

Maidstone's Parks & Open Spaces

10 Year Strategic Plan

2017 - 2027

Final June 2017

Foreword

Maidstone is proud of its parks and open spaces. They provide a sense of place, an attractive environment for those living and working in the borough, play a vital role in supporting health and well-being and provide a haven for wildlife. As the population of the borough grows it is more important than ever to protect these important open spaces.

The borough council is responsible for a unique heritage; with exemplars of municipal parks from the 19th to the 21st century, from the historic Mote Park and Brenchley Gardens to the Millennium Whatman Park. The borough's parks and open spaces also play a vital role in supporting and conserving our natural heritage. With its urban and rural network of open spaces, churchyards, allotments, riverside areas and highway verges, the borough can play its part in reversing the wider decline in our native flora and fauna.

This Parks and Open Spaces Strategic Plan recognises the benefits our parks and open spaces bring to local communities, for healthier living, play and recreation, but also for the benefits they bring to our local economy.

This Plan sets out the Council's intention for the future of our parks and open spaces, as part of an interconnected network of high quality open spaces, cycle paths, green ways and footpaths. This plan recognises the different needs of communities across the borough, the valuable role of local people in managing their open spaces, and the Council's responsibility to protect our unique heritage not only for current residents, but to pass on to our children and those that come after them.

This bold and strategic approach is being taken to ensure that Maidstone Borough Council's Parks and Open Spaces continue to provide benefits for residents, visitors and wildlife, despite increased pressure on the resources available to deliver this service.

Cllr David Pickett

Chair of Heritage, Culture and Leisure Committee

Part 1 – Setting the Scene

About this Plan

A number of very significant challenges lie ahead for all local authorities.

Housing growth places further pressure on public services if not planned for. Every part of Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) must consider carefully how its services are delivered; and this is particularly important for non-statutory services, including Parks and Leisure.

Despite these challenges MBC is ambitious in its aspirations for the borough. MBC's Strategic Plan recognises the importance of heritage, cultural and natural assets in ensuring Maidstone continues to be a thriving and attractive place to live, work and visit. Parks and open spaces are essential in supporting this, but we need to find different ways of working in order to continue to provide the service residents expect.

This plan deals with how MBC will manage the parks and open spaces that are under its control. There are a number of other documents, explained further in Part 2 of this plan, which deal with borough wide issues such as Green and Blue Infrastructure, Biodiversity, Landscape Character, Air Quality, Heritage and Tourism. Whilst the Parks and Open Spaces 10 Year Plan may contribute towards the actions in these documents, it will not repeat existing borough wide targets.

This plan sets out how we will face the challenges ahead, founded on the evidence base produced by Parks and Leisure for the Local Plan, alongside the results of the Residents' Survey. The plan sets out a route map for the short, medium and longer term so that MBC is well-prepared. Some changes will take time to implement and it is

imperative we start now to ensure a smooth transition to new ways of working.

We need this plan to:¹

- Ensure high quality, attractive parks and open spaces are provided to serve a range of needs for our current and future residents and visitors, as Maidstone continues to grow;
- Ensure that the provision and management of open spaces is sustainable in a future with less public sector funding;
- Address the difficult issues we are facing and provide a sound basis for decision-making;
- Ensure that parks and open spaces effectively support the delivery of Maidstone's Strategic Plan;
- Provide a clear direction which MBC and its partners can unite around.

The plan is in three parts:

- **Part 1** – provides background about Maidstone's open spaces and states why they are so important;
- **Part 2** – sets out the challenges ahead;
- **Part 3** – sets out the way forward, our service's Priorities and Principles and the actions needed.

¹ This plan covers parks, nature reserves, amenity space, play areas and allotments owned by Maidstone Borough Council. Other spaces owned or managed by other organisations also make a valuable contribution, but this plan cannot prescribe actions for these. However, in reviewing greenspace provision, this plan takes these other spaces into account.

Why we Need Parks and Open Spaces

Our vision is for a greener, healthier Maidstone – valued, enjoyed and cared for by local people.

At a time of reducing public resources, this ten year plan for Parks & Open Spaces will provide the strategic direction for the Parks service to ensure that this vision is attained.

Parks and open spaces are vital parts of the fabric of communities; they are places where people relax, play sport, socialise and exercise. They also underpin MBC's priorities and, as important components of the green infrastructure network, are essential to the successful delivery of Maidstone's Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy.

A theme throughout this plan is the need to ensure all the benefits² provided by Maidstone's open spaces are fully maximised. This requires good planning, prioritisation and cross-sector working; working 'smarter' to deliver the most possible with the resources available.

Economic Growth

Investing in greenspaces can be a catalyst to regeneration. There is good evidence that when open space projects are integrated with regeneration and economic development projects they provide more benefits, faster. Improved attractiveness of an area also increases visitor numbers and visitor spend. Open spaces can be attractions in

² This is termed 'multi-functionality' in green infrastructure planning. It requires that each site provides as many benefits as possible.

themselves as venues for events, attracting new spend to the area.

"Investments in greenspace have been shown to improve a region's image; helping to attract and retain high value industries, new business start-ups, entrepreneurs and workers."

Natural Economy North West (2008)

Being physically active is strongly linked to better health and well-being, with lack of exercise shown to increase at least 20 chronic health conditions, including heart disease, stroke, cancer, type 2 diabetes and mental health problems.³ Evidence shows that providing open spaces helps raise physical activity levels and can have a positive impact on low level mental health issues.⁴ Visits are influenced by distance from home, ease of access, the amenities on offer and the absence of vandalism and graffiti. These are important considerations in attracting more people to open spaces to improve their health.

Quality Environment

Open Spaces are Important to Maidstone's Residents:

- More than half of residents use an amenity greenspace regularly (at least once a week);
- The most popular activities are walking and exercising;
- Areas for children and young people are regularly used by over a third of residents (at least once a fortnight)

(Residents Phone Survey 2015)

³ Department of Health (2011), Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity from the four home countries', Chief Medical Officers.

⁴ Masterclass Briefing - Evidence Review: Spatial Determinants of Health in Urban Settings, Building Health; Planning and designing for health and happiness; 22 January 2010 University of the West of England.

All parks and open spaces, not just nature reserves, can contribute to better biodiversity. They can also help to improve the environment in other ways, such as reducing air pollution or helping to control flooding. In line with the ambition to provide multiple benefits, environmental improvements will be sought in as many open spaces as possible, in a way that also supports the needs of communities.

About Maidstone's Parks and Open Spaces

Parks and open spaces are part of the character of Maidstone. There are many unique and historic greenspaces, including The Archbishop's Palace Gardens, Penenden Heath and Brenchley Gardens, several large parks including Cobtree and Mote Park and many other open spaces providing local play areas, sports pitches, wildlife havens and spaces for festivals and events.

Maidstone Borough Council's Parks and Open Spaces:

- 425 hectares of greenspace
- 30 large parks
- 80 Neighbourhood greenspaces
- 68 play areas
- 700 Allotments plots across 12 sites
- 4 Green Flag parks

To make sure all residents have sufficient access to greenspace the Council has set out quantity standards for publicly accessible open space in its 2016 Local Plan. These standards indicate the minimum size for greenspace types and the area to be provided per thousand residents, as well as the maximum distance that any resident should have to travel to a greenspace.

The standards were devised to ensure that adequate greenspaces are provided on new housing developments; but they have also been applied across the rest of the borough to help ensure that all residents have access to a range of different types of open space. As well as addressing the quantity of open space, the quality of Maidstone's open spaces was also evaluated recently. The Council's Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy considered the quantity and quality of publicly accessible open spaces, alongside the location and size of planned housing developments, and it has identified those areas of the borough where there is currently a deficit or over-provision of open space (or will be in future).

The Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy identified the following current public accessible open space deficiencies across the borough:

- Amenity Greenspace - Current deficits in Fant, High Street, Bearsted, Allington and North Wards;
- Children's Play Space - Fair in most of the borough with slight deficiency in urban Maidstone. There is also a shortage of youth play in Marden, Staplehurst, Headcorn and Sutton Valance;
- Natural/Semi-natural Greenspace – Generally good but deficient in urban Maidstone, Staplehurst, Headcorn and Marden and slight deficiencies in Lenham, Coxheath and Sutton Valence.
- Allotments - Deficient in most of the Maidstone urban area and Staplehurst.

How our Parks and Open Spaces are Managed

Managing Maidstone's open spaces includes strategic service planning and budgeting, from management planning for individual sites, liaison with site teams, contractors and local community groups, to the day-to-day operation of sites including maintenance and repairs.

What Maidstone's residents say ...

- 75% of residents rate the quality of open spaces in Maidstone as good or very good
- Natural open spaces are important to 60% of residents
- 90% of residents visit one of Maidstone's parks every year
(Resident's Phone Survey 2015)

The Parks Team is responsible for overall managerial oversight, with site maintenance carried out by in-house teams.

A number of other MBC teams are also involved in site management, including cleaning, waste removal, parking, events bookings and general enquiries. Some sites are managed by other organisations on behalf of MBC and allotments are managed through The Maidstone Allotment Management Committee.

As finances reduce, it will become increasingly difficult to continue to manage all sites to a high quality and to respond to the demands of visitors.

It is not MBC's intention to dispose of any of our parks and open spaces. However, there may be occasions where disposal of a small piece of land or open space will be considered where doing so could facilitate the achievement of broader objectives. It is also becoming increasingly necessary, as other local authorities have found, to consider alternative options for the management of existing stock and new stock emerging through the Local Plan process.

Several local community groups also support managing some parks, varying from running small events to operating the site day-to-day. The input of local communities is vital to the smooth running of our sites and is to be particularly welcomed as public funding becomes more constrained. It is also a good way for local communities to get involved in the management of their local park. Through the delivery of this strategy, 'Friends Of' groups will be encouraged and local people will be supported in taking on more formalised management roles of some sites.



Profile of Mote Park - "The Jewel in Maidstone's Crown"



Formerly a country estate, Mote Park was purchased by the Council in 1929. It is the biggest of Maidstone's parks at 186 hectares (450 acres). Mote Park is one of the UK's ten favourite parks (People's Choice Awards) and receives over 1 million visitors each year.

Mote Park has a very active 'Friends' group - 'The Mote Park Fellowship'. The group meets regularly with MBC officers to provide feedback and find ways to improve the park. The group run the Mote Park website, have weekly volunteering sessions, run a tree sponsorship scheme, assist with large events as well as organising their own, apply for funding toward Mote Park Projects and carry out conservation activities such as sowing meadows, planting trees, clearing unwanted growth and assisting the grounds maintenance team in the park.

Mote Park is also an important venue for events and festivals, annually hosting the Ramblin' Man festival, Race for Life and hosting The Radio 1 Big Weekend in 2009. A multitude of other regular events take place in the park, including fun fairs, low key walks and runs, open air theatre, dragon boat racing, "It's a knock out" and history and wildlife walks and talks.

Fact File

- ✿ Grassland, woodland, 30 acre lake and river
- ✿ 4 play areas
- ✿ 6 mile of paths
- ✿ 5 Football and Rugby pitches
- ✿ 5k walking/running track
- ✿ Dementia walk with interactive signage
- ✿ BMX track
- ✿ Model railway
- ✿ Café
- ✿ Model boat and fishing clubs
- ✿ Watersports – sailing, windsurfing, canoeing and rowing boat hire
- ✿ Picnic Area
- ✿ 3 car parks
- ✿ Over 35 events expected in 2017
- ✿ 100 veteran trees, 9 of the UK's 17 bat species and at least 28 different mammal species
- ✿ Arboretum in excess of 150 trees species.
- ✿ 90 benches and 91 bins

Part 2 – Preparing for the Future

Delivering Maidstone's Strategic Priorities

MBC's Strategic Plan (2015-2020) sets out the direction that the Council will take to deliver services and improve the borough, set against a backdrop of reduced finances. Open spaces support the delivery of the Strategic Plan and directly contribute to many of the Action Areas.

The Strategic Plan is supported through a range of other strategies, each setting the direction for specific areas of work. An overview of how greenspaces and this plan contribute to delivering the Strategic Plan and several of the additional strategic documents is shown below (Strategic Plan) and on the following page.

Contribution to Delivering Maidstone's Strategic Plan

Maidstone Borough Council Strategic Plan 2015 -2020 - Vision

That our residents live in decent homes, enjoy good health and a pleasant environment, with a successful economy that is supported by reliable transport networks.

Priority 1: Keeping Maidstone borough an attractive place for all

Priority 2 : Securing a successful economy for Maidstone borough

ACTION AREAS

Providing a clean and safe environment

High quality open spaces contribute to Maidstone being a pleasant and attractive place to live and work.

Encouraging good health and wellbeing

Open spaces provide places for healthy exercise and support efforts to improve health inequality.

Respecting the character and heritage of our borough

Many of Maidstone's open spaces have high environmental, heritage and biodiversity value.

Ensuring there are good leisure and cultural attractions

Parks host major events, as well as being attractions in themselves.

Regenerating the town centre

Urban parks add to the setting of the town, and an enhanced riverside route will contribute to regeneration.

Securing improvements to the transport infrastructure of our borough

Open spaces provide safe off-road transport routes.

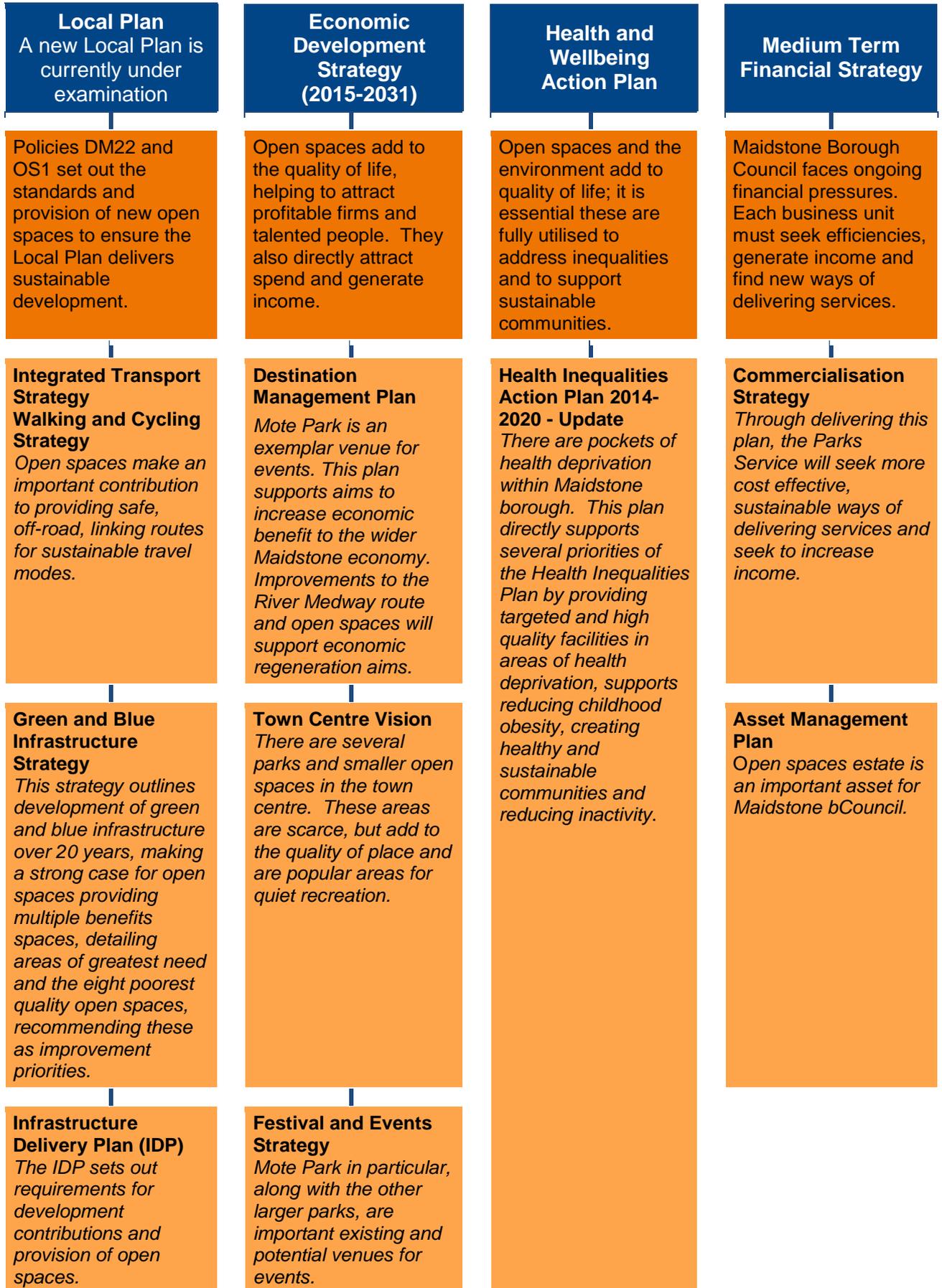
Promoting a range of employment opportunities and skills required across our borough

Open spaces provide opportunities for apprenticeships and volunteers to gain skills.

A home for everyone

It is important that Maidstone creates attractive new communities; open spaces are essential in doing this.

Contribution to Delivering Maidstone's Supporting Strategies



Important Documents that link closely with the Parks and Open Spaces 10 Year Plan

Below is a summary of the other MBC strategies and plans that are most closely linked to the Parks and Open Spaces 10 Year Plan.

All of these documents have their own aims, objectives and targets. The Parks and Open Spaces 10 Year Plan deliberately does not repeat the aims and objectives of these other documents, but it is important that the relationship between them is understood:

Maidstone Local Biodiversity Action Plan 2009- 2014

The Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) provides the opportunity to review current activities and issues, identify aims and set specific objectives and targets for action by a wide range of internal and external partners.

It provides a much-needed overarching strategy for everyone involved in safeguarding and enhancing Maidstone's natural environment.

The Maidstone LBAP fits into a framework which consists of the UK BAP, The South-East Biodiversity Strategy, Kent Biodiversity Action Plan (Kent BAP).

The LBAP provides targets for a number of biodiversity opportunity areas across the borough regardless of ownership.

It is planned that a light touch review will be carried out of the Maidstone LBAP as an action in the Parks and Open Spaces 10 Year Plan.

Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy

This document was produced by Planners and provides the green spaces and rivers input into the Local Plan. In the production of this document an audit was carried out to identify the type, size and quality of all of the publicly accessible green space in the borough.

The information from this audit was used to agree new green space standards for the whole of the borough, and sets out a vision for the borough's green and blue infrastructure for the next 20 years.

An action plan is currently being produced to implement this vision.

Health Inequalities Action Plan 2016

This Plan sets out plans to tackle health inequalities across the borough. This report highlights how living in areas of low income, poor employment and poor infrastructure increases the risk of ill health. Currently there is a 9 year difference in life expectancy depending on where you live in the borough. This report highlights how health inequality including inactivity will be dealt with.

Maidstone Play Area Strategy 2017 (DRAFT)

This deals with the play element of the Parks and Open Spaces 10 Year Strategy by setting quality and accessibility standards for play across the borough going forward. It describes how the borough will ensure that quality play areas are provided across the borough.

This document will be adopted in the later part of 2017.

Maidstone Playing Pitch Strategy and Sports Facilities Strategy (DRAFT)

This is currently being produced by the Planning Team as part of a wider assessment of sport and leisure provision in the borough which also includes playing pitches. It will direct the Local Plan as to the future playing pitch and sports facility need of the borough.

Maidstone Landscape Character Assessment 2012 (Amended 2013)

This document identifies all of the landscape types and landscape character areas that occur in the rural part of the borough (i.e. outside of the main urban area of Maidstone). This then guides the type of development that would be acceptable in these areas.

Maidstone Low Emission Strategy 2017 (DRAFT)

This document aims to achieve a higher standard of air quality across Maidstone in a number of ways including reductions in vehicle emissions through the promotion and uptake of low and ultra-low emission vehicles.

The Challenges Ahead

Parks and open spaces are facing significant challenges. The greatest of these is how to continue to deliver a quality parks and open spaces service with significantly reduced resources.

Budgetary pressures are ongoing, with Government funding having ended.

Park maintenance budgets have not increased for a number of years and are currently being reduced; however the net cost of managing the parks estate increases every year. MBC has already introduced management efficiencies and has worked hard to maximise income streams e.g. through concessions and events in parks. Current funding projections indicate that in the near future the costs of managing our greenspaces will exceed budget.

MBC are committed, however, to continue to provide quality spaces where they are needed and to be ambitious and forward-looking. We believe that through committed and steadfast delivery of this plan, not only will open spaces continue to provide their current benefits to Maidstone residents, but these benefits can be increased.

Maidstone is also set to grow, with 17,000 new homes planned from 2011 to 2031; increasing the population of Maidstone by 42,000. Additional greenspaces are being

provided on some new housing developments, but not all.

The long-term management of these new greenspaces is an important issue and one for which an agreed way forward is required between MBC and developers to ensure that these spaces do not place additional burdens on the Council.

It is vital that the actions set out in this plan begin now. Many of them are inter-connected requiring action across many areas. Several of them are challenging. Many also need other MBC services and local communities to take a stake in delivery. To delay in taking forward these actions now will create further problems in the future, will make the challenges more difficult to address and will lead to a reduction in the quality of open spaces.

Providing and managing open spaces represents just 5.6% of MBC's gross annual expenditure

Consider a range of Options

Innovative approaches and non-traditional thinking will be needed in moving towards a secure future for our open spaces. This Plan will support a strategy for MBC in gearing-up for potential changes. As other authorities face similar pressures and difficult funding choices, some of the approaches they are adopting may provide useful learning for MBC.

The service faces multiple and inter-connected challenges



Rethinking Parks

'Rethinking Parks' was a 2016 £1 million Big Lottery Fund, Heritage Lottery Fund and Nesta programme designed to find, support and test new business models to sustain the UK's public parks. 'Rethinking Parks' developed ideas for the future resourcing of public parks, ran pilot projects and produced the 'Learning to Rethink Parks' report.

The report suggestions included:

- Consider a ring-fenced revenue budget planned for the medium term and investigate other sources, including income from assets, concessions and events, as well as capital receipts, dowries, endowments and trusts, donations and sponsorship;
- Deploy different funding models to help parks focus on sustainability, exploring ways to build alternative long-term income streams such as setting up endowments for parks;
- The key messages from the work included ideas for future funding of open spaces, the value of involving partners and local people and the importance of encouraging innovation and sharing good practice;
- The programme recognised that public parks need to diversify their funding sources to meet the size of cuts, but cautioned against looking to one answer to solve everything, favouring the approach of diversifying income sources and finding new ways to maintain open spaces at lower cost.

Recognising the issues facing local authorities in securing the future of public parks and open spaces, the Government held an inquiry into the future funding of public parks. The report of the findings has just been published <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/communities-and-local-government-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/public-parks-16-17/>

The report recognises the challenges being faced by the parks sector and the need for a sustainable future to be secured. It also recognises the importance and value of parks and highlights particular benefits, including parks' role in public health and well-being, in social cohesion, as vital green corridors for nature, in ameliorating the local effects of climate change and in supporting local economies and growth.

Assessing the value of parks in terms of health and other benefits may be helpful in identifying and accessing funding from other sources including health, flood prevention or water quality. This wider contribution of parks and open spaces may be helpful in local authority funding decisions regarding their open spaces.

Of particular interest to MBC, the report supports the concept of cross-sectoral funding e.g. accessing funds available under public health strategies such as the Obesity Strategy, and of Parks teams working with Health and Well-Being Boards; of accessing developer contribution funds to cover parks' revenue requirements; the importance of understanding parks as part of wider networks of green infrastructure and the sharing of learning and good practice.
(*Department for Communities and Local Government Committee Public Parks report 2017*)

Part 3 – The Way Forward

Our Priorities and Principles

The Priorities and Principles are all necessary and mutually supporting (detailed on following page). If delivery in one of these is lacking, then delivery in the others will be compromised. All of the actions in this strategic plan contribute directly to delivering these Priorities and Principles.

Focused Decision-Making means Effective Delivery

As this 10 year plan progresses, many individual decisions will be taken. These will each be measured against the Priorities and Principles to ensure that the vision and financial viability is achieved. ‘Smarter’ ways of working will be found, which will include questioning the ways we do things.

Underpinning this are the ways of working which we will integrate into all service areas:

- **Targeted and focused on outcomes:** we will apply actions to the areas of greatest need as identified, as part of this Plan;
- **Evidence based:** we will seek the best available evidence to support our decisions;
- **Forward planned:** we will produce forward plans and assess progress;
- **Effective:** we will question whether each decision and action provides the greatest benefit for the resources employed;
- **Efficient:** We will consistently seek to reduce resource input, while retaining quality and delivering the Priorities and Principles.



Brenchley Gardens

Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3
Open Spaces supporting Vibrant and Healthy Communities	Open Spaces Fit for the Future	Quality Spaces - Quality Service
Principle 1A	Principle 2A	Principle 3A
Open spaces will be accessible to all residents	The open space needs of future populations will be met	Quality open spaces will serve community needs
<p>All communities will have access to a range of facilities. These will include spaces where they can play, participate in sport, find quiet recreation and access nature.</p> <p>Our open spaces will be accessible for all abilities and will provide facilities to serve the needs of the local population.</p> <p>The Open Space Standards will provide a basis for this. Achieving this principle also links to Principle 1B and the need to provide a range of facilities on all sites to bring maximum benefits.</p>	<p>We will strive to ensure that all communities – future and existing – will have access to greenspaces.</p> <p>The Local Plan requires that new greenspaces are provided in housing developments or for contributions to be made to improve existing sites.</p> <p>We will ensure that new greenspaces are secured for the future and existing sites enhanced to provide good quality facilities. This principle closely links with Principles 1A and 1B and the need to provide multiple benefits for communities.</p>	<p>Providing quality sites supports Principles 1A and 1B. However, with reduced resources it may not be possible to continue current levels of management for all sites.</p> <p>Open Space Management Standards will be developed to ensure that quality meets the needs of communities.</p>
Principle 1B	Principle 2B	Principle 3B
Social, environmental and economic benefits will be maximised	The long-term management of Parks and Open Spaces will be secured	The Service will seek continual improvement - invest and enhance
<p>The need for greenspaces to provide multiple benefits is a thread throughout this plan. All spaces will provide multiple benefits to contribute to the social, environmental and economic needs of the communities which they serve.</p> <p>Social: increasing use of open spaces, supporting health and well-being and deprivation improvement and reducing ASB and vandalism;</p> <p>Environmental: Enhancing biodiversity and incorporating nature in our sites – and ensuring people can experience nature;</p> <p>Economic: Spaces will contribute to ‘quality of life’ and inward investment through place shaping as well as (where possible) generating income.</p>	<p>Sustainable service delivery models will be required to adjust to reduced resources.</p> <p>This will require both income generation and reduction in expenditure.</p> <p>It will also require changes in delivery structures and different delivery models.</p> <p>It will require communities to increase their involvement in open spaces.</p>	<p>The Service will continue to be ambitious in delivering quality open spaces for Maidstone.</p> <p>Forward planning will enable a programme of continuous improvement.</p> <p>We will seek external funding and work with other partners to secure this (links to Principle 2B).</p> <p>We will invest in those sites identified as being of greatest ‘value’ or with the greatest potential to increase income (Principle 3A) to maximise this potential.</p>

Delivering this Plan

Actions are needed across a number of areas to deliver the Priorities and Principles of this Plan. Many of these actions are interconnected, meaning that several actions need to progress at the same time. These actions and interconnections are shown in Appendix 1 of this report.

The high level actions will be delivered on the ground through more detailed Annual Forward Plans which will set annual targets and review progress year on year.

The diagram on the following page – ‘from strategy to delivery’ shows how the priorities and principles will be delivered through the Action Areas and annual plans.

These annual plans will be agreed every year. The initial meeting could take place as a workshop to set short medium and long term objectives, which will then be broken down into annual achievable objectives. Progress on the previous year will be reviewed prior to agreeing the new objectives each year.

These objectives will then filter down to the individual parks and open space management plans.

Working with Partners

MBC cannot deliver all these actions alone and we will need the support of a range of people and organisations to be successful. These partners will include other local authorities, parish councils, friends and community groups. In order to build productive relationships with partners it is essential that the appropriate resources are available.

In meeting the open space demands of a changing population, it is important for MBC to be clear about its Priorities and Principles, and that specific position statements provide clarity on the future direction of the service.

From strategy to delivery



Position Statements

1. Adoption of Open Space

MBC will ensure that housing development provides a high quality environment with sufficient, high quality open spaces where needed for local people to enjoy. These open spaces, though welcomed as assets for the borough, cannot place additional financial burdens on the Council. It will therefore be the responsibility of the Developer to make arrangements for the long term management of these open spaces.

2. S106 Developer Contributions

The Maidstone Borough Local Plan (2011 – 2031) Policies DM19 and OS1 together set out the Council's requirements for the delivery of new and improved open space to support development within the Borough. The Council's preference is that the needs for open space generated by new development should be accommodated within a development site to increase the overall quantity of provision. Where these needs cannot however be met in full on site, or in an off-site location, the Council will require financial contributions through planning obligations to ensure that necessary improvements to the quality of existing open space provision can be delivered. This Plan and its subsequent Action Plans, together with other relevant evidence, will be used by the Council to inform decisions about where contributions can be allocated most effectively.

3. Biodiversity

MBC's commitment to encouraging and promoting biodiversity has always been strong and will continue to be so in the future. Wherever possible we will set aside areas for biodiversity, these could be large sites such as woodland and meadows, or on smaller well used sites where it could be incorporated as part of the overall management. MBC will continue to work with partner organisations to provide maximum benefits from our open spaces for wildlife and residents

4. MBC Nature Reserves

MBC will plan to ensure that the management of its open spaces supports and enhances biodiversity and addresses fragmentation of wildlife habitats. This will be achieved through the review of Maidstone's Local Biodiversity Action Plan and the management of existing sites. Any opportunities to create new nature reserves will be considered on their individual merits with regard to relevant national guidelines and their sustainability.

5. Ownership of MBC open spaces

MBC has a strong commitment to its parks and open spaces and the value that they provide to residents, visitors and wildlife. We are not seeking to reduce the amount of parks and open spaces we have or outsource the wholesale management of them at this time. However, it is important to regularly review the way in which we manage these assets and we will be receptive to alternative management arrangements such as working with Parishes and community groups.



Cobtree Manor Park Adventure Zone

Actions

Four high-level Action Areas are identified which will deliver the Priorities and Principles of this Plan.

Action Area 1: An Open Spaces Estate which best serves Maidstone's needs

Why do we need this Action Area?

- To prioritise resources to where they are most needed;
- To reduce our resources on areas which don't best serve the needs of Maidstone's residents;
- To deliver more benefits (e.g. health and environment) where they are needed, despite reduced resources;
- To generate increased income.

How will we achieve this?

- To ensure we target our resources fairly and effectively a **Strategy for Maintenance and Development** has been developed. This will identify the needs of our communities - social, economic and environmental – and determine where there is sufficient or not enough provision of each type of open space;
- We will evaluate whether these needs are currently provided for. The Strategy is described below, and includes a **Quality: Value Matrix** which measures the value (or benefits) provided by each open space (or its potential to provide them) against its current level of quality.

As resources reduce, decisions will need to be made as to how we manage our open spaces. An ongoing process of gradually reducing budgets and reducing standards for all open spaces is not acceptable. A rational, objective approach is therefore needed to decide on:

- The levels of maintenance at each site;
- The range of facilities to be provided;
- Management arrangements;
- Targeting of improvements and investment.

The framework for decision-making is complex and needs to take into account a range of factors. These include:

- The need to support MBC's priorities, existing strategies and wider agendas (social, environmental, health inequality and economic development);
- Current levels of need for and provision of open space;
- Future levels of need for and provision of open space with an increasing population.

The Quality/Value Matrix

A matrix will be used to reach decisions about our open spaces, which fully incorporates the wider factors necessary to make decisions on a future strategy for individual open spaces. These decisions need to be transparent, rational and defensible, and the use of the matrix will support this.

There are two elements to the matrix approach:

- 1 Quality Rating – the quality survey data for each site will be used to represent the current quality of the site;
- 2 Value Rating – each site will be assessed against a range of wider social, economic and environmental criteria to arrive at a value rating.



Value Rating

In rating each greenspace for Value, the potential of the site should be borne in mind, and not simply the extent to which it is currently fulfilling its potential. The interaction between 'quality' and 'value' is important in this regard; e.g. a site may not be fulfilling its potential value due to the current low quality.

Economic

The economic benefits of open spaces in contributing to the economy of a local area are well recognised and supported with a substantial body of research. The 'intensity' of this varies; from an open space providing an attractive setting to new development which boosts house prices to an open space asset which itself directly attracts spend into the local economy through, for

example, being a tourist attraction. It is also important that those assets which can directly generate income to support the parks service do these most effectively.

Two measures are proposed, which encompass the ability of the greenspace to directly contribute to the economic growth and development of Maidstone borough and to generate income for the sustainability of the service.

- 1 *Ability or potential ability of open space to promote economic development/ regeneration in the locality and/or support tourism.*
- 2 *Ability or potential ability of open space to generate income for the parks service and/or Maidstone Borough Council.*

Social

Open spaces support health, well-being and quality of life, and are important spaces and places which support community cohesion. They may be valued by communities for their heritage or for creating a more attractive place in which to live. This parameter captures the wider social benefits of open spaces.

Three measures are proposed:

- 3 *The open space serves the population in one of the four Wards with levels of deprivation, contributing to (or with the potential to contribute to) improving health deprivation (Shepway North and South, High Street and Park Wood) and/or is identified as a key priority for improvement in Maidstone's Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy.*
- 4 *The open space makes an essential contribution in reaching the open space standards set out in the Local Plan (draft), or is in an area for which the open space standards are not being met (an area of deficiency) or will not be met in the future due to increased housing.*
- 5 *The open space has inherent social value by virtue of, for example, having historic or landscape value, being an attractive setting for the community, being a site with high levels of community interest or a site for educational activity or through providing other demonstrable social benefits.*

Environmental

Open spaces obviously provide a range of environmental benefits. This not only includes biodiversity on the site itself, but can also include the site's role in providing wider connectivity of ecological networks, in improving air quality, helping to regulate water flow and assist with flood management and other benefits; for example in providing pollination sources or protecting ground water quality. As a principle, the maximum range of environmental benefits will be sought from sites managed by MBC, in line with the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy. This approach is termed 'multi-functionality'; which in essence means that each site should contribute to a wide range of needs of the community and the environment.

Two measures are proposed:

- 6 *The open space has high biodiversity value (or potential to improve biodiversity value) – demonstrated through being designated for its interest, being highlighted in the Maidstone Biodiversity Action Plan for its habitats or species or being identified in the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy as an important site.*
- 7 *The open space provides (or has greater potential in providing) wider environmental benefits, for example contributing to water management including flooding, as a connecting wildlife corridor or ‘stepping stone’ site or through contributing to improving air quality or climate change adaptation.*

Implementing the Matrix

After assessment, each open space will fall into one of the four quadrants of the matrix. This will help to indicate a possible course of action for each open space, but the final decision will require consideration by experienced staff and elected representatives. The matrix provides a tool to help decision making by MBC in the context of wider MBC strategies and the Parks & Open Spaces 10 year Plan. Fundamentally it supports decision-making on the targeting of resources.

In summary, the actions going forward could be:

High Value – High Quality: These open spaces are performing strongly; they fulfil an identified need to a high quality. It is important that this standard is maintained to ensure that these functions continue to be provided. Although these sites perform well there may also be areas in which the site could be improved. Plans should be produced to identify areas of improvement and to ensure that the sites continue to maintain high quality.

High Value – Low Quality: These open spaces have a high value/serve a strong need but this not being delivered to its full potential due to low quality or inadequate facilities. These open spaces should be a priority for investment. Investment plans should be drawn up to quantify the improvements required and to develop a business case. Funding could then be sought through s106, CIL or internal or external funding sources.

Low Value – High Quality: These open spaces are being maintained to a high quality but do not score highly across the value criteria. This may be, for example, that they are in an area where there is a good supply of open space. The future of these open spaces needs careful consideration on a case-by-case basis and taking into account the wider community. In these cases the matrix should be used to provoke a more in-depth consideration of the open space and its role and not for making the final decision on the future of the site. Even though the value score for the open spaces may be low, they may be highly valued by the local community. Options for these open spaces may include reducing management input, seeking ways to manage with less input (e.g. reducing bedding or planting) or divesting to a more community based management structure in the medium term.

Low Quality – Low Value: These open spaces do not provide high value or serve a high level of need. Although low quality, investment in these open spaces would not improve the value which the sites bring. MBC therefore needs to consider future management of these open spaces. Options may include reducing management input, seeking ways to manage with less input (e.g. reducing bedding or planting) or divesting to a more community based management structure in the medium term.

Action Area 2: Providing Open Spaces for a Changing Population

Why do we need this Action Area?

- Maidstone is growing: new housing and population change will increase the demand for open space, and we need to make sure it is provided and supports vibrant communities;
- We need to make sure new open spaces provided by developers continue to be maintained to a high standard in the long term; and that the Council does not pay the cost of failure;
- We need to make sure that existing open spaces are invested in so that more demand from an increased population does not degrade them;
- We need to work smarter to deliver more health and well-being improvements for a changing population.

How will we achieve this?

- By understanding the supply of and need for open spaces, and forward-planning to ensure provision is made;
- By setting up robust agreements with developers to ensure sustainable management;
- By ensuring new spaces are well-designed;
- Through seeking developer contributions to improve existing spaces to meet the identified need.



Whatman Park

Action Area 3: Connected Delivery – Multiple Benefits

Why do we need this Action Area?

- Because many organisations and groups, as well as MBC, manage the open spaces which residents enjoy;
- Because we understand that parks and open spaces need to deliver social, environmental and economic benefits better, and to do this means we need to work in partnership more effectively;
- Because it will help us secure external funding;
- Because there is a need for communities to take a more active stake in managing open spaces.

How will we achieve this?

- MBC will set up two external groups to plan strategically for the open spaces that Maidstone will need into the future, to progress ambitious projects and to seek funding:
 - ✓ Parks and open spaces are key elements of Maidstone's 'green infrastructure'. MBC will lead an action-focused partnership to plan and deliver Maidstone's Green and Blue Infrastructure network and larger strategic projects, with the objectives of maximising the social, environmental and economic benefits of open spaces and to champion open spaces and wider green infrastructure at a senior level. This partnership will draw in other organisations at a senior level to collaborate in developing strategic projects, raise funding and support delivery.
 - ✓ A Maidstone Parks and Open Spaces Stakeholder Group, led by the Parks and Open Spaces team, to include other organisations who manage public open spaces to work together in addressing practical management issues, improve communications and to seek funding.
- We will also support capacity-building, skills-development and independence in community groups.

Action Area 4: Working Smarter

Why do we need this Action Area?

- We need to be more effective, efficient and targeted to continue to deliver a good service with fewer resources;
- We need to continually review our service to find better ways of working;
- We need to increase external income and increase commercialisation opportunities;
- Because different parts of MBC have a stake in making sure open spaces serve residents – we need to work as a whole council and not as disconnected units to ensure we work smarter and more collaboratively and maximise resources; to deliver high quality spaces which fully support communities.

How will we achieve this?

- The Parks Team will set up and lead an internal MBC working group to better coordinate activities in our open space sites; to ensure accountability and responsibility; to implement streamlining, remove duplication and increase effectiveness;
- We will assess the income generation potential of sites;
- We will increase external funding, particularly utilising the new external grouping established under Action Area 3;
- We will consider all options of providing and managing our public open spaces in the future, including alternative non-MBC arrangements;
- We will produce annual plans which will set ambitious targets and review implementation of this plan.



Cobtree Manor Park

Appendix1 – Detailed Action Plan.

