

Parks and Open Spaces 10-year Management Plans and Design Principles

Cabinet Member: Cllr Karl Busch

Responsible Officer: Andrew Pritchard, Director of Operational Services

Reason for Report: To invite Members to discuss potential landscape design principles for parks and open spaces.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: Protecting the natural environment.

Financial Implications: The Council's Parks and Open Spaces service covers a number of essential operations. Indicative spend is as follows:

- Grounds Maintenance £0.61M
- Parks and Open Spaces £0.38M
- Play Areas £0.10M
- Bereavement Services £0.08M
- Cemeteries £0.11M

This design principles paper aims to generate a discussion to enable the service to deliver sustainable landscapes within our parks and open spaces, developing new facilities fit for present and future needs, whilst also ensuring future financial affordability.

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.

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

1.0 Introduction

1.1 On 6 September 2016 Environment PDG members received a report on the introduction of wild flower, natural grassland and slow growing sustainable meadows within current parks and open spaces.

1.2 These proposals were accepted and in the last 6 months work has been completed to turn certain areas into more naturalised wild flower meadows. These sites include various traffic islands and areas in People's Park, Tiverton and Crediton Cemeteries and Newcombes Meadow, Crediton. Additionally,

Millennium Park, Cullompton and Phoenix House, Tiverton are locations that now have grassland meadows in their maintenance regime.

1.3 The response from the general public has been broadly supportive, however there have been a few enquiries regarding the new maintenance approach. A number of projects completed over the winter generated greater attention than, for example, the introduction of new grassland meadows. These projects were primarily associated with altering the main infrastructure of the parks and open spaces. In particular;

- Amory Park - removal of conifer hedge
- Peoples Park and West Exe Park - reduction of hedges
- Newcombes Meadow, Crediton - removal of shrub beds

1.4 The projects have generally been welcomed by the community as a good initiative and responses so far have been typical of any change to local community areas and are as expected when change is introduced. The Council is now in a better position to discuss a transformation program for open spaces that will offer attractive, welcoming and sustainable leisure provision for now and the future.

1.5 This report is intended to start a discussion to establish a framework within which the future design of our open spaces will be considered. To aid the discussion it contains a number of proposed 'Design Principles'. The intent being to use any agreed design principle to structure discussion in the future.

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.

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 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 report dated 6 September 2016.

Proposed Design Principle 1

4.2 Where appropriate, the Council will 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.

Proposed Design Principle 2

- 5.2 It is proposed that where shrub beds have become overgrown, a new style of specimen planting will replace the traditional shrub bed area. 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.

Proposed Design Principle 3

- 6.2 The management of tree stock will be set in the context of the 10 year management plan for that open space.

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 could 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.

8.0 Play areas

8.1 Play areas are part of the built environment and would ordinarily be approached within the context of paragraph 7 above. The current interest around play areas warrants them being identified as an element of the built environment for specific discussion.

8.2 The 'traditional' design of play areas over the last 20 years has seen a rise in bow topped fencing that has been adopted by many local authorities. The "**Play England - Making Space for Play**" publication is the document being put forward as the design principle reference.

8.3 The guidance 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 rather than fenced areas common in many open spaces. Fenced play areas are no longer considered best practice in play design; clearly there may be circumstances when retaining fencing is appropriate, yet the clear direction of travel is to provide unfenced play areas where there is less reliance on traditional play furniture.

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

8.4 Mid Devon District Council currently maintains 105 play areas 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.

8.5 There are 4 play areas, Peoples Park, Wilcombe open space, Margarete Road and Everett Place, with no boundary fencing. It is estimated that fencing these currently open play areas would cost £19,000 (based on 380 linear meters).

8.6 As a rule of thumb, play areas have around 120m of fencing for a 'typical' play area. The cost per linear meter of typical play area fencing is circa £50.

Proposed Design Principles 4

- 8.7 As repair work or significant works to play areas are required the intent and spirit of 'Play England – Making Space for Play' should be applied in conjunction with the proposal outlined in paragraph 7 above. For the built environment that would be to remove, reduce than repair.

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.

Proposed Design Principle 5

- 9.2 Headstone runners will be used to define and structure new burial plots. Environmental areas should be generated in the old sections of the cemeteries and biodiversity actively promoted by promoting sustainable naturalised habitats.

10.0 Conclusion

- 10.1 In order to create long term sustainable landscapes, it is proposed that the design principles outlined in this paper are considered by members in order to establish design principles that allow for officers, in consultation, to progress 10 year management plans for open spaces in Mid Devon.

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