

ENVIRONMENT PDG
7th November 2017

Parks and Open Space 10 Year Management Plans and Design Principles

Cabinet Member: Cllr Clive Eginton, and Cllr Colin Slade

Responsible Officer: Andrew Pritchard, Director of Operational Services

Reason for Report: To consider potential design principles for parks and open spaces under the control of Mid Devon District Council.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: Environment – Priority 4 – Protecting the environment.

Financial Implications: The 17.18 budget to maintain open spaces and parks is set out below:

- Grounds Maintenance £620k
- Parks and Open Spaces £386k
- Play areas £159k
- Bereavement Services £77k
- Cemeteries £120k

Legal Implications: Health and Safety legislation requires the Council to ensure all parks and open spaces are compliant with current guidelines. Crime and Disorder Act Section 17 requires that open space design and maintenance ensures adequate provision is made to design-out opportunities for anti-social behaviour and criminal activities.

Risk Assessment: The Council would require a relevant review of risk assessments for all proposals that significantly impact on current landscaping provision; the intent being to assess risk on a case by case, site by site basis.

Equality Impact Assessment: There are no equality issues identified in this report.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 At the Environment PDG held on the 11th July 2017 a discussion paper (Item 15) was tabled which outlined a potential framework which could be used to take a long term view of our open spaces and parks. It was a paper written to stimulate discussion and debate. That debate included a resolution to ask the Community PDG to discuss the paper with regard to the health and wellbeing of families using open spaces, in particular section 8 concerning play areas.

1.2 At the Community PDG which met on 1st August 2017 it was resolved that the Environment PDG be asked to ensure that the Parks and Open Spaces 10 Year Management Plan be clear that:

1.2.1 Play areas must be fenced when necessary for health and safety reasons, as the health, safety and wellbeing of children was of paramount importance:

1.2.2 Play England criteria be used:

- 1.2.3 When work was undertaken to remove fences or other items such as benches, the work must be undertaken safely and no hazards left:
- 1.2.4 That communication and clear consultation must take place with all parties being updated.
- 1.3 The Environment PDG meeting on the 5th September 2017 received the response from the Community PDG and agreed a full report with recommendations be brought to the next meeting of the PDG; this report being that document.

2.0 Overarching Ambition

- 2.1 The overarching ambition is to develop a 10 year management plan for each open space under the control of Mid Devon District Council. The intention is to prioritise the design of formal parks and gardens in the first instance.

3.0 10-year Management Plans

- 3.1 The idea behind introducing 10 year management plans is to establish a long term view of our open spaces. It is a chance to look at planting and infrastructure investment over many seasons rather than simply year to year.
- 3.2 From the outset it is clear that consultation is a vital step when considering the future look of our open spaces. There is an important role for our Town and Parish Councils and we welcome their opinion and involvement.

4.0 Wild flower displays, natural grassland meadows, slow growing grasses.

- 4.1 The options and benefit of these environments were set out in the briefing paper to Environment PDG dated 6th September 2016¹. The introduction of wild flower in particular has been well received to date.

4.2 RECOMMENDATION 1: The Council should look to increase the volume of wild flower, natural grassland meadows and slow growing grasses in its open spaces.

5.0 Shrub bed maintenance

- 5.1 A traditional feature of public open space has been the use of displays with typical shrubs set within shrub bed areas. Over recent decades the maintenance of these areas has been largely reduced to trimming shrubs with hedge trimmers in the autumn. As a result of this practice the parts of the plants that develop the traditional flower displays have been removed. An unintended consequence has been that certain areas have become isolated and, in part, have encouraged anti-social behaviour. The original intended objective of producing attractive seasonal displays has been lost by these practices.

¹ A briefing paper on 6 September 2016 called 'Wildflower displays, grassland meadows and slow growing grass seed mixtures'. It was noted by the PDG but no decisions were made.

5.2 **RECOMMENDATION 2: Where shrub beds have become overgrown, a new style of specimen planting will be used to replace traditional shrub bed areas.**

This will remove the need for high intensity shrub pruning and allow specimen plants to mature in the right location. Seasonal displays will be enhanced by the removal of incorrect hedge trimming practices and areas of anti-social behaviour will be reduced within the parks.

6.0 **Tree stock maintenance and development**

6.1 All parks have a variety of trees and shrubs. In certain areas the wrong species may, perhaps, have been introduced into that open space. This means there may be incidences when we choose to removal a healthy tree or group of trees in order to benefit the long term development of an area. In these situations a full replacement plan and explanation of the proposals would be set out in advance.

6.2 **RECOMMENDATION 3: The management of tree stock will be set in the context of the 10 year management plan for that open space. There should be a presumption on the use of native trees as the prominent choice within any landscape design.**

7.0 **Built Environment**

7.1 Within our parks and open spaces the built environment can be as important to the public as the natural or soft landscaping provision. This includes paths, furniture, fences and walls.

7.2 When developing a 10 year management plan for an open space it is proposed that a hierarchy of questions is used when determining the response to maintenance. These should be:

7.2.1 **Remove** - is the facility needed? Often a feature may be unnecessary but retained over decades without a clear reason for doing so. There are numerous paths within our open spaces that are in need of resurfacing and walls and fences that are becoming dilapidated. By removing a feature the Council can reduce future liabilities.

7.2.2 **Reduce** - in many instances there may not be an option to remove a facility completely. Therefore our second option could be to reduce the quantities provided. For example, careful consideration of how benches are sited could result in an overall reduction in the number of benches without that loss being seen as a detrimental reduction. If a bench is located in an area that enjoys far reaching views, rather than in a dark and hidden area of a park, it is more likely to be used and less likely to be vandalised or encourage anti-social behaviour.

Footpaths could be removed and returned to grass land areas. Fences to internal areas of open spaces can be reduced in height with boundary treatments changed to reduce the need for a fence. Un-fencing play areas in certain circumstances will create a broader area for natural play.

- 7.2.3 **Repair** - only after consideration of Remove or Reduce would we look to repair the facility in question in a like for like manner.
- 7.2.4 When working through the '**remove, reduce, repair**' hierarchy of questions, the view of Town or Parish Council would be sought as an important part of the decision making process.

8.0 Play areas

- 8.1 Play areas are part of the built environment and would be approached within the context of paragraph 7 above. The interest around play areas warrants them being identified as an element of the built environment for specific discussion.
- 8.2 In considering play areas the "**Play England - Making space for play** (ISBN: 978-1-84775-225) publication is a potential independent reference. It sets out extensive recommendations for play design within the landscape. The guidance is comprehensive and focuses on the design principles of play in the landscape.

The following link www.playengland.org.uk contains useful source material; including the reference document "Play England – Making Space for Play".

- 8.3 Mid Devon District Council currently maintains 97 play areas skate parks and a BMX track of varying size and condition. There are currently 11 play areas leased to Parish or Town Councils. The active leases have terms of between 2 and 20 years remaining.
- 8.4 In 2008 the Council adopted a Supplementary Planning Document relating to 'The provision and funding of open space through development'. Should recommendation 5 at paragraph 8.5.1 be adopted the advice from planning officers is that the "Play England – Making space for play" could be cited as a material consideration when assessing developer proposals.
- 8.5 **RECOMMENDATION 4: When considering maintenance of the built environment the Remove – Reduce – Repair approach outlined in paragraphs 7.2.1 to 7.2.4 above should be applied.**

With particular regard to play areas it is further recommended that:

- 8.5.1 **RECOMMENDATION 5: Play England – Making Space for Play should be adopted by Mid Devon District Council as its formal reference for best practice in the design and management of play areas.**
- 8.5.2 **RECOMMENDATION 6: Play areas must be fenced where fencing is the most appropriate means to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of children.** E.g. to physically separate play areas from roads and/or cycle paths.

8.5.3 RECOMMENDATION 7: When work is undertaken to remove fences or other items, such as benches, the work must be undertaken in a safe manner ensuring no residual hazards.

9.0 Cemetery Maintenance

9.1 The new sections of our cemeteries are now laid out in formal rows that allow for the installation of a headstone and a small vase to each side of the headstone. In defining the area for floral displays and by setting out each headstone border in a formal manner it allows for a high standard of mowing and ensures that none of the new areas become over grown or unsafe to access.

9.2 RECOMMENDATION 8: Headstone runners should be used to define and structure new burial plots.

9.3 RECOMMENDATION 9: Environmental areas should be generated in the old sections of the Council's cemeteries and biodiversity actively promoted in naturalised habitats. At all times War Graves shall be tended and maintained with clear access routes made available.

10.0 Conclusion

10.1 The recommendations contained in this report aim to reflect the debate and representations made during discussion on how to deliver sustainable open spaces. The next step, if supported, would be to apply the principles to our main parks and open spaces to generate a vision for how each space could develop over the next 10 years.

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Circulation of the Report: Cabinet Members, Leadership Team, Community and Environment Policy Development Groups.