



Open Space Strategy Executive Summary

'We all want quiet; we all want beauty for the refreshment of our souls.' Octavia Hill; b.1838 – d.1912

Our vision is to maintain the traditions and quality of the Borough's open space for the continued enjoyment, health and recreation of residents and visitors. We will do this by, prioritising quality over quantity, celebrating our green heritage, giving space to nature and seeking innovative ways to fund our work. We will know we have succeeded if we hand over the Borough's open spaces to the next generation and they are able to enjoy its benefits as we have.

1. The Open Space Strategy is a guide to how the Borough Council manages its open space asset base to ensure that the needs of the community are met in the most appropriate way. An accompanying audit of existing open space includes the following types of open space; (i) *Parks & gardens* (ii) *Amenity green spaces* (iii) *Natural and semi-natural green spaces* (iv) *Designated play spaces for children and young people* (v) *Allotments* and (vi) *Green corridors*. Outdoor sports facilities are not part of the Open Space Strategy as this is dealt with through a separate Sport England compliant Playing Pitch Strategy.
2. Research has shown that Borough has a valued and well-distributed network of open space comprising spaces of varying sizes that have historical, cultural, aesthetic and recreational significance – in a word the open space asset is 'diverse'. Research has also shown that the quality of open space in the Borough is generally good or very good. This finding does not extend to all the buildings located in open space, some of which are already presenting a challenge to maintain since their original purposes have often long since changed. New methods are needed to manage these buildings and where these challenges cannot be addressed, their removal may be the only remaining option.
3. There are great challenges going forward, especially about the ownership and management of municipal open space. These challenges are greater than at any time in the last 70 years. The most significant of these is reduced staff and financial capacity to manage and deliver open space services. A further notable challenge lies in the relationship between open space and new development; since the Borough Council needs to allocate more land for economic purposes; including housing and commercial.
4. It is certain that the model of municipal management that has been in-place for generations will have to change to reflect new economic realities and this will not be an easy process. However, change presents opportunities as well as threats; for example, the multifunctionality of some open spaces can be enhanced and better connected to communities and any reduction in open space can free resources to invest in the improvement of other sites.
5. The methodology for the strategy review conforms to meeting the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and Planning Practice Guidance. The NPPF also highlights the importance of maintaining and enhancing public rights of way and access by linking existing networks, planning for biodiversity and ensuring that local ecological networks are considered within planning policy. In support of this approach, the Council has also prepared a Green Infrastructure Strategy. The evidence base for both the Open Space Strategy and the Green Infrastructure Strategy is shared.
6. The geographical scope of the Open Space strategy is the whole of the Borough. The Borough is broken down into three 'framework areas' these are Newcastle under Lyme (Urban), Kidsgrove (Urban) and Rural Areas including smaller settlements.
7. The intended time span of the reviewed Open Space Strategy is for the life-time of the Joint Local Plan for Newcastle under Lyme and City of Stoke-on-Trent. It is anticipated that the Open Space Strategy will be refreshed mid-way during this period.

8. In the urban areas, there is a valuable history of traditional open space creation and management, exemplified by the 'Britain in Bloom' participation and formal bedding. This has led to the conclusion that there is a notable 'heritage sensibility' in Newcastle under Lyme. This discovery is to be welcomed and maintaining this heritage is part of this Strategy.
9. There are important countryside sites in the Borough of which Apedale Country Park, Silverdale Country Park and Keele University are notable examples. These sites present opportunities for more informal recreational and have a value in providing 'close to nature' experiences.
10. Open space is a vital component of the Borough's overall 'Green Infrastructure'. It is also the most accessible type of Green Infrastructure.
11. The single greatest strategic challenge is to ensure that both the 'wider community' and 'users' participate and buy into the necessary changes since loss of local amenity will almost certainly be met with resistance even when alternatives are made available. Good communication and transparency are prerequisites for addressing these issues, but objections will inevitably occur wherever rationalisation is proposed. The Borough Council needs to present clear and well-articulated counter-arguments in support of rationalisation.
12. Open Space Standards have been determined by comparison with similar, comparable local authorities as well as consultation. However, the Borough is relatively well provided for in terms of open space.

OPEN SPACE TYPES	COUNT	AREA (HA.)	CURRENT PROVISION (Hectares per 1,000 population based on 124,381 pop)	PREVIOUS STANDARD (Hectares per 1,000 population)	PROPOSED QUANTITY STANDARD (Hectares per 1,000 population)	PROPOSED ACCESS STANDARD (measured in straight line)			
						URBAN	NEIGHBOURHOOD	RURAL*	
Parks and gardens	35	436.29	3.51	2.35	3.10	Local 400m	Neigh 800m	District 1600m	
Amenity green space	112	128.31	1.03	No standard	0.90	220m [open green] & 700m [MUGA]			
Natural and semi-natural green space	181	1746.22	14.0	3.60	3.60	600m			
Designated play spaces for children and young people	81	51.35	0.41	0.76	0.41	LAP 100m	LEAP 400m	NEAP 1,000m	
Allotments	12	13.60	0.11	No standard in last audit	0.15	400m (5-10 min walk)		15 min* drive	
Green Corridors	16	46.03	0.37	No standard	No standard	No standard			
Outdoor Sport Facilities				NO STANDARD					

13. **QUALITY** - The quality of sites in Newcastle under Lyme is good to very good. This is a strong foundation for maintaining quality. The recommended strategic target for quality is 80%. Sites below a threshold of 70% are a priority for further assessment, investment, intervention or review.

	Urban (no.)	% of urban	Rural (no.)	% of rural	Total (no.)	% Total
Total no. of sites	326		227		553	
Total no. of sites audited/scored	176		81		257	46.5
Score > 80%	104	59.1	8	9.81	112	43.5
70 – 80%	60	34.1	38	46.9	98	38.2
< 70%	12	6.8	35	43.2	47	18.3

14. **QUANTITY** - Except for allotments, the quantity of different open space types is ahead of Standard when considering the Borough as a whole. At first appearance, this gives the Borough Council flexibility in terms of quantity across many open space types. However, understanding distribution is necessary. Hence, the Borough Council is not free of constraints on what can or cannot be rationalised if this proves necessary. In practice, any reduction in quantity must be justified on a case-by-case basis and be in general alignment with legacy planning policies or the new Joint Local Plan.
15. **ACCESS** - Standards apply equally to urban and rural areas, except for allotments. In this case, the urban standard is set as a walking distance (400 metres) and in the rural area a driving time (15 minutes). These standards are within the range of other authorities and recognise that in rural areas it is not practical for pedestrian only provision. Distance standards are shown as a linear distance, but when making planning decisions the route to an open space, typology should also be considered. In practice, very few routes follow straight lines and users will normally follow pavements, green corridors and cross busy roads at traffic lights.
16. **DIVERSITY OF PROVISION** - Maintaining diversity of provision is necessary if the needs of whole communities are to be met. This includes having some open space sites that can meet both a wide range functions and those that can provide for minority or hobby interests. In many cases, this requires little more than access to land, water or air without undue restrictions. It may be beneficial to consider site provision under the 'duty to cooperate' in the NPPF, as suitable sites may exist close to the Borough boundary.
17. **PLANNING POLICY** - Open Space is a cross cutting policy theme because it strongly influences quality of life and place shaping. To emphasise its importance, it is recommended that the new Joint Local Plan should contain a specific policy/policies on Open Space as well as a separate specific policy/policies on Green Infrastructure.
18. **DEVELOPMENT** - In circumstances where there are clear surpluses of open space provision, in terms of quantity relative to location and/or typology, it is appropriate to consider reallocation of land for the provision of new development, in whole or in part. This is subject to the application of Local Plan policies for protection of the natural and historic environment, the maintenance of coherent and connected Green Infrastructure, ecosystems services provision and other potential restrictions.
19. **FINANCE**- Budget reductions are anticipated up to and beyond 2020. Since open space functions delivered by the Borough Council are mostly non-statutory; budget reductions are expected to exceed those of other service areas. Income generation potential is unlikely to wholly bridge the gap. In the short-term, budget reductions are inevitable, which will lead to reduced capacity and level of service. The precautionary principle can be applied here, so the Council should avoid making irreversible decisions without careful consideration. Given the reduction of both staff and financial capacity, it will be necessary to look towards a mixed economy of providers. Whilst the providers of services may be different, the transfer of ownership is to be strongly resisted wherever practicably possible; to paraphrase "when its gone – its gone forever". Some of the opportunities in developing the mixed economy of open space management include:
- Address budget reductions and consequent reduction of services but seek to offset in part by increased commercial activity.
 - The Borough Council should have a good understanding of total cost and practice 'full cost recovery' in its decision-making processes.
 - Avoid irreversible decisions, notably to allow for future expansion when the economic cycle changes. It is acceptable to transfer land management of open space to alternative providers but with the Borough Council should retain the ownership of sites wherever practicably possible (an example is Parish and Town Councils which can use precepts to fund management works).
 - Organise the service department as an entrepreneurial enabler and facilitator.
 - Dispose of sites no longer fit for purpose or otherwise surplus to requirements, noting the constraints found elsewhere in this Strategy, to reduce the asset size.
 - Reinvest funds from disposal into open space improvements.
 - Require developers to have mechanisms in place where residents pay directly for the open space created as part of the development and that this is transferable on sale. It is essential to have a robust and automated collection mechanism.

20. **INVESTMENT** - In a resource limited environment, the potential for investment is highly limited but not impossible. Realistic instances of investment opportunities include:

- Funds released from rationalisation.
- Funds generated through new development (planning agreements or S106) and/or CIL.
- Local authority invest-to-save funds.
- Grants from external organisation including National Lottery funders.
- One-off grants from governmental sources.
- Sponsorship or funding from business, trusts and foundations and private individuals.

21. The investment strategy is a, listing-in-priority-order, of how investment funds should be deployed. It should be made clear that investment is an entirely different consideration to management funds or revenue associated with current staffing. assumed that existing management funds are sufficient to retain the standard of current open spaces above the 80% quality threshold.

MOST

- Sites which currently fall below the 80% quality standard which it is determined should be retained as open space.
- Open space that provides (or could provide) enhanced open space connectivity including green corridors or improved multifunctionality.
- Sites where a capital investment could significantly reduce ongoing revenue running costs and/or increase income earned from a site.
- Sites where a funding opportunity presents itself (although this does not appear at the top of the list they should almost invariably be taken in a resource limited environment).
- Sites where investment would lead to improved ecosystem services or protection of neighbouring communities from climate change impacts (an example is the re-engineering of amenity grassland as flood retention areas).
- Sites new/or existing which attract or retain significant new economic investment in the Borough, for example through attracting more tourists to stimulate the visitor economy.
- Refreshment of facilities that are nearing their end of life e.g. play equipment.
- Improvements to open space path networks, parking, on-site interpretation, shelter, provision for youth.
- Refurbishment or removal of time-expired built structures if these have not been dealt with under a higher listing.

LEAST

22. **VOLUNTEERS** - involvement is critical to the successful management and development of the Borough's open space assets. Whilst the Borough Council is already successfully involved it is an area for further revenue/staffing investment with potentially large returns. The strategy for volunteering should not be undertaken in isolation from the offer/support available through other organisations. The approach to volunteering should also involve developing skills, supporting inter-generational activities, reducing social exclusion and supporting health and wellbeing. In respect of these activities, linking with NHS service providers, GPs, offender rehabilitation and community & neighbourhood services are all desirable attributes.

23. **EVENTS** - The Borough has long participated in 'Britain in Bloom' and has enjoyed considerable success. This is to be celebrated and should be continued. It is an evidential activity which reaches many citizens and apart from the physical results of attractive planting and community participation, it also raises awareness of open space management as a valued council service. It is also cost neutral since the costs are not met from Council budgets. Maintaining events in a resource limited environment more efficient approaches will be required. This will be an ongoing activity and require continued creative thinking at the management level. The Borough Council should continue the existing trend by moving from being an 'organiser' to an 'enabler & facilitator'. Staffing should be used, as far as possible, to support events created and led by volunteers.