

Response to the Consultation Draft: Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2009 to 2013

(Cambridge City Council – Active Communities August 2009)



Cambridge Past Present & Future is a charity that celebrates the unique value of Cambridge as a cultural, academic and economic centre of international stature. It seeks to have a constructive influence on the continued social and economic growth and prosperity of Cambridge and its surrounding villages and countryside, based on sustainable forms of development that give priority to protecting its unique character as a place that is attractive in which to live and work.

Naming and Purpose of the Consultation Document

1. We have come to expect a high standard of presentation in the documents emanating from the City Council – unfortunately this is an exception. Our main cause for criticism is that whilst it recognises the sub-standard provision of green open space in the City and the worsening position over the next decade, it fails to address what to do about this fundamental problem. Its approach seems to imply that the problem of providing green open space by the City Council will get worse rather than better with the proposed new housing developments, that there is little that can be done about the inevitability of this situation. This is an approach that CambridgePPF strongly refutes.
2. By failing to address this fundamental issue, the document does not merit the status of a “strategy” – it is more a policy document that sets out how to improve the management of open spaces owned by the City Council (i.e. quasi a Parks & Open Spaces Asset Management Plan 2009-2013) through a number of measures around improved consultation with the users. These measures are laudable and will clearly improve the use and enjoyment of the City Council’s open spaces, but when the basic provision is failing, the paper focuses on the wrong issues.

Quantity of Open Space in the City

3. CambridgePPF is mystified by the figures presented in the document. In October 2007, the Policy & Projects Section of Environment & Planning Department produced maps * showing the current extent of public open space in and around Cambridge, and the projected increase in open space incorporating the urban extensions proposed for implementation by 2021. These maps suggested that the area of public open space as a percentage of the total built up area was projected to increase from 6.5% in 2007 to around 12.7% in 2021 because of the extensive additional provision in the new edge-of-city developments. This is the exact opposite of the message given in this strategy for 2009-13. In particular the lack of open space within the inner city and suburbs built around 1900s to 1960s must be considered and the situation improved. We very strongly support the City Council with the notion to create quality open spaces in city areas deficient of appropriate open space(s). It is essential that in areas with low or no open space provision that new open space is being integrated and that no commuted sums (Section 106 contributions) are taken in lieu.

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*Map: <http://www.cambridge.gov.uk/ccm/content/policy-and-projects/open-space-in-the-growth-areas.en>

4. So which is correct? This is a fundamental question – as the document says, green open space is a key element in creating attractive places in which people want to live and in developing vibrant communities. It is essential that the City Council gets its act together on these key issues and produces a definitive statement on how in the future it intends to meet standard levels of provision as set out in PPG17 and aspirations as set out in the City's Local Plan 2006 and City's "Open Space and Recreation Strategy 2006". We look forward to seeing this clarification and closer joint working between teams of the various departments of the Council such as officers of Planning Policy, Planning Case Management and Active Communities.
5. A possible explanation for this muddle is that this strategy covers only the open space managed by the City Council and excludes all other areas managed by the University, Colleges, churchyards, or the environmental charities. It is therefore incomplete. What we need is a strategy for the total estate of all open spaces in and around the city, including City Council, SCDC and privately owned sites irrespective of who manages each individual area. This assessment would need to differentiate on the basis of their accessibility to the public (unrestricted/partial access/no access) rather than on their ownership.

Quality of Open Space in the City

6. Table 1, page 7, shows the accelerating deterioration in the provision of green open space by the City Council per 1000 population. In general terms, by 2021 green space is projected to decline by about 25% from the current level which is already below the standard, so that by 2021 it will meet only about half the space required to meet the City's standard (using, for example, the figures for informal open space in the fourth paragraph of Section 4.3). If true, this is just not acceptable. The paper emphasises the benefits of a network of quality green space in contributing to sustainability and quality of life (eg Section 7.3), but seems unable to come forward with any proposals about what to do to reverse this decline.
7. The Summary of Emerging Issues does not grasp the reality of declining provision. It focuses on a range of options for improving the management of the current open spaces – a strategic approach, management plans, toolkits, benchmarking, public feedback, profile raising, communication etc – all well-meaning and but only partially irrelevant in the face of the overwhelming issue of declining provision. We accept that issue g) does include "quantity" alongside "quality" and "range", but this does not reflect the importance of increasing provision. The Society strongly supports the Council and its Active Communities Department in the creation of new and quality open spaces particularly in areas deficient in open space provision.
8. It is absolutely paramount to commence diversification and creation of distinctiveness of parks particularly located between city centre edge and edge of the proposed urban extensions (quasi housing areas developed between 1930s and 1990s). It is essential that modern and high quality primary parks (higher amenity parks such as 'Christ's Pieces') are being provided in areas such as Cherry Hinton, Arbury, Abbey etc deserve better than current provisions.
9. The PPG17 typology includes "natural/semi-natural space" as areas for biodiversity and wildlife. Section 4.3 states that "provision of this type of green space in Cambridge falls well short of the level of provision required by Natural England's ANGSt standard" – but then makes no further proposals as to what to do about it. The paper makes much of the needs to promote wildlife and biodiversity, but then fails to show how this is to be done. Much open space in Cambridge is sterile habitat for wildlife – playing fields, mown grass, formal areas etc – and we need more wild areas to encourage biodiversity as per the City Council's Nature Conservation Strategy
[http://nr.cambridge.gov.uk/uploads/Nature%20Conservation%20Strategy%20Sept%2006%20\(Section%20A\).pdf](http://nr.cambridge.gov.uk/uploads/Nature%20Conservation%20Strategy%20Sept%2006%20(Section%20A).pdf)
10. The section on Assessing Value (4.5) provides a useful analysis of the public benefits arising from providing green open space. This should be used to argue the case for an expansion of open space in the new City/South Cambs developments so as to re-attain the basic standard level of provision.

11. The area of children's play space may currently meet the City Council's minimum standard of provision but by 2021 it will also be in deficit – and presumably in breach of the Council's own Charter for Play.
12. The Society does not wish to see further fragmentation of any green or open spaces – and in particular small spaces - in the City with built developments such as Community Centres, formal sports facilities etc (e.g. Brown's Field Site off Green End Road or Cam2 proposal in relation to the Stourbridge Common) but rather see such essential buildings etc integrated nearby to safeguard the City's precious green spaces.
13. Instead The Society considers it as paramount that all parks and open spaces are fully master planned to ensure gradual improvements are achieved resulting in tranquil and high quality parks and open spaces for all local people.

Conclusion:

If taken at face value, the message that emerges from this document is very disturbing. It generates the impression that open spaces are a second order issue, and that faced with the reality of near-impossible housing targets, it is an issue about which little can be done.

In reality nothing could be further from the truth – green open spaces are vital in creating dynamic communities, in improving the quality of life for residents, in mitigating climate change, and in keeping the city an attractive place in which to live and work. We hope therefore that the City Council will discard this “strategy”, and will instead come up with a new version that clarifies the future provision of public open space, including how the basic standard of provision is to be re-attained in the future.

The Society is keen to further support this process as it considers that **green space provision is the quality denominator for current and future generations** and one of the vital building blocks to ensure not only that citizens stay healthy, happy and relaxed but that all also benefits biodiversity, tackles climate change issues and supports the reduction of the overall city's environmental footprint of the city.

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Formerly Cambridge Preservation Society

Cambridge Past, Present & Future — a charity working to keep Cambridge and its surroundings special by positively influencing planning developments, delivering environmental education and managing the green spaces and historic buildings in its care — for the benefit of all.

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CambridgePPF comments in relation to: Summary of emerging issues

a) Address localized concerns about standards of provision and maintenance

- **More neighbourhood involvement is favourable** to give people more ownership and respect of their open spaces – but within limits to balance with essential increased staff input of the Active Communities' team.
- Many green spaces are city-wide facilities and with some good provision and some local quality/ provision however there is concern about **lack of supervision and maintenance** in many parks.
- **Involving younger people** – incl friends groups in aspects of looking after the green spaces or pockets (Friend's Garden) and innovative community green spaces such as old BMX course near Abbey Swimming Pool, which seems to engender much more stakeholder ownership and thus also popularity.
- **Litter and increased erosion with cycle commuter routes** is perceived as major issues in some parks.
- **Transition towns** – opportunities for inner city 'food growing' using bedding areas or odd park and street corners should be investigated as a one off or long-term sustainability to highlight facilities in the city and engender support from local people appreciating local green spaces etc.
- **See also our other comments as made under b), t) etc.**

b) Provide a shared and systematic approach to the monitoring, evaluation and management of grounds maintenance that involves and responds to the needs of local people

- The Society agrees that there is a need to accumulate more knowledge on the management of the varied green spaces. It is considered in these cash-strapped times, a better and integrated grounds maintenance unit should be set up with improved value for money as well as wider skills range to not only cover formal but also informal green space management techniques (horticultural and nature conservation orientated) and be able to better deal with volunteer support.

c) Establish a broad range of opportunities for encouraging feedback on parks and open spaces by all users

- Yes – such is always more informative. However any such should conform with requirements of grant providers as well as ensuring that data required is provided in an acceptable format to inform the formulation of planning policy and such can hold its ground during intense scrutiny at planning inquiries and appeals.

d) Develop an assessment process and toolkit to identify requirements for play that offers systematic engagement with children and young people

It is important to provide more imaginative play and easily accessible. A "Lamma's Land type-play" area should soon obtain sister locations e.g. in Arbury or Abbey but also have more imagination in terms of theme and overall design integrating play scope for the children and their guardians.

The Society considers it as paramount that all parks and open spaces are fully master planned to ensure gradual improvements are achieved and all at once drastic impacts are avoided resulting in high detrimental impact for local people (e.g. recent tree felling scenarios).

e) Revise conservation and management plans of key parks and open spaces

Yes – for all sites and for every park at least 20 years ahead and even more long-term in relation to tree management etc. It is essential that not only nature conservation issues but also the conservation of the built fabric and wider historic environment is being integrated into the plans to ensure improved quality management of the green spaces in the future. This should include the revision of the Conservation Plans (for Coe Fen & Sheep's Green; Parker's Piece, Midsummer Common, Christ's Pieces and New Square) and initially concentrate on all Registered Historic

Parks and Gardens (such as Mill Rd/ Histon Road Cemeteries, the Backs etc). The Society would be able to further support the preparation of such plans as well considers it as essential that draft combined management and nature/ historic fabric conservation plans are being consulted on. It is essential that not all public open spaces are publicly accessible. This to ensure, that some sanctuaries are provided for the more sensitive wildlife species. More in depth ecological surveys need to be undertaken to ensure wildlife areas are better understood, enhanced and protected (see also City Council's Nature Conservation Strategy).

All draft master plans of the open spaces should be consulted with local amenity groups as well as wider stake holders.

f) Consider opportunities for external investment where the need for improvement has been identified.

- Yes – opportunities must be sought to maximise return for the preservation and enhancement of local open spaces and to maximise the outcome with limited city funding. This to include local friends groups and charities supporting green spaces, accessing grants made by regional, national and international funders; involving local businesses etc without selling the soul of a park etc (e.g. avoidance of excessive advertising signage).
- However the Society would like to see a higher proportion of the Council's annual budget being spent on the City green spaces to ensure quality environment is sustained giving free/ low-cost recreation opportunities to local people.

g) Consider ways to improve the quality, quantity and range of parks and open spaces in Cambridge

- It is absolutely paramount to **commence diversification and creation of distinctiveness of parks particularly located between city centre edge and edge of the proposed urban extensions**. More interesting and imaginative planning of park refurbishments and enhancements using not just catalogue finishes but more site-specific ideas and themes designed and implemented by quality design teams. The name of the game should be a higher variety of green spaces at everybody's doorstep with at least a high quality park and spaces of different landscape character – i.e. in walking distance there should be formal parks with bedding and ornate plantings; formal and informal sports provision, play areas for younger and older children as well as allotments and naturalistic environments (incl Local Nature Reserves).
- **It is essential that modern and high quality primary parks (higher amenity parks such as 'Christ's Pieces') are being provided in areas** such as Cherry Hinton, Arbury, Abbey etc deserve better than current provisions. The parks should be better maintained and cater for variety of uses for local people of whatever age.
- **Where possible in new and adjacent developments open space allocations should be pooled to rather create a larger park** rather than too many 'mini parks'. This to engender better local ownership and more effective management.

h) Consider improvements in the quality of maintenance of neighbourhood parks and open spaces to encourage people to use more local facilities rather than travel to 'destination' parks.

- Please see comments as made above – park and open space maintenance need to be better value for money and quality.

i) Use a systematic approach to identifying areas for investment

- Yes - in liaison with local people: avoid of selling any land of existing open spaces (to fund any improvements) or constructing any buildings on green/ open space land.
- Create other primary parks in areas lacking of quality provisions as outlined in g)

j) Explore further the views of BME residents who wish to use parks and opens spaces; also that a range of methods of engagement and communication should be offered.

- The Society considers such as useful. A clear understanding of why people insufficiently use such spaces as well as making positive provisions (e.g. BBQ corners) would improve

the inclusiveness of the City's Open Spaces. This must also refer to the active sports provisions.

- The same applies in relation to the City's disabled population and clear improvements should be achieved.
- Where possible liaison with individuals and local organisations – City Rangers, residents' associations etc are useful information holders. Some good practice is being established with e.g. Jesus Green Issues in relation to the HLF-bid when liaising with the wider community.

k) Contribute towards an updated open space and recreation strategy for the Council to include standards for informal and formal open space

- Please see comments made earlier – **in areas with low or no open space provision it is essential that new open space is being integrated and that no commuted sums are taken in lieu.** Parks & Recreation Strategy as well as Planning Obligation Strategy should always be in focus and every opportunity should be sought in areas lacking of adequate green spaces to ensure such are provided (e.g. CB1, Kings Hedges/New Chesterton, Romsey town etc).
- More provisions for students with no college facilities should be provided (active sport and informal recreation spaces – e.g. CB1, ARU main campus area). The Strategy should recognise that student accommodations are not covered under the new homes/ dwelling calculations but significantly increase the usage of nearby open spaces (wear and tear and need for active sport areas).
- The Society increasingly receives informal comments stating that the City should resist any further loss of any existing sports provisions in the inner city as well as suburbs and ensure full sport provisions are integrated right from the start at all new urban extensions. This should include enhanced provision in areas currently underprovided with active sport facilities.
- No allotments sites should be developed and rather the opposite more allotments spaces should be created in areas where there is a shortage of allotments or community gardens.
- All new open space should be in the full ownership of the City Council and not leased for 99 years etc (e.g. Trumpington Meadows). This to ensure public ownership and full control in perpetuity.

l) Develop a benchmarking programme to ascertain the extent to which cost effectiveness and best value are achieved.

- The Society fully supports good practice to ensure better grounds maintenance operations and cost effectiveness are achieved. Immeasurable items cannot easily be captured - such as the value of varied types of green spaces, satisfaction rates etc – and should be addressed as and when more research data becomes available.
- Local knowledge local councillors, officers and other local stakeholders are useful to involve this process.
- However balanced approach should be taken – some research but more importantly improved park / OS provisions for local people.

m) Raise the profile, understanding and value of parks and open spaces in Cambridge

- The Society strongly supports promotion of local open spaces and suggests such is integrated with the promotion of facilities to the urban / rural fringe such as Nine Wells, Milton Country Park, Coton Countryside Reserve, Magog Down as well as Wandlebury Country Park – i.e. over 250ha of informal green space managed by three local charities to the edge of the City.

n) Engage systematically with local people to identify aspirations and opportunities for involvement

- Yes – ensure aspirations are set high and are imaginative. Involvement of local people is advisable as outlined earlier but limitations must also be highlighted to ensure cost-effectiveness of resources.
- It is essential to demonstrate to local people what is possible and to engender out of the box thinking using ideas and examples from all over the world and potentially emerging local ideas.
- Good consultations should be held to obtain support and refined design solutions and maintenance operations; it overall should lessen impacts of less desirable outcomes (noise, damage to trees and ground surfaces etc).

o) Encourage 'ownership' by the local community through Friends groups and opportunities for volunteering

- Yes - such is very important but ensure local children and schools etc are involved, too.
- local friends group can be excellent champion for their parks but also need to take on issues as raised by other city residents and stakeholders as well as respect the expertise of the City Council's various management departments. In areas such needs to be strengthened and insular workings reduced.

p) Consider proactive ways to 'design out' crime with techniques such as natural surveillance and encourage positive approaches such as increasing activities that bring natural policing by visitors.

- Yes – but needs careful planning and phasing in to avoid adverse effects of potentially drastic measures. However the retention or reversion to “parks just grassed and with boring lollypop trees” should be avoided
- We strongly desist from any introduction of CCTV in public parks. It is more advisable to bring the right people into the park and ensure green spaces are respected by all users.
- We object to any integration of lighting within our commons and more sensitive green spaces as well as Green Belt areas/ edge. This to preserve the special character of Cambridge, avoidance of light pollution and ensuring the night sky can still be seen in the parks located at the centre of the city. We do not consider that a lit park is necessarily a safer park for all users.

q) Consider and consult on the introduction and updating of bye laws where this is appropriate byelaws need to be enforced to work

- Byelaws will only work if the Council is taking them seriously and will have skilled enforcement officers in action.
- It is essential to work together with the City Rangers as well as Friends Groups and other stakeholders.

r) Develop conservation, habitat and management plans for parks and open spaces

- Yes – see our comments under e)
- Plans should cover all green spaces - small and large .

s) Review methods of working to ensure that they have as little environmental impact as possible

- Yes – carbon foot-print reduction and climate change issues and biodiversity needs should also be tackled as part of the management of open spaces
- Parks should better be reachable with sustainable transport means and only new parking provision for disabled should be considered. Adequate maps on the Council's web and in printed format need to be available to illustrate access and overall facilities.
- All users should be considered when making alterations
- The tranquillity of all – in particular inner urban parks – should be safeguarded as parks will be increasingly be refuges from the growing city – i.e. especially in relation to the ongoing densification of the built environment within the inner city and its hassle and bustle.

t) Develop more integrated internal working relationships to address environmental work

- The Society strongly concurs with this notion and considers that closer working relationship should be engendered with the Council's environmental design team, policy makers, park management as well as grounds and ranger maintenance teams. Current fragmentation results in more ineffective working relationships and closer joint working may achieve more and be of better best value.

u) Utilise the emerging events framework to balance the increased use of parks and open spaces for events against realistic capacity and impact.

- Balance – it is considered that a balance of events and activities needs to be achieved and that perhaps some of the larger events are also spread at times to other city location with reasonable access with sustainable transport means. A park/ open space is there to have at times activities and events and Cambridge has a wonderful tradition of such at various open spaces. In respect of larger events, preventative means need to be integrated and rapid quality repair is engendered to ensure the fabric of spaces is preserved.
- It is considered that external income generation is necessary if budgets of local green spaces are not significantly increased and actually more decrease in real term from year to year.
- Better usage of the Market Square and nearby roads should be made for events such as French Market and the City must ensure other large paved squares become available in the near future due to the population increase and associated wear and tear (link with guided buses and P&R sites may be suitable such as those suggested by the Society as part of the Clay Farm development proposals). Parker's Piece is showing the effect of overuse in areas.

v) Use 'Be Active, Be Healthy' to guide partnership approaches to increase opportunity for improvement to health and well being by the use of parks and open spaces

- Yes – but avoid patronising users or people in need; consider working in close relationship with local community centres and better link community facilities with active sports facilities to be more inclusive and perhaps cost-effective.
- Provide easy website one-stop-website on where one can carry out free/ low cost recreation including sports activities. Include what to do and not to do on websites i.e. park byelaws - BBQ and dog issues seem to some of the major local concerns).

Other thoughts:

- **Map** - The Strategy needs to include maps of all open spaces in the City and which are owned and also those not owned by the City Council; those which are accessible to the public without pay as well as areas of low or lacking open space provision. Suggested are to use classification categories as per PPG17.
- **Policies, references documents and glossary** – it is essential to include policy and other advisory background documentation (local, regional and national, European) and more detailed glossary on acronyms used.
- **Planning Material** – document should illustrate its relevance in the planning process (presumable this document is just advisory rather than a material consideration).
- **Informal open space** – please note that the Society owns the Leper Chapel Meadows – one of the important informal open spaces in the City and a designated City Wildlife Site.
- **Bedding areas in the city should be re-evaluated** – i.e. areas rich in bedding should be slimmed down (re-moved or transition town ideas being developed) and areas deficient of such receive increased provision.