

Oxford City Council - Parks and Green Spaces Survey

Oxford Civic Society response

1. Preamble

1. A general appreciation of the intrinsic value of parks and green spaces as an essential element for individual health and well-being has been recognized, especially over the past two years of COVID. Those residents who had no access to their own or shared garden space were profoundly affected by the inability to enjoy the outdoors. Where did such people turn – to their public parks and green spaces.

2. This response has been prepared in response to the public survey on Parks and Green Spaces undertaken by Oxford City Council. While the questions posed in the survey go some way to gathering important information about the ‘features and facilities’ in the city’s parks and green spaces, Oxford Civic Society felt it would be helpful to provide a more comprehensive response which goes beyond these questions and by some measure addresses the need for a more robust strategy and appropriate policies concerning access and use of the spaces and how more green spaces can be provided for the enjoyment of everyone.

2. What do we have to work with?

2.1. The assets

3. The city of Oxford has 8 public parks¹ and two under the control of the University and Christ Church. Six parks and green spaces have been recognised as among the very best in the world, all receiving a Green Flag Award Status

4. The Green Flag Award® scheme recognises and rewards well managed parks and green spaces², setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world. The purpose and aims of the scheme are:

- To ensure that everybody has access to quality green and other open spaces, irrespective of where they live.

¹ Blackbird Leys, Botley, Bury Knowle, Cutteslowe and Sunnymead, Florence, Hinksey, Raleigh, South Park. Surprisingly, Oxford’s first and oldest park – the 4-acre site at Alexandra Park in North Oxford - is not listed on the Register of City Parks. Opened by Princess Alexandra in 1925 and made for the people in Oxford as recreational land within the city when public open space was becoming scarce and the population was growing.

² Also included are cemeteries and crematoria, recreation grounds, canals, reservoirs, educational campuses, hospital grounds, housing estates, nature reserves and allotments.

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- To ensure that these spaces are appropriately managed and meet the needs of the communities that they serve.
- To establish standards of good management.
- To promote and share good practice amongst the green space sector.
- To recognise and reward the hard work of managers, staff and volunteers.

5. In addition to the public parks and the 4 public recreational sports grounds³, there are those spaces under the control of the University and the colleges. University Parks and Christ Church Meadow are the main areas in the city where residents, workers and tourists can freely access and enjoy a rural experience in the heart of the city. Both these parks have the added advantage of a close proximity to the Thames and its tributaries, providing access to punting and boating. Limited access to the college boathouses on the East side of the river is gained via Christ Church Meadow, again understandable for security reasons. Residents of Iffley and Cowley would value some access to the Meadow via a bridge from Aston's Eyot to the Boathouse Island. Many of us will recall the existence of a temporary pontoon bridge when building work was undertaken on the island and the enormous benefit it presented to those living in the area for easy access to the city.

6. Further, there are the 39 private college gardens and 11 college sports fields. The private college gardens are open to visitors during particular and restricted times: this is understandable for security purposes and to respect the learning aspect of the college. The college sports fields, many of which are shared by colleges, are used during the 24 weeks of full term. These underused areas have little biodiversity, consisting essentially of hectares of finely mown grass. For the remainder of the year when the students have 'gone down', these could be accessed by local sports clubs and organizations? A recent study, as yet unpublished, has investigated the feasibility of such an arrangement. We look forward to seeing the report.

7. The city is surrounded by water and the green spaces forming the frontages and pathways provide essential recreational space for walkers and cyclists, for the latter they offer a safer route away from traffic, congestion and pollution.

8. In addition, the city has a number of Nature Parks, freely accessible to all – Boundary Brook, Chilswell Valley, Lewis Nature Reserve, Iffley Meadows, Lye Valley, Raleigh, Rivermead, Sydlings Copse⁴. A number of these are part of the Wild Oxford Project run by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT).⁵

³ Marston, Grandpont, Boult Lane, Horspath,

⁴ Spindleberry Nature Park on the southern edge of Greater Leys could also be included. It will be even more crucial as a green lung when 3,000 new houses are built on Grenoble Road (with a further 7,000 in the pipeline).

⁵ The Wild Oxford project is run by BBOWT in partnership with [Friends of Lye Valley](#), [Friends of Raleigh Park](#), [Oxford City Council](#), [Oxford Conservation Volunteers](#), [Oxford Urban Wildlife Group](#) and [Oxford Preservation Trust](#).

9. For those who include gardening and manual work as part of their leisure, there are the 36 allotment sites situated around the city (with a total area of 70.35 ha), 11 per cent of the total green space in the City). Management of the sites is devolved to the individual site association committees, most of which belong to the Oxford and District Federation of Allotment Associations (ODFAA).⁶ The provision of allotments in Oxford is good, amongst the highest in relation to the population in the country. Allotments are the most important Green Space within the City for many of the 2900 allotment holders and their families. Demand is likely to increase as more housing is built, generally without gardens suitable for growing vegetables. The interest in vegetable and fruit growing on allotments stimulated by the Covid pandemic is being maintained. The increase in demand for allotments in recent years has been met initially by clearing abandoned plots and areas and latterly by subdivision of standard plots.

2.2. The policies and strategies

10. **The Oxford Local Plan 2016-2036** takes the overall view that Oxford benefits from a wide range of green spaces such as parks, amenity space, natural and semi-natural spaces, historic sites, floodplains and sites of importance to biodiversity and nature conservation. The Blue Infrastructure Network is interwoven and interlinked with the Green Infrastructure Network, and enhances the experience and function of it. The key waterways are the River Thames, River Cherwell and the Oxford Canal. There are also many brooks and streams, for example Bayswater Brook and Northfield Brook, which often form part of wildlife and movement corridors. These green and blue spaces and features perform important functions both individually and as part of a wider network:

- Social Functions contributing to health and wellbeing, heritage, sense of place and tranquillity
- Environmental Functions supporting biodiversity, water management and air quality
- Economic Functions supporting jobs, tourism and an attractive business environment

11. It is noted in the Local Plan that it is important to protect a network of green and blue spaces across Oxford for different needs such as recreation, biodiversity and flood protection. The Oxford Green Infrastructure Study identifies Oxford's green spaces and assesses their social, environmental and economic functions. This information has been used to identify a network of multi-functional green spaces, many of which are part of the network of watercourses that require protection through the Local Plan as part of the Green and Blue Infrastructure Network.

⁶ The Oxford and District Federation of Allotment Associations (O&DFAA) works to:

- promote the existence of, the need for, and the benefits to be gained from allotment gardens in Oxford
- promote, support and safeguard the welfare of the Allotment Associations in Oxford by:
 - providing or signposting administrative advice and support,
 - acting as an arbitrator in unresolved disputes, whether between association Committee members or Committee members and plot holders,
 - acting as representative and or advocate for Associations in any dealings or disputes with Oxford City Council and other public bodies,

acting as negotiator on behalf of all Associations during rent, lease or SLA reviews, and at other times when governing constitutions or rules or other matters affecting the conduct of Associations' business are involved.

There are 36 working allotment sites in Oxford City. These all have devolved management where the association members annually elect a committee to manage the site and plots. Most associations send representatives to the O&DFAA/Oxford City Council Allotment Liaison Meetings, where policy for the overall management of Oxford's allotments is agreed. This partnership has not worked well in the last 4 years during the negotiation of new allotment leases, as the responsibility for allotments within the City Council staff hierarchy has been transferred 3 times.

<https://www.odfaa.com/site-photos-and-odfaa-map>

12. To maintain the existing recreational resource of waterways in the city for residents and visitors it is important to prevent the loss of existing waterbased recreational facilities, including centres for boating activities such as college boathouses, boat hire bases, boat passenger services, rowing clubs

and businesses providing support services for boat users. The importance of the network of waterside paths for cycling, running and walking should also be protected and enhanced.

13. Most of the city's parks have a range of functions and are an important recreational resource. These are protected as part of the Green and Blue Infrastructure Network. Some open spaces have a specialist function that is protected, which might be biodiversity, Green Belt, allotments or open air sports. The Oxford Local Plan 2016-2036 contains a range of policies concerning the protection and enhancement of Oxford's green and blue infrastructure network:

- Policy G1: Protection of Green and Blue Infrastructure Network
- Policy G2: Protection of biodiversity and geo-diversity
- Policy G3: Green Belt
- Policy G4: Allotments and community food growing
- Policy G5: Existing open space, indoor and outdoor sports and recreation facilities
- Policy G6: Residential Garden land
- Policy G7: Protection of existing Green Infrastructure features
- Policy G8: New and enhanced Green and Blue Infrastructure Network Features

14. The city council is currently updating this plan to roll it forward to 2040.

15. **The Green Spaces Strategy 2013–2027** was adopted in 2013 with the purposes to:

- Protect and improve Oxford's accessible parks and open spaces
- Provide clear objectives and direction for the planning and management of parks and open spaces
- Provide the Council with a robust basis for making development decisions and negotiating planning gain
- Identify ways in which parks and open spaces can be improved in a coordinated way whilst providing value for money.

16. The strategy sets out a Parks and Open Spaces Vision and Aims, presents Oxford's Local Quantity Standard and strategies to improve access to Green Space, promote High Quality Green Space, contribute to Biodiversity, Sustainability, Heritage and Culture and to Health and Well-being. The strategies also include recommendations for community involvement and delivering the Strategy. It is not certain if this strategy is still considered to be operational.

17. **The Oxford City Strategy 2020-2024** includes emphasis that:

18. The inter-connected priorities of the City Strategy 2020-2024 include the following, and priorities 3 and 4 are particularly relevant to the protection and enhancement of Oxford's green and blue infrastructure network:

1. Enable an inclusive economy
2. Deliver more affordable housing
3. Support thriving communities
4. Pursue a zero carbon Oxford

19. Selected relevant policies include:

- Priority: Support thriving communities
 - Our services, grants, community and leisure facilities, parks and cultural events will have helped reduce inequality, increase cohesion and improve health and wellbeing across Oxford's communities
 - Children and young people's resilience and confidence will have increased through the educational and recreational activities we offer
 - Our parks and public spaces will remain clean, safe, and well maintained, and will be accessible to more people to enjoy the health and wellbeing benefits they provide
 - Deliver a Thriving Communities Strategy that sets ambitions and actions to reduce isolation and support community involvement, health and wellbeing through active lifestyles, volunteering, cultural engagement, and use of our parks and community assets.
- Priority: Pursue a zero carbon Oxford
 - Over the next four years we would like to see the following outcomes achieved as we pursue a zero carbon Oxford:
 - Our streets, neighbourhoods and open spaces will be greener with more trees and other plants, and increased biodiversity
 - The city will become more resilient to climate change including improved flood defences
 - Citizens, businesses and other organisations in the city will be taking action to reduce carbon emissions and waste, and increase biodiversity and recycling
 - Use our planning system to ensure the natural environment is enhanced and carbon emissions are reduced through all new development.
 - Encourage and enable public access to nature and support a significant programme to increase biodiversity and tree-planting.

20. **The Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy (Stage 1)** – Policy Area H2 - Access to Spaces for Physical Activity. The need to improve physical activity rates is identified in a suite of national policies which identify physical inactivity as detrimental to physical and mental health. In an Oxfordshire context, the strategic need for improved access to spaces for physical activity is reflected within the Local Transport Plan (LTP4) (OCC, 2015), the Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategy (Oxfordshire Health & Wellbeing Board, 2019) and the Rights of Way Management Plan (OCC, 2014).

21. Evidence collected by Sport England's Active Lives Survey (Sport England, 2020) identifies a need to increase physical activity levels within Oxfordshire's urban areas, particularly in more deprived communities. This includes building physical activity into people's everyday routines by investing in infrastructure such as dedicated sport and leisure facilities as well as high quality walking and cycling routes.

22. Policy Area PS1: Local & Liveable Communities also notes the need to create local and liveable communities is set out in both local and national planning policy to ensure communities are safe and healthy. The need for easy access to social, recreational and cultural facilities is also highlighted and encouraging reduced travel or a shift to travel by sustainable transport through providing key services and facilities within local reach of residents.

23. Policy Area E3: Enhance Natural Environment & Biodiversity - the UK Government's 25 Year Environment Plan (2018) identifies a need for a Nature Recovery Network rich in wildlife and biodiversity through the creation or restoration of 500,000 additional hectares of wildlife-rich habitat

outside of protected sites by 2042. This sets the tone for the emerging Environment Bill (2020) which proposes to establish a mandatory requirement for biodiversity net gain and to embed connected Nature Recovery Networks.

24. Oxfordshire's Nature Recovery Network has recently been drafted by a partnership of local environmental stakeholders led by Wild Oxfordshire with local authority input, under the direction of the Biodiversity Advisory Group, although is yet to be agreed.

25. The Oxfordshire 2050 Plan – the draft Plan notes that leisure, recreation, community and open space facilities provide significant benefits to both the mental wellbeing and physical health of communities in Oxfordshire, as well as making an important contribution to the vitality of our city, town and local centres. Open spaces, as well as grassroot sport and recreation facilities, can also make a positive contribution to biodiversity and the local environment. In reflection of this, it is important that the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 continues to support these facilities.

26. The recommended policy (Policy 16) includes: The Oxfordshire Plan would expect all new strategic leisure, recreation and open space facilities development to meet the following criteria:

- They must be located within the built-up areas of the city, towns and villages. In the villages, development must be proportionally scaled and in keeping with the character of the settlement. Development outside of these areas will only be supported in exceptional circumstances, for example where it is evidenced that it cannot reasonably be located in the city, or a town or village in the county, such as water-based facilities or parkland uses.
- They must be located in accessible locations, with excellent public transport and link to networks for walking and cycling and the public rights of way network.
- Use of sustainable travel is encouraged and a sustainable travel plan will be required that sets out the details of the bus and rail connectivity to be secured.
- They must be designed with renewable energy provision incorporated to help reduce use of carbon.
- They must have minimal traffic, environmental, visual and landscape impact.
- Provision for the long-term maintenance and management of the facilities will be sought and must be agreed as part of a planning application.
- School sports halls and outdoor playing fields should be made available to the local community. New facilities of this type would be required to enter into community use agreements.
- Sports lighting would operate within agreed hours where there is a need unless the lighting gives rise to demonstrable harm to biodiversity.

27. Community facilities would be a matter for individual local plans except where community facilities are intended to meet the needs of a wider district or neighbouring district(s) in which case they should be located within or adjoining rural service centres to maximise accessibility

3. What can be done?

28. **It is recommended that a review of the Green Spaces Strategy 2013–2027 is undertaken as part of the evidence building for the Green Spaces Strategy, City Strategy and Local Plan 2040 updates, (and for reviews of other plans and strategies) leading to revised policies giving emphasis**

to climate change and inclusivity than evident in the current Green Spaces Strategy and Local Plan⁷. The reviews should also consider the implications of increasing housing densities in the city, both as occurring and as planned in employment and housing allocation policies.

29. Population growth and consequent densification combine with competing demands for land use and budgetary constraints, to be a risk to the provision of local, accessible greenspace. In supporting the delivery of local health, social, environmental and economic priorities, good quality greenspace has the potential to deliver substantial benefits for public health and for wider local priorities at a relatively low cost. **Natural capital accounting methodology and tools now exist which can help to understand the true value of the green estate – methods and tools not available to earlier strategies and policy formulation.**

30. **Achieving the City Strategy outcomes requires concerted effort and close partnership between agencies, bringing public health and local healthcare and social care providers together with planning departments, parks and leisure management, transport providers, architects, developers, and the communities who will be using these spaces.** Local policies and strategies that include requirements for greenspace based on local needs, will help councils and the local NHS deliver on ambitions for healthy communities, whilst contributing to wider local priorities such as tackling climate change, reducing social isolation and improving the local economy. **These considerations are being championed in the ongoing inter-agency work of the Oxfordshire Inclusive Economic Partnership.**

31. Other factors to consider include:

- **Creation and the management of new green spaces in the city is to be welcomed** – the hugely popular recent pilot for the West end of Broad Street is a case in point. The current proposal to extend 'Broad Meadow' along the whole length of the Broad is to be welcomed and it is hoped the County can be persuaded any loss of income from parking fees outweighs the likely significant improvement of air quality in the city centre.
- **The many new developments taking place in the West end – Osney Mead, Oxpens, the Nuffield Island site – should/could all provide green spaces for workers and visitors.** Some of these sites sit on the waterways that surround Oxford and there is ample scope for the creation of areas that can be enjoyed away from polluting vehicles.
- A project recently commissioned by the Canal Trust for improvements to the towpath between Hythe Bridge Street and the Islip Lock offers further opportunity for access and enjoyment of green spaces.
- The Green Belt is a strategic planning policy tool designed primarily to prevent the spread of development and the coalescence of urban areas. There is growing concern that the Oxford Green Belt is no longer providing protection to the historic setting of the city and at the same time is constraining the development of the city in ways which could be of overall environmental benefit and with other city operational benefits. **A review of Green Belt policies could be considered as part of the review of policies concerning the protection and enhancement of Oxford's green and blue infrastructure network and updating current policies and strategies.**

⁷ Greenspace, such as parks, woodland, fields and allotments as well as natural elements including green walls, roofs and incidental vegetation, are increasingly being recognised as an important asset for supporting health and wellbeing. This 'natural capital' can help local authorities address local issues that they face, including improving health and wellbeing, managing health and social care costs, reducing health inequalities, improving social cohesion and taking positive action to address climate change.

- **Progress needs to be made with the implementation of the Oxford Waterways Shared Vision, which was produced in 2019.** The Vision included recommendations for the contribution of the waterways to city regeneration, moorings and service provision, tourism, active communities and the environment. **A clear waterways strategy (i.e., actions to achieve the vision) is needed.**

32. Selected policy reforms for the Local Plan, to be examined in the proposed review of the Green Spaces Strategy 2013–2027 could include:

- **Prioritise improving access to greenspace and creating greener communities especially in areas of deprivation or where there is poor or unequal access, as an important part of the wider plan to reduce health inequalities locally.** Greener neighbourhoods benefit everyone, but appear to disproportionately benefit disadvantaged groups, and socioeconomic-related inequalities in health are lower in areas with greater access to greenspace. Improvements must be carefully planned and purposeful consultation must occur at all stages in order to provide equitable, sustainable benefits and to ensure health inequalities are not inadvertently exacerbated.
- **Consider whether a formal valuation of benefits is necessary to strengthen the case for the creation, revitalisation and maintenance of greenspace.** This may be done using monetary, non-monetary or a combination of valuation techniques. Being able to demonstrate the value of greenspaces will help to ensure they are taken into account when difficult local finance decisions must be made.
- **Identify and factor in resilient funding arrangements for the maintenance of greenspace as early as possible, so that it can continue to provide benefits in the long term.** Spending or investment decisions need to take account of the potential impact on health and wellbeing as well as future financial sustainability, and this gives local public health teams and the NHS an opportunity to engage in the decision-making process.
- **Establish interventions, such as green social prescribing initiatives, that will support people who do not use greenspace to begin using it.** Programmes to support social engagement or to facilitate participation in activities coupled with improvements to the physical environment, are an effective approach to enable people to start using these spaces and to continue to use them.
- **Support robust evaluation of local greenspace interventions to help build a broader evidence base.** It is vital to use valid and reliable measures of data collection. The Survey Questions

4. The survey questions

33. Returning to the Council's survey questions, these focus on access and facilities **and to our mind the primary issue is the management and maintenance of the places and spaces.**

- It is accepted such elements come at a cost and budgets are consistently being reduced. **Hiring out space for events, charging for parking (if available, but not for disabled), operating a sponsored seating campaign (named benches) could all bring in much needed funds.**
- **There is scope for working with the University, the colleges and local businesses to create partnerships for specific initiatives, such as rewilding some park areas, funding improved lighting and signposting, renovating playground areas.**

34. These represent just a few initiatives that could be considered, and many others do exist.