

Belfast City Council Parks Service

1.0 Project Brief

- 1.1 To develop and articulate a modern customer-orientated, outcome focussed service that will promote and assist in the delivery of the council's aims and objectives.
- 1.2 To undertake a baseline assessment of the existing service, excluding the zoo which will be the subject of a separate piece of work.

2.0 A Parks Service for the 21st Century

- 2.1 Nationally and internationally, parks are again mainstream and valued not merely for their heritage value but more so as key assets, capable of contributing significantly to the "liveability" agenda on a number of fronts- crime prevention, healthy living, prosperity, lifelong learning, environmental quality etc. For example, surveys show that gardens, parks and woodlands are used more than any other facility for recreation (Sport England, The Use of Public Parks in England, 2004). They also can play a major role in promoting and sustaining community cohesion. For years they were at the heart of local communities; safe, well maintained places absorbing activities for all ages- the first leisure centres, the first community centres.
- 2.2 Unfortunately, in the 60's they entered into decline which, for a long time, appeared to be irreversible. Some blame may be attributed to how the parks continued to be managed which changed little to reflect the changing needs of society.

"For too long, Local Government (Parks) has been a closed world of professionals delivering services to standards they determined, untouched by those they serve."

(Director, Best Value Inspectorate, Audit Commission)

"Parks for plants not people."

(Anon)

2.3 This was compounded by the deterioration of buildings and infrastructure which was not arrested due to public investment being targeted towards more contemporary needs such as leisure centres. Research has shown that decline in the quality of a public space contributes to the onset or acceleration of vandalism, anti-social behaviour and even serious crime (Greenspace, 2004). Accordingly, users began to abandon the sites often to be replaced by the less socially inclined. In some cases, abandonment was perceived as being completed in the nineties with the advent of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (C.C.T.) and the withdrawal of site based gardeners in the name of efficiency.

“Nothing encourages the vandal more than management by abandonment”

(CABE Space)

2.4 During the latter stages of this period, however, an increasingly strong lobby emerged promoting a renewed interest in the importance of parks. This movement received a huge boost with the establishment of the Commission of Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) whose research has been so influential in re-establishing the importance of parks in a modern society and in advising local authorities of the differing approaches they have encountered which deliver “a successful park”.

2.5 One size does not fit all and the design and management of each park must be “bespoke”. However, the following have been identified as “success factors”...

- To achieve buy in and ownership, the top down strategic approach, which for Belfast is contained in the Your City Your Space strategic document, must be accompanied by a bottom up approach through engaging with the local community. Furthermore, this involvement must continue especially in the longer term management of the park. The process is as important as the product.
- To adopt a holistic strategic area approach parks must not be viewed as “stand alone assets” meriting special attention through playing the sentimental historical card or the green ecological one. Parks are important community assets capable of catering for multiple uses, determined by local needs/intelligence and complimenting what goes on in other areas of their catchments. For example, in the case of buildings, it is common for those in parks to be underused. Yet, by opening them up for other non-traditional parks uses will not only enhance park usage but may also result in asset rationalisation elsewhere with resulting efficiency gains.

- To adopt a comprehensive pro-active approach to park management that needs to be customer friendly and adaptable. Managers must know and regularly engage with their customers and non-customers. There also needs to be day-day site management. How this is being undertaken throughout the country varies widely and is often a combination of approaches – site based gardeners, park rangers, parks patrols, facility attendants, franchise operators etc.
- To promote the development and use of the facility through investment and marketing. Parks require capital investment and to attract such they need to be marketed at a strategic level as part of a holistic area approach as described above. Once developed, they also require sufficient revenue support to maintain them as welcoming, attractive, customer friendly and well managed places. Maintenance is key. In *Parks and Squares: Who Cares?*, CABE Space found that the things that the public most dislike about green spaces are that they are not kept clean or safe with people feeling more secure if a place is visibly maintained. Yet, as CABE point out, park managers usually employ gardeners during weekdays when few people visit parks rather than at weekends when they are at their busiest.
- To be well designed, often benefiting from being opened up and made more inviting through the removal of peripheral hedges and/or fencing and by creating new gateways to give a sense of arrival. Lighting and the introduction of security measures such as C.C.T.V. have also proved reassuring. It is also interesting that a survey by The University of Sheffield in 2002 found that 32% of people would use their urban parks more if they had more varied vegetation.

2.5 In summary, successful parks meet the needs of their users. CABE research (*Decent Parks? Decent Behaviour?*) noted 17 elements that were identified as key to the success of the case studies they examined (Appendix 1). In summary, however, they conclude that ...

“Ultimately local solutions are necessary, although the evidence shows that investing in good design, attractive facilities and good maintenance remains the driver for improvement.”

3.0 Belfast Parks Service 2008-A Baseline Assessment

3.1 For many years, the Parks and Cemeteries Service (Parks) has been subjected to varying changes and reviews. In the nineties, to prepare for C.C.T., the operational side was transferred to a Contractor Department and was substantially downsized to obtain the efficiencies considered necessary

to retain the work in-house. At this time, the outdoor leisure function was transferred from Parks to Leisure Services only to return in 2003 when C.C.T. ended and the client/contractor sides of leisure combined. With Parks, the client/contractor split was allowed to continue until 2005 when the current structure (Appendix 2) was created with the most significant change during the pre- 2005 period being the loss of the Environmental Education function. In 2007, when the new Parks and Leisure Department was created, the function was again affected through the loss of its Head of Service, a situation which has continued until the present (approximately 18 months).

- 3.2 When one adds to these structural changes (which often also required alterations to working practices and work places), the various reviews which have been commissioned since November 2005 and the number of agency staff and secondees in post, some of whom undertake key roles, it is surprising that the service continues to operate at the level it does. Indeed, none of the component parts of the service could be described as failing while some would appear to be delivering to high standards. Most significantly, public perception is generally good. Two recent surveys involving 1168 interviews across 23 parks and cemeteries found high levels of satisfaction especially concerning general maintenance and upkeep although some did fall short of users' expectations mainly due to a lack of facilities, antisocial behaviour and a lack of staff presence. This achievement is largely down to the dedication and commitment of the staff especially those involved in the day-day delivery of front-line services. However, it is not sustainable.
- 3.3 The current position must also be seen against a backdrop of lack of investment. Belfast's parks, with a few exceptions, have attracted little capital expenditure in recent years. In November 2006, the Community and Recreation (Parks and Cemeteries Services) Sub-Committee in receiving a report entitled "*Funding of Open Spaces Strategy*" was informed that the estimated cost of upgrading the city's parks was in the region of £29m. This lack of investment is beginning to show. Two notable examples which should cause concern are the poor condition of parks' railings and the imbalanced age structure of their trees. It is also doubtful if the revenue budget has kept pace with commitments and growth over this period, thus putting undue pressures on maintenance.
- 3.4 For a variety of reasons, not least the degree of change described above, morale is generally low and a number of staff are becoming increasingly frustrated. Cracks are beginning to appear and the service is stagnating and becoming dated. While structural changes have taken place, the service has changed little, continuing to be largely operationally driven and high on process as opposed to being outcome customer focussed. Large areas

appear to be drifting along, without focus and lacking direction. Of prime concern is the lack of policies and strategies. Without such, fully informed

decisions cannot be made while the chances of attracting investment are being substantially reduced. Their absence permits the current tendency to be reactive. This is time-consuming and high risk and has allowed a culture of fire fighting to develop which also focuses on damage limitation. This will often manifest itself through staff coming across as negative wishing to contain rather than explore. Similarly, the situation also allows officers to be “opportunistic” and/or selective in what they do.

- 3.5 The service does not pull together as a team. There is evidence of silo working across the various functional groupings in addition to duplication of effort. This may, in part, be due to the staff working from separate offices although aspects may also stem from the C.C.T. client/contractor split and to the sometimes flawed attempt at unification in 2005 with some of the service mixes within the functional groupings appearing illogical. An example of this is the siting of Outdoor Leisure within the Finance Function. The situation is also not helped by poor levels of communication/information exchange. In summary, roles and responsibilities have become blurred across parts of the service with there being evidence of overlap/duplication. This clearly impacts upon the efficiency and effectiveness of the service and at times will confuse “the customer”.
- 3.6 Contributing to the above are issues relating to capacity. While evidence points to the Council investing in the training and development of their staff, especially those involved in front line service provision, it is clear that the service suffers from a lack of leadership and management skills. Some officers are not operating at levels commensurate with their posts with there being a tendency to abrogate decisions upwards and to utilise the grievance process to resolve issues. This may, in part, reflect a previous management ethos of control which has the added disadvantage of stifling innovation. Combined with a risk averse culture, this may also explain a prevalence of dwelling on process which has resulted in lengthy and time-consuming paper trails especially for those operational managers. To compound this problem, administrative support across the service is lacking and needs to be looked at. Finally, it should be noted that some staff have been found to be particularly key, having assumed personal responsibility for high profile schemes, services and essential advice. However, there has been no continuity planning and, as with the other capacity issues, if not addressed, the Council will be putting itself in a position of risk with the possibility of these staff moving on.
- 3.7 It is difficult to objectively assess how good the service is as there are few measures in place to enable comparisons to be made, for example, through the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) Performance Network

of which Belfast is a member. This is of particular concern in relation to the operational side of the service which accounts for the majority of expenditure (£11.2m nett/66%). The asset register which was compiled in preparation for C.C.T. is now dated and the specification exists largely as a shelf document only. The main driver for the current operational set up was to establish single points of accountability and to restore a presence in parks. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the operational split was measured while some arrangements which appear illogical date back to C.C.T. days (East Area staff travelling to undertake routine tasks in the west and vice-versa). The lack of measures cause difficulty in making informed management decisions while the operational set up poses efficiency queries especially with increasing utility costs.

3.8 The scope of the service provided is fairly comprehensive although, given the current trends regarding health, sustainability and increasing costs, allotments and urban agriculture should have a higher profile. For example, in a plan inspired by American cities, London's royal parks are pondering the creation of a string of model allotments to give the public "*a living, ripening illustration of the virtues of growing their own fruit and vegetables.*" There is also an issue regarding the lack of a dedicated horticultural specialist to keep the city abreast of modern developments. The lack of marketing is also holding the service back while the role of parks as venues for events is not being fully realised which is not helped by a relatively small budget and, again, a lack of an overall strategy. The existing roles performed by the Park Rangers need to be examined within the overall context of introducing a parks presence while there are also matters around the attendant functions which are currently addressed through overtime and/or the use of agency staff. Finally, there are issues regarding the role of the service within the context of the Council as a whole. The recent departmental restructuring needs to be further refined regarding roles and responsibilities and discussions have commenced with the Development Department in an attempt to do so e.g. public art, events, play. Furthermore, consideration needs to be given to what specialist services parks could develop and deliver corporately especially given the increased responsibilities that will come with RPA. Such functions will include

- Local public realm aspects of roads functions including ***streetscaping ; town and city centre environmental improvements***; street lighting; off-street parking; permitting local events to be held on roads etc;
- Urban regeneration and community development delivery functions including those associated with ***physical development, area based regeneration (such as Neighbourhood Renewal) along with some community development programmes and support for the voluntary and community sectors***;
- ***Local arts, sports and leisure.***

3.9 To address the risks, inefficiencies and inconsistencies described above and to deliver a new modern customer orientated parks service, structural change will be necessary. However, structural change alone will not succeed. This must be accompanied by actions that will fundamentally change the culture and general management philosophy of the service in addition to clearly defining what functions it undertakes and that such are not duplicated elsewhere. Initially, it is being recommended that the service embraces the following functions:

- the development of a policy/strategic framework for all matters relating to open space provision, design, maintenance and management;
- responsibility for all matters relating to landscape design within the City;
- maintenance and management of all existing open space to achieve cost-effective landscapes;
- all matters relating to trees within the City
- promotion/facilitation of Belfast in Bloom;
- assuming the lead role for matters relating to biodiversity;
- promoting the use and understanding of the external environment;
- facility management of all outdoor public space – parks, play areas, outdoor leisure facilities including allotments;
- promotion/facilitation of a wide range of events
- a cemeteries and crematoria service;
- Belfast Castle and Malone House;
- Belfast Zoo ; and
- support services

3.10 As part of any review, it will be assumed that the following will be examined:

- the service's assets - land, buildings;
- the continuation of annualised hours;
- the levels of overtime being worked;
- the use of agency staff;
- the operation of a flexible multi-tasking approach;
- the development of an enabling culture as opposed to one of control with clear levels of devolvement, responsibility and accountability;
- the balance between development, support and frontline staff;
- capacity issues - skills, funding including distribution, machinery etc;
- the employment inconsistencies;
- the geographical split of responsibilities within operations;
- the apparent duplication of activities/responsibilities with other departments and the potential for rationalisation and efficiencies;
- the service's by-laws;
- the need for a presence in parks especially at peak times (evenings and weekends and school holidays);
- the possibility of adopting the local area working approach to bring the services closer to the public and to their specific needs;
- the nursery service;
- the need to address customer relationship management(CRM);

- a review of partnership working - existing and potential; and
- the need for income generation and marketing.

The review will also involve consideration of the existing work that has been undertaken by the Council's Business Improvement Team.

Recommendations

- 1) That the factors identified in Section 2 of the report for the development and management of a successful park be adopted.
- 2) That advance design work for the redevelopment of two major parks be initiated adopting the approaches outlined in the report.
- 3) That the role of the service in supporting the Council's policy objectives through delivering the suite of functions described in paragraph 3.9 be approved
- 4) That the Director of Parks and Leisure undertakes a comprehensive review of the Parks structure ;
- 5) That a comprehensive review of the grounds maintenance/management operational aspects is undertaken including...
 - a. establishing a comprehensive asset register of all land that is currently maintained;
 - b. a review of grounds maintenance standards; and
 - c. an option appraisal of how such standards may be met within the context of an efficient and effective service – to include staffing levels and training, depots, the type, quantity and distribution of all plant, the procurement of all related supplies and services
- 6) That the assumptions outlined in paragraph 3.10 to inform the review process be approved.
- 7) That a programme to develop staff capacity be implemented as a matter of urgency focussing initially on management and leadership skills
- 8) That the current budget is restructured to reflect the new customer orientated enabling culture and to gain “greater purchase” through the potential of leverage from other sources.
- 9) That the feasibility of bringing the service together in one location be examined by the Director of Core Improvement and reported back to this committee as part of the above structural review.

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Checklist of Key Elements

These elements were considered key to the success of the case studies. Use them together rather than singly.

1. Restore original designs where possible at sites of heritage importance.
2. Ensure all designs are of a high standard, involving relevant professionals (landscape architects and designers) and valuing the contribution of users.
3. Manage risk sensibly and retain positive features that attract people to parks; the paddling pool, play area and shrub beds.
4. Take advantage of the potential for buildings within parks for natural surveillance, e.g. from cafes, flats and offices.
5. Involve the community early in the process and continually.
6. Involve 'problem' groups as part of the solution where possible and work hard to avoid single-group dominance in the park.
7. Build a relationship with community groups that can lead to their achieving external funding and exerting a legitimate authority.
8. Provide activities and facilities to ensure young people feel a sense of ownership. Address young people's fear of crime as well as that of adults.
9. Use publicity to let people know that management believes in the place. Send a clear message to vandals and criminals: 'your time is up, you are no longer welcome, things are about to change'.
10. Ensure that people know how to report damage and incidents.
11. Make sure that maintenance budgets are adequate to support after-care.

12. Employ 'target hardening' measures sensitively as part of overall improvements.
13. Respond rapidly to vandalism and anti-social behaviour, but bear in mind it is highly localised and caused by a minority.
14. Work in partnership. Others may be trying to manage similar problems and be willing to get involved and share resources.
15. Research the range of tools and powers available and use appropriate enforcement where necessary to tackle problems.
16. Reintroduce staff and gardeners, who provide a level of authority and a point of community interaction. Ensure they are provided with back up.
17. Ensure that initiatives are part of a coordinated approach.

Principal Parks & Cemeteries Services Development Manager

Landscape Planning & Development Manager

- landscape design (parks, play areas, civic space incl. public art)
- project management
- l'scape planning/policy development
- grant applications
- civil engineering services incl. Term Contract (Tarmacing, inspection of all paths etc)
- planning applications
- community consultation and planning

Conservation & Promotion Manager

- Biodiversity promotion city-wide-partnership facilitation (Environ. Heritage Service, Ulster Wildlife, RSPB).
- Countryside Officer. Promotes cycling/walking/r.o.w. Budget holder for Belfast Hills P'ship (£20k -3 staff & Board) and Lagan Valley Reg.Park (£20k)
- Events with £124k budget incl. community events (£50k)
- Marketing-little if anything-little sponsorship
- Parks Community and Cultural Off
- Public art
- Forest of Belfast
- Heritage

Parks Services & Support Manager

- Procurement (1 staff)
- Mobile plant
- Urban Forestry/Trees incl. Roads Service & Belfast Regen.Off (£750k) – little planted by Areas
- Offer hort. training
- Play areas-planned maintenance

Zoo Manager

Separate Review

Principal Parks & Cemeteries Services Manager

Area Managers

- Grounds maintenance
- Parks management
- Parks Outreach work
- Park Rangers
- Floral decor.s incl.indoor
- Play inspection
- Events
- Allotments via Park Managers

Parks Estates Manager

- Belfast Castle (Houses Cave Hill Country Park (750-800 acres) Visitor Ctre, Adventurous Play Area (staffed all summer and winter w/ends by agency staff. New toilet block).
- Barnet Demense, Malone House ,Lagan Meadows (Ulster Wildlife Group) & Clement Wilson Park
- Park Manager-11 staff, own machinery, attends Cavehill Conservation Group and Belfast Hills P'ship
- No Rangers
- Open 24/7

Bereavement Services Manager

- Burials
- Crematorium
- Grounds maintenance
- Cemetery archives

Finance/Systems Manager

- Financial advice incl.
 - Budget setting
 - Develop, oversee & maintain sectional procedures
- Income/debt/payments
- Grant aid claims
- Assist with grant aid applications
- Assist with Annual pricing
- Information system advice & strategy
- Outdoor Leisure-work closely with Park Managers
 - Pitch bookings
 - User groups
 - Facility management
 - Sport development
 - Tennis
 - Bowls
 - Soccer

Human Resources/Admin Manager

- H.R. incl.
 - employee relations
 - recruitment
 - sickness management
- General administration
- Training co-ordination
- Parks properties admin.
- Community/private events admin