

READING OPEN SPACES STRATEGY

Reading Borough Council

March 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive summary	2
1. PURPOSE	4
2. DEFINITIONS	5
3. POLICY CONTEXT	7
4. HOW MUCH PUBLIC OPEN SPACE SHOULD BE PROVIDED IN READING?	9
4.1 Surveys	9
4.2 Forecasts	12
4.3 Provision standards	12
4.4 Summary and implications for the Open Spaces Strategy	14
5. HOW MUCH PUBLIC OPEN SPACE IS PROVIDED IN READING?	15
5.1 Area and distribution of current provision	15
5.2 New public open space	18
5.3 Summary and implications for the Open Spaces Strategy	18
6. DOES READING BOROUGH HAVE ENOUGH PUBLIC OPEN SPACE?	19
6.1 Assessment of current provision	19
6.2 Summary and implications for the Open Spaces Strategy	20
7. THE STRATEGY	21
7.1 The vision	21
7.2 Objectives for open spaces	21
7.3 Constraints	21
7.4 Local provision standards: a Reading standard	22
7.5 Provision of public open space: establishment of priorities	24
7.6 Provision of public open space: guiding principles	24
7.7 Provision of public open space: policies	25
7.8 Management and maintenance	30
7.9 Planning issues	31
8. MONITORING	34

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Accessibility of all open space in Reading	6
Figure 5.1: Recreational open space with 400m catchment areas	16
Figure 5.1: Recreational open space with 600m catchment areas	16

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1: Summary of findings of the GreenSTAT survey, 2005/06 (%); N=821	10
Table 4.2: Comparative survey data (2000/01)	11
Table 4.3: Summary of CABE guidelines on optimal distribution of open space	13
Table 4.4: Summary of NPFA guidelines for provision of children's playgrounds	13
Table 4.5: Summary of the London guidelines	13
Table 5.1: Supply of public open space in Reading Borough	15
Table 5.2: Open space brought into the public domain 1995-2005	17
Table 6.1: Identification of discrepancies in total provision	19
Table 7.1: Hierarchy and typology; and provision standards for Reading	23

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This draft Open Spaces Strategy (OSS) sets out the aims and approaches that Reading Borough Council will adopt in its role as custodian of Reading's public open space. The OSS reflects the objectives of the Reading 2020 Community Strategy and will underpin the relevant policies in the Local Development Framework. The strategy will also provide the context for the future management of and investment in recreational public open spaces.

The draft strategy is informed firstly by a comprehensive audit assessing the amount, distribution and quality of existing open space, and secondly by the results of an independent public consultation exercise conducted by specialist consultant GreenSpace in order to assess the views and needs of the community.

Vision

The strategy adopts the Reading 2020 Community Strategy vision for public open space (POS) in Reading:

Everyone will be able to enjoy high quality public open spaces that are clean, safe and well-maintained. Our rivers and canals will be the focus for an interconnected series of accessible and desirable public spaces, providing a range of natural and urban experiences. In addition there will be a choice of accessible, high quality public parks and open spaces that together will provide places for people to meet, play and relax. These open areas will incorporate a range of habitats that will help maintain and enhance the diversity of local wildlife, and provide for a better overall quality of life.

The Reading Context

Although Reading's total amount of public open space is broadly in line with national guidelines, it is unevenly distributed across the town. *Over the last 20 years the Council has brought about 30ha of previously private open space into the public realm.* However, people in and around the town centre are still further away from public open space than guidelines recommend and parts of north Reading are short of play areas. In many cases historical development patterns make it difficult to introduce new areas of POS without large-scale redevelopment. The cost of acquiring land outright for use as POS is prohibitive, and has normally only been achieved as part of wider development proposals.

The perceived quality of POS varies significantly, especially in terms of cleanliness (dog fouling, litter and graffiti), maintenance, size and facilities. The user survey revealed that many visitors chose not to go to their nearest park, but instead to travel further to a larger park with more facilities and a variety of features. 'Natural' spaces are preferred. There is general agreement that green spaces make Reading a nicer place in which to live.

Policy Objectives

The Council recognises that the issues of provision and the increasing pressure arising from continued urban development require a more integrated and robust approach to the management of open space.

The Council's principal aims are to:

- Safeguard Reading's environmental endowment
- Ensure that there is no net loss of recreational POS
- Secure additional open space where opportunities arise

In response to the findings of the audit and public consultation exercise, the strategy adopts the following objectives that together will help protect and improve the choice, quality and accessibility of public open space. The Council will:

- Adopt a comprehensive Reading Open Space Standard based on the most up-to-date national guidelines
- Secure new public open space through the development process where opportunities arise
- Make improvements to the quality and facilities of existing public open space
- Secure more play areas where feasible and manageable
- Change the management of some existing open spaces (like woodlands or under-used allotments) to increase public access where desirable
- Continue to upgrade facilities in larger parks to benefit the wider population
- Develop a network of safe and attractive green routes for pedestrians and cyclists that will link open spaces across the borough
- Secure an attractive and safe network of urban civic spaces

This Strategy will not only strengthen the existing protection given to open space in the Development Plan but bring about additions and improvements to open space provision and distribution across Reading.

1. PURPOSE

This document sets out the strategy to guide the planning, design and management of open spaces in Reading. It has been prepared jointly by the Parks and Open Spaces Team and by the Council's Planning Department.

A town's open spaces - in their nature, extent and quality - contribute significantly to defining its character. Visitors' impressions tend to be determined by the aggregate impact of the interplay of green spaces and the built environment; residents tend to be more aware of the textured detail of the town. Reading has considerable advantages arising from its location between the Kennet and Thames rivers, from the historic retention of its wooded ridges, which influence views of and from the town, and from its rural hinterland. The town also faces challenges arising from the recent building of compact apartment blocks in the town centre with no associated open space for the new urban population; from the need to replace aging educational and transport infrastructure; and from pressures for further residential and commercial developments. A strategy is needed to provide a network of attractive civic spaces and larger, green spaces connected to residential areas by green routes.

The local authority will use the strategy to support the Local Development Framework (formerly the Local Plan), as the basis for developing a Parks Strategy, and as a tool for delivering broader Council objectives. The Open Spaces Strategy:

- Provides an assessment of the need for all types of open space in the Borough
- Provides a comprehensive qualitative and quantitative audit of all open space within the Borough and adjoining districts (generally within 0.4 km of the boundaries)
- Identifies any deficiencies or surpluses in provision
- Sets a local standard for provision
- Assesses opportunities for increasing and improving provision as well as the need for additional protection of existing open spaces and facilities

2. DEFINITIONS

Government planning policy guidance on open space (PPG 17) defines open space in accordance with the Town and Country Planning Act (1990) as 'land laid out as a public garden, or used for the purposes of public recreation, or land which is a disused burial ground'. The recommended typology of public open spaces is summarised in Table 2.1. School playing fields are excluded. These are afforded special statutory protection under the School Standards Framework Act (1999).

Table 2.1: A typology of public open space

OPEN SPACE	
Any unbuilt land within in the boundary of a village, town or city which provides, or has the potential to provide, environmental, social and/or economic benefits to communities, whether direct or indirect.	
GREEN SPACE	CIVIC SPACE
A subset of open space, consisting of any vegetated land or structure, water or geological feature within urban areas.	A subset of open space, consisting of urban squares, market places and other paved or hard landscaped areas with a civic function.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parks and gardens Amenity greenspace Cemeteries and churchyards Children's play & teenage areas Outdoor sports facilities/recreation grounds Green corridors Natural/semi-natural greenspace Allotments, community gardens & city farms Accessible countryside in urban fringe areas Waterfronts Other functional greenspace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civic squares Market places Pedestrian streets Other streets
Source: Adapted from Kit Campbell Associates (2001); ODPM (2002)	

Another distinction needs to be drawn. Figure 2.1 shows all open space in and around Reading Borough. Not all of this is generally accessible to the public. Some is completely inaccessible because the land is privately owned: Caversham Park or railway embankments (shown in red). Some has limited access: agricultural land; the university campus; Green Park; golf courses; schools grounds (shown in orange). Land to which the public has free access is shown in green. This is referred to in this document as public open space (POS). Although all types of POS are valuable and fulfil different social and/or biodiversity functions, not all are suitable for general recreational use: for example, civic spaces, cemeteries, allotments, housing amenity land and public rights of way. For this reason, where appropriate, we also define RPOS (recreational POS), mainly parks, gardens, play areas, recreation grounds and semi-natural sites.

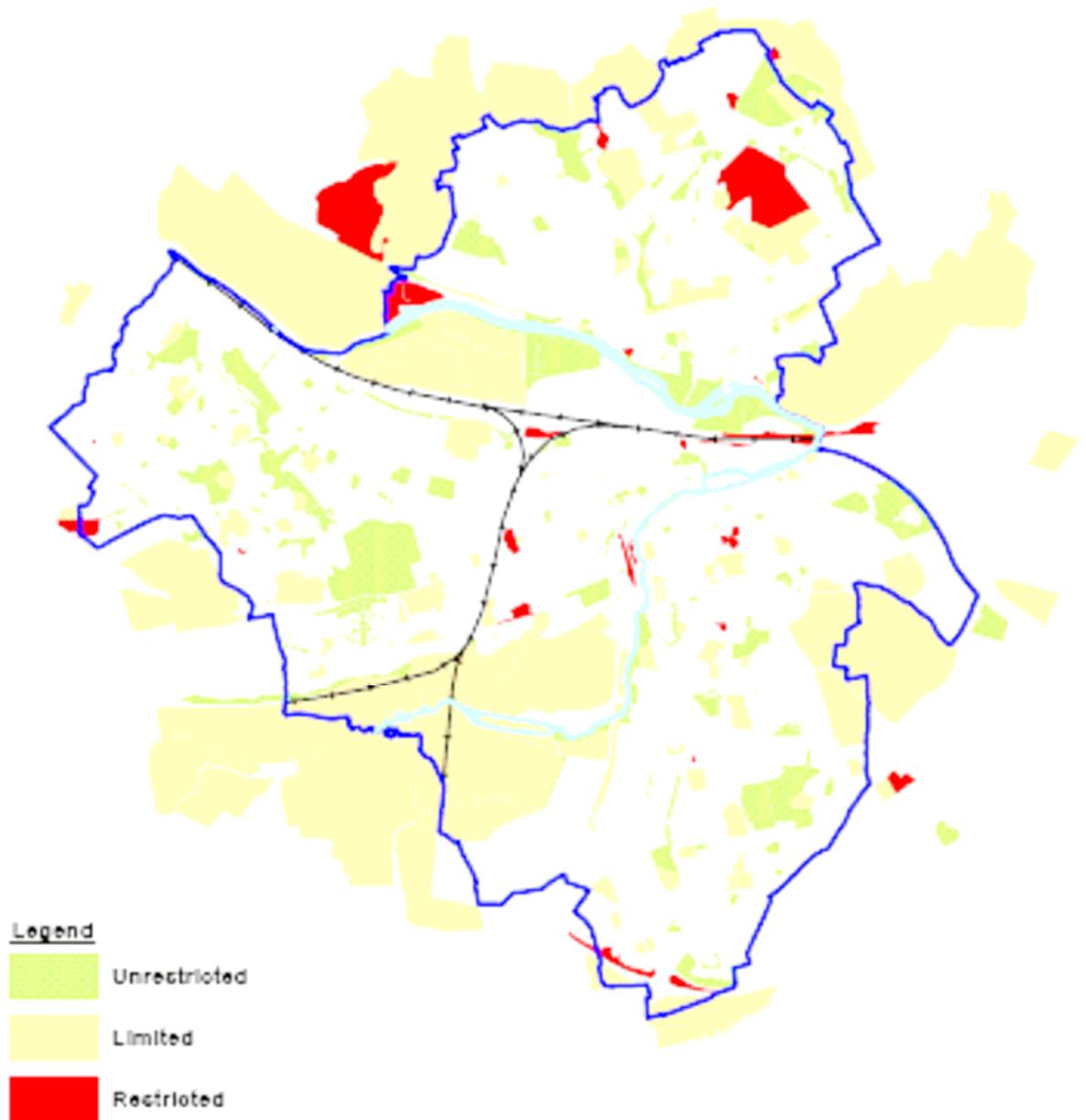


Figure 2.1: Accessibility of all open space in Reading

3. POLICY CONTEXT

The production of an Open Spaces Strategy, informed by a comprehensive open space audit and public consultation, is a requirement of national Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 (Open Space, Sport and Recreation). The Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG 9) indicates that development plans should maximise the positive contribution which open spaces can make to urban areas in terms of recreational, nature conservation, and wider environmental and social benefits.

One of the objectives of the Reading City 2020 Vision is to enhance and increase access to open space, as a key building block of a sustainable community. The Reading 2020 Community Strategy sets the broad vision for public open space:

Everyone will be able to enjoy high quality public open spaces that are clean, safe and well-maintained. Our rivers and canals will be the focus for an interconnected series of accessible and desirable public spaces, providing a range of natural and urban experiences. In addition there will be a choice of accessible, high quality public parks and open spaces that together will provide places for people to meet, play and relax. These open areas will incorporate a range of habitats that will help maintain and enhance the diversity of local wildlife, and provide for a better overall quality of life.

The strategy also includes the following Key Action:

Enhance the quality and accessibility of existing and potential public open spaces in Reading, including those associated with the waterspace of the River Thames and Kennet.

Policy LE11 of the adopted Reading Borough Local Plan states that the Council will not normally allow development proposals that will result in the loss of open space, except in exceptional circumstances, and providing that replacement open space is made available or the quality of existing open spaces serving the same area can be upgraded. Areas identified as major areas of open space are afforded even more protection under policy LE12, which identifies specific sites and states that the Council will not normally allow any development or change of use on or adjacent to these sites that will result in their loss or jeopardise enjoyment of them. The Local Development Framework is expected to carry forward these policies to guide the future protection and provision of open space, and will be supported by the Open Space Strategy.

The Cultural Strategy affirms the importance of Reading's parks, open space and waterways, and sets the objective of protecting and maximising the potential of the Thames and Kennet rivers. A series of area- or facility-specific plans have been produced to help deliver this strategy, including the Playing Pitch Strategy, which looks at future provision and management of sports fields, the Allotments Strategy, which recommends the consolidation of existing allotment sites, and an improvement in their quality, and the Thames Parks Plan which provides a strategic plan for the eight Thameside Parks. The Reading Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) sets out the Council's policies to protect and enhance the town's wildlife diversity. Many of the sites of highest wildlife interest are owned by the Council,

which needs to protect and to manage to a high standard its own sites of high wildlife importance as an example for private landowners. The City Centre Strategy aspires to see Reading become nationally renowned for excellence in maintenance, cleanliness and safety, quality of planting, leisure, commerce and town centre living.

In summary, this Open Spaces Strategy builds on the established aspiration to protect and enhance open space within existing Council policy.

4. HOW MUCH PUBLIC OPEN SPACE SHOULD BE PROVIDED IN READING?

Demand for open space - in terms of both quality and quantity - is ascertained (i) by asking people what they want - survey results; (ii) by estimating future trends in population growth and changes in use - forecasts; and (iii) by setting targets based on desirable or normative levels of supply - standards of provision.

4.1 Surveys

Findings from a public consultation exercise held from November 2005 to February 2006, and summarised in Table 4.1, found that the use of public open space in Reading generally mirrors national experience. Nationally, 40% of users visit their local park every day; the figure for Reading is also 40%. Elsewhere in the UK, about 70% of those interviewed walk to parks; in Reading the percentage is also 70%. However, in other UK towns, most people take less than 5 minutes to get to their local parks, while in Reading only 40% take less than 5 minutes. Indeed, only about 50% of journeys to the park are less than a 10-minute walk, reflecting the finding that some people choose to use a park further from home on a regular basis.

In Reading the overwhelming majority of people of all ages go to enjoy the outdoors, and many stay several hours, especially in the summer, suggesting that public open space plays an important role in residents' recreational activities. A significant proportion of users do not visit the open space nearest to home as their first choice, citing poor maintenance and a lack of either facilities or features of interest as reasons for travelling further. Size and variety matter: things to see and do are important factors in choosing which open space to visit. In particular, a combination of natural spaces and recreational activities create favoured open spaces. Satisfaction with one's nearest open space is 40%, while the approval of the most frequently used park is 83%. A large number took the opportunity to express their appreciation for the space, offer praise for its management and declare their opposition to any plans for development or change.

The main issues are protection from development, access (for some), quality of both cleanliness (dog fouling, graffiti and litter) and maintenance, and inadequate facilities like toilets and furniture. Most park users claim to feel safe in the park in daylight hours, although there are concerns about anti-social behaviour.

Irrespective of whether or not people use parks, there is unanimity on the importance of open space generally and trees specifically to improving the appearance of the town and to making Reading a nicer place in which to live. Where open space is deficient, respondents believe that better street planting, better off-road routes to parks, and pedestrianisation of streets and other civic spaces, is the best way in which to redress the deficiency.

Meeting the specific needs of vulnerable groups would also generally result in direct benefits to all visitors, primarily because they involve improved security, improved access to and around open spaces, improved standards of maintenance, cleanliness and repair, and better and more diverse facilities. Any park that successfully meets the needs of its vulnerable social groups is likely also to achieve very high satisfaction across the broader majority visitor base.

Table 4.1: Summary of findings of the GreenSTAT survey, 2005/06 (%); N=821

Importance of provision		
Perceived importance of trees & open space to Reading's appearance	98	
of open space to quality of life in Reading	97	
of open space as a focal point for communities	81	
of open space in encouraging business location in a town	80	
of open space to personal health	64	
Perceived importance of off-road footpaths and cycle routes	91	
of off-road routes to encouraging more walking/cycling	83	
Use		
Frequency of visits	Weekly or more	Monthly or more
Civic spaces	42	77
Green corridors	36	67
Small parks/recreation grounds	28	62
Large parks	20	53
Semi-natural green spaces/woodlands	17	49
Allotments	14	22
Children's playgrounds	11	29
Outdoor sports facilities	10	19
Formal public gardens	6	29
Reasons for visiting open spaces (% of users)		
To get some fresh air	62	
To go for a walk	50	
To see birds and wildlife/trees and flowers	38/31	
To enjoy the surroundings/relax or think/peace and quiet	36/34/30	
Exercise/children's play	20/18	
Access and location		
Method of transport used to reach open space normally visited		
Walk	70	
Car	18	
Public transport	2	
Cycle	10	
Method of transport to reach open space normally visited when it is ...	closest to home	not closest
Walk	82	51
Car	10	32
Public transport	2	2
Cycle	6	15
Time taken to travel to the park normally visited		
< 5 mins	40	
6-10 mins	28	
10-20 mins	26	
> 20 mins	6	
Quality		
User perceptions of the open space	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Closest to home	40	26
Visited most frequently	83	4
Quality ratings of the most used open space	Good/very good	Poor/very poor
Design and appearance	65	14
Cleanliness and maintenance	60	13
Horticulture and arboriculture	65	12
Nature conservation	58	9
Visitor facilities	45	23
Children's facilities	53	13
Sports facilities	55	19
Suggestions for quality improvement where open space is limited		
Improve the appearance of the streets (grass, flowers, trees)	92	
Improve off-road routes and public transport	82	
Pedestrianise streets, shopping areas, community spaces	76	
Negotiate access to private land/school playing fields	68/53	
Safety		
Users 'generally' feel safe in parks and open spaces	60	
Users unsure about safety	35	
Information		
Ease of finding out about parks and their facilities	31	

These results confirm those from previous annual surveys in Reading, summarised in Table 4.2. Residents attach considerable importance to the existence of parks: recreational POS is the most widely and frequently used leisure facility provided by the Council. The positive reasons for visiting parks have to do with the range of outdoor recreational opportunities offered, chiefly for children's play, informal recreation, or special events. Particular importance is attached to public places for children to play close to home. Almost all concerns that residents have with parks involve the *quality* of provision, of which the main issues are cleanliness and personal safety.

Table 4.2 Comparative survey data (2000/01)

BMG survey			Focus group survey		Telephone survey	
Most visited park	Prospect 42% Palmer 17%		Most visited park	Prospect Palmer	Most visited park	Prospect 51% Palmer 16%
Time taken to reach park/CPG most visited:	Park	CPG	na	na	Distance travelled to park most visited:	
< 5 minutes	41%	39%			< 0.5 miles	64%
5-10 mins	33%	33%			0.5-1.0 miles	20%
11-20 mins	23%	26%			1.0-2.0 miles	13%
> 20 mins	2%	2%			> 2 miles	6%
Sample size	365	117				
Reasons for visiting at least weekly:			Reasons for visiting in order of importance:	na	Reasons for visiting:	
Children's play	56%		Children's play		Children's play	46%
Walking, incl. short cut	67%		Exercise and interest		Walking, incl. short cut	48%
Relaxation	32%		Short cut		Floral displays	16%
Enjoying the surroundings	23%		Events		Dog walking	20%
Dog walking	15%				Relaxation	
Importance of selected services:			na	na	na	na
Children's playgrounds	40%					
Teenage play/meeting	35%					
Sports facilities	35%					
Open grassed areas	34%					
Suggestions for improvement:			Suggestions for improvement:	na	Suggestions for improvement:	
No additional service needed	31%					
More facilities for children	10%					
More benches						
Better cleanliness	8%					
Better safety	12%					
	10%		Better safety		Better safety	33%
			Reintroduce park keepers		Reintroduce park keepers	61%
			More facilities for teenagers			
			More toilets			
			Greater owner restraint of dogs		Greater owner restraint of dogs	67%
			Better cleanliness			
			Better maintenance			
					Restrictions on cyclists	78%
					More commercial activities	66%

4.2 Forecasts

Given the mobility of the economically-active population, it is difficult to forecast specific leisure needs. It may not be necessary to do so. Variable assets, like play and sports equipment, can be introduced or removed in response to current demand (subject to funding constraints). This means that, if the open space exists, within certain obvious limitations (like topography, size and previous investment), its use can be varied by changing the management-maintenance regime or by new investment.

The supply of fixed, especially non-renewable, assets - like green space - is considerably more difficult to vary. Revised estimates of population, based on the 2001 census, reveal that the population of Reading is now about 160,000. This is expected to continue to grow.

Between 1991 and 2001 the population of Reading Borough grew 7.1%, twice the national rate of increase (3.5%). Fastest growth occurred in the age range 30-59, which now makes up about 40% of all residents. Roughly a quarter of the population is under 20, and 16% is of retirement age.

Housing growth has not kept pace with the increase in demand, so the development implications of past population growth are only now being felt. The Borough covers most of the most-densely built parts of Reading. Large new residential developments across the urban area continue to put pressure on existing facilities. A high proportion of new housing occurs as high-density developments, without direct access to private open space, making the quality of the associated public realm more crucial.

Even where new public open spaces are provided as part of new developments - and this is not always practicable - the expansion raises the pressures on civic spaces, on transport routes (both road and off-road), on the larger, better-endowed open spaces, and on open-air events. The Council therefore needs to plan for an increase in the use of open space in Reading by all age groups.

4.3 Provision standards

There are few, if any, nationally accepted standards of open-space provision. One of the earliest attempts was the National Playing Fields Association's (NPFA's) Six Acre Standard, which provides a benchmark for setting aside sufficient land to enable people of all ages, especially the young, to participate in outdoor physical recreation.

More recent guidelines were drawn up by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment in 2005. These recommendations suggest an appropriate range for the spatial distribution of different types of open space:

Table 4.3: Summary of the CABE guidelines on the optimal distribution of open space

	Target	Maximum
Play space	100m	200m
Allotments	200m	400m
Playground	400m	600m
Local green space	400m	600m
Kickabout area	600m	800m
Park	600m	800m
Playing fields	1000m	1500m
Adventure playground	1000m	1500m
Natural green space	1500m	2000m

Source: CABE (2005), Making design policy work, p.7

The CABE guidelines direct open space providers to the NPFA for play provision. These recommend a variety of provision for children's play, which are already used by the Council.

Table 4.4: Summary of NPFA guidelines for provision of children's playgrounds

Facility	Walking time	Walking distance	Radial distance	Min. size activity zone	Nearest dwelling	Characteristics
LAP (local area for play)	1 min	100m	60m	100m ²	Boundary 5m from activity zone	Small, low-key games area
LEAP (local equipped area for play)	5 mins	400m	240m	400m ²	Boundary 10m from activity zone	5 types of play equipment, small games area
NEAP (neighbourhood EAP)	15 mins	1,000m	600m	1,000m ²	Boundary 30m from activity zone	8 types of play equipment; ball games

Source: NPFA, 2001:63

An alternative standard for urban areas, from the Greater London Development Plan, is useful for considering a hierarchy of open space provision. These guidelines take account of the range of parks provided in urban areas, from large parks with a wide range of facilities serving the whole town to small, local green spaces serving an immediate neighbourhood.

Table 4.5: Summary of London guidelines

	Size	Distance from homes
Regional parks and open spaces	400 ha	3.2-8.0 km
Metropolitan parks	60 ha	3.2 km
District parks	20 ha	1.2 km
Local parks	2 ha	0.4 km
Small local parks and open spaces	0.2 ha	0.4 km
Linear open spaces		0.4 km

Source: reported in Chesterfield (2002:19)

The 0.4 km radius catchment area for local parks and 1.2 km catchment for larger parks has become the rule-of-thumb for assessing the distribution of open spaces in urban areas. The standard of 0.2 ha minimum local park size is also widely used.

Open space provision in other urban areas may also be used as a benchmark. There are three problems with this approach: (i) data are patchy; (ii), data may not be strictly comparable; and (iii) caution must be exercised when using supply elsewhere as an indicator of local demand. However, comparative data are useful as an indicator of what may be possible, what is considered desirable, and what is available in competing locations. UK data on green space provision are poor. Data for 13 boroughs in England and Wales show the area of green space as a proportion of total urban area is generally about 10%; in Reading it is 9%. Provision per 1,000 people varies considerably, ranging from 2.5 ha to 6.9 ha ; in Reading it is 2.9 ha. By both measures, Reading's provision of green space is close to average, but at the lower end of the range.

4.4 Summary and implications for the Open Spaces Strategy

Reading's open spaces are valued both because they offer opportunities for outdoor recreation and for the contribution they make to the environment of the town. Users want to see open space protected from development, clean and well-maintained, and accessible to all. Residents also want off-road routes extended and improved. These views are taken into account in formulating open space policy options.

PPG17 advises that open space provision standards be set locally, in line with demographic profiles and the extent of the existing built development, recognising that national standards cannot cater for local circumstances. However, national standards are helpful in guiding local authorities towards an optimal provision to which they might aspire. The 2005 CABE guidelines are the most suitable basis for developing a Reading standard of provision. These point to the NPFA standard for variety in children's play provision, which the Council is already using for this purpose.

5. HOW MUCH PUBLIC OPEN SPACE IS PROVIDED IN READING?

5.1 Area and distribution of current provision

An audit was carried out to assess Reading's current provision of open space. A significant proportion of green space in Reading - including many of the larger pieces of land - has limited public access (Figure 2.1 above). Excluding open space with limited access (shaded red or orange in Figure 2.1), the overall distribution of publicly accessible open space (shaded green) is characterised by:

- Concentrations in the west, north-east, and along the waterways
- Gaps in and around the town centre, and to the north and far west of the Borough
- Unconnected green spaces, with no continuous links, except along the waterways

The total area of different types of public open space is summarised in Table 5.1. This shows that the full range of recreational and other POS is available in Reading Borough.

Table 5.1: Supply of public open space in Reading Borough

	Description	Total area	Catchment
Recreational public open space		356 ha	
Borough/district parks	Varied character and facilities; natural, formal, sport, play and relaxation	152 ha (3 parks) (includes sports pitches)	Wider urban area
Local parks, recreation grounds, children's play areas	Informal recreation, equipped play areas and ball games	+/- 24 ha	Immediate neighbourhood
Outdoor sports	Formal sports pitches	+/- 80 ha	Wider urban area
Semi-natural sites	Woodlands, water meadows, gravel pits, scrubland	+/- 100 ha	Immediate neighbourhood
Other public open space		52 ha	
Allotments		42 ha	Immediate neighbourhood
Cemeteries, churchyards, civic spaces	Varied	10 ha	Variable
Total		408 ha	
Green corridors	Riverside, other public rights of way	32 km	Wider urban area

In order to assess the effective access of residents to this open space, it is usual to shade on a map the areas of the town that fall within the catchment area of each site. If, for example, a catchment area with a radial distance of 400m (5 minutes' walk) is applied to public open space, then, as Figure 5.1 shows:

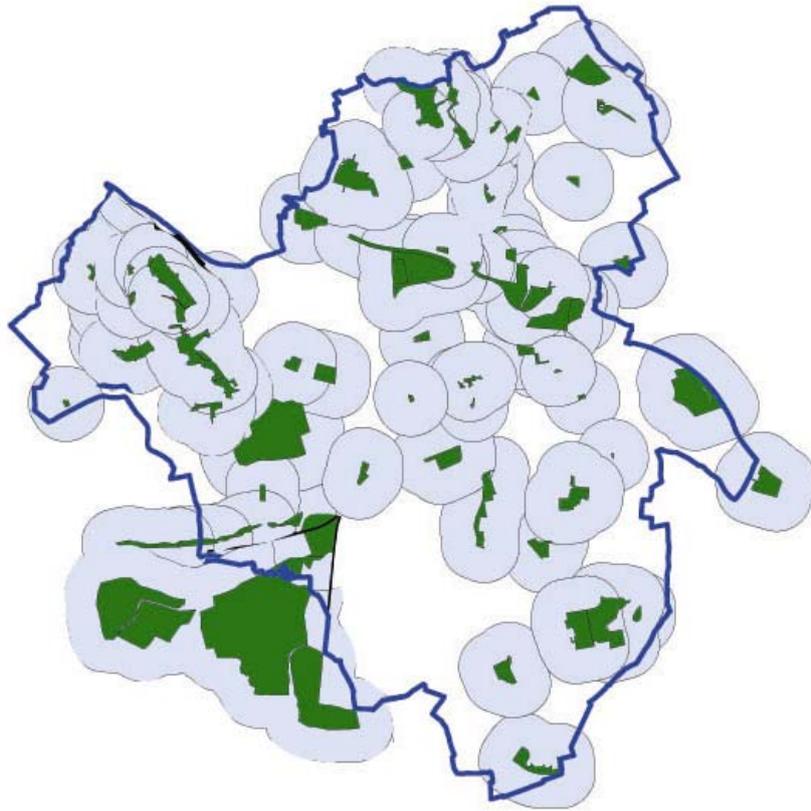


Figure 5.1: Recreational open space with 400m catchment areas

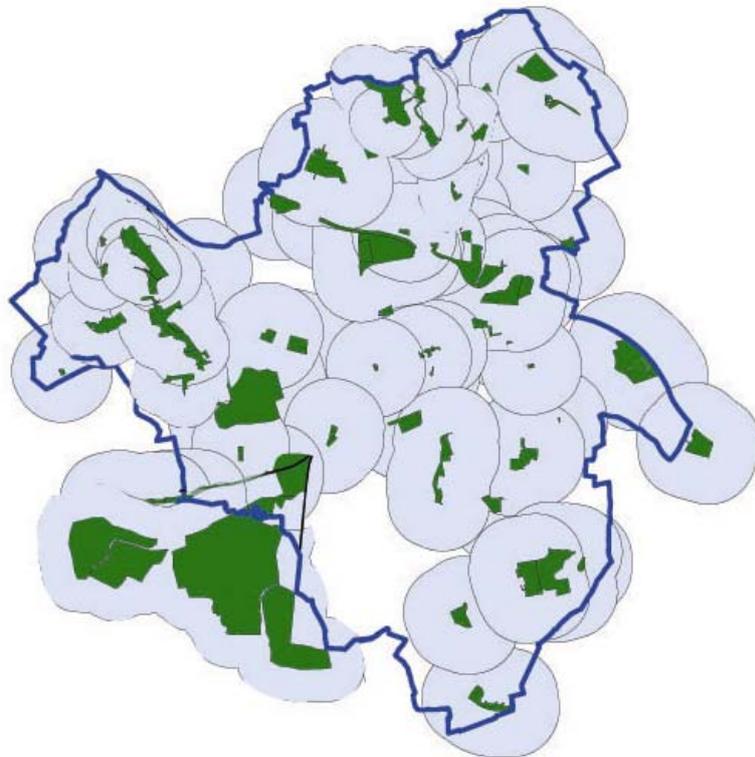


Figure 5.2: Recreational open space with 600m catchment areas

- Some areas are not served by any freely accessible recreational public open space
- Many households are further than 5 minutes' walk from a children's playground
- Unbridged severance lines - major roads, railways or rivers - reduce further residents' access to open spaces, especially for people of limited mobility or pushing buggies

The application of catchments of 600m - as recommended by CABE - shows that only a few areas are left underserved as a result of historical development patterns (Figure 5.2).

The Council has recently published assessments of access to and the quality of specific types of public open space:

Sports pitches

The Playing Pitch Strategy identified a surplus of football pitches, adequate provision of pitches for cricket and Gaelic football; and deficiencies in provision for hockey, rugby and lacrosse. Changes in patterns of use since the publication of the strategy means that demand now exceeds supply of football pitches on a Sunday (although there are more than sufficient pitches at other times). Pitch location is often not optimal, and, generally, grounds and ancillary accommodation are in poor condition.

Semi-natural sites

Reading Borough has about 100 ha of semi-natural space, found mainly in West Reading (woodland), Southcote (water meadows) and to the east (gravel pits), as well as strips along the rivers, especially the Thames. The Biodiversity Action Plan found that habitats in Reading are increasingly fragmented, so that species occur in very small populations in scattered locations. Infill housing puts further pressure on wildlife refuges offered by large private gardens.

Allotments

The Allotments Strategy found that take-up of sites is variable, with long waiting lists for some sites while on others take-up of plots is consistently low. The Strategy recommends the consolidation of existing allotment sites, an improvement in their quality, and the identification of a source of income for investment in improvements to the service.

Green links

The rights-of-way network is fragmented. With the exception of the Thames and Kennet towpaths, the strands of the existing network are not continuous or well connected. There is no north-south link and no green corridor from either West Reading or South Reading to the town centre.

5.2 New public open space

The Council strives to create new areas of public open space where practicable. It has brought about 30ha of previously private open space into the public realm in the past decade.

Table 5.2: Open space brought into the public domain 1995-2005

Site	Size (ha)
Addington Road	0.2
Amersham Road	1.25
Ayrton Senna Playground	0.03
Coley B woodland	0.48
Coley Holybrook Walk	0.61
Deans Farm	1.98
Fobney Island	13.69
Hirstwood and the potteries (Midwinter close etc)	0.03
Kings Meadow: Coal Woodland] 6.55
Kings Meadow Nabisco site]
Kings Road Gardens	0.15
Portman road play areas	1.04
Randolph Mews	0.02
Rufus Isaacs play area	0.02
Southcote linear park (part)	2.25
View Island	1.41
TOTAL	29.71

5.3 Summary and implications for the Open Spaces Strategy

The full range of recreational and other public open space is available in Reading Borough, and there have been additions to this over the past decade. There are variations in quality and access, which need to be addressed in the Open Spaces Strategy. In order to develop the Strategy, existing supply will be compared with national provision standards in the next section.

6. DOES READING BOROUGH HAVE ENOUGH PUBLIC OPEN SPACE?

6.1 Assessment of current provision

Table 6.1 compares provision in Reading Borough with national guidelines.

Table 6.1: Identification of discrepancies in total provision

	Guidelines (NPFA)	Reading Borough
Total POS	na	408 ha
Sports pitches	182 ha	80 ha public; private unknown
Other playing space	182 ha	176 ha
Other POS (allotments, housing amenity land, cemeteries, woodlands, etc)	na	152 ha
	Guidelines (CABE)	
Any space suitable for play, including private gardens	100-200m from every home	Many pieces excluded from the audit which examined publicly owned open land > 0.1ha
POS radial catchments: Smaller sites	400-600m or (for larger sites)	Some households without immediate access; see Fig. 4.1 Some households without immediate access Most households within 2000m of a woodland or waterway
Larger parks	600-800m from every home	
Semi-natural sites	1500-2000m from every home	
	Guidelines (GLA)	
POS radial catchments Smaller sites	Some POS within 400m of every home	Some households without immediate access; see Fig. 4.1 Almost all households within 3.5 km of a large park
Large parks	1.2-3.2 km from every home	

The total area of recreational public open space provided in Reading approximates that recommended by national guidelines, with the possible exception of formal sports pitches. However, in Reading, many formal sports pitches are provided by the university, schools or private clubs, which were excluded from the audit of public facilities.

While total provision is adequate, the main issues for Reading are:

- Access: the distribution of POS leaves some areas underprovided:
 - In central Reading, POS is, by and large, where residents are not
 - In north Reading, large areas are without access to children's play facilities
 - Areas immediately to the west, north-west, south and east of the town centre are amongst the most poorly supplied in the Borough; the problem is exacerbated by very dense housing
 - In the south, there is no higher-tier park offering a greater variety of facilities
 - Severance lines reduce further residents' access to open space
- Quality: some of the existing parks and open spaces are of poor quality

- Green links: these are fragmented, so that some POS is not linked off-road to homes, and wildlife corridors are incomplete

Many of these problems are common to urban areas in the UK.

Surveys show that what matters to residents are access (for some), cleanliness and quality of maintenance, and facilities like toilets, catering, play equipment and furniture. These are also consistent with consultation carried out in other towns in the UK. Many comments specifically discourage too many facilities, preferring 'natural' spaces and requesting that public open space does not become overly urbanised. Irrespective of whether or not people use parks, there is almost unanimity on the importance of open space generally and trees specifically to improving the appearance of the town and to making Reading a nicer place in which to live.

6.2 Summary and implications for the Open Spaces Strategy

The total area of recreational public open space (RPOS) provided in Reading approximates that recommended by national guidelines, with the possible exception of sports pitches. This suggests that the existing endowment needs to be protected. Concentrations of RPOS leave some areas underprovided.

The Open Spaces Strategy needs to address:

- (i) protection of the existing endowment of RPOS
- (ii) access to POS, especially for people living in areas currently underserved
- (iii) issues of quality
- (iv) variety in the provision of POS
- (v) green routes

7. THE STRATEGY

This draft Open Spaces Strategy sets out the aims and approaches that Reading Borough Council will adopt in its role as custodian of Reading's public open space (POS). The Council recognises that the issues of provision and the increasing pressure arising from continued urban development require a more integrated and robust approach to the management of open space.

7.1 The vision

The Strategy adopts the Reading 2020 Community Strategy vision for public open space:

Everyone will be able to enjoy high quality public open spaces that are clean, safe and well-maintained. Our rivers and canals will be the focus for an interconnected series of accessible and desirable public spaces, providing a range of natural and urban experiences. In addition there will be a choice of accessible, high quality public parks and open spaces that together will provide places for people to meet, play and relax. These open areas will incorporate a range of habitats that will help maintain and enhance the diversity of local wildlife, and provide for a better overall quality of life.

7.2 Objectives for open spaces

The Council's principal aims are to:

- Safeguard Reading's environmental endowment
- Ensure that there is no net loss of recreational POS
- Secure additional open space where opportunities arise

In order to achieve these aims, the following specific objectives for the provision, management and maintenance of public open spaces in Reading are identified:

- To improve access to POS in areas of deficiency by creating new open space or upgrading existing provision
- To deliver safe, pleasant and popular urban civic spaces
- To develop a network of attractive, safe green links across the town
- To preserve the views of wooded ridges and enhance the streetscape through planting

The Council recognises both under-provision of some types of public open space in Reading and the need for change. The Open Spaces Strategy sets out its policy for addressing the difficulties with access left by historical development patterns.

7.3 Constraints

- The dense urban fabric of parts of Reading is an inheritance. It is difficult to provide new POS in these areas in the absence of large-scale demolition and redevelopment.
- The cost of acquiring land outright for new POS by the Council is prohibitive.

7.4 Local provision standards: a Reading standard

Table 7.1 contains proposals for the 'hierarchy' of public open spaces for Reading, and the associated provision standards. These provision standards are based on a thorough appraisal of all available guidelines (drafted by the National Playing Fields Association, the Greater London Authority and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment). As the most up-to-date guidelines, the CABE recommendations have been adopted as the basis for the Reading standard. These have been augmented by the suggested hierarchy set out by the GLA, and the play facilities provision advised by the NPFA. A distance of 400/600/800m represents a 5/7/10-minute walk for the average adult.

All guidelines recommend that at least some open space for children to play, *whether publicly or privately owned*, be available within 100-200m of every home. This will primarily affect very high-density developments, like flats, as almost all other houses have some form of garden.

The open space hierarchy in the table should be used as a benchmark for considering open space provision in the Borough - in terms of both quality and quantity. Its objective is to assist in promoting some consistency in provision across the town, as well as helping to identify where households have limited access to public open space and where the quality of provision is inadequate.

Large, higher-tier parks are not substitutes for a good distribution of local parks. Clearly, an open space labelled 'district park' is also a neighbourhood park for households within a reasonable catchment. For residents living further away from a district park, access to local parks and other small recreational open spaces nearer by must also be available.

There should be some flexibility in considering the minimum functional size of public open space. For some purposes, the minimum size might accommodate a seat under a tree. The guiding principle should be a spontaneous and creative response to a situation rather than a check-list approach. The point of publishing minimum standards is to ensure that full account is taken of the amount of recreational space provided across the Borough, since it is almost impossible to replace the stock of open space once it has been eroded.

Table 7.1 Hierarchy and typology of open spaces of recreational value, and provision standards for Reading

	Description	Size	Transport mode	Radial catchment
Borough park	Varied character and facilities; open parkland, natural, formal, sport, play and relaxation; catering	60 ha	Car; public transport; cycle	
District parks	Varied character and facilities (but fewer than above); natural, formal, sport, play and relaxation	20 ha	Car; bus; cycle; foot	1.2 km
Local parks	Relaxation, play and ball games	2 ha or 1-2 ha equipped	Cycle; foot; wheelchair	0.8 km
Neighbourhood park	LEAP + informal space	0.1-0.2 ha equipped	Foot; wheelchair	0.4-0.8 km
Small recreational open spaces	'low-grade' recreation	0.1-0.2 ha	Foot; wheelchair	0.4-0.6 km
Linear open spaces	Relaxation; green link		Foot; cycle	
Semi-natural sites	Comparatively undisturbed sites, managed for wild flora and fauna		Cycle; foot; wheelchair	1.5-2.0 km

7.5 Provision of public open space: establishment of priorities

There is inevitably a balance to be struck between the provision of POS and securing improvements to other Council services. The spectrum of approaches to open space can be viewed as:

- (i) Protect: the existing site is viewed as so vital to the life of the town's residents that it should be protected from all development except proportionate leisure-enhancing facilities
- (ii) Replace: the total area currently set aside as POS is desirable, but, because its distribution is sub-optimal, advantageous developments on public land should be permitted, with the condition that the open space be replaced by new provision to benefit either the same geographic location or a neighbourhood deficient in POS
- (iii) Reconfigure: where amenity space is fragmented, as for example in housing estates, or where land swaps will achieve a better distribution of POS, advantage should be taken of opportunities to consolidate land and improve its quality for recreational purposes
- (iv) Build: if the advantage to be gained from new developments exceeds the value (broadly defined) of the POS, the new development should have priority

There are obviously different costs attached to these approaches. Preservation of all existing open space limits the Council's opportunities to deliver improvements to other public services. Replacement of open space used for development can have significant financial implications.

7.6 Provision of public open space: guiding principles

The objectives of this Strategy, specifically the commitment that there be no net loss of the endowment of RPOS, will strengthen the existing protection given to open space already in the Development Plan. The baseline endowment will be as at 1 January 2007.

The Council will continue, where possible, add to the stock of accessible POS.

The Council will explore the following potential means of adding to and improving open space provision and distribution:

- Creating new POS through the development process
- Providing areas for play in places of deficiency as land and resources allow
- Taking opportunities to reorganise space through land swaps or housing redevelopment
- Making community access to school grounds possible in areas of high deficiency where practicable
- Using surplus allotment land
- Upgrading facilities in larger parks to benefit the wider population
- The qualitative improvement of existing recreational POS

7.7 Provision of public open space: policies

7.7.1 New public open spaces

Where appropriate and feasible, deficiencies in open space and play facilities should be redressed through the development process. In new, large residential developments, the provision of a specified minimum size of and minimum facilities for new public open space should be required, clearly defined within Supplementary Planning Guidance.

In larger scale commercial/retail developments, the integration of additional public spaces such as civic squares should be required.

Regeneration initiatives and housing redevelopments create opportunities to reorganise space through land swaps, and there should be a requirement that the feasibility of this alternative be considered in areas deficient in public open space.

Where re-development of the urban fabric creates an opportunity, opportunities should be sought to create areas of public open space. Where the opportunity arises, consideration will be given to bringing new open spaces into the public domain, even where there is no identified deficiency, so as to have added flexibility as the population changes, and to improve the quality of the environment.

To supplement this policy, access to green space will be improved by creating pedestrian- and wheelchair-safe crossings of significant severance lines.

7.7.2 Compensatory open spaces

Although the protection of existing POS must be regarded as the key open spaces priority, where development on existing site is approved as being in the public interest, open space of similar size and quality may be identified and provided as compensatory open space. In areas of deficiency, the substitute ground must serve residents in the same locality. The redevelopment of housing estates provides opportunities for consolidating housing amenity land to provide viable recreational open space for the wider community.

In addition, Council-owned land of inferior recreational value may be identified, and swapped for planned development sites better suited to meeting both the criteria and identified demand for POS.

7.7.3 Conversion of Council-owned open space for recreational use

In the context of the Reading standard, where there are areas deemed deficient in formal recreational public open space but well supplied by other Council-owned open space (like woodlands or under-utilised allotments), there should be some changes to the management of existing sites to enable recreational use by a wider range of residents, without destroying significant habitat. The Allotments Strategy identifies some land adjacent to residential areas in allotments sites that are not fully subscribed for consolidation and conversion to POS. Any such change in use

makes possible re-conversion to allotments should demand for allotment sites increase.

7.7.4 Dual-use agreements

Where it is not possible to create new open spaces to satisfy local needs, the use of school playing fields for wider community benefit will be pursued. There are successful examples, like the play area at St John's School in Newtown, and public use of facilities at Highdown Secondary School. These, and other schools, have agreements that permit community recreational use of their grounds. A more proactive approach to schools may help to relieve some of the excess demand for public open space in poorly provided areas: schools are more willing to allow public use of grounds in return for capital injections, funded from planning gain. Possible sites are identified in the action plans.

The university campus is a significant open space in a part of Reading otherwise poorly served. There is a designated public right of way across the grounds, and this and other paths are used by local residents for dog- and recreational walking. Some university sports pitches are used by community sports leagues. It is desirable that public access to the campus is retained, and that formal access to the open space is negotiated with the University.

7.7.5 Qualitative improvements to existing public open space

Improvements to the quality and facilities of existing open space will be secured through Section 106 agreements as part of smaller developments. As a minimum, the provision of safe access for new households to existing enhanced public open space should be a requirement.

7.7.6 Upgrading of existing open spaces (creating more higher tier parks)

A hierarchy of recreational open space creates variety in the available facilities in each neighbourhood. Where there are no larger parks offering a wider range of amenities, consideration will be given to 'upgrading' existing open space, through investment, to the status of 'district' or 'borough' parks, serving both the immediate neighbourhood and the wider community. In order to fund this, S.106 contributions from larger developments, even those more remote from the immediate locality of the park, will be negotiated, on the grounds that larger parks in Reading serve the entire community.

The Thames parks have the potential to become a borough park of regional significance. The Thames Parks Plan aims to create a chain of quality green space, with high amenity and landscape value, a variety of experiences, and a wide range of facilities through Reading. The proposals contained in the strategy are adopted as part of the Open Spaces Strategy. The required investment is more than can be raised via planning gain, and other ways of raising funding will be sought.

The south of Reading has no district park. The John Rabson Recreation Ground and adjacent semi-natural site, The Cowsey, together occupy about 28 ha. Investment in the site would create a park of varied character and facilities, providing formal

and informal sport, play, and places for relaxation, as well as areas for wildlife. Following recommendations in the Playing Pitch Strategy, improvements to drainage of existing football pitches at Rabson's have been carried out. The site was identified as the most appropriate in the Borough for new junior rugby and lacrosse facilities. The topography of the site lends itself to re-landscaping that will create a site of beauty as well as providing varied facilities. In addition, a link between the site and the Sports Academy across the road would enhance the value of both as an amenity in South Reading.

Investment in play equipment, ball games areas, benches and attractive landscaping will upgrade existing recreation grounds to neighbourhood parks. Some sites already have play equipment or youth facilities, but require improved landscaping, paths and benches to encourage greater use.

Changes in the management regimes of some open spaces, particularly sites currently maintained as 'semi-natural', would increase the supply of neighbourhood parks where provision is inadequate. Converting parts of some of these sites to recreational open space by opening up views, increasing the sense of safety, installing benches and play equipment and surfacing paths will, in part, redress the recreational deficiencies. It is not inevitable that changes in management will compromise the biodiversity value of these sites: it is possible to intensify naturalism, both visually and functionally, by appropriate design and management.

7.7.7 Civic spaces

In larger scale commercial/retail developments, the integration of additional public spaces such as new civic squares should be required.

Some of Reading's existing civic spaces are in need of improvement in order to create urban sanctuaries in which people can relax, meet, give children a chance to play, or take a break from work or shopping.

Town centre spaces are an essential component of commercial regeneration and for attracting visitors to Reading. In the town centre, the creation of a coherent series of public-space experiences would supplement recent improvements in the town centre, establishing appealing 'gateways', improving first impressions of Reading for thousands of visitors, promoting the regeneration of these commercial zones, and generating income. The Kennet River, in particular, lends itself to the creation of linked riverside civic spaces - with trees, benches, lighting and other features.

Attention will also be given to civic spaces in local community centres, as places for people to meet in their local neighbourhood. These will be respectful of local identity. Floral displays and trees are as significant in creating viable civic spaces as is providing street furniture, and attention will be given to an urban planting programme.

7.7.8 Streetscape

Streets are important public open spaces. The development of a green city would be greatly enhanced by the planting of urban trees. Site perimeter tree planting should be a requirement of new development to increase the effective number of street trees and help create green links and corridors.

In densely developed areas deficient in public open space, amelioration should be provided by pedestrianisation of streets, enhancement of civic spaces and greater efforts with street planting (trees, verges and floral displays).

Wherever this is done, it is likely also to increase property prices over time, raising the aggregate value of town as well as its desirability as a place in which to live and work. Residential areas would be made more attractive by street tree planting. Major roads could be transformed into boulevards by the planting of avenues of the same species. Special attention should also be given to the approaches to major parks and important public buildings. Avenues of trees radiating out from the park extend the 'influence' of the park on its locality.

The enhancement and maintenance of urban horticulture is being addressed in a Tree Strategy, currently being prepared by Planning. This also needs to form part of a Green Links Strategy (see below). The main cost of a tree planting programme is in the after-care. It is recommended that a capital sum be set aside for an urban tree planting programme, and that associated annual maintenance costs be estimated and committed for the first ten years after planting.

7.7.9 Green links

Better access to public open space is needed in many parts of the Borough. Through the Local Development Framework and accessibility aspects of the Local Transport Plan, the Council will seek to remove or mitigate barriers to accessing public open space.

The creation of a network of safe green links for pedestrian/cycles that improves access to a choice of open spaces, is a key objective and an integral part of the OSS. Not only will these routes increase open space usage, reduce trips by cars, but they should be considered as part of the open space structure and experience that Reading offers.

The fragmentation of the rights-of-way and cycle network needs to be addressed. The Council will develop a Green Links Strategy - as part of the Transport Plan - that identifies the deficiencies of the network, that investigates obstacles to creating an integrated system and to linking the fragments, and that prioritises the development of complete routes. The Strategy will also examine the links that would most usefully double as wildlife corridors, as the management regime will need to balance security concerns with providing sufficient cover for fauna.

In new or 'refurbished' developments, public footpaths and cycle routes will be included, and these will be linked to existing routes.

Green links need to be established between the main visitor ports (the railway/bus station and public car parks), the town centre, and the major open spaces. The upgrading of civic spaces will address pedestrian routes from the main town centre parking garages and from the station to the town centre. The station redevelopment will also address the inadequate pedestrian route to the Thames parks by creating, as a fundamental aspect of the project, a well-integrated, legible, green link to the Thames.

7.7.10 Sports provision

The recommendations of the Playing Pitch Strategy are adopted by the OSS. The overarching proposal of the PPS is that the Council provide for identified demand. Where the supply of pitches currently meets or exceeds demand, the PPS advises that increased future need be provided for by mothballing pitches, by redefining playing pitches as open space, or by replacing lost pitches via S.106 agreements. Further loss of playing space should be resisted because of the difficulty of finding suitable sites for new pitches when demand increases.

7.7.11 Supporting children's play

In areas that are inadequately supplied with children's playgrounds, the value of existing public gardens and squares as spaces for informal children's play will be explicitly recognised. This will require the reclassification as LAPs (local areas of play) of places like Forbury Gardens, Eldon Square and Caversham Court.

In areas with too few equipped play areas, play apparatus will be erected in existing green spaces, and/or children's play areas will be incorporated in new developments. The alternative of installing on primary school grounds play equipment for after-hours community use will be explored.

Pressure for more and better quality provision for teenagers will be addressed by investment in, for example, shelters, ball courts and skate facilities at existing sites. A skate park serving the whole Borough, and forming a regional attraction, will be provided at a site accessible from the rail station.

7.7.12 Supporting wildlife

The Biodiversity Action Plan recommends that, as Reading develops, a structured mosaic of habitats be created through the planned incorporation of appropriately located corridors and buffer zones. It also advises that cemeteries, school sites and highway verges be enhanced as wildlife corridors, and that more sites be designated as Wildlife Heritage Sites or Local Nature Reserves in order to enhance the protection afforded them. The BAP also recommends that the Council draft Supplementary Planning Guidance to address the specific issues of biodiversity for land and property developers where required. The BAP proposals are adopted.

In addition, where there is habitat deficiency, opportunities to change the maintenance regimes of existing open spaces - or parts of existing open spaces - will be sought, to provide a range of cover for wild flora and fauna.

7.7.13 Allotments

The Allotments Strategy recommends the consolidation of existing allotment sites, and an improvement in their quality. Where take-up of plots is significantly and consistently low, it is proposed that part of the allotments area be converted to recreational public open space, to be converted back to allotments when demand increases. It is also proposed that a source of income be identified for investment in improving the service. These proposals are adopted by the OSS.

7.8 Management and maintenance

Reading Borough Council will produce the following policy documents to guide the management and maintenance of its parks and open spaces:

- A parks strategy
- A woodlands plan
- Management plans for major public open spaces

Regular monitoring and review will be written into each strategy and plan, to ensure that the Council's policies are implemented, that they are working, and that issues for further development are identified.

The following issues will be specifically addressed.

7.8.1 Landscape quality

The quality of existing POS and of the facilities provided requires improvement in many instances. The Council is currently auditing each of its parks, and this database will form the basis of quality checks and maintenance systems. The landscape quality of each of the major sites will be addressed in a series of management plans. The Council is also producing British Standards compliant performance specifications. These will be embodied in management plans, and subject to scheduled monitoring and review

Equipped play areas are systematically being improved, and have received substantial investment in recent years. Similar enhancement programmes also need to be implemented (and funded) for sports pitches and their ancillary facilities, and for allotments. A Parks Strategy will identify other aspects of the service requiring systematic improvement, propose how this will be addressed and investigate sources of funding.

The Biodiversity Action Plan recommends that the Council demonstrate best practice with respect to ecologically sustainable management on all of its sites. RBC will consider the environmental impact of all building, landscape and horticultural initiatives occurring on its land. Provisions of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2000 will be strictly applied, including, for example, in avoiding disturbance to nesting birds.

7.8.2 Safety

Safety is very important to users. There are both macro- and micro-design issues which influence both actual safety and the perceptions of it.

At the macro-level, neighbourhoods and public spaces, which allow freedom of pedestrian movement and are well-integrated with other areas, provide for greater natural surveillance. In line with this view, open spaces will be linked by pedestrian and cycle routes and to public transport, and measures will be taken to increase the numbers of people in public spaces.

At each site, open spaces will be managed so as to maintain open views and minimise sheltered areas for anti-social behaviour. The reintroduction of permanent staff in important parks and gardens, and patrols by street wardens, are having an important influence on occurrences of anti-social behaviour and crime as well as on user perceptions of it, and this practice will be extended as resources are made available.

7.9 Planning issues

There are two aspects regarding the involvement of Planning in the provision, improvement and protection of open space in the Borough.

7.9.1 Development Plan Policies

Policy LE11 of the adopted Reading Borough Local Plan states that the Council will not normally allow development proposals that will result in the loss of open space, except in exceptional circumstances, and providing that replacement open space is made available or the quality of existing open spaces serving the same area can be upgraded.

The Plan also lists specific areas of open space for protection, including historic parks and gardens, major areas of open space, etc. where the Council will not normally allow any development or change of use on or adjacent to these sites that will result in their loss or jeopardise enjoyment of them. Policy LE14 specifically identifies neighbourhood parks and seeks to secure improvements through the wider development process. The Local Development Framework will carry forward these principles into the emerging Core Strategy. The Open Spaces Strategy is an essential tool in supporting the policies in the LDF, and at the same time the LDF will provide the framework for securing improvements to open space provision.

7.9.2 S.106 contributions

The current Supplementary Planning Guidance on Planning Obligations seeks contributions from developments towards open space to mitigate the impacts arising from increasing population and households. This Strategy will now provide a more robust set of standards (Table 7.1) and requirements to support this guidance, which will need to be reviewed in due course. When negotiating new S.106 agreements, new standards based on the local provision standards will be sought as the minimum provision as part of new developments. Open space

provision will be required to be provided on-site for larger development; play areas will be required to be provided on site for small to medium, as well as larger developments; and contributions towards the provision of, or improvement to, local areas of open space will be required for smaller developments. Guidelines on design issues relating to what constitutes appropriate new provision are set below.

In large developments, planning gain relating to open space provision will be discussed by Parks and Planning prior to and, if necessary, during negotiations. The purpose of this is to ensure that contributions are appropriate to need, so that the quality of open space serving the neighbourhood of each new development is enhanced.

Future documents to be produced as part of the LDF include a site allocations document that will examine the potential and suitability of available sites for open space provision.

To assist Planners in making decisions about open space requirements and development opportunities, the corporate information database will be extended to identify all areas of green and other open space in the Borough. This requires capability in computerised Geographic Information Systems in both Planning and Parks Departments, so that open spaces maps can be updated and consulted.

The budget implications of maintaining new capital spending will be estimated and a source of finance for maintenance identified *before* a new investment is approved. In negotiations over planning gain, a commuted sum for maintenance will form part of discussions over new public space or new equipment.

7.9.3 Developer guidelines for new open space: general principles

In general, open spaces planning gain will require the following main elements:

- In areas deficient in recreational open space, the provision of appropriate (defined below) new public open space, together with a sustainable strategy to ensure its maintenance to a high standard in perpetuity
- In areas with an adequate quantity of public open space, a financial contribution to improving access to and the quality of existing open space to cater for additional use
- In town centre developments, a requirement that street boundaries be planted with urban-scale trees, as well as a contribution to off-site open space improvements to cater for both access and additional use

New public open space must be:

- A minimum of 0.2 ha where the provision of a new neighbourhood park is required; in the case of very large developments, the provision of a new local park (minimum area of 1.0-2.0 ha) should be required
- Integrated, not overly fragmented, open space (in terms of both area and topography)
- Linked to adjacent local communities (not buried within the new development)

- Accessible to the general public and to people of all capabilities
- Not severed by roads
- At least in part, informal landscaping for both aesthetic and recreational purposes
- Appropriate, in that it satisfies the most urgent local need, whether formal children's play provision; youth facilities; sports grounds; green links; or informal landscaping

The rationale for these requirements is as follows:

- An integrated space is important for creating a sense of place and local 'ownership'.
- Tall buildings or vehicular access within the space tend effectively to separate the spaces and reduce the recreational value of the park.
- In smaller fragmented spaces, buildings may dominate the space.
- In smaller spaces, activity in the space may adversely affect adjacent properties.
- Open space scattered amongst buildings will appear less accessible to the general public (who will think it is a private open space 'belonging' to the development and not to the community).
- Open space scattered between buildings is more difficult to manage, less attractive and more subject to being shaded.
- Small scattered spaces do not adequately accommodate sizeable parks-scale trees without impacting upon neighbouring properties. Large trees contribute to pollution abatement and rain water absorption, as well as to sense of place.
- A long linear space or wide corridor is likely to create the same difficulties as fragmentation.
- Vehicular access cutting across open spaces used by children is hazardous as well as aesthetically weak. Pedestrian routes may be integrated into public open space.
- Densely populated residential areas, inadequately provided for in terms of appropriately landscaped public open space, are less desirable places in which to live.
- The appropriate provision standards, size, proximity, and level and mix of use, are set out in Table 7.1.
- A variety of landscape types within the area will increase community value, whether informal play, formal plantings, formal play, etc. These best benefit from being within an integrated area.
- Isolated pockets of open space accessed solely by very steep slopes are unlikely to serve a recreational need and should not be included with the calculation of recreational open space provided.

8. MONITORING

In order to monitor implementation of the Open Spaces Strategy, an annual report will be brought to the Culture and Sport Scrutiny Panel, setting out the net change in the area of recreational public open space in Reading. The same report will table statistics of open space, significant developer contributions to open space gains or improvements, and a summary of the annual GreenSTAT user survey to which the Council subscribes in order to assess public opinion on Reading's open spaces.