

## INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

**FROM:** Audit and Risk Manager  
**TO:** Head of Neighbourhood Services  
**C.C.** Chief Executive  
Head of Finance  
Contract Services Manager  
Green Space Team Leader

**SUBJECT:** Open Spaces  
**DATE:** 27 November 2012

---

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 In accordance with the Audit Plan for 2012/13, 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. This topic was last audited in November 2006.
- 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 544 hectares of parks and open spaces owned and managed by the council across 171 sites. There are five major parks in the district and numerous community parks and green spaces. 47 maintained play areas are located within these parks along with BMX and skate facilities.
- 2.2 The council manages over 27,000 individual trees in parks, open spaces and along the highway as well as many groups of trees. Also, in partnership with Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, several woodlands are managed by the council.

### 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 Planning & Provision**

- 4.1.1 A draft Green Space Strategy was presented to Executive in April 2012. The Green Space Team Leader (GSTL) advised that, due to a need for further consultation, the final version has not yet been formally approved and a revised draft is to be presented to Executive in December 2012, with the results of public surveys, which had been undertaken at the district's major parks, being fed into the revised draft strategy.
- 4.1.2 The (draft) strategy reflects on a wide ranging Parks and Open Spaces audit that was performed by Pleydell Smithyman Limited in 2008. This is summarised within the strategy. Within the strategy, general principles for the retention, acquisition and disposal of open spaces are discussed, although not in the level of detail to identify individual parcels of land. This will be considered in more detail in an ongoing basis following the formal implementation of the strategy.
- 4.1.3 One of the main concerns of the audit and the strategy is the quality of open space provision across the district. The GSTL advised that a quality audit has been performed and quality standards are now being set.
- 4.1.4 As well as the surveys that have been fed into the strategy, the Park Ranger, provided by Action 21, also performs some surveys each year to obtain the views of visitors to Jephson Gardens. However, the GSTL highlighted that he was aware of the need to undertake specific projects looking into satisfaction levels relating to community parks, as the majority of views obtained relate to the five major parks within the district.
- 4.1.5 The GSTL highlighted that he is a consultee for relevant planning applications where open space contributions may be required. There is a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in place with regards to the provision of open spaces within new housing developments with a supporting document setting out the commuted sums that are payable by developers.
- 4.1.6 For new housing developments (i.e. larger schemes where provision of open spaces will be on site), the aim is to get the open spaces transferred to the council along with a contribution towards maintenance. There is also a move towards getting management plans drawn up prior to the space being transferred.
- 4.1.7 The Field Fare Trust are about to undertake a review of accessibility regarding the council's open space provision. The GSTL highlighted that this would concentrate on things like the local nature reserves as opposed to the 'urban, traditional' parks, as these were generally felt to be accessible and accessibility reviews of the buildings contained within them had already been undertaken.

### **4.2 Trees**

- 4.2.1 The council has a Tree & Woodland Strategy in place, although the GSTL advised that this document may need revising as it was implemented in 1999

- 4.2.2 A contract is currently in place with Glendale to maintain the trees, although the current contract is due to expire by April 2013. The management of woodlands is undertaken in conjunction with the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust (WWT).
- 4.2.3 As highlighted above, the council is currently managing County Highways trees. However, this may transfer to Warwickshire County Council in the future and they may then take on the management of trees in the district's parks to provide more resilience to the current service. A report is to be presented to Executive in December setting out recommendations for this to happen, which should result in a saving to WDC.
- 4.2.4 The Arboricultural Officer (AO) advised that an inventory of maintained trees is held on the Confirm system. This is linked through to the GGP mapping software which plots the location of each tree. All trees maintained by the council, including highways, cemetery, housing and neighbourhood trees are recorded on the system, along with details of species, location, date of last inspection etc.
- 4.2.5 He advised that any works required would be recorded on the system and it would then be updated once the work had been performed. Any new trees planted would be recorded as and when he became aware of them, although there was no budget for new trees, so any additions are generally reliant on receipt of donations.
- 4.2.6 The AO also advised that all trees are included on an inspection programme and are to be inspected every three or four years. He advised the actual programme had been set up by a member of staff who has since left the council, and he was not sure how it had been undertaken.
- 4.2.7 The actual inspections are outsourced to an external company who come into the council to download data from Confirm and then return to upload the results, highlighting the work that is required. However, the AO highlighted that, if a 'priority one' job was identified, they would notify him immediately so that an order for the work to be undertaken could be raised as soon as possible.
- 4.2.8 He also advised that he was not aware of how to track progress against the planned inspections, so was unsure where the contractors were in terms of the overall programme. With the maintenance and inspection of trees due to be transferred to Warwickshire County Council (assuming that Executive approve the recommendations in December), no recommendation is thought to be required. However, if works are not transferred Internal Audit would recommend that steps are undertaken to enable progress against the plan to be monitored.
- 4.2.9 Whilst there is a formal plan of inspections, some additional inspections are performed if requests are received from individuals asking for works to be undertaken on trees. Records of these requests and the status of the jobs are recorded on Confirm. The AO advised that enquiry lists can then be produced from the system to highlight the outstanding jobs.
- 4.2.10 Upon review of the system with the AO, it was ascertained that there is quite a long list of outstanding jobs, although again, should the work be

transferred to Warwickshire County Council, this should improve as there will be greater resilience in place.

### **4.3 Play Areas**

- 4.3.1 The GSTL advised that there is an annual inspection undertaken for all play areas. In addition to this formal annual inspection, Glendale (the current grounds maintenance contractor) perform weekly and more thorough monthly inspections, with the results of these inspections being passed to the Green Space Development Officer.
- 4.3.2 Audits of play equipment are undertaken to review the usage and condition of the equipment and a working party is in place to look at play areas within the district.
- 4.3.3 A full Play Area Review and a Play Area Improvement Programme have gone before Executive for consideration. The improvement programme has set out how each play area will be developed over the next 10 years, looking at the capital costs of developing each site and suggesting how they will be developed, including refurbishments as appropriate.

### **4.4 Risk Management**

- 4.4.1 The Neighbourhood Services risk register has recently been discussed by the Finance & Audit Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The register includes a number of risks relating to play areas, trees and other aspects of operating open spaces.
- 4.4.2 The GSTL advised that a consultant has undertaken assessments in both 2010 and 2012, looking at the strengths and weaknesses of the district's open spaces. The assessments have reviewed, amongst other things, the provision of safe facilities and access to the open spaces provided.

### **4.5 Budget Planning & Management**

- 4.5.1 The financing of plans for programmes such as play area improvements are considered prior to reports being presented to committees. The report was found to contain relevant estimates of capital costs that would need to be incurred should the programme be undertaken.
- 4.5.2 The budgets for open spaces come under a number of different headings, with some being covered as part of the grounds maintenance budgets and others being part of the integrated waste contracts.
- 4.5.3 Budget monitoring is performed on a monthly basis with the Contract Services Manager and the Senior Contracts Officer reviewing spreadsheets provided by the Assistant Accountant.
- 4.5.4 More specific spreadsheets are also maintained by individual officers to monitor the budgets that they are responsible for.

## **5. Summary & Conclusion**

- 5.1 Following our review, we are able to give a SUBSTANTIAL degree of assurance that the systems and controls in place for the management of the district's Open Spaces are appropriate and are working effectively.
- 5.2 One minor issue identified during the audit, in relation to the ability to review progress against the programme of tree inspections will cease to be an issue if the responsibility for tree maintenance is taken over by Warwickshire County Council and, therefore, no recommendation is thought to be required. However, if this transfer of responsibility does not take place then steps need to be taken to address the issue.

Richard Barr  
Audit and Risk Manager