

Report to: Executive Board – 27th September 2002

**PARKS AND GREEN SPACES STRATEGY**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Report of: Head of Parks and Green Spaces</b></p> <p><b>Report Author: Andrew Parsons</b></p> <p><b>Lead Member</b><br/><b>Responsible: Councillor Peter Johnson</b></p> <p><b>Overview and Scrutiny Committee</b><br/><b>Responsibility: Environment and Finance</b></p> <p><b>Key Decision: Yes</b></p>   | <p><b>WARDS AFFECTED</b></p> <p>All</p> |
| <p><b>SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b></p> <p>This report sets out some strategic options for future capital investment in the Parks and requests that the Board consider a number of specific Capital Bids for immediate approval. The staffing implications will include compilation of design schemes and arrangement for procurement and execution of some of the schemes. It should be noted that some of these items could be progressed during this forthcoming winter period through the use of existing staffing resources from within Parks and Green Spaces. The financial implications for the year 2002/03 for types of scheme are set out in appendix 1. More detailed information about the individual schemes proposed to use the funds approved will be brought to the Executive Board at a later date as projects are developed.</p> <p>The Executive Board is ASKED to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Select those types of scheme which it would like to see developed and executed.</li> <li>2. Recommend to Council that the corresponding sums of Capital funding be placed within the Council's capital budget.</li> </ol> |   |

**1. Background Issues**

- 1.1 In 1999 the Parks and Green Spaces Business Unit was formed through the amalgamation of the Client and Contractor teams, that had existed through the Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) regime, and placed within the overall structure of City Works at Horspath. With the subsequent reorganisation it was transferred to the Directorate for the Physical Environment and now has some increased responsibility for other services such as Allotments, Sports Development and Port Meadow.
- 1.2 Perhaps because of its background, it is sometimes mistakenly thought that the Unit is engaged solely on issues relating to the maintenance of land and, while this does form a key element of what we do, it is important to understand that the team does deliver a wide and diverse set of activities that are linked together under the common theme of outdoor leisure.

- 1.3 The past decade has seen expenditure on Oxford's open space reduced by around £800,000, or about 22%, as a result of two factors. Firstly, the CCT regime of the early 1990's shifted the focus of Parks management away from developmental and regeneration issues towards the single goal of reducing maintenance costs while latterly, the Council's own financial situation has led to a three year period of further cuts. During this time, by contrast, the area and number of sites the city owns and that the Unit now manages has increased by about 10% as sites such as Gillian's and Fry's Hill Park have been developed and absorbed into the land we manage.

## **2. An Investment History in Parks and Outdoor Leisure**

- 2.1 For years there have been double standards within the leisure environment as to the quality of indoor and outdoor facilities. While in the past larger budgets have been targeted towards improving the quality of the city's indoor provision, infrastructure items in parks, such as sports changing rooms and outdoor toilets have largely been ignored. People's aspirations as to their leisure requirements are rising and the quality of our outdoor facilities, with often-inadequate showering facilities and tired out of date play areas, will very soon no longer be tolerated. No sports centre would last long with such facilities and our Parks should now be recognised for what they are "leisure centres without roofs" in terms of their future management and commitment to funding.
- 2.2 Parks are often associated with children and childhood. Most people will have memories of playing in parks as children but serious issues regarding the perception of safety and the quality of the play value of many of the city's play areas now need to be addressed. Across the city there are over one hundred children's play areas with the majority designed in an age when parents were prepared to allow their children to travel unaccompanied to the nearest neighbourhood play space or recreation ground. This sadly is no longer the case and has led to a position whereby our larger play areas, in the major parks, are seeing their use increase, as they become venues for family outings. By contrast, however, many of the smaller sites now show little evidence of any use at all.
- 2.3 This is an issue the Unit is addressing, particularly in areas of high concentration such as Wood Farm and Blackbird Leys and has led to the publication of the Wood Farm/Town Furze Play Areas Strategy. However, the issue remains that as a consequence of many years of under investment the quality of the play provision in the vast majority of sites is at best out dated and in some cases extremely poor. This then is another example of the inability to accommodate an equipment replacement programme within the existing revenue budget.
- 2.4 Similarly, the pressure from our young people to provide street activities and wheeled sports venues needs to be addressed as their own demands shift to new and more exciting activities. In the past a series of five Street Sport sites were developed through Section 106 funding but there seems little hope of completing other sites without the approval of additional direct capital funding.
- 2.5 The recent background to this under investment in Parks can largely be traced to the "CCT era" of the 1990's. Within Government and Local Authorities alike a huge misunderstanding existed as to what Parks Management was really about. While CCT succeeded in driving costs down and therefore generated genuine reductions in budgets, it separated the decision makers from the deliverer of the front line service. The sheer effort in monitoring contracts distracted key staff from their true developmental roles.

### **3 Customer Feedback**

- 3.1 The resources within our parks and green spaces can be as beneficial to the wider issues of Community Safety, Health and Social Inclusion as can any other Council service. In simple terms if there are areas for teenagers within certain parks then the issue of boredom and frustration that ultimately leads to vandalism can be reduced. Unlike some other service the indicators by which we are judged are not financial but by attracting a larger segment of a defined target market to our Parks, we too can contribute strongly to the Council's corporate objectives and therefore raise the value of the service we provide.
- 3.2 In 1999 the first Talkback survey on Leisure and Youth Issues identified that 75% of people spent an hour or more visiting parks, open space or the countryside and this strong indication of the importance of open space to local people was reinforced in August 2002 with the completion of a second wave of Customer Satisfaction research in our major parks. This latest tranche has allowed us to measure the contentment levels of users against time to gauge both our performance and improvement.
- 3.3 The results from the study in 2000 had already highlighted the fact that users were generally satisfied with the standard of horticulture but that they were concerned as to the quality of infrastructure items. These latest results simply show that this position has worsened.
- 3.4 This dissatisfaction simply reinforces the points raised above concerning our inability to address infrastructure improvements due to falling budget thresholds and a lack of past investment.

### **4 Possible Capital Projects.**

- 4.1 With all of the above in mind therefore I have set out below a list of the type of items where urgent investment is required: -
- a Car Parks surfaces;
  - b Footpath/cycle paths;
  - c Parks Toilets;
  - d Pavilions;
  - e Signage;
  - f Changing Rooms
  - g Hard Sports surfaces (Tennis, Multi-Sport, Five a side, Basket Ball.)
- 4.2 If the Council is to consider realigning its Capital programme in order to fund some of these items they are mostly of the type of work where it would be possible to begin work with little delay. There is expertise within the Unit in playground construction and other hard landscaping skills and it would be possible for these items to be completed during the forthcoming winter as long as funding was released now.
- 4.3 Appendix 1 contains a list of items that have been flagged up in the past as being urgent capital bids but which are not currently included in the current Capital programme. They were also included in the 2002 – 2005 Business plan for Parks and Green Spaces.

- 4.4 For clarity the items marked with a ♦ are those which the Unit feels can be completed within a six month period as long as funding is realised immediately.
- 4.5 In undertaking any of these projects that may be released from the Capital programme the Unit will comply with all financial regulations as set out in the Constitution.

THIS REPORT HAS BEEN SEEN AND APPROVED BY:

The Head of Parks and Green Spaces

Background papers: None

| Capital Bids 2002 – 2005 |                                       |         |         |         |         |        |          |                                    |  |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|----------|------------------------------------|--|
|                          |                                       | TOTAL   | 2002/3  | 2003/4  | 2004/5  | 2005/6 | Priority | Criteria                           | Comments   |
|                          |                                       | £       | £       | £       | £       | £      |          |                                    |  |
| ◆ 1                      | Parks Infrastructure repairs          | 300,000 | 100,000 | 100,000 | 100,000 | 0      | H        | Improving the physical environment | This sum will allow for a programme of repairs to items such as path and roadways, the resurfacing of sports areas, railing and fence repairs and the refurbishment of toilets.  |
| ◆ 2                      | Improvements to children's play areas | 170,000 | 170,000 | 0       | 0       | 0      | H        | Improving the physical environment | The play area strategy has identified that usage of the main play areas is increasing while some of the smaller ones are in decline and there is now an urgent need to up grade these major attractions in our main parks. (£95,000). Similarly the Wood Farm/Town Furze Play Area Strategy, which was developed with local people, has identified the need for a new toddler play space in Town Furze. (£75,000). |
| ◆ 3                      | Street Sport sites                    | 150,000 | 75,000  | 75,000  | 0       | 0      | M        | Improving the physical environment | This item will allow for the construction of two more Street Sports sites to complement the five successful existing facilities - Rose Hill and Northway are suggested.  |
| ◆ 4                      | Parks Signage and Publicity           | 25,000  | 25,000  | 0       | 0       | 0      | M        | Improving the physical environment | The item was referred to in the April 2001 LS Committee report and is to support the introduction of the fouling of Land Act with signage and publicity.   |
| ◆ 5                      | Play Area Signage                     | 25,000  | 25,000  | 0       | 0       | 0      | H        | Improving the physical environment | This item was referred to in the July 2001 Leisure Services Committee report and will equip all play areas with suitable signage.  |
| 6                        | Paddling Pools                        | 100,000 | 30,000  | 70,000  | 0       | 0      | M        | Improving the physical environment | The three existing paddling pools are increasing proving difficult to comply with water treatment legislation. A new water feature could be created that would incorporate improved play opportunities and its own integrated water treatment system.  |

| Capital Bids 2002 – 2005 |                             |         |        |         |         |          |          |                                    |   |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|---------|--------|---------|---------|----------|----------|------------------------------------|---|
|                          | TOTAL                       | 2002/3  | 2003/4 | 2004/5  | 2005/6  | Priority | Criteria | Comments                           |   |
|                          | £                           | £       | £      | £       | £       |          |          |                                    |   |
| 7                        | Sports Changing Rooms       | 500,000 | 10,000 | 250,000 | 200,000 | 40,000   | H        | Strengthening local communities    | The existing "Portacabin" buildings at Donnington Sports Ground will not be granted another temporary planning consent when permission expires in 2003. They must therefore be replaced with a permanent building if football is to continue at this site, where there is good local demand. Other sites are also in urgent need of improvement and a capital sum could be used as match funding with grants from the Football Foundation or Sport England. |
| 8                        | Repairs to Shotover Toilets | 50,000  | 50,000 | 0       | 0       | 0        | H        | Improving the physical environment | This sum will allow for the refurbishment and subsequent reopening of the toilets at Shotover Park. At present there is no toilet provision at this extremely popular location.   |