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1. Introduction

Pressure for increasing residential and commercial development within the Essex and the South East creates major challenges for the provision and protection of Colchester's parks and greenspaces. The quality and variety of green spaces is a strong factor that establishes the character and attraction of Colchester. With new development come new opportunities. This strategy considers how opportunities can be taken to ensure economic growth is linked to sustainable communities with better quality environment for residents and visitors to Colchester.

Sustainable communities are places that people like living in and want to stay in, neighbourhoods with a real character and a sense of place. These successful places should have well designed green spaces that people want to use and respect.

The measure of any great civilisation is in its cities and a measure of a city's greatness is to be found in the quality of its public spaces, its parks and its squares.

John Ruskin

1.1 Colchester's Vision

Colchester 2020 launched **Colchester's Community Strategy** at the first Assembly meeting in 21 January 2004.

Their Vision is for Colchester to develop as a prestigious regional centre.

Colchester is going to be a centre of excellence and innovation for culture, education and learning, recognised regionally, nationally and internationally.

Colchester will become a preferred destination for visitors, for business location and for investment.

Colchester 2020 will create a sustainable environment in which people will continue to enjoy high levels of health and well-being, but with modern health and social care services for those who need them.

In short, Colchester will be a place where people, families, their communities and businesses thrive; where everyone has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Through Colchester 2020, the Council is committed to achieving, with partners, the objectives of the Essex Local Area Agreement 2006-2009. One of these objectives is about obesity: to reduce the prevalence in adults and to halt the increase in rates of obesity amongst children. In turn, these targets are in line with the national targets from the Public Health White Paper 2004, "Choosing Health"

1.2 Colchester Strategic Plan

Colchester Borough Council is committed to delivering quality services to local people, providing an outstanding environment in which to live and work, and helping Colchester grow into a prestigious regional centre. To keep moving towards these goals, the Council needs to set out clearly its priorities over the next few years. It does this through the Strategic Plan 2006-2009.

The previous Strategic Plan was published in February 2004. The Council believes the time is now right to update it in the light of changing circumstances and expectations, and move it forward for the years 2006-2009.

The Strategic Plan 2006 – 2009 sets out three Corporate Objectives

- To promote economic prosperity, tackle deprivation and foster social inclusion
- To ensure the quality of life expected of a prestigious regional centre
- To be the cleanest and greenest borough in the county

To achieve these corporate objectives, the Council must be ambitious and outward looking yet at the same time making sure top quality day to day services and excellent customer service remains at the heart of what we do. We will need to become even more efficient and responsive. During 2006 – 2009 the Council will focus on four priorities

- Customers
- Services
- Partnerships
- Ambition

The Parks and Green Spaces Strategy will provide a strong, flexible framework for targeted improvements in our greenspaces, which benefit local people and improve our natural environment. Actions arising from the Strategy will be cross referenced to the Strategic Plan priorities.

2. Scope of the Strategy

Planning Policy Guidance Note 17: Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation (PPG17) states that;

Open space should be taken to mean all open space of public value including not just land but also areas of water such as rivers, canals, lakes and reservoirs, estuary and coasts which offer important opportunities for sport and recreation and can also act as a visual amenity.

For clarification, the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy covers the following categories of green space;

- Parks and public gardens

- Natural and semi natural spaces (including woodlands, grasslands, commons and meadows)
- Green corridors
- Outdoor sports facilities
- Amenity green spaces
- Provision for children and young people
- Allotments
- Cemeteries church yards and other burial grounds

To balance the beneficial contribution provided by smaller green spaces with the administrative effort associated with auditing every piece of green space, the minimum size of areas included in the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy will be 0.2hectares.

3. Context

3.1 National position

“Public spaces are a barometer of a community. As human beings we respond positively and instinctively to places that are welcoming. We want to spend time - and money - in such a community.

The quality of public spaces affects all of us wherever we live and work. Safe, well-maintained and attractive public spaces have a critical role in creating pride in the places where we live which, in turn, is essential to building community cohesion and successful communities. That is why the Government is committed to action to make public spaces cleaner, safer, greener places that enhance the quality of life in our neighbourhoods, towns and cities.”¹

In 2004, the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (PCPA 2004) introduced a new spatial planning system in the UK. The new planning system is regards a primary mechanism to deliver the governments sustainable development and sustainable communities agenda’s.

National planning guidance sets out clear expectations for local authorities to take a strategic approach to green spaces.

- PPS1 – Delivering Sustainable Development

PPS1 was published in 2005 and sets out the overarching planning policies on the delivery of sustainable development through the planning system. “Planning Policies should seek to maintain and improve the local environment and help to mitigate the effects of declining environmental quality through positive policies on issues such as design, conservation and the provision of public space.” PPS1 requires all planning authorities when preparing their development plan to “provide improved access for all to jobs, health, education, shops, leisure and community facilities, open space, sport and recreation.”

¹ ODPM October 2002 Living Places: Cleaner, safer, greener

- PPS3 – Housing

PPS3 was published in November 2006 and sets out the Government's overarching objectives for the delivery of housing through the planning system by making the most efficient use of land available. Local Planning Authorities should have regard to "The current and future level and capacity of infrastructure and facilities such as public and private amenity space, in particular green and open space." Good design is key to providing successful communities and using the land available most efficiently.

- PPS9 – Biodiversity and Geological Conservation

PPS9 was published in 2005 and outlines the Government objectives on protection of biodiversity and geological conservation through the Planning System. PPS9 encourages Local Authorities to contribute to the Government objective of rural renewal and urban renaissance by enhancing biodiversity in green spaces and among developments so that they are used by wildlife and valued by people, thus recognising that healthy functional ecosystems can contribute to better quality of life and people's sense of well-being.

A new duty to conserve biodiversity has been placed on all public authorities under section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC 2006) Parks and green spaces is one key area where CBC can fulfil this duty.

- PPG17 and the Companion Guide have not been updated since the draft PGSS.
- Regional Planning Guidance has been updated by the Draft East of England Plan

The East of England Plan has undergone an Examination in Public and the Secretary of State's proposed changes to the draft East of England Plan were published in December 2006. Formal adoption of the East of England Plan is expected in mid 2007. (EERSS now not expected until 2008) The draft East of England Plan identifies the region's environment as a key asset which is to be conserved and enhanced as it is a major contributor to the character and the economy in which we live.

- Changes to the development plan process were introduced under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act in September 2004. The Act requires Local Authorities to prepare a Local Development Framework with an ever increasing emphasis on sustainable development in accordance with National and Regional Policies. The Local Development Framework is to be a suite of documents each with a focus on a specific issue. Colchester Borough Council intends to submit the Core Strategy to the Secretary of State in mid 2007. Full details can be found on the Colchester Borough Council website. www.colchester.gov.uk

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) included a duty on all public authorities, including Local Authorities, to have regard to biodiversity conservation. This duty came into effect on 1 October 2006 and Defra has now issued *Guidance for Local Authorities on Implementing the Biodiversity Duty (2007)* which explains the positive steps that local authorities should take to improve their estate for biodiversity.

Biodiversity: The UK Action Plan (1994) and *The Essex Biodiversity Action Plan (1999)* provide the national and local context for conserving and enhancing biodiversity across the borough, and in its parks and green-spaces.

Colchester falls within the Haven Gateway Sub Growth Area as identified in the draft East of England Regional Spatial Strategy. A Green Infrastructure Strategy (GIS) is currently being written for the Haven Gateway Sub - Growth Area. The GIS will identify open space requirements for this Haven Gateway area as an integral part of the planned growth. This may present opportunities for open space provision within Colchester to help meet sub regional open space targets.

3.2 Local position

Colchester Local Cultural Strategy

Adopted in May 2003, “Colchester a place for people” has a stated aim of Colchester a place for people; a place where people want to be. Working together, the aim is to make Colchester an attractive and enjoyable place in which to live, work and visit, recognised as a leading cultural centre in the east of England and an important visitor destination.

Three strong themes emerge from the strategy to give a clear focus and direction to cultural planning – to make the most of our cultural assets and create high quality opportunities for participation in cultural activity;

- **Green and pleasant place**
Improving the presentation of the Borough, enhancing its image and attractiveness; providing adequate space for play and recreation, recognising that a clean, high quality environment is an important priority and makes a real difference to people’s lives
- **Made in Colchester**
Pursuing quality and valuing diversity – encouraging activity to promote creative aspirations and healthy living. Encouraging people to do and make things locally, releasing creative talents, using their energies in a constructive way – giving life to the area, building community capacity and a sense of place and purpose. Exploring opportunities to use local products and services to promote Colchester locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally
- **Destination Colchester**
Making Colchester an enjoyable and attractive place in which to live, work and visit in order to bring investment, jobs and prosperity to the local economy. Developing Colchester’s cultural identity, developing the notion of ‘place making’ in order to compete effectively. Concerned with building a

positive image and asserting Colchester's values, encouraging high quality visitor attractions, products and services so that potential users, visitors and investors are aware of Colchester's distinctive and competitive advantages

4. Why a Parks and Green Spaces Strategy?

Under the new UK planning system, local plans are gradually being replaced by Local Development Frameworks.

Colchester's Local Development Framework will guide the delivery of spatial planning within Colchester Borough. It builds on guidance and policies set out nationally and regionally, taking into account local needs and variations. Green space strategies should contribute to the development plan documents and should become important supplementary planning documents within this process.

A clear plan, linked to the Council's corporate aims and objectives can help maintain existing spaces, secure new green spaces and assist in obtaining funding for improvements to existing areas through the planning process and developers' contributions for the benefit of the whole community.

Good quality green spaces are an essential element of urban neighbourhoods and make a profound contribution to the quality of life of communities. The economic, social and environmental benefits derived from quality green spaces are now being recognised.

Agreeing a set of policies for parks and green spaces provides a framework for future provision and improvement. Arising from the Strategy will be a Delivery Plan which will identify specific actions to deliver improvements based on the agreed policies. The Delivery Plan will be prioritised and reviewed regularly to ensure its relevance and deliverability in the light of changing factors.

The population of Colchester is set to rise by 13,000 over the next six years. The east of England is an identified area of long term major growth with 17,100 new homes and 14,200 new jobs planned for Colchester by 2021. With 4 major regeneration projects identified in the Strategic Plan 2006-09 and the increasing pressure for redevelopment and additional housing, the need to improve, protect and enhance our parks and green spaces has never been so vital. The strategy provides a coordinated approach to incorporate existing policies, building on the benefits of green spaces. 5 major regeneration areas have been identified within the draft Core Strategy.

This strategy aims to be a living and relevant document, influencing the delivery of parks and green spaces within the borough for the benefit of residents and visitors. This document will;

- Create a comprehensive framework for the protection, enhancement, accessibility and use of parks and green spaces
- Create a framework for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity in parks and green spaces
- Contribute to the development of the Local Development Framework (LDF) and PPG17 requirements
- Ensure green spaces enhance the quality of life of local communities,

- Identify how green spaces can promote civic pride and social inclusion
- Ensure that green space networks meet current and future needs.
- Generate internal and external support for parks and green spaces
- Develop a shared vision by members officers key partners and stakeholders
- Create a framework for participation by the community and volunteer groups in park and green space management.
- Build on previous playing pitch and play area strategies to provide a coordinated approach to the development and provision of outdoor recreation provision.

5. The “value” of public space

Good quality green spaces generate enormous social, economic, environmental and ecological benefits.

Parks and green spaces are essential to our towns and cities. They breathe life into communities, bringing charm, beauty, character, wildlife and a sense of place. Decent parks and green spaces not only contribute to a higher quality of physical environment, but also assist in area regeneration and contribute to the health and well-being of local residents as a network of spaces.²

5.1 The Economic Value of Public Space

Customer Expectations

It is generally accepted that Colchester’s parks and green spaces influence the local character and environment for those who live, work or visit the borough. Customer Satisfaction Surveys which are carried out nationally to compare local authority performance in a range of services, demonstrate high levels of satisfaction for parks, playgrounds and open spaces. Satisfaction levels have been showing a steady increase since BVPI user satisfaction records were kept. Residents benchmarking since 2002 have shown responses of good and very good from 87% in 2003 and a continual increase to the 2005 response of 96%.³ These annual independent surveys are further supported by the 2003/04 Customer Satisfaction Survey satisfaction levels which currently stand at 82%. This is in comparison with a national average of 72%. Customer Satisfaction Surveys have been repeated in 2006 and figures will be incorporated into the Adopted Strategy when they are announced.

Through work carried out to develop Destination Colchester surveys are carried out regarding the upkeep of parks and open spaces. Visitor benchmarking has been carried out since 2001 when the response to the upkeep of open spaces was 94% good or very good. In subsequent years the annual independent survey results have been compared with other historic towns and all destinations and have demonstrated Colchester being between 3 and 11 percentage points ahead

² I&DeA 1999

³ Destination Colchester Residents benchmarking

each year of other historic towns.⁴ The 2005 results of 94% for Colchester compare with 89% for other historic towns and 85% for all destinations.

Whilst satisfaction levels are important to gauge the opinion of local residents, the proportion of residents who use parks and open spaces is an equally significant indicator. High levels of usage demonstrate a willingness and confidence of the public in using parks and open spaces. An increasing use of parks and open spaces illustrates the public's desire to come into contact with the range of experiences that are offered by parks and open spaces. Parks and recreation fields were used by 87% of Colchester residents in 2000/01 and this has further increased to 92% in 2003/04.

High-quality public environment has a significant impact on the economic life of urban centres big or small, and is therefore an essential part of Colchester's regeneration strategy. As Colchester competes with others to attract investment, the presence of good parks, squares, gardens, the River Colne and other public spaces becomes a vital business and marketing tool: companies are attracted to locations that offer well-designed, well-managed public places and these in turn attract customers, employees and services. In town centres, a pleasant and well-maintained environment increases the number of people visiting retail areas, otherwise known as 'footfall'. A good public landscape also offers very clear benefits to the local economy in terms of stimulating increased house prices, since house-buyers are willing to pay to be near green space.

Public space plays an important role in tackling climate change (ref 7.2.4) – green spaces such as woodlands act as carbon sinks, helping to reduce the severity of climate change. Other habitats such as floodplains, rivers and coastal habitats can help reduce flooding and dissipate wave energy. Natural habitats are also important in providing corridors to allow mobile species to move in response to changes in climate.

5.1.1 The positive impact on property prices

Many cities are also now seeing that the redevelopment of high-quality public spaces aids the regeneration of an area, with commercial property prices increasing in those locations. There is evidence too that a well-planned, well-managed public space has a positive impact on the price of nearby domestic properties.⁵ In the towns of Emmen, Appeldoorn and Leiden in the Netherlands, it has been shown that a garden bordering water can increase the price of a house by 11%, while a view of water or having a lake nearby can boost the price by 10% and 7% respectively. A view of a park was shown to raise house prices by 8%, and having a park nearby by 6%. This compares with a view of an apartment block, which can reduce the price by 7%.

A similarly positive picture emerges from Dallas, where many residents cited the public green spaces running behind their back gardens as a major factor in their decision to move to the area. 60% of these residents believed that the value of their homes was at least 15% higher because of the presence of the green spaces. Half of the people who did not have green spaces at the back of their homes said they would prefer to have this kind of communal green area close by, even though

⁴ Destination Colchester Visitors benchmarking

⁵ Landscape and Urban Planning Vol 48

that would mean less private open space. Almost all residents valued these public green spaces highly and most used them for recreational activities regardless of whether or not their homes backed on to them.⁶

5.1.2 Good for business

In Coventry, improved pedestrianisation, a new civic square, clearer signage and better placement of street furniture have made the city centre a much more attractive place to be, as has the introduction of CCTV and radio security schemes, and the introduction of an alcohol-free zone. As a result, footfall in the town centre has risen by 25% on Saturdays, benefiting local trade tremendously.⁷

Examples of the value of services provided by woodlands.

- Reducing air pollution – the benefits of trees reducing air pollution in Britain have been valued at between £222k and £11.2 million per year.
- Storage of carbon helping to reduce climate change – the net present value of carbon storage of broadleaved woodlands has been estimated to be £2,684 million in the South East.
- Enhancing the urban environment – the total value of views of urban fringe woodlands in England has been estimated at more than £3.5 billion (capitalised value) or £150 per hectare (annual net present value).

5.1.3 Being close to public space adds economic value

- Small businesses choosing a new business location rank open space, parks and recreation as a number-one priority. In 1980, 16% of Denver residents said they would pay more to live near a greenbelt or park. By 1990 this figure had risen to 48%⁸
- In Berlin in 2000, proximity to playgrounds in residential areas was found to increase land values by up to 16%. In the same study, a high number of street trees resulted in an increase of 17% in land values.⁹

5.2 The health benefits of Public Space

'Obesity already costs more in public health terms, and will overtake smoking as Britain's biggest killer in 10-15 years if current trends persist'. A variety of research has identified these startling facts:

- 20 per cent of four-year-olds are overweight
- 8.5per cent of six-year-olds and 15 per cent of 15-year-olds are obese.

This increase in obesity is linked to ever more sedentary lifestyles and a reduction in outdoor activity. Evidence shows that adult patterns of exercise are set early on in life. Inactivity breeds inactivity, so a lack of exercise when young can in turn create problems in adulthood such as diabetes and heart disease. Growing medical evidence shows that access to the natural environment improves health and wellbeing, prevents disease and helps people recover from illness. Experiencing nature in the outdoors can help tackle childhood obesity, coronary heart disease, stress and mental health problems.

⁶ The private value of public open space. Journal of Architectural and Planning Research Vol 10

⁷ DoE & Assoc of Town Centre Management. Managing Urban Spaces in Town Centres

⁸ Economic Benefits of open space index

⁹ Landscape Design No 303

In summer 2006 the PCT weighed most year 6 children (10-11 year olds) in the borough. The findings suggest that the proportion of obese children in Year 6 in Colchester schools is approximately 13.9% with an additional 14-15% overweight.¹⁰

It is estimated that by 2020 half of all children could be obese. Studies suggest that there is more scope to increase children's activity levels (and decrease their levels of obesity) by encouraging more outside play in greenspace than there is in formal sport.¹¹

Programmes providing regular healthy walks and organised activities to improve the local environment could be greatly expanded. The UK has one of the highest death rates from heart disease in Europe. 115,000 die prematurely each year.

It is not just the nation's physical health that is at risk: there are concerns too about people's mental well-being, given the stressful lives that many now lead. Each year the economy loses millions of working days through stress-related employee absence.

5.2.1 The health benefits of walking

Safe, clean spaces encourage people to walk more and therefore offer significant health benefits. Some doctors are even prescribing a walk in the park to aid patients' health¹² as it has been proven to reduce the risk of a heart attack by 50%, diabetes by 50%, colon cancer by 30% and fracture of the femur by up to 40%. If done as part of a group, walking offers social benefits too. The Council has established 'health walks' at High Woods and in Castle Park, and are looking for new venues to extend this initiative to new areas.

A study of walking groups has shown that just increasing the distance walked from one to two miles a day means one less death per year among 60 male patients aged 61-80 who suffer from heart disease. It is also estimated that if just one in 100 inactive people took adequate exercise it could save the NHS in Scotland as much as £85 million per year.

5.2.2 Green spaces and long life

Evidence from Japan emphasises the vital role that tree-lined streets, parks and other green spaces play in our lives. Not only do they enhance our sense of community and our attachment to a particular neighbourhood – they can even help us live longer. Of more than 3100 people born between 1903-1918 in Tokyo, 2211 were still alive by 1992; the probability of their living for a further five years was linked to their ability to take a stroll in local parks and tree-lined streets.¹³

¹⁰ North East Essex PCT Health Needs Assessment 2007.

¹¹ Natural England's Health Campaign

¹² Improving urban parks, play areas and green spaces ODPM 2002

¹³ Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health Vol 12

5.2.3 The importance of nature and 'green exercise'

There is increasing evidence that 'nature' in the urban environment is good for both physical and mental health. Natural views – of elements such as trees, rivers and lakes – promote a drop in blood pressure and are shown to reduce feelings of stress. Many people express this effect by saying that a park or green space is a good place to 'get away from the stresses of life'.

One suggested way to obtain both physical and mental health improvements is through 'green exercise' – taking part in physical activities 'whilst at the same time being directly exposed to nature'. Increasing access to high-quality public spaces where green exercise can take place produces substantial public health benefits and so reduces healthcare costs.

CBC works in partnership with the PCT on the coordination and delivery of the Colchester Weight Management and Physical Activity strategy. This includes a range of initiatives that take place in our green spaces, such as cycling, sports and the health walks. The Council is also hoping to develop an outreach LEAP exercise referral scheme which will make use of green spaces, including walking, cycling and (potentially) gardening at CBC allotments.

5.2.4 The environment and mental health

Improvement in people's mental well-being is one of the benefits of a better physical environment. When housing and the surrounding external environment in one typical new-town estate were upgraded in consultation with residents, 'substantial improvements' were recorded in the mental health of those residents.¹⁴ Nature also helps to enhance our physical and mental health, by encouraging outdoor recreation, exercise and relaxation. Biodiversity increases the variety, attractiveness and interest of the landscape. It also plays an important role in educating us about the world around us. It is an important part of our cultural heritage and identity defining local character and distinctiveness. It offers opportunities for community engagement and volunteering, and as a result social inclusion.

Biodiversity within public spaces is an indicator of the wider health of our environment – an environment rich in biodiversity is also likely to perform well against other measures of environmental quality (such as air and water quality), and to provide a healthy and attractive living environment for people. Biodiversity is therefore a key indicator of sustainable development.

5.2.5 A place for sport

It has been estimated that some 7% of urban park users in England go there for sporting activities – that represents about 7.5 million visitors a year. Sports such as football are part of the weekly routine for many people and require good-quality pitches. As people get older, the types of sports they enjoy may change, with golf, bowls and cycling becoming more popular with the over-sixties. All of these activities help us to keep fit by protecting the cardiovascular system and preventing the onset of other health problems. Many of our hard urban public spaces also offer opportunities for less formal but equally beneficial sports. Skateboarding, for example, mostly attracts younger males.

¹⁴ Mental health and the built environment 1995

Access to good-quality, well-maintained public spaces can help to improve our physical and mental health by encouraging us to walk more, to play sport, or simply to enjoy a green and natural environment. In other words, our open spaces are a powerful weapon in the fight against obesity and ill-health.

5.3 The value for children and young people

Under the UN Convention on the *Rights of the Child*, children have the right to play, recreation and culture.²⁶ Play is crucial for many aspects of children's development, from the acquisition of social skills, experimentation and the confrontation and resolution of emotional crises, to moral understanding, cognitive skills such as language and comprehension, and of course physical skills. But increasing urbanisation has left our children with far fewer opportunities than previous generations to play freely outdoors and experience the natural environment. Good-quality public spaces – including well-designed school grounds – can help to fill this gap, providing children with opportunities for fun, exercise and learning.

Further work is being carried out in this area with the production of a Colchester Play Strategy.

5.4 The value for community safety

Fear of crime and, to a much lesser extent crime itself, can deter people, not just vulnerable groups, from using even good-quality public spaces. Children and young people, for example, are often prevented from using our parks, squares and streets because of their parents' fears about crime, whilst women often also face particular concerns. Physical changes to, and the better management of, public space can help to allay these fears. Such changes can help everyone to make the most of public spaces.

5.5 The value for community cohesion

Public spaces are open to all, regardless of ethnic origin, age or gender, and as such they represent a democratic forum for citizens and society. When properly designed and cared for, they bring communities together, provide meeting places and foster social ties of a kind that have been disappearing in many urban areas. These spaces shape the cultural identity of an area, are part of its unique character and provide a sense of place for local communities.

5.5.1 Promoting neighbourliness and social inclusion

The open spaces near our homes give us a valuable place to socialise with our neighbours, whether chatting over the garden fence or meeting in the local park. Gardens and allotments, for example, can provide an especially good community focus and an opportunity for small, personal interactions. On a larger scale, community gardens and city farms bring people together from different ages and cultures, and help to create a real sense of neighbourhood. Once again, however, quality counts: the better the design of the space in question, the better the quality of the social experience. In this regard, it has been found that big, bland spaces on housing estates fail to offer the same opportunities for social cohesion as more personal spaces. Free, accessible flexible and inclusive local parks provide an

important “social space” and are used by a broader spectrum of users than most other cultural services.¹⁵

5.5.2 A venue for social events

One of the benefits of high-quality public space is its potential as a venue for social events. Well managed festivals and other events can have a very positive effect on the urban environment, drawing the community together and bringing financial, social and environmental benefits. They can, in particular, reintroduce the kind of civil society that has been lost in too many of our urban areas. Festivals are key features in many towns and cities calendar. Festivals are a major boost for commercial companies, and the areas’ artistic community also benefit. To encourage events like these, along with their spin-off benefits, towns need to plan the physical layout of their public spaces with festivals and other social activities in mind.¹⁶ Urban parks have a role in marking the passage of time. Memories are held by local residents of using the park throughout people’s lives. – their childhood, their wild teenage years, wedding photographs, the place where they had subsequently taken their children and grandchildren.¹⁷

5.5.3 Public space generates community cohesion

Public spaces are not just empty voids. Typically, they are filled with people and with both soft and hard landscape elements to help shape their character. What we put into our public spaces is just as important as the space itself. To enliven civic spaces, use should be made of carefully situated fountains and sculptures. Public art should make historical references, but at the same time be fun to look at and interact with, appealing to adults and children alike. Meanwhile, sponsorship of artworks allows family-run businesses and larger companies to feel that they have a direct stake in the quality of the public environment.¹⁸

5.5.4 Green spaces are well used

There is evidence to show that people use their local public spaces more, and are more satisfied with them, if these include natural elements: a green and pleasant space is generally, therefore, a well-used space. A study in Chicago found that people living in apartments tended to use nearby public spaces more if they were ‘natural’ than if they were man-made. This increased use of the green spaces led in turn to a greater amount of socialising among neighbours – initially as they met while simply pausing to sit, and later to deepen social ties.¹⁹

5.5.5 The social value of trees, plants and ‘natural areas’

A view of trees is, along with the availability of natural areas nearby, the strongest factor affecting people’s satisfaction with their neighbourhood. Having somewhere to grow flowers and vegetables also significantly affects feelings of community. How and where these natural areas are located is important. It has been found, for example, that if green spaces are surrounded by housing or are in some way a continuation of the home environment, then they are shared by residents and are unlikely to suffer from the kind of maintenance problems that arise when there is a lack of perceived ownership. Large open spaces, on the other hand, do not often generate such positive community feelings. It is most beneficial, therefore, to

¹⁵ Realising the potential of cultural services Nov 2001

¹⁶ Planning Practice and research J. M. Schuster 1995

¹⁷ Park Life Greenhalgh and Worpole 1995

¹⁸ Project for public space newsletter C. Hagelskamp 2003

¹⁹ American Journal of Community Psychology Vol 26

provide small natural areas close to housing, providing opportunities to grow flowers and vegetables.²⁰

5.6 The value for wildlife

There is great public alarm about decline of many previously familiar species such as song-thrushes and house sparrows, and as modern farming has eliminated much wildlife habitat, urban open spaces, gardens and 'brownfield' sites such as old quarries and abandoned industrial sites have become crucial refuges for threatened wildlife.

Engagement with wildlife either directly or indirectly has recognised social and psychological advantages. In the UK 500,000 people are involved in a current national survey of bird populations, Essex Wildlife Trust has 38,000 members, RSPB more than a million, while millions more feed garden birds and garden with wildlife in mind.

5.7 The heritage and cultural value of open spaces.

Place making is an important factor in delivering Colchester 2020's vision of a prestigious regional centre. Most, if not all our open spaces have a distinctive place in the history of the town and of the life-histories of the people who live here. Hilly Fields – pre-Roman history, fortifications in the civil war, etc, High Woods, fragment of former royal hunting forest, favourite haunt of Colchester's most celebrated naturalist, WH Harwood are examples of the diversity within the town which are important contributions to the character and heritage of the Borough. Open spaces also provide inspiration for artists – eg exhibitions in the Mercury theatre gallery and of course one of the countries most celebrated landscape architects, John Constable.

6 Links

This Strategy identifies a number of links with other plans and initiatives. Effective co-ordination achieved through partnership and cross departmental working will enable the application of resources in the most cost effective way.

It is important to establish clear links and cooperation between different council services such as Planning, Protection and Licensing, Planning Policy, Housing, Cultural Services, Sport and Leisure Services and Museum and Heritage Services.

Environmental awareness campaigns being promoted by the Council also have significant impact on the quality of open spaces that are often affected by irresponsible littering.

Parks and green spaces are by their very nature open spaces used for a variety of purposes. Some of those purposes are in conflict with other users or adjacent property owners. It is the aim of this strategy to tie in to the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and other relevant bodies to design out crime and anti-social behaviour.

These are examples where increased partnership working and improved communication will enable a seamless, smooth running service to develop and improvements to be delivered.

²⁰ "Nature at the doorstep" Journal of Architectural and Planning Research 1985

The provision of open spaces is not a statutory requirement for local authorities and the pressure on resources in competition with statutory services is significant and recognised. Approaching the planning and management of parks and open spaces strategically will maximise the value of capital investment and revenue expenditure. The parks and green spaces strategy will offer an opportunity to improve parks and green spaces including;

- a consistency of delivery based on population figures and the type of open space currently provided.
- protecting and enhancing levels of biodiversity and ecological habitats
- providing a wide variety of cultural, social and community facilities, including seasonal activities such as fairs, festivals and concerts
- protecting the historical, cultural and archaeological heritage
- reinforcing local identity and enhancing the physical character of an area, so shaping existing and future development
- maintaining the visual amenity and increasing the attractiveness of a locality to create a sense of civic pride
- raising property values and aiding urban regeneration and Neighbourhood Renewal
- boosting the economic potential of tourism, leisure and cultural activities
- securing external funding and focusing capital and revenue expenditure cost-effectively
- illustrating the contribution to health agendas e.g. Reducing stress levels, by providing formal and informal recreational facilities
- providing popular outdoor educational facilities for schools and academic institutions
- improving physical and social inclusion including accessibility, particularly for young, disabled and older people
- offering alternative routes for circulation, including networks for walking and cycling and safer routes to school
- assisting the identification of strategic land acquisitions

6.1 A “Vision” for Parks and green spaces in Colchester

It is important for the focus of this strategy that the rationale behind providing parks and green spaces is clearly understood and accepted. For this reason the vision is stated

Colchester’s parks and green spaces are provided to enhance the quality of life of those people who live, work and visit the town and its surroundings.

We aim to develop the range, quality and accessibility of public open space to support regeneration, encourage social inclusion, improve community health and enhance biodiversity.

7. Policy issues

The provision and development of parks and green spaces can be considered in terms of quantity and quality.

7.1 Quantity

7.1.1 Local standards

Local standards are needed to assess the amount of green space needed in an area. Local standards for quantity act as a yardstick as a basis for benchmarking and to assess the need for on-site green space provision in a proposed development or the need for a developer to contribute to the provision or enhancement of off-site spaces or facilities. Local standards can also be used to highlight deficiencies and to help forecast future needs and priorities.

Open spaces can provide a number of functions within the urban fabric of towns and villages. For example the provision for play and informal recreation, a landscaping buffer within and between the built environment and a habitat for the promotion of biodiversity.

Each type of open space has various functions. For example allotments for the growing of produce, play areas for children's play and playing pitches for formal sports activities. Open space can additionally perform a secondary function, for example outdoor sports facilities have an amenity value in addition to facilitating sport and recreation.

There is a need to provide a balance between different types of open space in order to meet local needs. Not all residents' needs in particular areas will show a demand for open space in the form of playing pitches or allotments, for example. Some areas may have specific local demand for 'green corridor' sites such as nature walks or bridleways, instead.

Changing social and economic circumstances, changing work and leisure practices, more sophisticated consumer tastes and higher public expectations have placed new demands on open spaces. They have to serve more diverse communities and face competition from various developers including sport and leisure. Open spaces can also promote community cohesion, encourage community development and stimulate partnerships between the public and private sector.

PPG17 states that local authorities should undertake robust assessments of the existing and future needs of their communities for open space, sports and recreational facilities.

It also states that local authorities should undertake audits of existing open space, sports and recreational facilities, the use made of existing facilities, access in terms of location and costs, and opportunities for new open space and facilities.

Paragraph 5 of PPG17 states that "The Government expects all local authorities to carry out assessments of needs and audits of open space and

recreational facilities” and that “local authorities should use the information gained from their assessments of needs and opportunities to set locally derived standards for the provision of open space, sports and recreational facilities in their areas”.

The Supplementary Planning Document (SPD); Provision of Open Space, Sport and Recreational Facilities 2006²¹, uses the National Playing Fields Association standard, updated by the former Ministry of Housing and Local Government advice, of 2.83 hectares per 1,000 population as the minimum guideline for provision of sports and recreation facilities and open spaces.

The work completed through the PPG17 process to consult with residents and users looks at open spaces in a variety of typologies and seeks feedback on the basis of current levels of provision. The feedback from the consultation provides specific recommendations for quantity standards for each typology rather than the general 2.83 hectare per 1,000 previously used. The PPG17 study quantity standards calculator (Appendix A) illustrates the current levels of provision for various typologies, consultation feedback and recommendations for local quantity standards in hectares per 1,000 population.

The recommended quantity standards are generally in line with current levels of provision but the SPD will need to reflect the recommended quantity standards so there is consistency between this strategy, the Local Development Framework including the emerging Core Strategy for Colchester.

In conjunction with work being undertaken for PPG17, the location of parks and green spaces is being plotted. Plotting current provision enables deficiencies to be identified along with areas where responding to that deficiency will be most effective. Whilst it is not always possible to deliver new parks and greenspaces in the optimum location due to the presence of other land use constraints, mapping does offer the opportunity to identify strategic land acquisitions.

The Colchester Playing Pitch Strategy²² refers to the provision and demand in Colchester from football, cricket, rugby and hockey clubs, based on the National Playing Fields Association²³ recommendation of 1.21 hectares of sports field per 1000 population. The calculation by Ward identifies major variations including an overall borough shortfall of 60.53ha based on 2000 ward population figures. In addition to the NPFA recommendation, Sport England²⁴ has produced a Sports Facility Calculator which is a tool to help estimate the facilities that are needed to meet the needs of a given population. By inputting the demographic profile for Colchester (actual or future) it is possible to determine team generation rates and facility requirements. The Facility Calculator currently provides information on indoor sports facilities whereas the Team Generation Rate Calculator identifies the

²¹ Adopted July 2006

²² Adopted 2001

²³ NPFA Six Acre standard

²⁴ www.sportengland.org/sportsfc

number of teams expected to be created from numbers within population age groups.

The 2.83 hectare (7 acre) standard applied to the whole Borough. However, due to the isolated nature of some settlements and potential difficulty in accessing open spaces in rural areas, this standard is applied to individual village settlements, of which there may be two or more in a single ward. In parallel with the quantity standards recommended in the PPG17 study, the strategy proposes that we will aim for all the main town and village settlements to each have a multi-use recreation ground. Accordingly 25 locations are identified in the Open Spaces Register where there exists or it is desirable to have a recreation ground.

Local standards are set for the provision of local equipped areas for play (LEAPs) and neighbourhood equipped areas for play (NEAPs). Definitions are to be found in the Play Area Development Plan. There are four principal targets for provision of play facilities; these are:-

- To provide an even distribution of *LEAPs* and *NEAPs*, so that the maximum travel distance from any dwelling to the nearest playground is 400 metres or 10 minute walk time, without having to cross a major physical barrier.
- To provide one *LEAP* or *NEAP* playground per three hundred head of population in the age group 0 to 9 years.
- To provide 11+ facilities in locations identified where these would be of value.
- To provide the equivalent of 0.05 hectares of equipped play space per thousand head of population.

PGSSS 1

This strategy endorses the results of the PPG 17 audit and consultation exercise in determining local standards of provision for typologies of open space.

PGSSS 2

The Council will seek to acquire strategic areas of land for public open space that are of borough wide significance, contributing to the network of green spaces which are freely accessible to residents and visitors

PGSSS 3

The Strategy supports the provision of a Local Equipped Area for Play (LEAP) or Neighbourhood Equipped Area for Play (NEAP) for every 300 population aged 0 – 9

PGSSS 4

The Strategy supports the provision of a LEAP or NEAP within 400m or 10 minute walk time of every urban dwelling.

PGSSS 5

The Strategy supports the provision of equipped play areas within all main town and village settlements in rural areas where possible.

PGSSS 6

The Strategy supports the provision of a multi use recreation ground within all main town and village settlements in rural areas where possible.

7.1.2 Hierarchy of sites

The general standard of park and green space provision referred to above, whilst being an important indicator, does not take account of the size and function of open spaces in a given area. Parks and open spaces provide a variety of functions and the character of open spaces is a significant factor in the demand and appeal of the open space. The range of facilities and opportunities offered at each open space will influence the attraction of the open space and accordingly the catchment area of that space.

It is important that all areas should have a suitable mix of open spaces. Areas with numerous small green spaces will have limited access to team game areas and similarly areas with a few large open spaces will lack the experiences to be gained from smaller intimate and varied sites.

To assist in determining the value and contribution of green spaces, the typologies referred to in the PPG17 guidance are followed

Each typology of greenspace has a local accessibility standard identified as a result of the consultation exercise. The catchment area is the walking time or travel distance which is considered acceptable by the public. The size and content of parks and open spaces will influence the catchment area and therefore the accessibility standards should be considered as indicative guidelines. Physical barriers such as rivers or major roads are also factors affecting the shape of the catchment.

For example. A small open space with ornamental gardens or visitor facilities will be of greater attraction than an area of grassland with little diversity and few facilities. Allocating sites to categories is not an exact science and there would be local debate regarding the most suitable category for sites. The importance of the hierarchy is that it helps identify areas of deficiency and identifies gaps that can be filled by raising the quality, diversity and range of facilities of existing open space or the acquisition of additional open space. Margins of sports fields and playgrounds can be managed in a way that gives more aesthetic diversity and interest as well as providing habitat for wildlife

Greenspace typology and accessibility standards

Park Hierarchy	Accessibility standard
Parks and gardens	15 minute walk – urban areas 15 minute drive time - rural areas
Natural and semi natural greenspaces	15 minute walk time

Outdoor sports facilities	20 minute walk – urban areas 20 minute drive time - rural areas
Amenity greenspaces	10 minute walk
Doorstep greens and LAPs	5 minute walk or 200m
LEAPs and NEAPs	10 minute walk or 400m
Provision for young people	15 minute walk
Allotments	15 minute walk – urban areas 15 minute drive time - rural areas
Regional parks and open spaces	30 minute drive time

The Council will work with developers and Planning Officers to overcome the provision of small open spaces in new developments that have limited recreational value. The Council will reject Sites Left Over After Planning (SLOAPS) and efforts will be made to consolidate open spaces amongst developments so that combined areas deliver meaningful open space capable of supporting a variety of uses.

PGSSS 7

For the purpose of greenspace evaluation and consistency with the Local Development Framework, the following Greenspace typologies are adopted;

**Parks and gardens
Natural and semi natural greenspaces
Outdoor sports facilities
Amenity greenspaces
Doorstep greens and LAPs
LEAPs and NEAPs
Provision for young people
Allotments**

PGSSS 8

The accessibility standards for the Greenspace typologies are agreed as follows:

Parks and gardens	15 minute walk – urban areas 15 minute drive – rural areas
Natural and semi natural green space	15 minute walk time
Outdoor sports facilities	20 minute walk – urban areas 20 minute drive – rural areas
Amenity greenspaces	10 minute walk time
Doorstep greens and LAPs	5 minute walk time or 200m
LEAPs and NEAPs	10 minute walk time or 400m
Provision for young people	15 minute walk time
Allotments	15 minute walk – urban areas 15 minute drive – rural areas

PGSSS 9

The Strategy supports the approach to address deficiencies in park and greenspace provision through the enhancement of existing areas to raise the hierarchy and therefore the catchment area or the acquisition of open space that has a strategic benefit

PGSSS 10

The Council will only adopt new open spaces that have a strategic benefit to the community in which they are located. Only in exceptional cases where a strategic benefit can be demonstrated will small open spaces (less than 250m²) be transferred to the Council. New open spaces will be adopted on receipt of a commuted sum to pay for the subsequent maintenance of that site.

7.1.3 Accessibility

It is estimated that each year some 33 million people make more than 2.5 billion visits to urban greenspaces²⁵. 85% of people surveyed by Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment felt that the quality of public space and the built environment has a direct Impact on their lives and on the way they feel.²⁶

Restrictions on access

The contribution to the quality of life of residents and visitors made by parks and open spaces is limited if they are not accessible. Strategic parks and open spaces impact on the character of Colchester through their contribution to the visual appearance of the area. Nevertheless the full benefit of parks and open spaces cannot be gained unless the public have access to them.

In some cases site restrictions are a requirement to overcome unauthorized or inappropriate use such a motor cycling. In such situations restricted access must be considered in the context of other users to ensure a balanced approach and legitimate users have access.

Information and publicity

Visitor awareness of the range of open spaces and their diversity within Colchester is a factor of accessibility. A lack of knowledge in the age of information technology cannot be acceptable and it essential that open spaces are publicised explaining what they have to offer and how to get to them sustainably : ie walking, cycling, public transport – but esp. by using green corridors. Publicity in public buildings and notice boards – town hall, library, museums, tourist information offices as well as interpretive centres, partnering with local organisations to prepare site specific and generic information.

²⁵ Improving Urban Parks, play areas and greenspaces ODPM 2002

²⁶ Streets of shame CABE 2002

Signage to sites and at sites

Local residents and visitors are often unaware of their right to access parks and green spaces. Areas where the public are encouraged to visit should be well signed so that the name of the site is known and the managing authority and contacts can be displayed. Signage at the site needs to be informative, relevant and appropriate to the location. Major sites such as regional greenspaces are likely to have a high proportion of non resident visitors and will benefit from signage directing visitors to the facility. Not only does this raise the profile of the park or green space but it will assist in community safety by preventing visitors getting lost in unfamiliar areas.

Welcoming parks and green spaces

The initial appearance of a park or greenspace is paramount in how it is perceived by its users. Parks and green spaces must be attractive and welcoming, showing that they are cared for by those who manage them and those who use the facility. High quality entrance features such as gates and railings provide a sense of arrival and set the tone for the experience within the park or greenspace.

Welcoming parks give the user the feeling that their visit is welcomed and that they will have a pleasant experience. Issues such as safety, cleanliness and quality all contribute to the perception of welcoming. Not only is a visitors' experience influenced by the presentation of the park in real terms but awareness of the park's existence and ease of locating also contribute to the overall experience. It is therefore important to residents and visitors that parks and greenspaces are well publicised in a variety of ways making best use of information technology to provide details about the location of open spaces and the range of facilities provided. Some parks may provide excellent quality features but unless they are known to the public they remain inaccessible.

PGSSS 11

The Council will ensure that new open spaces are easily accessed and do not prevent or obstruct access by those who have a legitimate use. Efforts will be made to prevent access by unauthorized users to existing open spaces by the use of appropriate of barriers or other restrictions.

PGSSS 12

The Council will ensure its parks and green spaces are welcoming. Information about parks and open spaces will be regularly reviewed to make sure its content is current and the means of accessing the information makes best use of current information technology.

PGSSS 13

The Council will review signage leading to and within parks and greenspaces and will seek to provide signage that is informative, relevant and appropriate to the location.

7.2 Quality

7.2.1 Meeting community needs

Providing new open space or enhancing existing facilities needs to be based on evidence. The Play Strategy and work being carried out in support of the LDF and PPG17 study will provide the evidence base in terms of current levels of provision and degree of existing deficiency. Open spaces need to be provided not simply to meet allocation targets but to meet users' expectations. This can be achieved through consultation with community representatives where care needs to be taken that representation is genuine and reflective of the entire community and not a vocal minority.

Identification of need reflects the views of residents at the time of consultation. Although the general demand for open space provision is unlikely to change significantly over time, how an area is to be used will change.

Engaging with the community at the earliest opportunity is beneficial for new residents to take an ownership and interest in their local area and their engagement can be a strong tool to develop community cohesion. In many examples, open space provision needs to be assessed and provided in advance of new development or the occupation of residential properties. In such situations incoming residents will often expect open spaces to be laid out. Developers also recognize that well landscaped public spaces establish the character of the development and help to sell houses.

Where open space enhancement is required to improve the quality or range of facilities on existing open space opportunities should be taken to engage with the local community. Suggestions for improvement may be put forward by residents or the opportunity may arise to develop Friends Groups that can consider ideas from the perspective of park users. Friends Groups will be supported in their establishment and will be encouraged to become independent to enable them to be wholly representative of the community and to access funding which may otherwise be outside the scope of the Council. Parks and open spaces are community facilities. The days when Parks staff introduced new features in parks on the basis of personal whim or horticultural experiment have passed. Parks need to be distinctive, individual and meet community needs; without community support, parks will be lifeless unvisited and unwanted areas.

PGSSS 14

The Council will engage with the local community and Parish Councils on proposals which change the use of or significantly alter the appearance of parks and open spaces.

PGSSS 15

The Council will continue its support of existing Friends Groups and will encourage the establishment of new groups and partnerships who wish to help in improving their local parks and to act as a forum for presenting new ideas for parks and open space improvement and representing park and open space users.

By engaging the community, the potential use of parks and open spaces can be broadened. Whilst it is expected that park users and local residents will be protective towards “their” local park it must be recognised that some parks and open spaces by their location or content have the opportunity of staging a variety of events and attracting a variety of facilities. The Council will act in an enabling role encouraging event organizers and concessionaires to submit proposals for parks and open spaces. Events and concessions must consider the impact on the park and local residents and the possible use of parks and open spaces must be appropriate to their site restrictions. Events in parks and open spaces will be influenced by the Events Policy and will be held in accordance with licensing requirements covering aspects of safety and potential disturbance.

PGSSS 16

The Council will encourage the use of parks and open spaces for charity and commercial events and concessions which are appropriate to the open space and in accordance with licensing requirements.

7.2.2 Designing in quality

Designing new open space

Parks and open spaces help define the character of the locality. Discussion at the design stage and reference to the landscape character assessment will ensure that open spaces contribute to the natural character of the locality. It is essential that open spaces are designed with their use and abuse carefully considered. For new open spaces it is common for the users and local community to be in a stage of development and establishment. The quality of the open space is therefore essential in reflecting the expectations of the future community. A park or open space that is poorly designed will not meet the needs of the community it is provided to serve. Poor quality will be reflected in poor infrastructure and features that are expensive to keep in acceptable condition. Reducing the quality of hard and soft landscape features is a poor business decision as maintenance costs will increase to provide for quicker wear and tear and replacement. It is therefore recommended that design guidance notes are prepared for new parks and open spaces that emphasize the need for quality. Parks and open spaces are provided for generations to enjoy and the infrastructure must reflect the quality that is to be provided in new parks and open spaces.

The Council will continue to work with developers and their landscape architects to bring about imaginative and high quality landscapes in parks and open spaces. Whilst developers will have their agendas regarding the proportion of the development budget that is made available for landscaping, quality will reflect on the appearance of the development and the residual property prices. Investment at the start of the development will lead to quick property sales at premium prices.

PGSSS 17

The Council will develop landscape design guidance incorporating high quality design, selection of hard and soft landscape materials and construction methods and the retention and enhancement of natural features to assist in the long term care of parks and open spaces to the highest standards.

PGSSS 18

The Council will work closely with developers to ensure high quality standards are incorporated in all aspects of landscape design. The Council will reinforce the requirement for high quality on the basis that such initial investment is recovered from the sale price of properties, the economic growth that is attracted and the increased respect that is given by new residents.

Improving the quality of existing open space

On existing open spaces, the use of the area will have become established. Creating changes to user patterns may be difficult to introduce and can often be resented. Community engagement is therefore an essential element. Raising the quality of existing open spaces is likely to be well received by the local community if the improvements are simply not replacing features that have been previously neglected or damaged.

In many instances the use of the park or open space will have redesigned the original features. Poor quality features or inappropriate design may have created maintenance difficulties which have led to the original concepts being lost. It remains essential to engage with the community, review the current uses of parks and open spaces and consider ways of improving the experience of those visiting the area.

Quality of existing open spaces can be considered on 2 levels. Firstly there is the quality of the individual site including the quality of the features within it. For example does the park demonstrate horticultural excellence? Secondly there is the quality of the experience of the site and its suitability to customers needs. For example a piece of grassland may not require benches of the best materials but it needs to be safe, clean and welcoming? Increasing the quality of existing open spaces includes designing out maintenance difficulties as well as incorporating features that are well designed and of high quality material.

PGSSS 19

The Council will seek to retain and maintain park and open space original features wherever possible if their use is consistent with the current uses of the park or open space.

PGSSS 20

The Council will seek to improve the quality of existing parks and open spaces by redesigning features which have changed from their original intended use and are causing maintenance problems which lower the standards on the remainder of the site.

7.2.3 Creating healthy spaces

Recent work carried out by Sport England through the Active People survey²⁷ demonstrates the amount of physical activity taking place across the country. Colchester features in the middle 50% with 22.9% of residents aged 16+ regularly participating in 30 minutes moderate intensity activity for 3 days a week. To improve participation in physical activity at a local level requires more development work, a desire from residents and the provision of facilities where there are deficiencies. The Playing Pitch Strategy and Sports and Playing Fields Development Plan²⁸ identify deficiencies for formal sporting activities. As a nation, there are increasing levels of obesity with a particular increase in the proportion of childhood obesity. Much comment has been made regarding the reduction in physical education within schools and there is increased awareness of the importance for children and young people to take part in physical activity in any form to improve their long term health. The Active People survey identified walking as the most popular recreational activity for people in England. Over 8 million adults aged 16 and over (20%) did a recreational walk for at least 30 minutes in the last 4 weeks. 5.6 million people (13.8%) swim at least once a month while 4.2 million people (10.5%) go to the gym.

Parks and open spaces provide free access to a variety of healthy leisure activities for all age groups. Whether it is children playing on an equipped play area, young people using multi use games areas or participating in winter and summer sports, parks and open spaces offer a variety of opportunities. A suitable provision of open spaces and green links form a network enabling people to move across the borough avoiding congested streets and away from traffic and the associated pollution.

Walking, jogging and cycling are to be encouraged in appropriate locations. There is so much more for the senses to experience by using parks and green links than being a vehicle passenger. Encouraging the community to use their parks, open spaces and green links for healthy activities will remain a high priority. Not only is this a sustainable approach but greater use of parks and green links leads to healthier residents, greater awareness of the natural environment and provides increased surveillance.

To support the encouragement of healthy activities within parks and open spaces, the venues themselves must be safe and free from unacceptable risk. The Council will work closely with contractors to make sure their maintenance operations are carried out in a safe manner causing minimal disruption to users.

Play provision will be challenging and will contain elements of risk. It is considered that play provision which is totally safe has no educational value and children gain little experience of assessing their own capabilities. Play areas will not be dangerous but will be designed to stimulate and extend children's play experiences. Further detail about play provision and the need for stimulating areas for play including equipped areas is provided in the Colchester Play Strategy.

²⁷ www.activepeoplesurvey.com Dec 2006
²⁸ Adopted April 2004

PGSSS 21

The Council will encourage the use of parks, open spaces and green links for healthy activities and as a means of movement across the borough.

PGSSS 22

The Council will work closely with contractors to ensure safe methods of working are adopted and the minimum amount of disruption is caused by maintenance activities to users and local residents.

7.2.4 Creating sustainable spaces

The Council has a responsibility for providing a range of parks and open spaces that meet the needs of residents and users. There is clearly a place for highly ornamental parks as supported by customer comments and visitor numbers to local facilities such as Castle Park and national facilities such as the Royal Parks. Consideration must be given to the sustainability of spaces and the additional resources that are required to maintain the standards of provision. Maintenance regimes that are highly reliant on resources such as heat or water must be examined to identify energy savings and potential alternatives. The use of peat alternatives in bedding plant production is a topical issue and one which has attracted national attention. Other materials have been tested and are being assessed in terms of overall sustainability. Discussion is taking place with suppliers and other authorities to identify alternatives that will produce plant material of comparable quality.

Water and energy consumption are kept under review not only for the financial benefits but to identify sudden peaks in consumption and long term means of energy reduction. Maintenance regimes are often machine intensive and the Council will work in partnership with contractors to trial new fuel efficient machines and different fuel sources, investigate alternative management regimes which have impacts on CO2 emissions, biodiversity and landscape diversity. Waste material arising from maintenance operations in parks and open spaces will be recycled where possible. Pesticide use should be minimised and justified.

Climatic changes are being associated with global warming, burning fossil fuels and carbon emissions. It is not the role of this strategy to comment on the cause of climatic changes but to recognize that there are increasing incidents of climatic extremes. Changing precipitation levels places a greater reliance on irrigation to sustain types of floral display. Plant selection and types of displays will be kept under review to ensure appropriate consideration is taken at the time of design. Methods of reducing water reliance will be investigated including drought resistant varieties and water retention composts and additives.

PGSSS 23

Methods used in maintaining the park or green space and its facilities will be environmentally sound, relying on best practices available according to current knowledge. The Council and its contractors shall be aware of the range of techniques available to them, and will demonstrate that informed choices have been made and are regularly reviewed.

PGSSS 24

The Council will keep under constant review the design and selection of landscape features which are being affected by climatic changes.

7.2.5 Maintaining quality spaces

The success of open space management is strongly influenced by the contract arrangements between the Council and its contractors. Arising from previous Best Value reviews recognition was made of the potential benefits of partnering arrangements. Previous contracts were generally for periods of up to 5 years. Unless there are major difficulties with the delivery of contracts most contracts run their term and are re-tendered. This leads to significant costs associated with the re-tendering exercise and seldom a reduction in prices compared with previous contracts. On this basis it was recognized that longer term partnering arrangements had benefits to the Council and the contractors involved. Longer term contracts provide security for the contractor and the opportunity to invest in staff and machinery. From the Council's position, costs are kept stable for a longer period, long term improvement opportunities can be developed and a more open, constructive relationship is created with the contractor and his staff.

A measure of the quality of parks and open spaces management and maintenance is demonstrated by the Green Flag award scheme. The Green Flag Award is the national standard for parks and green spaces in England and Wales. The award scheme began in 1996 as a means of recognising and rewarding the best green spaces in the country. It was also seen as a way of encouraging others to achieve the same high environmental standards, creating a benchmark of excellence in recreational green areas. Winning a Green Flag Award brings excellent publicity. Both the media and the public are becoming increasingly aware that a site flying a Green Flag is a high quality green space.

PGSSS 25

The Council will enter into partnering arrangements with contractors for maintenance work that is regular and routine. The Council and contractors will work together to deliver standards of maintenance that are continuously improving and are responsive to new techniques and users views.

PGSSS 26

The Council will seek Green Flag status for parks and open spaces and will actively seek accreditation for eligible sites which recognizes the quality of the boroughs parks and open spaces.

7.2.6 Managing parks and green spaces for biodiversity and heritage

Colchester's countryside is one of the most varied in Essex. This is reflected in landscapes that range from Constable Country in the north of the Borough, to marshes and the coast in the south, the River Colne through the town centre and heathland in the west. The countryside supports an equally diverse range of wildlife habitats and species. It is also a popular attraction for both Borough residents and visitors.

Urban open spaces are increasingly recognised as crucial refuges for threatened wildlife, and often provide more direct and accessible access to nature for urban residents than do more remote rural locations. Colchester's unique network of green open spaces needs to be protected and enhanced if we are to maintain this distinctive asset for wildlife, residents and visitors to the town. The positive value of many so-called 'brownfield' sites should be recognised and taken into account when planning decisions are taken. The contribution made by the River Colne must be considered in the context of other open spaces.

PPS9 was published in 2005 and outlines the Government objectives on protection of biodiversity and geological conservation through the Planning System. PPS9 encourages Local Authorities to contribute to the Government objective of rural renewal and urban renaissance by enhancing biodiversity in green spaces and among developments so that they are used by wildlife and valued by people, thus recognising that healthy functional ecosystems can contribute to better quality of life and people's sense of well-being.²⁹³⁰

A new duty to conserve biodiversity has been placed on all public authorities under section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC 2006) Parks and green spaces is one key area where CBC can fulfil this duty.

Biodiversity means variety of life. It includes all plants and animals and the habitats they live in. It is important that this is protected for future generations to enjoy. Protecting wildlife and habitats is set out in legislation, planning policy guidance, and biodiversity action plans at national, regional and local levels.

There is a wide range of wildlife in the parks, green spaces and green corridors in Colchester, in particular, on the edge of Colchester town where there are a number of wetland, woodland and grassland sites. Almost 100 hectares of these are designated as Local Nature Reserves whilst others are classified as Sites of Nature Conservation Importance. All of them are looked after in line with an ecological management plan and the Essex Biodiversity Action Plan. They house a range of species that are nationally and regionally rare, such as great crested newts, native black poplars, skylarks, bats, stag beetles and water voles. With a few exceptions many of the smaller urban green spaces lack a good-quality landscape and hence biodiversity. Most have a grassed area and a few isolated trees. The poorest greenspaces for biodiversity are the recreation grounds and playing fields where there are mainly sports pitches.

One of the main challenges to protecting and enhancing biodiversity throughout the estate relate to the patchy knowledge of the biodiversity value of the parks and green spaces.

More than ever before we understand that the state of the environment cannot be left to chance. Protecting or creating natural habitats is essential for the biodiversity of the area. Increasing areas being developed for residential or commercial use mean a network of green corridors which provide continuous habitats for wildlife are essential for the movement of flora and fauna. Managing for biodiversity in

²⁹ Jules Pretty 2007 *The Earth Only Endures*

³⁰ Pretty, J., Peacock, J., Sellens, M. & Griffin, M. 2005 The mental and physical health outcomes of green exercise. *International Journal of Environmental Health Research* 15 pp319-337

parks and green spaces means working to improve the ecological qualities of our spaces and to maximise the opportunities for people to experience nature close to hand. Biodiversity conservation will require an integrated approach to the spatial relationships of green spaces and connections between them – ie a ‘green infrastructure plan’ that feeds into the basic premises of the core spatial framework in the borough’s planning strategy

PGSSS 27

The Council will arrange for surveys of and the monitoring of parks, green spaces and green corridors and their species including those in the Essex Biodiversity Action Plan.

PGSSS 28

The Strategy supports the protection and enhancement of biodiversity in parks and green spaces in accordance with NERC 2006.

PGSSS 29

The Council will prepare a programme for the adoption of management plans for every significant park and green space that includes measures to enhance biodiversity.

PGSSS 30

The Council will continue the Local Nature Reserve Designation Programme.

PGSSS 31

The Strategy supports the development of effective partnerships and funding arrangements to enhance biodiversity in parks and green spaces.

PGSSS 32

The Council will raise awareness and support education for all sectors of the community relating to habitats and species within parks and green spaces.

7.2.7 Encouraging use and appropriate behaviour

Areas where the public feel safe and welcome will be well used and popular. There are a variety of approaches to the perception of safety which affect the public’s enjoyment and experience of the open spaces.

To encourage greater use of parks and green links as a means of movement will require users to have confidence regarding their safety. Whilst the perception of some may be that quiet footpaths pose a risk to personal safety, this is not borne out by the statistics which demonstrate nationally low levels of personal crime. Perception is nevertheless an issue to be addressed and work is required to make sure parks, open spaces and green links are safe and welcoming with appropriate signage and lighting.

CCTV can act as a deterrent to antisocial behaviour and criminal damage and can give park users greater confidence. Overt surveillance has the advantage of deterring antisocial activity whereas covert surveillance is of greater use in recording acts of damage and providing evidence for prosecutions. For greatest

impact on public perception of safety the presence of CCTV cameras should be well signed. The introduction and extension of CCTV systems into parks and open spaces has revenue implications and therefore needs to be considered on the basis of justification.

Parks which are regularly used create their own feeling of safety. Users will feel safer if they know there are other users in the neighbourhood. It is therefore a self improving situation if more people can be encouraged into parks and open spaces.

The presence of identifiable patrol staff give park users the feeling of safety with someone watching over them and being able to respond if there is activity taking place in the park or open space which could be intimidating or disturbing to others. The cost of patrol staff is significant and needs to be justified on the basis of effectiveness. Patrol staff based in one well used location become aware of potential causes of problems and can build up rapport with regular park users to gather information. Mobile patrols have limited effectiveness in that there can be significant down time travelling from one site to another. If patrols are limited in the time they can spend in specific parks or open spaces, the chance of attending when anti social activity is taking place is low. Those intent on causing damage or disruption will cease whilst the patrol is present and return at later date.

A combination of education and enforcement may be the best means of approach. Those who are infrequent or minor infringers can be advised and cautioned about their behaviour and this may be sufficient to address the problem. If infringement continues, enforcement can be carried out using suitably accredited staff.

Safety in parks and open spaces can be improved by discouraging people using sites after dark unless they are suitably lit or on main routes. This is a personal safety issue and one which the community should consider as a general attitude to safety and not specific to parks and open spaces. Some parks are opened and closed daily. This arrangement is resource intensive and prevents the public gaining access outside daylight hours. Such an arrangement does not ensure parks remain empty during the hours of darkness as those who are intent on entering the park will do by climbing gates or fences or creating holes in boundaries. The downside to locked parks is that those who are in the park after dark can usually expect to be there alone and uninterrupted by patrol staff.

PGSSS 33

The Council will review public safety in parks and open spaces by considering improvements to patrolling, CCTV, lighting and signage.

PGSSS 34

The Council will continue to provide site based patrols at Castle Park and High Woods Country Park.

PGSSS 35

The Council will not increase the number of parks and open spaces that are opened and closed daily unless there is an agreement established with the local community to participate in this activity.

Council Health Warning:

Greenspaces can seriously improve your health!