



Greenspace is the natural environment that provides the setting in which we live, work and play

Greenspace Management Strategy

2022-2027



North Herts
Council



1. Foreword

Greenspace, whether they are parks, commons, playing fields, woodlands or nature reserves, are one of the things that make North Herts such a great place to live and work. Our health and wellbeing, our sense of pride in our local area and our enjoyment of being outdoors are all affected by the quality of these spaces which is why it is so important that they are managed properly.

Of course, apart from contributing to the quality of our lives, greenspaces also make a major contribution to the wellbeing of other species, increasing biodiversity at a time when this is under so much pressure and helping to reduce the impact of carbon emissions and air pollution.

Surveys show that 82% of residents use our parks and open spaces. You will find many reasons for this highlighted in this document. This strategy sets out how we intend to continue to maintain the quality of greenspace in North Herts into the future. Like councils across the country, we have to do this with ever reducing resources, but plans set out here will enable us to do that as well as increase the contribution that they make to the wider environment of the district.

People in North Herts are proud of the green spaces available to them, and I am proud to be able to present a strategy that will maintain and improve those spaces for future generations.

Councillor Steve Jarvis

2. Introduction

This strategy sets out our vision, aims and strategic objectives for the management of our greenspaces for the period 2022-27.

The strategy relates to the management of greenspace that is owned by North Herts Council, or that we maintain on behalf of third parties. It also includes the management and provision of all services within those green spaces such as play areas and burials.

This strategy sets out high level principles for management of greenspace. It does not cover day- to-day maintenance of our parks and open spaces. The delivery of this service is carried out under a contract with John O’Conner Ltd. The contract was reviewed in 2021 and a new contract period will operate from April 2022 to March 2027. The contract review identified options for financial savings while delivering positive outcomes for improving biodiversity and reductions in carbon emissions. This is in line with the aims of this strategy.

Through the vision, strategic aims and objectives outlined the aim is to ensure that the Greenspace Service continues to be regarded as a high quality and highly valued service of North Herts Council, delivering best value for our residents.





3. Background


What is Greenspace?

- 3.1 Greenspace is the natural environment that provides the setting in which we live, work and play. It makes a major contribution to raising the quality of life of both residents and visitors. Greenspace is made up of our parks and open spaces, highway verges, woodlands, outdoor sports facilities and all the small incidental areas found between buildings and highways.

Why is Greenspace important?

- 3.2 Greenspace is an important component to create a balance between the urban and rural environments found in North Herts and has been recognised as having an essential role for the quality of life found in the district through:

- Promoting healthier communities and reducing health inequalities
- Enabling children and young people to develop social skills, test their boundaries, explore, and learn about nature and wildlife
- Improving the life chances of people living in more deprived areas
- Creating safer and stronger communities
- Improving the image of and pride in the different settlements
- Creating cleaner and greener communities
- Enhancing biodiversity
- Mitigating and adapting to climate change
- Recognising the value of the historic environment
- Avoiding, managing and reducing flood risk.



3.4 Historically North Herts Council has predominately provided the maintenance and development of green space within its four urban towns of Hitchin, Letchworth, Baldock and Royston.

3.5 In 2009 the council launched its first Greenspace Management Strategy (GSMS). There have been subsequent updates and revisions with the latest being 2017 – 2021. This strategy will take forward the principles of best practice for greenspace management into the future, 2022 – 2027.



4. Review of previous Greenspace Strategy 2017 – 2021

- 4.1 As part of the last Greenspace Management Strategy, a series of policies on different aspects of the service were agreed. These can be found in Appendix 1. below. These policies have all been reviewed as part of the development of the new strategy.
- 4.2 The last strategy was developed against a backdrop of challenging economic circumstances for the council and therefore while continuing to invest in play areas, this was limited to only one play ground per year. Equipment was also removed from some of the less frequently used play areas following consultation.
- 4.3 Greenspace investment in the last period was prioritised in our four key urban areas of Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth and Royston and this can be demonstrated by the investment in some of our urban parks and open spaces, as shown in the table below.
- 4.4 Working with partners has been critical to the successful management of our open spaces, in particular with Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside and Rights of Way who manage some of our local nature reserves on our behalf. Working alongside volunteer groups has also been a highly successful approach.
- 4.5 We have prioritised high standards of maintenance across the district and this is evidenced through our approach to seeking Green Flag accreditation at five of our sites.

4.6 Key achievements of the last strategy period
The Greenspace Strategy for 2017-21 delivered the following actions

Item	Cost
Extended the roadways and footpaths at Wilbury Hills Cemetery Letchworth	£35,000
Extended the car park at Walsworth Common Hitchin	£30,000
Renovated the play area at Jackman's Central Letchworth	£75,000
Equipment replacement at Brook View play area Hitchin	£10,000
Renovated the play area at Great Ashby District Park	£75,000
Renovated the play area at Chiltern Road Baldock	£10,000
Renovated play area at King George 5th Rec Hitchin	£35,000
Renovated play area at Howard Gardens Letchworth	£75,000
Renovated play area at Holroyd Crescent Baldock	£10,000
Renovated play area at Archers Way Letchworth	£10,000
Football pitch improvements at Walsworth Common Hitchin	£110,000
Provided a new multi use games area at Bancroft Hitchin	£180,000
Renovated and improve footpaths and entrances at Pryor's Wood Great Ashby	£25,000
Introduced new fitness equipment to Priory Memorial Gardens play area Royston	£35,000*
Introduced new fitness equipment to Baldock Road Rec Letchworth	£35,000*
Replaced historical perimeter bollards to Butts Close Hitchin	£20,000*
Replaced the benches Butts Close Hitchin	£10,000*
Brought Hill End and Barkway Chalk Pits back into public use and safe access	£15,000*
Norton Common skate park and floodlights	£210,000*
Introduced drinking fountains to four town centre parks	£25,000*
Partially replaced fencing around the bowling greens at Norton Common Letchworth	£15,000
Introduced permanent pickleball courts to Norton Common Letchworth	£4,000
Facilitated re-levelling works to the bowling greens at Norton Common Letchworth	£4,000

* Figure quoted was possible due to external funding opportunities

5. Looking forward – Vision, objectives and aims



5.1 Vision

Our vision is to provide high quality, well managed green spaces to meet the needs of our communities and which contribute positively to our sustainability priority.

5.2 Objectives

The council has set three new priorities for 2022-27 which are:



People first






Sustainability



A brighter future together






The objectives of this strategy flow from these priorities:

-  To manage our greenspace in an environmentally sustainable way, while also providing value for money for residents.
-  To provide a wide range of greenspaces which can be used for many recreational purposes.
-  To ensure greenspaces for future developments are developed with the needs of communities and sustainability in mind and deliver long term-benefits.

5.3 Aims

5.4 The overarching aim of this strategy is to build on our achievements and provide focus for the Greenspace service for the period 2022-27 and beyond.

5.5 Specifically to focus on:

-  Supporting the council's Local Plan with regards to public open space provision within new developments or providing offsite improvements.
-  Optimising our current public open space provision to a high standard.
-  Ensuring our services provide value for money for residents.
-  Managing environmental and climate influences that may require seeking new ways to deliver the service.
-  Identifying opportunities to generate income.

5.6 The aims of this strategy are set out below:

Aim 1

To promote the central role that greenspace plays in contributing to the district's health and wellbeing for all residents.

Aim 2

Provide and maintain quality green spaces in appropriate locations and ensure they are protected for future generations.

Aim 3

Use greenspace as a community resource that encourages social interaction, contact with nature and active outdoor participation.

Aim 4

Promote the important role that green spaces play in contributing to biodiversity, while adapting to climate change, improving sustainability, culture, and heritage within the district.

Aim 5

Allow local people to understand and influence the way that greenspace is developed and managed.

Aim 6

Agree objectives for good design, greenspace planning, management and maintenance, and provision in new housing sites that reflect the landscape, townscape and heritage character and qualities of the district.

6. Specific areas of focus

Greenspace Management Strategy flow chart





6.1 In order not to limit or constrain other evolving policies or strategies, the previous diagram depicts where this strategy will sit in relation to other strategies, action plans or policies that affect the greenspace service. For example, the Playing Pitch Strategy is due to be updated separately and therefore the link with this strategy is only identified at this stage.

6.2 This strategy has three key areas of focus:



Planning



Environment & biodiversity policy



Finance

6.3 The other areas identified in the diagram above e.g. allotments and outdoor play, will also require their own strategies and action plans. These will be reviewed as part of the action plan arising from this strategy.

6.4 **Planning**

6.5 The importance of good quality green space or 'green infrastructure' in the planning system has significantly increased over recent years. The climate crisis, biodiversity crisis and impacts of the Covid pandemic mean we need multi-functional green space now more than ever to address the challenges of the physical and natural environment we live in.

6.6 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires strategic policies in Local Plans to set out an overall strategy for the pattern, scale and quality of development and make sufficient provision for the conservation and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environment, including landscapes and green infrastructure and planning measures to address climate change mitigation and adaptation. (NPPF para 20).

6.7 National planning practice guidance promotes the following benefits of green infrastructure:



Building a strong competitive economy.



Achieving well-designed places.



Promoting healthy and safe communities.







Mitigating climate change, flooding and coastal change.



Conserving the natural environment.

6.8 Green infrastructure also has an important role in enhancing the setting of, access to and the revealing of heritage assets within the landscape.



- 6.9 The planning system plays an important role in environmental protection, with one of its three overarching objectives enshrined in national planning policy being to protect and enhance the environment.
- 6.10 Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 places a duty on all public authorities in England and Wales to have regard, in the exercise of their functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity.
- 6.11 Meanwhile, the Environment Act 2021 will (through amendments to the Town and Country Planning Act 1990) create a statutory and mandatory requirement for all new developments to provide a 10% biodiversity net gain. The council will be responsible for securing this provision and also have regard to nature recovery networks, a national network of wildlife-rich places which will be planned on a strategic scale to increase and restore nature.
- 6.12 There are several strategic policies in the emerging Local Plan which seek to protect and enhance the district's green infrastructure and ecological network. The council has approved the use of the Fields in Trust (Guidance for outdoor sport and play. Beyond the six acre standard) November 2020 open space standards in determining the amount of type of new green space required in new development.
- 6.13 A series of evidence-based documents support the implementation of these policies, the key ones being:
-  Playing Pitch Strategy and Action Plan 2018.
 -  Open Space Review 2016.
 -  North Herts Local Cycling & Walking Plan (LCWIP).
 -  North Herts Green Infrastructure Strategy 2009.
- 6.14 These documents inform the decision-making process on what, how much and where new green space infrastructure should be located to support new development. The needs and demands for open space, sport and recreation facilities can change over time. As such existing studies will require reviewing and updating alongside consultation with local organisations to ensure local evidence is robust and can effectively inform decision-making on the location, type and amount of new green space required through new development. Consultation with the relevant national governing bodies and Sport England will be undertaken in relation to playing pitch and outdoor sports provision. As part of the review process, a new Green Infrastructure Strategy is due to be put in place, which will mean it is necessary to update the Greenspace Management Strategy to reflect investment and management needs.

6.15 Environment and biodiversity

North Herts Council Climate Change Strategy

6.16 North Herts Council declared a climate emergency on 21 May 2019 asserting commitment toward climate action. The council's Climate Change Strategy (reviewed in 2021) acts as a foundation upon which actions arising from other service areas across the council are built.

6.17 The key objectives of this strategy are:



Achieve carbon neutrality for the council's own operations by 2030 (at least Scope 1 and Scope 2).



Ensure all operations and services are resilient to the impacts of climate change.



Achieve a net zero carbon district by 2040.



Become a district that is resilient to unavoidable impacts of climate change.

6.18 The council's Climate Change Strategy primarily focuses on carbon reduction, and greenspace has an important role to play in carbon capture through vegetation and soils. This carbon capture provides opportunities to offset emissions, and the council's Climate Change Strategy sets out actions relating to offsetting opportunities presented by greenspace management. Forward planning will ensure that the greenspace management service will align with the council's target to achieve carbon neutrality across all council operations by 2030.

6.19 Greenspace can have an indirect impact upon carbon emissions and can contribute to the council's target to achieve a net zero carbon district by 2040. For example, paths and cycle lanes through safe and accessible greenspaces can encourage a shift to active transport. Greenspace is also proven to assist in the regulation of temperature, reducing the urban heat island effect by providing shade and evaporative cooling. This has the potential to reduce the need for heating and air conditioning and the emissions they produce.





6.20 Local greenspace will have a role to play in adapting to the impacts of climate change in the district. The predicted impact of climate change locally includes hotter and drier summers, warmer and wetter winters, and more extreme weather events. Over the past 10 years, the UK has already experienced a variety of climate-related extremes including major floods and heatwaves. As well as the ability to regulate temperatures, green spaces have the potential to intercept, store and filter water. This can reduce the risk of flooding and improve water quality in streams, ponds and rivers.








- 6.21 The impacts of climate change are likely to affect the district's nature and greenspace. To ensure resilience, consideration must be given to heavy precipitation, flooding, damage caused by excessive heat, and other climate-related impacts on local plant species and greenspace operations. It is critical that the service and operations remain flexible as the future impacts of climate change are uncertain and the potential for more extreme weather may not be easily planned for.
- 6.22 Whilst the Climate Change Strategy relates primarily to the reduction of carbon emissions, the council is enabled to address a wider range of issues relating to climate change. These include mitigation, adapting to the impacts of climate change and environmental matters through its other policies and plans, its membership of county-wide partnerships, and its process of assessing the environmental implications of new decisions and actions. Given the intrinsic link between the environment, climate change, and greenspace, the environmental implications assessment process will play an important role in ensuring that greenspace management will continuously assess environmental implications to identify positive impacts and adapt to minimise negative impacts as much as possible.

HCCSP Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan

- 6.23 North Herts Council is part of the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP) which is comprised of all 10 district councils within Hertfordshire, Hertfordshire County Council, and the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The partnership's aim is to work collaboratively to deliver action on climate change and environmental issues.
- 6.24 In relation to the Greenspace Management Strategy, the HCCSP has produced a Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan, which is also the principal strategic level document relating to biodiversity for North Herts.
- 6.25 Biodiversity refers to the variety of plant and animal life in the world or in a particular habitat or area, where a high level of diversity is typically considered to be preferable. Biodiversity is important because having a wide range of animals, plants and microorganisms helps keep the ecosystems that we all rely on for clean water and air, food, medicines, and protection against disease and extreme weather events, functioning and healthy.
- 6.26 The Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan was produced in response to continuing declines in species and habitat, both locally and nationally, and seeks to initiate urgent action to help restore and enhance biodiversity across Hertfordshire.
- 6.27 The Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan includes:
-  Identifying and implementing opportunities to enhance biodiversity and pollinator habitats e.g. planting more trees and plants
 -  Reviewing opportunities to increase tree canopy cover (shade)
 -  Minimising and where possible excluding peat compost and pesticides
 -  Reviewing allotment strategies to ensure biodiversity-positive behaviours are promoted.

Financial pressures

- 6.28 The council uses two funding streams for greenspace – revenue (similar to money held in a current bank account) is used for the day-to-day maintenance of greenspace, and capital (similar to money held in a savings account) is used for improvements to greenspace e.g. equipment and facilities.
- 6.29 The current Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) reflects the funding forecasts for the council, which are highly uncertain. The expectation is that the council may be faced with a significant reduction in the revenue funding that it receives, whilst dealing with the impact of inflation on our costs and uncertainty over our income (particularly in relation to the continuing impacts of Covid-19).
- 6.30 Over the medium term (within the next five years) it is expected that the council will need to start borrowing to fund its capital spend, as it will have used up its capital reserves. This will mean that there will be a revenue cost associated with capital expenditure. This will be an annual cost of around 3-5% of the borrowing required.
- 6.31 The MTFS recognises the financial challenges that the council faces, and determines the following key strategies to address these pressures:
-  Deliver existing services at a lower cost, where efficiencies are available and especially linked to the use of automation and technology.
 -  Generate (new or additional) income from the services that we are able to charge for.
 -  Generate income from commercial activities.
 -  Where necessary, reducing the level of service.
- 6.32 Given the revenue impacts of capital spend, it is also necessary to challenge the need for capital expenditure. If the capital expenditure is being incurred to generate income, then the income must exceed the revenue cost of that capital spend.
- 6.33 It is possible that achieving a balanced budget will require consideration to reduce the level of service that the council currently provides. The MTFS states that when the future funding of the council is more certain (and therefore the scale of the funding gap is known), that the public will be consulted on the various options available to achieve a balanced budget. That feedback will be considered in making any difficult decisions.

7. Conclusions and outcomes

- 7.1 An annual action plan will be created which will detail the key activities relating to this strategy. The action plan will be considered by the Executive Member and Service Director to direct the work programs for the Greenspace Service on an annual basis.
- 7.2 The following table highlights changes to previous policies as well as where existing policies will be carried forward.

7.3 Table of actions / conclusions outcomes as a comparison against the previous strategy

Item	Previous strategy 2017 - 2021	New (to be adopted) policies 2022 - 2027
Parks and gardens.	Town centre parks remain the highest priority for future investment and maintenance.	To continue.
Playground provision.	Renovate one site annually with a budget of £75,000.	Increase budget to £180,000 annually and identify sites annually with the agreement of the Executive Member and Service Director.
Amenity greenspace.	To retain the value of green space and trees. Within financial constraints provide adequate infrastructure for other activities.	To continue and to promote the value of our existing green space. To continue to deliver high standards of maintenance that can also be extended into any new green space adopted through development gains.
Burials.	Wilbury Hills Cemetery is the district-wide provision for burials as existing resources reach capacity.	To continue. To include updating of the previous Cemeteries Strategy.
Environment & biodiversity.	Local Nature Reserves and green corridors.	In addition, to continuously consider the environmental impacts, either positive or negative, of our actions to maintain our parks and open spaces. This could include the expansion of areas left uncut and only mown once annually as an example. To continuously review the options and opportunities to reduce or cease the use of pesticides, specifically glyphosate based herbicides. Therefore, to consider alternative methods of weed control. To continue to explore opportunities to introduce more habitats to improve biodiversity and therefore increase the areas maintained on a wilding basis. To consider and work proactively to deliver the positive gains that can be delivered through biodiversity net gain.

Item	Previous strategy 2017 - 2021	New (to be adopted) policies 2022 - 2027
Accreditation.	Annual submission for Green flag accreditation at five sites.	To continue.
Planning and new developments.	Adoption of developed open spaces will not be undertaken by the District council unless there is a specific reason to do so, such as sensitive environmental habitat or contribution to our existing provision beyond the area of development. Otherwise, it is expected that open spaces within a new development will be maintained by a private management company.	<p>In the planning for new development the District council will continue to aim for all sections of the community to have access to green space and experience its multiple benefits. Green space should be freely accessible to all the public and not be reserved for the private use of residents.</p> <p>The council will consider the adoption and management of new strategic green space in the following circumstances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It is located within the four main towns of Baldock, Letchworth, Hitchin and Royston (and Great Ashby) and complements existing service maintenance operations. ● The green space is meeting a current deficiency and new provision would meet the needs of existing and new residents. ● The green space is meeting a strategic gap in the green space network and improving the quantity, quality and connectivity of the district's green space network. ● Where longer term revenue streams such as council tax can be effectively recycled back into the locality as part of place investment. ● Where other corporate objectives can be met such as climate change, biodiversity and health and wellbeing. <p>For smaller green spaces and new green space in other settlements other options should be considered and agreed on a site-by-site basis such as parish councils and private management companies.</p>