

FROM: Audit and Risk Manager
TO: Head of Neighbourhood Services
C.C. Chief Executive
Deputy Chief Executive (BH)
Head of Finance
Green Space Manager
Portfolio Holder (Cllr David Norris)

SUBJECT: Open Spaces
DATE: 14 October 2019

1 **Introduction**

- 1.1 In accordance with the Audit Plan for 2019/20, an examination of the above subject area has been undertaken and this report presents the findings and conclusions drawn from the audit for information and action where appropriate.
- 1.2 Wherever possible, findings have been discussed with the staff involved in the procedures examined and their views are incorporated, where appropriate, into the report. My thanks are extended to all concerned for the help and cooperation received during the audit.

2 **Background**

- 2.1 There are currently 550 hectares of parks and open spaces owned or managed by the Council across 170 sites. There are five major parks and a number of community parks and green spaces. Within these parks there are 49 maintained play areas along with BMX and skate facilities.
- 2.2 The Council manages the trees across the district in open spaces, including approximately 9000 in parks. 11 Local Nature Reserves are managed in partnership with Warwickshire Wildlife Trust including several woodlands.
- 2.3 The Green Space team manages the floral planting across the district utilising 1900m² of bedding areas and 410 hanging baskets. The team plan and coordinate the layout and the bedding plants to be used.
- 2.4 The Council currently spends in the region of £2.5 million per year maintaining, developing and improving its parks and green spaces throughout the district.
- 2.5 The Green Space team have involvement in various projects such as the restoration of the Pump Room Gardens, designing and building of the country park and developing an Abbey Fields management plan, as well as delivering Public Amenity Reserve projects which include upgrades to play areas.

- 2.6 To recognise the social, environmental and economic benefits of open space the Council adopted its first Green Space Strategy in 2012 with a vision to have "a well-planned and managed network of integrated, accessible and diverse green spaces within Warwick District creating a sustainable environment for the benefit of people, wildlife and our natural heritage" by 2026.
- 2.7 The high standards of the open spaces have been nationally recognised recently with the Council receiving three Green Flag awards, one each for Jephson Gardens, Crackley Woods and Oakley Woods in recognition of their excellence and importance to residents and visitors.

3 **Scope and Objectives of the Audit**

- 3.1 The audit was undertaken to review the controls in place over those aspects of Open Spaces that are not covered by other audits. Areas where controls are covered by other specific audits are:
- Outdoor recreational facilities
 - The management of the grounds maintenance contract
- 3.2 In terms of scope, the audit covered the following areas:
- Planning and provision
 - Trees
 - Play areas
 - Risk management
 - Budget planning and management
- 3.3 The audit programme identified the expected controls. The control objectives examined were:
- Open spaces under the control of the Council are appropriately managed and plans are in place to ensure that this continues in the future
 - Open spaces under the control of the Council are accessible to all
 - Members of the public are aware of the open space offering within the district
 - The Council is aware of any concerns that members of the public may have regarding the open spaces provided
 - Trees and woodlands under the control of the Council are appropriately managed and plans are in place to ensure that this continues in the future
 - The Council is aware of trees that need to be maintained
 - Potential issues with regards to trees within the district are identified
 - Play equipment within the district remains safe to use
 - The Council is aware of the risks in relation to the management of open spaces and has taken steps to address them
 - The financing of plans for open spaces has been appropriately considered
 - Budgets are appropriately controlled

4 Findings

4.1 Recommendations from Previous Report

4.1.1 The current position in respect of the recommendations from the previous audit, undertaken in March 2017, were also reviewed. The current position is set out below:

Recommendation	Management Response	Current Status
1 Review of the Green Space Strategy and refresh of the Green Space Action Plan should be scheduled on the Forward Plan at an appropriate juncture.	Agreed with recommendation.	Updates on the Green Space strategy and action plan are reported at Committee. Last report went to the Executive on 7 th March 2018
2 The role of the Green Space Development Group should be clarified by documented terms of reference including a timeframe for report back to Executive and/or Scrutiny Committee as appropriate.	Agreed with recommendation. To be developed, presented and discussed at the next Green Space Development Group meeting.	The Green Space Development Group no longer exists as it was found to be more effective to work directly with the Portfolio Holder and Ward Councillors.
3 Project tracking procedures should be implemented to ensure that issues likely to impact significantly on the project timetable or lead to cost escalations are promptly logged with explanations and actions taken.	Agreed with recommendation.	Reports are written frequently and presented to the Project Sponsor updating on the progress of projects. This includes any changes to timescales and costs and the reasons behind them.
4 Project timetables and cost allocations should be updated as and when they change during each project.	Agreed with recommendation.	See above
5 A completion report should be implemented for each project to be signed off by the Green Space Team Leader and Head of Neighbourhood Services.	Agreed with recommendation.	Reports to the Project Sponsor are signed off and the status of projects is updated.

4.2 **Planning and Provision**

- 4.2.1 The Green Space Strategy and Action Plan were approved in December 2012. Since its approval, updates and revisions have been reported to and approved by Executive. The Strategy supports the Local Plan and is publically available to view and download on Warwick District Council's website.
- 4.2.2 The open space provision within the District is reviewed frequently. Land that is not used has been offered for affordable housing and additional land has been acquired as part of Section 106 agreements, creating new spaces or providing funding to improve the existing ones.
- 4.2.3 The Green Space Planning Officer is the main consultee within the Green Space team, responding to relevant planning applications which meet Section 106 conditions where open space contributions may be required. There is an Open Spaces Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in place with regards to the provision of green spaces within new housing developments. Where the green space available is insufficient, Section 106 sums are requested to improve or develop existing local areas.
- 4.2.4 There have been no new open spaces acquired since the last audit, although new areas are currently being planned and land is in the process of being acquired. These include extending an existing nature reserve and the creation of a country park.
- 4.2.5 Accessibility to open spaces are reviewed regularly as part of the Green Flag criteria. When recommendations arise from the assessments the Green Space team carry out the required improvements, when possible. The Green Space Development Officer responds to the recommendation giving Green Flag an update on what work has been carried out or why the Council has been unable to complete the changes suggested.
- 4.2.6 Open spaces within the district are promoted through various channels, including: newsletters, 'What's On' guides, the Council's website and social media. The Community Engagement Officer liaises with the Media and Events teams to produce and communicate advertising material.
- 4.2.7 Feedback is actively sought when improvements have been made or events are carried out in the parks and open spaces. Feedback is usually required when external funding has been received as the feedback analysis supports the business case and shows the impact of the funding.
- 4.2.8 Feedback is also obtained with face to face research carried out by a team of volunteers and the Community Engagement Officer. This is completed on site in the open spaces and parks with short questionnaires and opinion boards. The data collected is then input on to a computer so it can be analysed.
- 4.2.9 The data collected from feedback is collated and analysed by the Website Service Manager. The Community Engagement Officer views the analysed data using it to improve the spaces and events carried out in them.

4.3 **Trees**

- 4.3.1 The Tree and Woodland Strategy approved in 2008 is now due an update. The team are in the process of reviewing it. The Strategy might not be applicable

any longer as the Council no longer manage trees on behalf of the County Council. There is also a Green Space Strategy and an Open Spaces SPD in place.

- 4.3.2 There is an SLA in place until March 2021 with Warwickshire County Council (WCC) Forestry team for maintenance of the Council's trees. The management of several local woodlands is carried out in partnership with the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.
- 4.3.3 The Green Space Development Officer advised that the Council does not have an inventory of maintained trees. Although the contractor, Abotrack, which carries out all tree inspections on behalf of WCC Forestry team, has a full inventory of trees that it inspects, Warwick District Council staff do not have access. This is being looked into so that relevant Council staff can review the data as and when required. All trees used to be plotted on the GIS mapping system but this has not been updated for some time due to the arboriculture knowledge no longer being in-house.
- 4.3.4 There is a schedule in place for the inspection of Council-maintained trees. The trees are prioritised into zones (1-3) depending on the frequency with which members of the public are within the area, with the frequency of inspections (either every one, three or five years) being dependent on which zone the trees fall into. There is an inspection spreadsheet saved to the network which shows progress and outcomes of the inspections carried out.
- 4.3.5 Meetings are held with the WCC Forestry team on a monthly basis. This ensures work is up-to-date and inspection results are discussed. There are also separate meetings held with a local community group called "The Tree Wardens". These are held with WCC Forestry on an as-and-when-needed basis.

4.4 **Play Areas**

- 4.4.1 There are various inspections carried out at play areas to ensure they are safe and well maintained. In-depth annual inspections are carried out by an independent play inspection company. Their contract came to an end recently, after the 2019 inspections had been completed. The Green Space team are preparing documents ready to go to tender with the new provider being expected to start early in 2020. Additional inspections are carried out by Veolia on a monthly and weekly basis. These inspections check for any broken or damaged equipment.
- 4.4.2 Any issues identified by Veolia during their inspections are reported to the Green Space Development Officer. If the issues are small and the contractors are able to repair on-site, they will do it at the time. For larger issues, where replacement parts or specialist repairs are needed, the equipment is made safe until the repair can be completed.
- 4.4.3 The completed inspection sheets show any outstanding work so the repairs can be monitored and followed up as needed. When equipment needs replacing, the Green Space Project Team Leader is consulted with. This prevents the possibility of equipment being replaced when the renewal of all of the park equipment is due.

4.4.4 There is a play area improvement programme in place with timelines for the project start dates. The team are currently on target to complete the improvements within the timescales agreed, with updates being reported at committee as and when required.

4.5 **Risk Management**

4.5.1 The Neighbourhood Services risk register includes a dedicated section for Open Spaces. There are a number of relevant risks identified for the provision of parks, play areas, trees and other aspects of open spaces.

4.5.2 As well as frequent inspections to ensure play areas are safe there are also assessments carried out in the open spaces across the district. The independent assessments are carried out annually by Green Flag judges as part of their criteria when assessing the local parks and spaces where a Green Flag award has been applied for. The Open Spaces are also audited on a three-yearly basis by an independent consultant, Red Kite. Red Kite audit the open spaces on behalf of the Council assessing various aspects including (but not limited to): accessibility; security and safety; maintenance of facilities, grounds and equipment; and various aspects of conservation.

4.5.3 The frequent inspections of the parks and trees help to reduce the risks and mitigate their impact. An Events Plan is being produced by the Events team which incorporates a section for events in the open spaces. This will help to set out rules and guidance for event organisers which will help to protect the Council's assets as well as manage some of the risks.

4.6 **Budget Planning and Management**

4.6.1 Section 106 funds contribute to the budget available for improving parks and open spaces. In the last financial year, £16,940 was received in contributions and £14,638 was spent. At present there is £761,022 available to spend across the parks and open spaces, most of which is reserved for ongoing and future projects.

4.6.2 The S106 funding provided has conditions and time limits attached to the use of the funds (e.g. funds have to be spent in relation to open spaces within specific areas). All S106 funds are logged onto a spreadsheet showing the conditions and time frames associated with the funds. This allows the team to see where funds have been reserved for specific projects. The spreadsheet is maintained and kept up to date by the Green Space Planning Officer and a Principal Accountant.

4.6.3 The budget for Open Spaces is split across a number of different ledger codes. The Green Space Manager discusses the budgets with the team before allocating them to ensure the expected spend is covered. If any additional funding is required, the team will look at using S106 funds or apply for grants and sponsorship.

4.6.4 Budget monitoring is performed on a monthly basis by the Green Space Manager reviewing spreadsheets provided by the Assistant Accountant. Any variances or concerns are discussed with the Accountant so they can be quickly resolved.

5 **Summary & Conclusion**

5.1 Following our review, we are able to give a SUBSTANTIAL degree of assurance that the systems and controls that are currently in place in respect of Open Spaces are appropriate and are working effectively.

5.2 The assurance bands are shown below:

Level of Assurance	Definition
Substantial Assurance	There is a sound system of control in place and compliance with the key controls.
Moderate Assurance	Whilst the system of control is broadly satisfactory, some controls are weak or non-existent and there is non-compliance with several controls.
Limited Assurance	The system of control is generally weak and there is non-compliance with controls that do exist.

6 **Management Action**

6.1 There are no recommendations arising from this report.

Richard Barr
Audit and Risk Manager