

1 Purpose

- 1.1 To inform the Committee about the variety of district wide green spaces owned and managed by AVDC, how they are used, and how their usage is actively encouraged.

2 Recommendations

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| 2.1 | That Members note the benefits that quality green spaces provide and the variety of work currently undertaken to maintain, encourage use of and promote such spaces. |
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3 Executive summary

- 3.1 This is the first report of this nature and includes work covered by the Community Spaces Team, Historic Buildings Team, and Communities Team.
- 3.2 It highlights the importance of quality green spaces, including the facilities provided within them, events held upon them and how such provision together with promotion encourages their use.

4 Introduction

- 4.1 AVDC manage around 190 hectares of green spaces within the district, equivalent to 266 adult football pitches. The majority of these spaces are owned by AVDC, the exceptions being the 6 closed churchyards at Aylesbury (St. Mary's), Buckingham (Hunter Street), Hulcott (All Saints), Marsh Gibbon (St. Mary's), Stoke Mandeville (St. Mary's) & Wing (All Saints).

As well as closed churchyards (see our closed churchyard management plan for further information <http://www.aylesburyvaledc.gov.uk/closed-churchyards>) these green spaces include parks, playing fields, children's play areas, woods, meadows, other natural areas and grassed areas.

- 4.2 The approximate distribution of these green spaces within the district is as follows: Aylesbury (79%), Buckingham (12%), Wendover (2.5%), Winslow (2%), Wing (1%), other parishes (3.5%).

5 Quality Spaces

- 5.1 The importance of quality, well maintained green spaces as vital community assets essential to the local economy has been widely documented by both former and current national organisations including Heritage Lottery Fund, Fields in Trust, Play England, CABE Space. Likewise so have the detrimental effects of such spaces being poorly maintained and of low quality.
- 5.2 They provide time out from the pressures of everyday life, have a positive effect on peoples mental health and well being and help improve people's physical health by providing places for sport, play and informal recreation.
- 5.3 As communities become increasingly mixed and diverse, and the population increases then green spaces provide one of the most important social spaces in a neighbourhood where residents, workers, and visitors can rest, meet friends and family, and hold events.

- 5.4 The economic competitiveness of a region can be enhanced, investors attracted, plus skilled workers and their families attracted and retained due to such spaces improving their quality of life.
- 5.5 According to Visit Britain, of the 31 million tourists visiting Britain, over a third enjoy visiting a park or garden, making it one of the most popular tourist activities (ranking higher than visiting a museum, castle, historic house or art gallery).
- 5.6 Green infrastructure complements the engineered 'grey' infrastructure and if properly planned can improve the resilience of neighbourhoods to the impact of climate change.
- 5.7 They provide places to accommodate and improve the biodiversity of an area, which in turn can improve the attractiveness and appeal of a space, having a positive effect on people's feelings of wellbeing.
- 5.8 Good maintenance standards are essential in ensuring quality spaces remain as such. Our joint horticulture and street cleansing contractors John O'Conner and SITA UK carry out the day to day maintenance of all AVDC managed green spaces. The joint contract which commenced on 21 January 2013 is due to run until 2020 and operates to ISO standards for Environmental Management (ISO 14001) and Quality Management (ISO 9001). Relevant works include:
 - grass cutting
 - management and maintenance of sports grounds
 - safety inspections and maintenance of play areas
 - maintenance of planted areas and hedges
 - tree works
 - site cleansing

6 Encouraging Use

- 6.1 Our Supplementary Planning Guidance for Sport and Leisure Facilities and its companion document the Ready Reckoner detail the type of sport and leisure facilities that should be provided per development or settlement size. A number of these facilities (e.g. play areas, skate parks and sports pitches) are often sited within parks and open spaces.

The provision of such facilities or improvements made to them encourages use of the facility and greater use of the park and open space as a whole by both new and existing residents; not only due to the improved facility, but also through any engagement process carried out beforehand with the relevant users and stakeholders, including ward Members.

Examples of such engagement include:

- 2015 Vale Park (Aylesbury Central) new skate park installed. Skate park user group contributed to the design brief.
 - 2005 - 2013 Over 30 play areas improved (district wide). Local school pupils and residents consulted and their preferred play experiences contributed to design briefs.
- 6.2 The following lists the locations of hireable sports facilities located within our parks or open spaces, thereby encouraging usage of the wider space.

- Alfred Rose Park (Elmhurst) – Cricket pitch
- Bedgrove Park (Bedgrove) – Grass football pitches
- Edinburgh Playing Fields (Southcourt) – Grass football pitches
- Fairford Leys Playing Fields (Coldharbour) – Grass football pitches
- Meadowcroft open space (Riverside) – Grass football & synthetic pitch
- Vale Park (Aylesbury Central) – 3G synthetic football 5-a-side pitches
- Walton Court Playing Fields (Walton Court & Hawkslade) – Grass football pitch

Excluding Vale Park's synthetic pitches (managed by Aqua Vale Leisure Centre) there has been a 3 year average of 1,545 games played per year attracting an average of 33,997 players per year (includes repeat users). See appendix 1 for a more detailed breakdown.

6.3 Improving existing or providing new access routes to and through our green spaces also enables and encourages greater use of them. Examples include:

- 2015 – 2013 Riverside Walk (Riverside) footpath improvements - Providing a suitable site for the national weekly parkrun event.
- 2015 The Paddock (Bedgrove) new bridge & footpath - Providing a much shorter and attractive wheelchair accessible route across Bedgrove Brook to The Paddock open space and play area.
- 2015 Alfred Rose Park (Elmhurst) footpath improvements - Making existing footpaths safer for users throughout the park.
- 2015 Heartlands (Buckingham South) footpath improvements - Macadam of existing failing compressed stone path.
- 2015 Walton Court Playing Fields (Walton Court & Hawkslade) footpath improvements - Widening and linking the existing route to Edinburgh Playing Fields.
- 2014 Edinburgh Playing Fields(Southcourt) footpath improvements - Reinstating a footpath that fell into disrepair in order to provide a continuous hard surfaced route through to Walton Court.
- 2014 Whitehill Park (Gatehouse) footpath and landscape improvements - Improving path surfaces and making the site more attractive and welcoming.

6.4 There are a variety of licensed events that are run on AVDC parks and open spaces (see appendix 2), which range from weekly 'fitness bootcamps' to large scale events such as fun fairs or Park Life (Aylesbury Town Council). The most requested park for events is Vale Park (Aylesbury Central) due to it's proximity to the town centre and surrounding population, closely followed by Fairford Leys (Coldharbour) and Cottesloe Green (Mandeville & Elm Farm). Outside of Aylesbury, there has been a steady rise in the number of events and activities taking place on land in Buckingham, especially on the skate park which is seen as a key location to engage with young people.

6.5 The Communities Team support a number of projects which take place in AVDC parks and open spaces. One of the most successful being the Multi Use Games Area (MUGA) project. This project utilises surfaced ball courts situated in open spaces to run free sports activities for children and young people, to encourage use of the facilities available. The sessions run over

seven weeks and are free of charge to attend. Sports include basketball, dodgeball, cricket, and tennis. Coaches hosting these sessions encourage participants wishing to continue that sport to join local clubs. In 2015 we had over 300 attendances at the sessions.

- 6.6 Sportivate is a Sport England funding programme that seeks to encourage children and young people aged 11 – 25 years to play sport. Each summer a number of sports projects are arranged at key parks to help reduce anti social behaviour in some areas. In 2015 we ran two rugby sessions at Alfred Rose Park and Walton Court open space, and a basketball session in Vale Park, all in Aylesbury during the summer holidays and had 50 participants attend sessions.
- 6.7 There are a number of AVDC supported volunteer conservation groups that carry out activities on AVDC open spaces that attract around 200 visits to carry out work (including repeat users) per year.
- 6.8 The Vale Countryside Volunteers (VCV) have provided essential practical conservation experience on sites such as Heartlands in Buckingham, Magpie Spinney in Winslow, Riverside Walk in Aylesbury and Walnut Tree Meadow in Wendover. Tasks have involved wild flower meadow establishment, wildlife friendly hedge laying, and tree planting. In all these cases local community groups have been invited fostering local ownership of projects.
- 6.9 The North Bucks Bat Group, Bucks Owl and Raptor Group, and Buckingham Railway Walk Group carry out a number of tasks at Railway walk in Buckingham. Berks, Bucks, & Oxen Wildlife Trust have designated this site as a Local Wildlife Site with community conservation projects assisting in the management of this busy pedestrian transit route through the town.

7 Promotion

- 7.1 Local residents are initially made aware of major park or open space improvement projects through our engagement process, which may be via articles in publications (e.g. Aylesbury Vale Times, Aylesbury Town Matters), letters to residents, emails to established resident groups (e.g. Bedgrove Residents & Community Association) or school presentations. All of which invite responses which we take on board and respond to accordingly. Resident groups are increasingly using social media (e.g. Facebook) which engages more people and can increase response rates.
- 7.2 If such projects proceed, then once completed, press releases are issued and official openings organised to which the ward Members, user groups, stakeholders (e.g. Town/Parish Council, PCSO's, contractors, external funders) and local media (e.g. Bucks Herald, Buckingham & Winslow Advertiser, Mix 96) are invited. The projects are promoted through the local media (e.g. appendix 3 & 4), AVDC and stakeholder publications, websites and social media pages.
- 7.3 Ongoing promotion of our individual parks and play areas is via our website <http://www.aylesburyvaledc.gov.uk/section/parks-and-play-areas> and we also produce a 'where's your nearest play area' flyer which is displayed in park noticeboards and included in relevant publications. (see appendix 5).
- 7.4 The use of our hireable sports facilities are promoted by the various sporting clubs and leagues, and also via AVDC's, our contractors John O'Conner's & Everyone Active's websites. Our pitches can be booked online via our contractors website.

- 7.5 Vale Countryside Volunteers' website (<http://www.vcv.org.uk>) promotes their activities and they also produce a flyer (see appendix 6) which is distributed in local outlets. The North Bucks Bat, Bucks Owl and Raptor, and Buckingham Railway Walk groups support events such as the Bat, Barn Owl and Newt walks which promotes Buckingham's Railway Walk to local residents.
- 7.6 AVDC Ecologist Paul Holton maintains responsibility for linking up conservation organisations with local community groups on AVDC open spaces. An example of this joint work will be demonstrated at The Coppice open space in Aylesbury during February 2016. A work party of local residents will be forming to further establish the wildflower meadow and establish a dead hedge, the latter bringing habitat enhancement to the area along with improving access. Further projects are planned throughout the year and will be promoted within the community groups the area covers.

8 National Campaigns

AVDC actively support a number of national campaigns that help to promote use of our parks and open spaces.

- 8.1 The Keep Britain Tidy Green Flag Award scheme is the national benchmark for parks and open spaces in the UK, recognising and rewarding the best green spaces in the country.

A Green Flag Award can generate excellent publicity for a community. Both the media and the public are becoming increasingly aware that a site flying a Green Flag is a high quality green space, which can only be a boost to its popularity and local economy.

Bedgrove and Vale Parks are both current flyers of the Green Flag, a good indication that the sites management and our district wide maintenance contract specification is of notable quality. Both sites are entered annually through the submission of detailed management plans which are available to view via our website (currently being updated).

The Green Flag ceremonies have been held at Vale Park and Bedgrove Park with the flags being raised by the Chairman and attended by all involved in contributing to the quality of the sites, as well as local media (see appendix 7).

Promotion of Aylesbury's Green Flag Awards isn't just limited to the local press, it is also publicised by national organisations and publications such as BALI (British Association of Landscape Industries), Pro Landscaper and Horticulture Weekly.

- 8.2 Love Parks Week is a national initiative about protecting, improving and promoting green spaces and is managed by Keep Britain Tidy. It raises awareness of the importance of parks and green spaces throughout the year with an official week of events taking place in July. These events encourage residents to enjoy and explore their local parks and open spaces. AVDC supports the initiative by running free family events in parks and open spaces across Aylesbury and Buckingham. Events have included fun days with sports activities, bouncy castles, orienteering, fishing, pond dipping and arts & crafts. In 2015 we had over 150 children attend such events.
- 8.3 'Play in the Park' has been held at Vale Park since 2007 and coincides with National Play Day. Play day 2015 (Mix 96 Play Day) - was sponsored by Mix 96 (Aylesbury's local radio station) and was supported by 30 public and

commercial organisations from across the district including RSPB, Heart Beeps, Youth for Christ, and Green Park. The day aims to encourage and develop family play and provide a unique day of activities and entertainment for children aged 3 to 12 years to celebrate National Play Day. Over 3,500 people attended the event with survey results showing that 38% said it was excellent and 54% saying it was good.

8.4 Parkrun is an entirely volunteer led and marshalled worldwide initiative which requires some start up support from local authorities. They are open to everyone, free of charge, and safe and easy to take part in. AVDC helped to set up a total of five parkruns which take place every weekend at:

- Riverside Walk/Buckingham Park (Riverside). Adult 5 kilometres
- Meadowcroft (Riverside). Junior 2 kilometres
- Heartlands & Bourton Park (Buckingham North & South). Adult 5 kilometres
- Bourton Park (Buckingham North). Junior 2 kilometres
- Rushmere Country Park (Great Brickhill & Newton Longville). Adult 5 kilometres

Between January and December 2015, 18,046 people attended the five parkruns. Our sites are promoted via the parkrun website, see <http://www.parkrun.org.uk>.

9 Future requirements and improvements to further encourage usage

9.1 A copy of the Improvement Plan (2015/16 – 2017/18) taken from our Parks & Open Spaces Management, Recent Work & Accreditations Report (Environment & Living Scrutiny Committee 11 February 2015) can be found in appendix 8 and details our future work programme which includes, but is not restricted to:

- Alfred Rose Park (Elmhurst) – create and implement improvement masterplan (incl. play area replacement & relocation, access/footpath improvements, additional seating, improve visibility into park, consider lighting)
- Bedgrove Park (Bedgrove) – Create and implement improvement masterplan (consider circumnavigation path, additional seating/bins, Bedgrove Brook improvements)
- Bowlers Field (Gatehouse) - park creation feasibility study
- Bridge Street (Buckingham South) - new skate park
- Closed Churchyards – resolves issues at Hulcott, structural testing of brick pillars at St. Mary's, Aylesbury, and implement memorial testing procedures at all sites.
- Embleton Way (Buckingham South) - Implement improvements (incl. pavilion use & play/sports facilities)
- Produce play area replacement programme (District wide)
- Riverside Walk (Riverside) – continue footpath improvements

- Vale Park (Aylesbury Central) - implement continued phased improvements (incl. Additional seating, entrance improvements, Bearbrook access feasibility study)
- Whitehill Park (Gatehouse) – lighting

9.2 There is an endless list that we and site users could produce to improve parks and open spaces in order to further increase usage, however, much of this cannot be delivered without funding.

9.3 In addition and more importantly, where grants can be applied for, these only cover the capital investment and do not provide for the ongoing maintenance and repair costs, which is why we have to be mindful when considering the provision of additional infrastructure or facilities within our parks or open spaces, as they will also increase our maintenance costs and liabilities.

10 Evaluation

10.1 The following statistics and statements have been taken from recent surveys and help to show the importance that people place on good quality parks and open spaces:

- Love Parks Week 2014 (Aylesbury & Buckingham sites):
When asked how often they visited Aylesbury Parks, 77% said every week, 23% said once a month.
- Play in the Park on National Play Day 2014 (Vale Park):
When asked how often they visited Aylesbury Parks, 43% of respondents said every week, 30% said once a month, 7% said less than once a month and 20% said rarely/never.

10.2 Due to the cost of commissioning external specialist park user surveys we will continue to include such surveys as part of any major AVDC events while taking all opportunities we can to obtain feedback directly from residents and via Ward Members.

11 Resource implications

11.1 The delivery of several improvements is dependent upon securing external funding including, S106, Lottery, WREN, SITA Trust, VAHT, etc.

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| Contact Officer | Joe Houston Ext: 5173 |
| Background Documents | State of UK Public Parks 2014 (The Heritage Lottery Fund 2014) |
| | Supplementary Planning Guidance for Sport and Leisure Facilities (AVDC 2004) |
| | Ready Reckoner (AVDC 2005) |
| | Parks & Open Spaces Management, Recent Work & Accreditations (AVDC Environment & Living Scrutiny Committee Report 11 February 2015). |
| | AVDC Green Infrastructure Strategy (2011) |

