management, habitat protection and habitat creation.
 - Promoting *sustainable land management and maintenance practices*.
 - *Encouraging native flora and fauna* in appropriate places.
 - Identifying requirements for new signage/entrances to sites with a common *BDC "branding"*.
 - Identifying opportunities for *events and activities* in selected greenspaces to encourage greater use and involvement from a wider cross-section of the community.
 - *Raising awareness* and promoting the use of green spaces which have high quality and accessibility but low usage.
 - *Creating and maintaining new sports provision* to the standards of governing bodies.
 - *Increasing accessibility* and ensuring that green spaces meet DDA requirements.
 - *Protecting key high quality, high use, and high accessibility green spaces from development*.

21. The Strategy includes producing “model” management plans which, in addition to influencing the way in which the Council manages its own land, will be promoted to the public and other bodies as being examples of best practice and encourage other landowners to raise the quality of their green spaces. Community involvement will be encouraged at all levels – generating ideas, inputting to management plans and forming “friends” groups. The Council will review its existing management practices and personnel skills to improve operational practices, improve skills, maximise opportunities for generating both financial resources and non-financial resources.

Action Plan

22. The Green Spaces Strategy will provide the basis for continuing to improve green space provision in Braintree District. The Action Plan is still being finalised, but it will include the following:
- Strategic policies for provision.
 - The programme for raising the quality of green spaces.
 - Proposals for improved links, including cycleways, between green spaces.
 - Management and maintenance plans.
 - Advice to the community and other landowners.
 - Marketing and educational activities (including involvement of the community).
 - Costs and funding.
23. The Action Plan will define:
- The steps, personnel and timescale for achieving the strategy’s aims. Relationship to the Best Value review process and to service delivery plans. A table to show:
 - A list of actions, including more detailed site-specific activities where appropriate.
 - Who will carry out the actions, e.g. Council personnel, community and other stakeholders.
 - A timetable prioritising the actions to be carried out.
 - The estimated costs of the programme.
 - The funding sources appropriate to each action.
 - Performance indicators.

Monitoring and Review

24. It is essential to maintain the impetus provided by the open space audit and development of this Strategy. The process has given us a detailed picture of the green spaces in the District, and information that will be of benefit to a number of Council services and to the local community. It is a firm foundation on which to build future policy and to raise the quality of green spaces in the District. Therefore it is important to ensure that there is a programme of continuous monitoring so that the information base can be updated and green space policies

changed when necessary. The following will be the key components of the monitoring and review procedures for the Green Spaces Strategy:

- Action Plan to be reviewed annually.
 - Strategy and Action Plan to be reviewed against corporate policy, performance criteria and targets every three to five years.
 - Supplement national performance indicators (Audit Commission) with tailor-made local performance indicators, e.g. measuring levels of use and user satisfaction with green spaces.
 - Green Flag Award criteria as a measure of quality. In using this national standard as a local performance indicator, improvements can be prioritised across the network of green space.
 - Green space audits to be undertaken every five years by the Council's Street Scene team to update information on the quality, accessibility and use of green spaces.
 - Consultation with the community to be carried out every five years to review the needs of the community and the use of green spaces.
25. It is proposed that the Annual Monitoring Report will include the following indicators to measure the effectiveness of the Strategy:
- Amount of new open space provided
 - Amount of financial contributions obtained through Section 106 Agreements
 - The number of green spaces with green flag awards, management plans and maintenance plans in place
 - The number of green spaces which have been improved
 - The amount of open space which has been lost

Conclusion

26. The Strategy is intended to be a Corporate Document, to be used as a basis for preparing open space and recreation policies as part of the Local Development Framework, as well as advocating a programme of management and maintenance plans for the Council's green spaces and recommending a closer working relationship with local communities. Because the BGSS will form a major part of the evidence base for new planning policies, it is important to ensure that the public have an opportunity to comment on its findings. The three Local Area Committees are being asked to endorse the Strategy for the purposes of public consultation, following which the document, together with any proposed amendments arising from the consultation, will be considered by the LDF Panel and then adopted as Council policy.