



**Kirklees**  
METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

**O  
V  
E  
R  
V  
I  
E  
W  
&  
S  
C  
R  
U  
T  
I  
N  
Y**

Report of the

# **Culture and Leisure Services Panel**

Review into

# **Park & Recreation Grounds- Upkeep and Maintenance**

**July 2000**

**Kirklees Metropolitan Council**

# KIRKLEES METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

## CULTURAL & LEISURE SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

### PARKS & RECREATION GROUNDS – UPKEEP AND MAINTENANCE

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Panel decided to undertake a planned scrutiny with the following terms of reference:

1. To examine the current condition of KMC parks and recreation grounds, and public perceptions of their condition.
2. To identify the range of provision and the resources available for its upkeep and maintenance.
3. To consider how Leisure Services have prioritised and managed the resources which are available.
4. To identify steps which could be taken to enhance upkeep and maintenance.
5. To make recommendations.

1.2 This report:

- Summarises the evidence gathered by the Panel (item 1 above).
- Provides factual background on the resourcing of parks and recreation grounds in Kirklees (item 2).
- Discusses the performance of the Service and possible improvements (items 3-5).

1.3 It should be emphasised at the outset that the scrutiny was concerned with parks and open space provision for the general public. Leisure & Recreation Services also maintains grounds for other Council Services, such as Housing, Highways and schools, which we did not review.

#### 2. THE STATE OF THE PARKS

2.1 The Panel gathered evidence in several ways:

- A small sample of sites, proposed by the Service to offer a representative view, were visited on 28 January 2000.<sup>1</sup> These visits were announced in the press and a small number of members of the public attended at some sites to meet the Panel – numbers were perhaps affected by the torrential rain that day.
- The press notice also invited written comments, and six were received (see *para. 2.7*).
- The Corporate Development Unit was commissioned to seek views from a representative sample of the public through the Talkback panel (see *paras. 2.3-2.6*).
- The Service was asked to seek views from a range of voluntary organisations (such as Friends of Parks Groups) which they had already consulted in 1999 whilst developing the Parks & Open Spaces Development Strategy (see *paras. 2.8-2.9*).
- The Panel met with UNISON representatives from the Service ( see *para. 2.11*).

2.2 The aim of this approach was to determine as far as possible the public perception of the parks – particularly the people who were interested in and concerned about the parks.

2.3 One of the most systematic sources of evidence is that available from Talkback. The questionnaire and detailed results from an initial survey in February 2000 are attached at Appendix 1. The questionnaire was sent out to all panel members (a total of 1086 questionnaires) and, following a postal reminder, a total of 789 were returned, giving a satisfactory response rate of 73%. The key findings were summarised as follows for the Panel:

- The majority (69%) of respondents think that grass in parks and landscaped areas is kept at a reasonable level.
- The majority of respondents think that the quality of tree maintenance in local parks and landscaped areas is average (36%) or good (28%).
- On flower, rose and shrub beds in parks and landscaped areas less than half (48%) of respondents thought they were kept free of weeds. The majority thought they were well stocked with plants (56%) and generally well maintained (67%). However, a large number of *respondents* disagreed with the statement that the beds were kept litter free (44%).

---

<sup>1</sup> These were: Greenhead Park, Huddersfield; Reinwood Recreation Ground, Oakes, Huddersfield; Ravensknowle Park, Moldgreen, Huddersfield; Standiforth Recreation Ground, Dalton, Huddersfield; Crow Nest Park, Dewsbury; Holroyd Park, Ravensthorpe; and Leesholme Park, Thornhill Lees.

- Over half (56%) of respondents think that hedges in parks and landscaped areas are trimmed to a satisfactory level.
- Less than half (47%) of the respondents think that public paths and rights of way in parks and landscaped areas are well kept with 22% expressing the view that paths are badly kept.
- The majority of respondents (71%) had visited a park in Kirklees in the last year. The most popular reason for visiting a park was to walk (37%).
- The majority of respondents' overall opinion of parks in their areas is satisfactory (37%) or good (30%).

In the light of these results, the Panel commissioned two follow-up surveys, to explore more fully the views of those who had said they did not visit parks; and those who did visit but found them in poor condition.

- 2.4 Questionnaires were sent to 163 non-users, of whom 101 replied (62%). The key finding was that dog dirt, personal safety and lack of time are the most common reasons that people do not visit parks, as Table 1 illustrates:

**Table 1. Are any of the following reasons why you do not visit parks?**

	No.	% of respondents
<b>Dog dirt is a problem</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>I don't feel safe when walking in parks</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>I do not have the time</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>It is difficult to park a car at the local park</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Parks have too much litter</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Seating and other facilities are in poor condition</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>It is difficult to travel to parks if you don't have a car</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>There is nothing to do in the park</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Grass is not cut enough or hedges and flower beds are not maintained</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The park is not open when I want to use it</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

Base: All who do not use parks. Multiple choice allowed

- 2.5 Questionnaires were also sent to 81 respondents who thought parks were poor, of whom 47 (58%) responded. A similar picture emerges from this group (although the sample is of course smaller and less statistically reliable), as Table 2 shows:

**Table 2. Are any of the following reasons why you think parks are poor?**

	No.	% of respondents
<b>Dog dirt</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Litter in the park as a whole</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Condition of seating</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Availability of seating</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>The range of facilities in the park</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>The condition of facilities within the park</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>The grass not being cut enough or hedges and flower beds not maintained</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Not feeling safe when walking in the park</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Getting to the park from your home if you don't have a car</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Getting to the park if you have a car, including being able to park the car</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The park being open when you want to use it</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

Base: All who think parks are poor. Multiple choice allowed

2.6 The general message from all of the above is that public concern with the state of the parks is focused on amenity issues – such as litter, dog-fouling, seating - and on safety, and to a lesser extent on horticultural basics such as grass-cutting and flower beds.

2.7 The individual representations from the public covered a range of specific issues. Letters received by the Panel raised the following issues of concern:

- Concern regarding the deterioration of the children's playground at Reinwood Recreation Ground, Oakes, Huddersfield and dog fouling on the adjacent recreation area and football pitch - 2 letters.
- Need for improved general maintenance at Greenhead Park.
- Need to preserve a green space at Norman Park, Birkby, Huddersfield and to repair the wooden boundary railings at the Park.
- Need for facilities to be provided in parks for children who are disabled or with special needs.
- A suggestion had been made to provide a skateboard/roller blade area for young people at Reinwood Recreation Ground Oakes, Huddersfield.

- An idea had been put forward to introduce rock-climbing facilities at two cliff faces at the northern end of Beaumont Park, Crosland Moor, Huddersfield.

And members of the public attending the site visits commented that:

- More could be made of the pavilions at Greenhead and Holroyd Parks.. A better quality café could also attract visitors back to Greenhead Park.
- A park-keeper, keeping Greenhead Park tidy, and encouraging responsible behaviour would help. He/she would need, of course, to have back-up from the Police, etc.
- The fountain at Greenhead Park, which is not working, is an eyesore.
- More floral displays would encourage more visitors to the Park.
- There were ongoing problems regarding the condition of the boundary wall at Ravensknowle Park.
- Concerns were raised regarding the increasing amount of litter in Ravensknowle Park and the presence of refuse skips at one of the entrances.

2.8 Whilst the above represents the views of the general public, there is also a significant constituency of organised stakeholders in the parks – Friends groups, sporting clubs and others. After the adoption of the Parks and Open Spaces Development Strategy by the Culture and Leisure Service Management Board in December 1999, copies of the final document were sent to all those who would have been involved in the consultation on the strategy, enclosing an expanded version of the questionnaire used by the Talkback panel. A total of 45 replies (54%) were received from 83 organisations contacted.

2.9 Interestingly, the message from these more active stakeholders was strikingly similar to the views of the general public. 74% found the parks satisfactory or better, compared with 69% in the general sample. But when a range of facilities in parks were specifically probed, 10% of 'votes' were for 'Good' or 'Very Good', 53% for 'Fair', and 36% for 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'. Play equipment, accessibility, sports pitches and events provision all scored marginally positively. But serious weaknesses were identified in the provision and cleanliness of the toilets; and in on-site supervision and security, personal safety and lighting. All these are of great significance in that they scored high on the very poor and poor criteria but also on the number of opinions (votes) cast on these issues (all in excess of 20 votes). Also of note are the low scores for the provision of seating, litter bins and the condition of the paths.

2.10 The Talkback and stakeholder surveys produced a wealth of information on public perceptions, not all of which fell within the terms of reference of

this particular scrutiny. This will be of value to the relevant Management Board in planning future service provision.

- 2.11 The Panel also took evidence from UNISON representatives. They expressed concern and disappointment that the present service was not what the public had a right to expect, identifying length of grass and loose cuttings as particular concerns. However, they also believed that budget reductions and productivity increases had reached their limits. These issues are explored in the next section.

### 3. EXISTING PROVISION AND RESOURCES

- 3.1 The Panel received extensive factual information from the Service on existing provision and budgets, from which some key points are summarised here.
- 3.2 The Council maintains 38 parks and 227 recreation grounds – a total of 265 sites.
- 3.3 The net revenue budget for 'Parks, Play and Open Spaces' for 2000/01 is £3326k, or about 1% of the Council's net revenue budget as a whole. Two-thirds of this is accounted for by employee costs, representing 184.7 full-time equivalent employees. The net budget is calculated after deducting income from such sources as the golf course and, much more significantly, from other clients employing the grounds maintenance service, notably schools. However, it still includes some £400k of expenditure on Housing sites. Thus the budget for fully 'public' parks and recreation grounds, in both 1999/2000 and 2000/01, is approximately £2900k.
- 3.4 Before 1999/2000, the budget for parks and open spaces had declined consistently for a number of years. The decline has been of the order of 25% over the medium term (the last five years), as the Council's overall budget has both reduced and been increasingly focused on statutory responsibilities in such areas as Education and Social Services. Over the longer term, there are now 120 gardeners employed by Kirklees compared with 300 within the Huddersfield County Borough alone before local government reorganisation in 1974. Such reductions in budgets and staffing reflect a national trend<sup>2</sup>. The Panel also heard evidence from Kevin Barker of Leeds City Council's Parks & Countryside Department, who painted a similar picture of diminishing resources.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Town & Country Parks*, 20<sup>th</sup> Report of the House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, HMSO, 1999.

- 3.5 Both management and the trade unions emphasised the impact which this trend has had on the nature of the service provided. Budget cuts have dictated a move from multi-purpose grounds staff deployed full-time in individual parks to an emphasis on highly mobile gangs, moving from park to park and focusing very much on grass-cutting. The cuts have been achieved by managing the service to a tight specification – also required by the CCT legislation – which, for example, requires the grass to be cut at defined intervals but does not allow for the cuttings to be cleared away afterwards. A member of the public at Greenhead Park argued that more job satisfaction and better results could be achieved from a permanent team of gardeners/maintenance workers, planning and carrying out schemes to a high standard solely within Greenhead Park, but present resources do not permit this.
- 3.6 Similar factors have affected other authorities and Kirklees still spends at about the average of Metropolitan Councils, according to Audit Commission data. KMC's net spending per hectare on parks and open spaces in 1998/99 was £3588, compared with the median for Met. Districts of £3641. Within West Yorkshire, Wakefield and Calderdale reported higher spending per hectare, while Leeds and Bradford reported spending less.
- 3.7 The Panel was given a more detailed breakdown of how the 1999/2000 budget was allocated. The overall net spend of some £2900k can be broadly broken down as follows:

**Table 3. Broad breakdown of budget, 1999/2000**

<b>Expenditure heading</b>	<b>£k</b>	<b>%</b>
Scheduled horticultural work (1)	1034	36
Ad hoc horticultural work (2)	570	19
Maintenance – buildings, pavilions and conservatories	401	12
Play areas – development and maintenance	280	10
Development	164	6
Nursery	120	4
Other front-line activities	149	5
Depot costs and managerial overheads	226	8
Sheltered/disabled employment	103	3
Income	(80)	(3)
<b>Total</b>	<b>2910</b>	<b>100</b>



#### Notes

- (1) Scheduled horticultural work includes: grass cutting (£267k), sweeping and litter (£163k), playing field maintenance (£146k), shrub beds (£143k), fine sports turf (£112k), flower beds (£71k) and a range of other smaller categories of work.
- (2) Ad hoc horticultural work includes work falling outside normal routine, including for example walls, paths, fences, planting, soiling, seeding, drainage, site clearance etc.

## 4. ISSUES AND OPTIONS

- 4.1 As reported *above*, the Council's budget for Parks & Open Spaces has been substantially reduced over a period of years. Judging from the various survey results, this seems to have resulted in some public disquiet, but general public expectations *appear to* have adjusted to the reduced levels of provision. However the Panel is well aware that there have been major expressions of dissatisfaction from time to time in particular localities.
- 4.2 In these circumstances, the Panel welcomes the fact that the budget was almost stabilised in the 2000/01 budget round, and believes that any further reductions would be damaging to the Service and to public perceptions of standards. **We also believe that even modest additional resources made available in the next budget round could be used to good effect to enhance general standards and to address particular local problems.** The recent investment of £130,000 in the Presence in Parks initiative, for example, has proved very successful.
- 4.3 Given the current budgetary climate, *however, we also* have to ask whether resources can be redeployed to better effect within the existing budget. It appears from the earlier evidence that the public is perhaps more concerned about amenity than horticultural issues, and this suggests that there may be *some* scope to reprioritise the budget from horticulture towards amenity issues such as pavilions and other park buildings seating and litter bins. There is of course a counter-argument that if the public are relatively satisfied with horticultural standards, it is best to leave well alone. Certainly the Service believes that horticultural spending is now at a critical minimum, and that any further downgrading of horticultural standards would therefore be very visible. So any reallocation would have to be cautious and controlled, with public reaction carefully tested. **However, we recommend that the Service continues to bring forward alternative service options in the next budget round.**
- 4.4 We have also considered whether there is scope for any greater productive efficiency in grounds maintenance. We have received no evidence from any quarter to suggest that easy gains are available – successive CCT tenders have been won by the in-house Service, and

both management and trade unions stress that productivity has already had to rise substantially to achieve the current 'mechanised' style of operation. However, we have explored two possible lines of thought in this area.

- 4.5 First, given that there is naturally more work to do in the summer growing season, is there scope for a more seasonal pattern of labour usage? This is already achieved to some extent by 'topping up' the substantive labour force with seasonal workers. A more radical step would be to adopt 'annualised hours' contracts for the substantive employees, enabling longer hours to be worked in summer and shorter hours in winter. Because of the physically demanding nature of much of the work (and of course the Working Time Directive), there is a definite limit to the length of the feasible summer working week. A working week of 41-43 hours was piloted in summer 1999, but its continuation has not at present been agreed with the trade unions, who wish to link it with other issues in a package which is not acceptable to management. **We recommend that both sides continue to work towards an agreed approach in this area.**
- 4.6 Second, we considered whether there is scope to supplement the workforce from other sources. There has already been some discussion within the Service about the scope for employing 'New Deal' trainees, through the Environmental Task Force, on parks projects. Such projects would have to be quite distinct from, and not substituting for, the regular work of the substantive workforce, or severe employee relations problems would arise. However, **we recommend that the potential for deploying New Deal labour to clearly identified additional projects is carefully explored.**
- 4.7 We also considered the possible involvement of voluntary labour. For example, Friends of the Parks groups or horticultural societies might be encouraged to take responsibility for certain areas of the parks. The view of the Service and of UNISON is that this can work where there is no interference between the voluntary and professional activity – for example, litter-picking drives – but that operational difficulties can arise where there is blurred responsibility, e.g. where voluntary bulb-planting reduces the efficiency of grass-cutting operations. **We recommend that the Service develops the role of Friends of the Parks groups and invites their involvement in maintaining the amenity value of parks.**

- 4.8 The Service itself pointed out that in some cases the historic design of parks results in unnecessarily high running costs. For example, there is public concern about the state of paths in parks, but perhaps there are just too many paths. Thus there may be opportunities to reduce running costs by redesigning some park layouts. Such initiatives would of course involve additional capital expenditure in order to achieve longer-run savings, and the Council's capital budget is very constrained. However, the Service is undertaking a series of feasibility studies on improvements in major parks in order to prepare bids for external capital funding, for example from the National Heritage Lotteries Fund. **We recommend that the Service, in developing proposals for park improvements, specifically tests the potential for revenue savings from capital investment.**

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.1 The Council spends about 1% of its net revenue budget on public parks and open spaces. The budget has shown a long-run tendency to decline in both absolute and relative terms, and the service provided today is very different from that provided 25 years ago. Both management and trade unions feel they are unable to provide the horticultural standards which they believe the public expects.
- 5.2 The evidence we have gathered suggests, however, that the public at large is fairly satisfied with the state of the parks. Where there are concerns, moreover, these are focused on issues of amenity and safety more than on horticultural standards.
- 5.3 Against this background we recommend that:
- 5.3.1 The Council in the next budget round should consider the possibility of allocating additional resources to improve general standards in parks and to address particular local problems.**
- 5.3.2 The Service should bring forward alternative options in the next budget round for the balance of spending within the total budget.**

**5.3.3 Both management and trade unions should continue to work towards an agreed approach to the seasonalised use of labour.**

**5.3.4 The potential for deploying New Deal labour to clearly identified additional projects should be carefully explored.**

**5.3.5 The Service should develop the role of Friends of the Parks groups and invite their involvement in maintaining the amenity value of parks.**

**5.3.6 The Service, in developing proposals for park improvements, should specifically test the potential for revenue savings from capital investment in park redesign.**

**5.3.7 The Service's Management Board should consider the full range of information obtained from the customer surveys commissioned by this Panel.**

5.4 In conclusion, we record our gratitude for the contributions we have received in undertaking this inquiry from officers of the Leisure & Recreation Service, particularly Richard Brooker and John Fletcher; from Ruth Southon, Corporate Development Unit; and from UNISON, Leeds City Council and members of the public.

Cllr SYLVIA SMITHSON (Chair)

Cllr MAGGIE BLANSHARD

Cllr SUSAN MAY

Cllr DAVID ROBINSON.

20 June 2000.

Officer support

David Gordon, Committee Administrator (01484 221714).

David Griffiths, Head of EDP Resources (01484 225022).