

Appendix 1 – Delivering the Vision, Strategic Choices

1. Introduction

1.1 To deliver the vision of the open space strategy and parks development plan it is necessary to break down the vision into its four key themes; analyse the strategic choices that relate to each theme; and decide on the Council's proposed approach to each strategic choice.

2 Modernising our parks and open spaces

Which parks and open spaces should we be seeking to improve?

2.1 The Council's parks and open space investment programme over the last five years has focussed on:

- setting up Falkirk Community Trust to manage our high profile parks;
- creating and establishing the Falkirk Helix;
- improving the quality of the 7 Core Parks previously identified in the 2003 Culture and Leisure Strategy;
- improving the quality of the poorest quality play areas; and
- Installing Multi Use Games Areas at several locations around the Council area

2.2 The Falkirk Helix is of extremely high quality and, together with the creation of the Kelpies and the associated extension of the Forth and Clyde canal, has helped to raise the tourism profile of the Council area and is proving to be very popular with residents and visitors alike. There are, however, other open spaces of national or regional importance across the Council area which have not attracted comparable levels of investment e.g. Callendar Park, Muiravonside Country Park & Kinneil Estate.

2.3 The quality of the 7 Core Parks identified in the 2003 Culture and Leisure Strategy has improved as a result of the investment made (from an average score of 2.87 in the first open space audit to 3.44 in the second open space audit). There are however some communities who would not feel that they have felt any benefit from this programme of investment. For example, there are no Core Parks located in Banknock, Carron, Carronshore, the Upper Braes villages or villages in the rural area. Additionally, there are some communities where the identified Core Park is not necessarily the most valued open space within that community.

2.4 The second open space audit has identified that the gap in quality between those open spaces which sit higher on the hierarchy of importance and those which sit lower in the hierarchy has widened over the last 5 years.

2.5 The choice facing the Council is whether to:

- 1) continue focussing capital investment solely on the Helix, the 7 Core Parks identified in the 2003 Culture and Leisure Strategy and poorly performing play areas identified in the previous Parks Development Plan; or
- 2) re-focus all investment on the poorer quality parks and open spaces which are particularly valued by the local community and where there is no better quality alternative provision; or

- 3) re-focus some investment on the poorer quality parks and open spaces where there is no better quality alternative provision and some on the parks and open spaces which are particularly valued by the local community whilst maintaining investment and revenue budgets in the higher level open spaces which serve a more strategic function and raise the tourism profile of the Council area.

2.6 The consultative draft open space strategy has chosen to refocus investment as described in option 3 above. The indicative spatial strategy for each settlement area (as detailed in section 7 of the strategy) will identify the range of parks and open spaces which the Council believes are of most value to each community and where priority should be given to delivering improvements. If the Council has not correctly identified the most valued open spaces within each community then this should become clear during the consultation process and can be addressed when finalising the strategy. The strategy should also raise its aspirations for the quality of national and regional level open spaces.

What sports and play facilities should we be providing within our parks and open spaces?

2.7 The parks and open spaces within the Council area have a strong traditional offering of grass sports pitches and equipped play spaces which are highly valued by the community. There are some new open space facilities which people have expressed a desire for and which are not currently widely available in our parks and open spaces. These include: all weather synthetic sports pitches; bmx tracks, pump tracks and skate parks; outdoor gyms and areas of natural play.

2.8 The 2010 open space strategy set a number of standards in relation to accessibility to open space including:

- All households should be within 400m walking distance of an open space containing a playspace; and
- All households should be within 800m walking distance of an open space containing a sports area.

2.9 In order to achieve these standards, it is not only necessary to protect and maintain the majority of existing playspaces and sports areas, but also to seek to create new playspaces and sports areas in areas of identified deficiency. In a climate of reduced capital and revenue funding, achieving this will become increasingly difficult.

2.10 The choice facing the Council is whether to:

- 1) Continue to maintain and upgrade our existing sports pitches and equipped play spaces, accepting that with reducing capital and revenue budgets, over time the overall play and sports development value will decline; or
- 2) Reduce the overall number of separate sports pitches and play areas we maintain, allowing capital and revenue budgets to be released to enable investment in a more modern portfolio of play and sports facilities which have a higher overall play and sports development value.

2.11 The consultative draft open space strategy has chosen option 2 as described above. To enable the implementation of this option the Strategy will review its standards in relation to walking distance to play spaces. The indicative spatial

strategy for each settlement area (as detailed in section 6 of the strategy) will identify the play spaces which are surplus to requirements in line with the new walking distance threshold and the open spaces where new or improved play facilities should be developed to enhance overall play value.

How can we encourage more people to use our parks and open spaces?

2.12 Amongst those who completed the citizens' panel questionnaire, roughly one third rarely or never used parks or open spaces. The most commonly stated reason was that there is too much dog mess, with a significant number of respondents indicating that there were too many bikes on the paths. The results of the questionnaire also indicated that just over half of respondents walked or cycled to the last park or open space they visited.

2.13 The choice facing the Council is whether to:

- 1) Do nothing about these problems; or
- 2) Aim to deliver wider health benefits by decreasing the amount of people who rarely or never use parks and open spaces; and increasing the amount of people who choose to walk or cycle to parks and open spaces.

2.14 The consultative draft open space strategy has chosen option 2 as described above. In order to decrease the amount of people who rarely or never use parks and open spaces the Council should:

- Renew its focus on tackling dog fouling within and around parks and open spaces; and
- Develop a strategy for encouraging more considerate use of bicycles within parks and open spaces;
- Encourage people to access parks and open space by advertising what facilities there are within the Falkirk area and promote the benefits of using them

2.15 In order to increase the amount of people who walk or cycle to parks and open spaces the Council should:

- Seek to ensure the provision of good quality open space offering a range of activities within a reasonable distance of every household;
- Improve the active travel network connecting our parks and open spaces;
- Increase the number of parks and open spaces connected to the active travel network; and
- Improve the quality of paths within our parks and open spaces.

Can we improve the range of benefits our parks and open spaces provide?

2.16 Parks and open spaces are vital to the quality of the urban environment and the physical and mental health of its residents, they can also provide valuable wildlife habitat. They help to define a sense of place within settlements, contribute to their landscape structure, provide areas for recreation and physical exercise and provide an attractive setting for businesses to flourish. Where linked into networks, parks and open spaces can be extremely valuable for active travel and can form corridors through which wildlife can migrate through the urban area. Parks and open spaces also have a role to play in sustainable flood management, providing areas for flood water to go without adversely impacting houses or businesses.

2.17 One of the findings of the programme of consultation carried out in advance of the preparation of the consultative draft strategy was that there was widespread support for enhancing the biodiversity and nature conservation value of our parks and open spaces. The Council also has a duty under The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 to further the conservation of biodiversity.

2.18 A number of communities within the Falkirk Council area are at high risk of flooding, most notably in Grangemouth, Airth, Bo'ness, Carron, Carronshore, Bonnybridge and Dunipace. The Council has a duty under the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009 to exercise flood risk related functions with a view to reduce overall flood risk. As outlined above, parks and open spaces can play an important roll in providing areas for flood water to go without adversely impacting on houses or businesses.

2.19 The choice facing the Council is whether to:

- 1) Develop a strategy for the long term improvement of its parks and open spaces without having specific regard to its biodiversity and flood risk management duties or the aims of Falkirk Greenspace; or
- 2) Change the management of the parks and open space resource to exploit opportunities to further the conservation of biodiversity, reduce overall flood risk and promote improvement projects which help to develop a high quality, multi-functional green network which will provide a range of benefits for people, businesses and wildlife and to the ecological status of water bodies across our area.

2.20 The consultative draft open space strategy has chosen option 2 as described above. In order to further the conservation of biodiversity the Council should:

- Identify opportunities to change the maintenance regime of its parks and open spaces to further the conservation of biodiversity;
- Identify opportunities to join up existing habitat networks through promoting targeted landscape change within existing parks and open spaces; and
- Encourage the provision of appropriately designed parks and open spaces within new developments which further the conservation of biodiversity and join up existing habitat networks.

2.21 In order to reduce overall flood risk the Council should:

- Support the development of flood risk management measures within existing parks and open spaces which have been identified within the Local Flood Risk Management Plan or Surface Water Management Plan.

2.22 In order to develop a high quality, multi-functional green network which will provide a range of benefits for people, businesses and wildlife and to the ecological status of water bodies across our area the Council should:

- Support a range of projects which improve the green network in and around the Council area by improving open space sites and corridors and their connectivity;
- Identify opportunities to change the maintenance regime of its parks and open spaces to enhance the ecological status of water bodies;

- Support a range of projects which deliver improvements to riparian habitats within open spaces and to restore water courses to their natural status where they are physically impacted.

3. Addressing inequality and fostering community through open space investment

How should we address the inequality of park and open space provision across our communities?

3.1 The quality of open space provision is not consistent across the Council area. The open space audit has found that there appear to be two tiers of quality of open space provision across the Council area with a greater number of larger, higher quality open spaces in Bo'ness, Falkirk, Polmont and the Rural Area and significantly less of these in Bonnybridge and Banknock, Denny, Grangemouth and Larbert and Stenhousemuir.

3.2 The open space audit has identified that the percentage of households with access to open space which is fit for purpose within 400m is lowest in the rural area concentrated in the villages of Allandale; Avonbridge; California; Dunmore; Greenhill; Shieldhill; Torwood; and Whitecross, and in the main settlements of Bonnybridge and Banknock; Grangemouth and Larbert and Stenhousemuir

3.3 Access to different types of open space is also not consistent across the Council area with access to park or amenity space over 2000m² lowest in Grangemouth and the Polmont Area; access to playspace the lowest in Bo'ness and access to a sports area lowest in Bonnybridge and Banknock.

3.4 The choice facing the Council is whether to:

- 1) Give investment priority to those areas and open spaces which need improving the most; or
- 2) Spread investment equally across all communities.

3.5 As indicated previously at paragraph 4.2.6 the consultative draft strategy will re-focus investment on the poorer quality parks and open spaces which are particularly valued by the local community and where there is no better quality alternative provision as detailed within the indicative spatial strategy for each settlement.

3.6 The programme of investment outlined in the Parks Development Plan (see section 8) is designed to promote the early delivery of projects which do the most to address the inequalities in open space provision revealed in the open space audit.

How can we foster community cohesion through open space investment?

3.7 Parks and open spaces can act as community hubs, providing a focus for community action, a source of civic pride and improving the physical and mental health of the community. Organised community groups can prove tremendously valuable, raising funds and providing expertise to help with the improvement of parks and open spaces and accessing sources of funding unavailable to the Council. The best parks and open spaces are those which sit at the community's heart, performing functions which directly meet their needs and desires.

3.8 There are currently a number of community organisations actively involved in the management and improvement of parks and open spaces across the Council area including: Friends of Kinneil; Friends of Zetland Park; Friends of Dollar Park; Friends of Muiravonside; the Falkirk Allotment Society

3.9 The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill looks to introduce a right for community organisations to take over control of land in public ownership if their plan is better for local people. This right is likely to extend to parks and open spaces.

3.10 A community organisation's enthusiasm for the improvement of a park or open space does not always sustain itself in the long term and there is a danger that the Council could be left with an expensive maintenance liability.

3.11 The choice facing the Council is whether to:

- 1) Actively encourage the increased involvement of community groups in the management and improvement of parks and open spaces; or
- 2) Continue to act as the primary guardian of parks and open spaces, providing support to community organisations with an interest in parks and open spaces only where they actively seek it.

3.12 The consultative draft open space strategy has chosen option 1 as outlined above. In order to actively encourage increased involvement of community groups the Council should:

- Clearly set out the qualifying criteria which community groups will have to meet before they are offered Council support for their plans;
- Clearly set out the level of support that community groups can expect to receive from the Council;
- Set up and actively promote a fund which community organisations can bid into to help with project establishment costs;
- Give priority to investment in open space improvement projects where an active community group is prepared to fund raise or put in their time into project development;
- Working with volunteers and the Council's Education Training Unit to improve parks and open spaces;
- Research and investigate different models for increasing provision for community growing space; and
- Work in partnership to develop initiatives which will help us exploit the educational potential of our existing network of greenspaces.

4. Working and investing more efficiently

Can we maintain our parks and open spaces more efficiently?

4.1 The Council currently spends a great deal of money maintaining its parks and open spaces. In 2014-15 grounds maintenance and environmental initiatives accounted for over £5.5 million of Corporate and Neighbourhood Service's revenue budget. The financial pressures facing the Council mean that there is an ever increasing need to find less expensive ways of delivering services.

4.2 Limited trials have been carried out in parks and open spaces where maintenance regimes were switched to less resource intensive methods. These

include allowing grassland to grow long and mowing paths through it rather than intensively cutting the whole area. Feedback has been mixed, with some seeing the benefit of this approach in terms of saving money and improving value for wildlife whilst others see the change as an unwelcome lowering of standards which is inappropriate for higher profile parks and open spaces.

4.3 The choice facing the Council is whether to:

- 1) Continue to maintain the majority of our parks and open spaces uniformly, accepting that as revenue budgets become tighter there will have to be an overall lowering of standards; or
- 2) Identify those parks and open spaces where: high intensity maintenance regimes are necessary to maintain an appropriate image; and lower intensity maintenance regimes would be more appropriate to save money and enhance value for wildlife.

4.4 The consultative draft strategy has chosen option 2 as outlined above. In order to take this option forward the Council should:

- Commission a study to identify those parks and open spaces where a lower intensity maintenance regime would be more appropriate either to save money, or to enhance value for wildlife;
- Identify a number of pilot parks and open spaces where the benefits of the new maintenance schedule can be showcased;

What is the best way to improve overall performance against the Council's various open space accessibility standards?

4.5 The open space audit has identified the locations across the Council area where accessibility to different functions of open space is above the walking distance thresholds set out in the various open space standards.

4.6 Addressing these deficiencies can be achieved in a number of ways:

- Creation of new open spaces;
- Addition of new facilities to existing open spaces;
- Creation of new entrances to existing open spaces;
- Revising the walking distance thresholds set out in the open space standard.

4.7 In order to improve overall performance in the most efficient manner the options available to the Council are to:

- 1) Revise open space standards to minimise the amount of investment needed to meet the new standards; or
- 2) Promote the creation of open spaces within new development sites to meet existing deficiencies; or
- 3) Introduce new facilities into existing open spaces to meet existing deficiencies; where possible this could be funded through planning gain; or
- 4) Identify where new entrances to existing open spaces; or where missing links in the active travel network can be created to address deficiencies.

4.8 The consultative draft strategy has chosen to pursue a mixture of all options above. The Council will review its accessibility standard in relation to access to an open space containing a play space with a view to reducing the number of separate play space sites whilst increasing the overall play value of the remainder. The following details will be outlined within the indicative spatial strategy for each settlement are in section 6 of this report:

- The areas of each settlement where there is a deficiency in access to different functions of open space.

4.9 The Council should then investigate the best way to address these deficiencies, considering the options outlined at paragraph 4.7 above.

How can we maximise the improvements achieved through Council investment?

4.10 Direct investment from Council funds is not the only way of improving parks and open spaces. Funding is available from a wide range of external sources to which the Council or individual community groups can apply. These include:

- Central Scotland Green Network Development Fund
- Scottish Rural Development Programme – via LEADER
- Sportscotland
- Forestry Commission
- Heritage Lottery Fund
- Sustrans
- Landfill Communities Fund – via Falkirk Environment Trust

4.11 If Council funding can be matched with external partnership funding then more park and open space improvements will be able to be delivered for a smaller cost to the Council.

4.12 The open space strategy and parks development plan are not the Council's only strategic documents which deal with the improvement of greenspace. The following strategic documents also deal with this subject:

- Falkirk Greenspace – A Strategy for our Green Network;
- Falkirk Forestry and Woodland Strategy; and
- Falkirk Core Paths Plan;

4.13 The choice facing the Council is whether to:

- 1) Develop a set of projects and priorities which seek to exclusively deliver the vision of the Open Space Strategy and Parks Development Plan and aim to deliver these projects the use of Council funds alone: or
- 2) Develop a set of projects and priorities which not only help to deliver the vision of the Open Space Strategy and Parks Development Plan but also help to deliver the aims of other related Council strategies; and align with the priorities of external funding partners.

4.14 The consultative draft strategy has chosen option 2 as outlined above. To ensure that the projects and priorities of the strategy also help to deliver the aims of

other related Council strategies, the Parks Development Plan (see section 7) outlines where projects also deliver the aims of those strategies.

4.15 To ensure that a greater number of open space improvements can be delivered for a smaller amount of Council investment, the Parks Development Plan (see section 7) outlines where projects also meet the priorities of funding partners and will allow the Council to target appropriate sources of match funding.

5. Generating money for investment in parks and open space.

How should we raise money for investment in parks and open spaces?

5.1 In a climate of reducing Council resources there is a need to think of new ways of generating money to invest in open space maintenance and improvement.

5.2 The Council's parks and open spaces are an attractive environment to do business and deliver services within. Feedback received during the consultation programme which preceded the drafting of this strategy appeared to give support to the introduction of a scheme of charging for the commercial use of some parks and open spaces. However concerns were also raised that any scheme of charging could end up discouraging businesses and their customers from using parks and open space. Falkirk Community Trust has recently introduced a scheme of charges for the commercial use of the parks they operate.

5.3 The open space audit has indicated that in the majority of our communities there is an abundance of open space with only a few rural villages falling below the 5ha/1000 people standard set out in the 2010 open space strategy. There may well be scope to sell off surplus areas of open spaces with a view to investing the proceeds in the improvement of parks and open space elsewhere. Feedback received during the consultation programme appeared to accept the benefit of selling off surplus open space to generate money for re-investment but also revealed concern that proceeds from the sale of open space could be diverted out of the local area.

5.4 The choice facing the Council is whether to:

- 1) Protect all Council operated parks and open spaces in their current forms and source money for improvement and maintenance of them from existing limited revenue streams; or
- 2) Explore opportunities to generate money for investment in park and open space improvement and maintenance through: selling off parks and open spaces which are surplus to requirements; and expanding the scheme of charging for the commercial use of parks and open space currently operated by Falkirk Community Trust to parks and open spaces which are directly operated by the Council.

5.5 The consultative draft strategy has chosen option 2 as outlined above. To generate money for re-investment in parks and open spaces the Council should:

- Carry out an exercise which identifies the parks and open spaces which are surplus to requirements having regard to the standards contained within this Strategy;

- Develop a protocol which establishes: the percentage of proceeds from the sale of parkland and open space which should be re-invested in open space improvement; and how far away from the site sale proceeds can be re-invested;
- Explore opportunities to expand the scheme of charging for the commercial use of parks and open spaces currently operated by Falkirk Community Trust to parks and open spaces which are directly operated by the Council;
- Carry out a study to identify what opportunities there are to commercialise the park and open space resource and develop a business case for this;
- Investigate the feasibility of establishing a Council owned factoring company which can take on the management and maintenance of privately owned open space;
- Investigate the potential to set up a crowd-funding mechanism to encourage public donations towards specific park and open space improvement projects; and
- Continue to explore opportunities to raise revenue for re-investment in the open space resource