



Bristol Parks Forum

Meeting on Saturday 13th January 2024,

10am Greenway Centre, Southmead.

Notes of a special meeting on the consultation on Bristol City Council's Parks and Green Spaces Strategy/Food Production and Allotments Strategy

Attendance:

Representatives from 7 Parks and Green Spaces Groups. Of those representatives 3 were Forum Committee members (Len Wyatt, Frances Robertson and Ted Fowler),

Cllr Ellie King, Cabinet member for Communities and Public Health.

Becky Belfin, Richard Ennion and Richard Fletcher, Parks Department, Bristol City Council.

A full list of attendees is held by the Committee.

Meeting Chaired by Len Wyatt, Notes by Kate Spreadbury and Len Wyatt.

Purpose and background to meeting:

The meeting had been organised to provide an opportunity for Parks and Green Spaces groups to meet with the City Council to ask questions about the consultation on the new Parks and Green Spaces Strategy and Food Production and Allotments Strategy (from here on the strategy) to help them respond to the consultation.

The consultation had started on the 11th December 2023 and was due to finish on the 22nd January 2024.

Up to the date of this meeting the Parks Forum had issued via an Update email a guide to the Strategy and supporting information before Christmas.

It had also called for any questions which could be put to the Council before the meeting to help focus the meeting; and had held a Zoom meeting on the Strategy on 4th January 2024 to seek the views of groups on what questions could be put to the Council. That list had been sent in, and addition to informing this discussion, a written reply is due back from the Council on the questions.

It was agreed that the main focus of these notes would be the discussion around the questions raised – and the answers given. It should be noted that some of the questions noted here, were originally expressed as statements, but for ease of presentation have been turned into questions. Questions from those at the meeting (other than the Council) are not attributed to individuals, and replies are from the Council. Where the Council has asked questions of the meeting, these are labelled.

After introductions, Len provided an overview of what is in the consultation document, using the Contents Page as the guide.

Frances provided an overview of the work the Forum Committee along with two volunteers from Parks Groups had done so far.

Cllr King introduced the consultation by saying that the production of the Strategy was a huge piece of work. She appreciated that the timing of the consultation was not ideal. Since the previous Strategy (dated 2008) so much has changed about the context around Parks and Green Spaces/Food Growing and Allotments which the Strategy has had to respond to. The intention is to get the Strategy to the March Cabinet meeting before the restrictions related to the Local Elections start, and the change to a committee-based system in May.

The Strategy

Question: Can we get assurances that the Strategy will not be dropped by the next administration?

It is a 15-year strategy, once adopted by Cabinet it is a City Council strategy, that must be adhered to.

Question: Can there be better acknowledgement of the role of Friends groups in the future?

There is room for more shared decision making and responsibility, especially as Parks budgets are struggling. Bristol is very lucky to have fantastic Friends Groups, helping to promote a sense of parks and green spaces belonging to communities.

Question: As the Climate and Ecological emergencies are more urgent than they were in 2008, are the commitments about these strong enough?

Feedback noted.

Question: Does the food growing work cover the only types of food growing in Bristol?

With 8,000 people on the waiting list for allotments, there is a move to look at other ways of meeting the demand – market gardens, community gardens etc. Not looking at private spaces, or all park areas.

Question: Is there enough detail in the Strategy to make it deliverable?

The strategy is an over-arching document so will not provide the level of detail needed.

Question: What other discussions have been held with other groups interested in the areas covered by the Strategy?

There have been meetings during the preparation of the Strategy with other groups interested in the themes covered – nature, food growing, allotments etc.

Following on from the above questions these more general points were made:

- There are a lot of challenges – doubling tree canopy, meeting the demand for food growing and managing 30% of land for nature.
- As a result, need to look holistically at how land is used – eg: should it be used just for recreation – or other things as well?
- The Strategy sets the direction of travel, and is not an implementation plan, but it is designed to be ambitious.
- There is no “pot of gold” available to support this, so the Strategy does not set out details of the resources needed. Resourcing is a challenge, but should not distract from setting out the ambitions in the Themes. The Strategy will be challenging to implement.
- The Strategy changes the context of relationships generally, towards building on what we have, and moving towards collaboration and partnerships.
- There will need to be a change in culture in the Parks Service and others to reflect this change.

Question: Is there a timetable for delivery?

There isn't, the Strategy and its delivery is “iterative”. Have identified short, medium and long-term timescales only.

Question: The Council asked how can we work together to achieve the strategy?

Don't forget to ask Parks Groups for inputs as the Strategy is developed and delivered.

Question: The Council asked are the priorities set out as part of the Strategy, your priorities? Are these the right ones?

The Council asked that if they are not your priorities you need to put that information in the responses.

Following on from the above questions the following points were raised:

- As we all work in silos to some extent, how do we recognise the best way to achieve what is needed.
- If Central Government, which provides funding, feels that Local Government is no longer the favoured way of delivering services etc, how do we ensure that Parks and Green Spaces etc are resourced?
- Bearing in mind that delivery will be complicated, how do we manage the situation where a lot of funding to do things, is tied into bidding processes, which often brings Councils and groups into competition with other similar organisations.

- A view was that Central Government for instance, was unlikely to change its approach to bidding for funds. Does this mean that there needs to be a change of focus of efforts towards working together?
- Could there be benefits to working on bids as groups of parks, green spaces?
- Can funding which is available be more focussed on long-term maintenance?
- There was a need for everyone to understand better the public health and well-being, accessibility, and inclusion related benefits of parks and green spaces etc.

Examples were shared of how applications for funding had been arranged, and how the funding had been funnelled through organisations such as Your Park. Also, examples were given of funding being made available to enable community development work, improving funding applications and training for groups/trustees.

Question: Are the medium-term actions actually needed now?

The medium-term actions are really on-going actions, that cannot be in the longer-term category due to their urgency.

Question: Is there going to be a specific plan for achieving the Managing for Nature?

There is a commitment within the Climate Emergency Plan for achieving the 30% of land managed for nature. And work is continuing on how to achieve these targets.

In preparing for the strategy there was work by the Council on a number of issues including:

- Defining what “managing for nature” means including – actively managing for nature which involves changes to the current management, using changes at different scales (majority of the site, or small areas) or making small adjustments to existing management regimes, or change methods (eg: transfer grasslands to hay cuts, rather than amenity cuts).
- The best place to look for what is being considered is the Nature themed map in the Online Questionnaire
This map uses information about
 - existing habitat quality – and areas where new habitats can be created or enhanced.
 - the West of England Nature Recovery Network proposals which cover the Council’s area
 - areas of land identified in the Local Plan for wildlife; and
 - the distances between council owned sites of similar habitats
- All of this informs decisions about which areas would be suitable for changes which could make a positive difference.
- Then a view was taken on what the change could be, and its implications on costs and priorities.

Currently the Council has identified 15% of Council owned land that would qualify as already managed for wildlife. 25% of all Council owned land is already designated as Sites of Nature Conservation Interest.

The issue is that the Council does not have up to date management plans for all sites being actively implemented, due to a lack of resources. In response there was a view that there were not enough management plans in place at the moment. A view was the technical work done for the Strategy could inform management plans.

The Council felt that it is important that Parks Groups respond to the proposals on the Map as best they can, bearing in mind the level of detail given so far.

Question: The Strategy has a lot of information in it about the Managing for Nature work, could this have been used to create a plan?

The view was taken that it would be better to concentrate on the Strategy at this point. The data can be shared in the future to help individual sites understand what is proposed, when more detailed proposals come forward.

Question: Is it worth having a separate Managing for Nature strategy – rather than have it in the Strategy, bearing in mind the importance of the subject?

The Council will think about that option.

Question: Food Growing and Allotments Strategy – is having that Strategy in the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy sensible? Surely it should be separate, perhaps with some food growing related themes and actions in both?

The reason for this question is that formal allotments are not publically accessible unlike parks and green spaces; and are subject to rules and regulations. It was mentioned that the consultation on those rules and regulations now underway was causing a lot of controversy.

The Council said that they were engaging with groups concerned about the changes in rules and regulations, looking at the feedback. The Council meet with allotment site reps every two months to try and pick up concerns. Some of the proposals for change are based on approaches tried elsewhere. Their view was that there is significant overlap between the two strategies.

Question: When will the related Tree; and Blue/Green Infrastructure Strategies be published?

The Tree Strategy should be published in the Spring of 2024. The Infrastructure Strategy is in preparation.

Question: Do the key actions presented need more work on the detail, and potentially be included in an Implementation Plan, rather than the Strategy? Keeping them separate may allow them to be quickly updated and reported on? Another option could be to call the key actions draft, and don't adopt them as part of the Strategy?

Potentially yes, as at the moment while there is a link between the Strategy and the future plan, the plan does need to be free-standing with more detail and dynamic.

Question: The Council ask whether the key actions are the right ones? Or could there be better alternatives?

The Council encouraged people to put views on these questions in their responses.
Question: Why doesn't the health and well-being of disabled people feature in the Strategy?

The wording of the Strategy now is designed to be inclusive of everyone by using words such as communities, rather than highlight a particular group of people. The wording will be reviewed to see if it is clear enough that disabled people do feature.

Question: Why doesn't the issues around dogs using parks feature in the Strategy?

The issues around dogs using parks are covered by Bye-laws rather than a Strategy.

Plans contained within the on-line questionnaire.

The Plans covered the following subjects – Potential benefits of Tree Planting, Managing for Nature, and Food inequality. Some of the on-line versions of the plans, contained further information if you clicked on an area, about the value of that area/hexagon, against the relevant criteria.

Potential benefits of Tree Planting.

The Council explained that drivers for this work is the commitment to increase the Tree Cover in Bristol, contained in the One City Plan; plus, the benefits to the Climate and Ecological Crises.

There isn't a reference to tree cover in the Strategy, but there are links to other parts of the Strategy. Tree cover is also mentioned in the Tree Strategy. But this Strategy does not cover highway trees.

The deepest colours are those areas where there could be most benefit.
The criteria used to decide which colour to apply to which area is in the key.

Question: If tree cover is not mentioned in the Strategy, why include a question in the survey about it?

The information was included, as it influences the way areas are to be managed for other purposes, eg: managing for nature could include increase tree cover.

Question: When you look at the information behind the maps shown within individual hexagons, why do the numbers that you find there, which are combined to make a cumulative score for an area, vary considerably?

The map is not a map about what will actually be planted, just the potential. There may be reasons why the decision is made not to plant there.

Each of 4 criteria used, indicate a potential benefit – be it provided shade (reducing the effect of increasing urban temperatures) or being part of a Nature Recovery Network for woodlands for instance. The criteria also highlighted that areas of high deprivation often have less tree cover, so would be less protected from the effects of heat due to climate change. The final judgement on an area is a combination of all of the individual hexagons that are within that area.

Managing for Nature

Question: Does the map cover those areas with Neighbourhood Plans in place? And is it comprehensive, as St Andrews Park doesn't seem to be present.

The map is about ecological condition and potential, and it is possible that some parks and green spaces are not included at this stage.

Question: If areas are coloured orange which have the potential to be managed for wildlife, does this exclude other uses?

The colours are allocated for whole sites, not individual parts of sites. It is possible that things are there, which are not picked up by the work so far. Consider the potential changes that could be made when replying.

Question: How were decisions to prioritise certain site made?

Using the information above, sites were identified which could improve the various Nature Recovery Network, as set out by the West of England Nature Partnership. The two main types of networks considered were the Woodland and Grasslands types. Although for most sites, even if they were in the Woodland or Grassland network, a “mosaic” approach to what needs to happen was taken. Mosaic means that a mixture of habitats are present (or are to be created) rather than have a single type of habitat.

Question: When will the next stage of this work take place?

There has been an initial funding application for Green Recovery Fund money. We are waiting to see if there will be an invitation to apply for money. The bid is for £1 million, which is more than what is in the fund. The process is known to be very competitive, so it could be that we actually get around £200,000?

In addition to this funding, we need to purchase new machinery which will allow us to deliver more of the improvements we are considering. We remain committed to improving things for biodiversity.

Food Inequality

This plan shows areas of moderate or severe food insecurity. The darker the purple the more severe the problem.

Question: How do allotments connect to dealing with food insecurity and improvements to mental health and well-being through being outside?

The link is the City Council's Food Equality Strategy (Growing for Bristol). Part of the problem is that some areas have big gardens that people can use, while other areas have large numbers of people in flats or terraces, with fewer food growing areas. A factor is the availability of land.

Question: how will Bristol be able to cope with significant increases in population, which are already known about – or could occur? There are going to be huge challenges on land use – and on park and green space use.

We will need to ensure that new developments contribute to green space which is local to users. The Local Plan out for consultation seeks to do this, and ensure that there is public access to private land. We have to get green space in developments. There needs to be more than generalised statements about access to green space in high density development applications. Council trying to ensure that statements made are deliverable. While there is a focus on improving quality in outer edges of our city these areas serve different purposes from areas in more central areas – where there is a need to green spaces, whether they are large or small.

The reality will be how developments are built.

Question: how has the Strategy influenced the Local Plan?

The influence is through the proposed quantity and quality standards in the Strategy, being part of the Local Plan. The 2008 Strategy while inspirational, turned out to be undeliverable in reality.

Conclusion

The meeting was reminded of the need for groups to respond to the consultation by Monday 22nd January. Groups could also send points from their responses into the Parks Forum by the 15th January, so that they can be reflected in the Forum response.

Kate Spreadbury and Len Wyatt
24 February 2024