

Draft Parks Development Strategy

Consultation and Engagement, July 2024

Frequently Asked Questions

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What is the Parks Development Strategy

Our Parks Development Strategy sets out how West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) in partnership with local communities and other interested parties* can protect, maintain and enhance our major parks ensuring they continue to enrich lives by meeting current and future community needs.

Our major parks and green spaces represent important assets within their communities. Not only do they represent places where people can visit to exercise and support their personal health and wellbeing, but they also play a major part in supporting local nature recovery and biodiversity.

In developing this strategy WNC is focusing on ensuring our major parks and green spaces remain important assets, offering something for everyone, within the heart of their respective communities. It provides a framework in which WNC, working with various stakeholders, can maintain and further develop them as “destinations”, by improving and innovating their specific “offer” through building on what makes them individually unique and special places.

* Other interested parties will include park-specific Management Committees/Friends of Groups, local businesses and community groups who use/are based in our parks and green spaces, parish/town councils. This does not represent an exhaustive or complete list of

everyone who may have an interest in our major parks and green spaces and therefore be involved in contributing to shaping and delivering this strategy.

Why has the Council developed this Strategy?

WNC has developed this strategy so that it is able to protect, maintain and enhance our major parks and green spaces ensuring they continue to enrich lives by meeting current and future community needs, in a thought out and sustainable way.

This strategy provides a framework as to how WNC intends to manage those major parks and green spaces which fall within its remit. It will help WNC, in partnership with others, to focus its limited resources on those proposals that will create the most social value for West Northamptonshire, whether that be park user experience, wider community health and wellbeing, nature recovery, biodiversity or, wider environmental/climate-related outcomes. WNC will also use this strategy to leverage additional, external funding, potentially via entering new public/private partnerships which would enable some of our bolder proposals, which represent potentially once in a generation opportunities to investment in the depth and breadth of park-specific features and facilities, to proceed.

Central to delivering the aspirations identified within this strategy, is WNC's commitment to ensure our major parks and green spaces retain the locality/site-specific context, environment and heritage, individual charm and character which make them so appealing, whilst identifying opportunities to sympathetically improve and innovate.

The Strategy talks at length about West Northamptonshire major parks and green spaces, but what about its more local assets?

Whilst the strategy focuses on the major parks and green spaces within West Northamptonshire, we are conscious that WNC owns and manages a number of local parks and informal green spaces. These smaller, increasingly localised assets do not possess the same scope to be "developed" in the same way our major parks do, however they still remain a significant element of West Northamptonshire's "green infrastructure". WNC will manage these spaces in accordance with this strategy's core principals and themes. In doing so, we will seek opportunities to increasingly engage and work with our local communities and our partners.

How many parks and green spaces does the Council own and manage?

WNC currently owns and manages 154 parks and green spaces. These include country parks, meadows, recreational parks, play areas, linear parks, memorial gardens, and a war memorial. Covering approximately 1,098 hectares, this estate varies from major parks covering over 40 hectares to small open spaces covering less than 0.05 hectares. Over 140 locations are less than 10 hectares in size, with 75 of these covering less than one hectare.

What is the Council seeking to achieve?

WNC has rightly acknowledged the many and varied benefits its major parks and green spaces bring to people who live in, work in and visit West Northamptonshire. Not only do they represent "destinations" where people choose to spend their spare time relaxing and participating in activities, generally self-directed, but they also represent a key, strategic part of West Northamptonshire's "green infrastructure". As such they act as "reserves" for local nature and its associated biodiversity and continue to play an increasingly important role in retaining, enhancing and developing existing and new habitats.

Within this strategy WNC sets out its intention to develop and market its major parks as a "network of destinations", which cater for the local community they serve, but also attract residents and visitors from further afield.

Whilst the strategy identifies a wide range of innovative and improvement proposals, they will not all be implemented at all sites. The larger, increasingly innovative proposals would be hosted in a park/green space, where the identified site's character, environment and heritage alongside its topography and supporting infrastructure are environmentally and economically conducive. For these proposals to progress WNC will be looking to enter public/private partnerships with specialist operators that will enable the associated benefits to be maximised whilst mitigating any associated risks.

However, this strategy represents more than a series of eye-catching, high profile proposals. It also identifies how WNC propose to enhance the "offer" being provided across all its major parks and green spaces. The strategy also provides a clear focus as to how WNC can enrich the wider visitor experience by assessing the facilities currently being provided and identifying what opportunities exist to improve them. These enhancements include facilities such as: providing parking, toilets, and café. Also, where appropriate WNC will consider the potential to host larger scales events within its major parks.

What will this mean for our parks and green spaces?

The intention of the Parks Development Strategy is to provide residents and visitors to West Northamptonshire with a portfolio of major parks and green spaces which continually push the boundaries as to what they can be and the value they can bring to local people and local communities. It means that WNC will, working in close partnership with others, identify opportunities to enhance the depth and breadth of the facilities available to residents. Some of these proposals are likely to be perceived as being innovative, offering something new, fresh and unique, whilst others are intended to improve the general ambience.

Where decisions are taken to progress this strategy's more innovative proposals the intention is to broaden the target market from West Northamptonshire and its surrounding localities and create parks and green spaces which are increasingly recognised as being regional and national destinations; places visitors are prepared to travel to visit to participate in and enjoy the facilities provided. Should some/all the proposals included in the strategy be implemented, it is anticipated visitor numbers would increase, which would generate additional income for the Council. Should this be the case it would mean WNC could:

- Minimise/eliminate the need for WNC funding to support the parks service;
- Support the delivery of additional innovations/improvements to West Northamptonshire's parks and green spaces, which could further increase footfall and generate additional income;
- Support the delivery of other statutory services that WNC delivers, alleviating any emerging budget pressures and subsequent requirement to reduce services provided by WNC on behalf of West Northamptonshire

Not only should such development(s) positively impact visitor numbers at the specific park, but it should also generate growth across the wider West Northamptonshire economy.

Where a park or green space does not host one of the potential major proposals, there is still the potential for it to benefit from the framework included in this strategy. This could result in the sites current facilities being enhanced either through providing "something" new, for example providing toilet facilities where they previously didn't exist or enhancing existing facilities e.g. enhanced car parking or improvements to on-site catering facilities. Again, the intention of such improvements would be to increase footfall, and wherever possible increase the revenue being generated, however in such case the impact on parks and green spaces is the positive physical and mental health and wellbeing gains flowing from the increased usage.

What is the rationale behind the new proposals/developments identified within this strategy?

The overarching rationale behind the various proposals contained within WNC's Parks Development strategy are to enhance the facilities / attractions provided with the intention of increasing visitor / user footfall. However, whilst these proposals are intended to be aspirational, innovative and drive improvements across our parks and green spaces, they will also be sensitive to locality/site-specific context, environment and heritage.

As the Parks Service is in the main, self-financing, i.e. the income that is generated from WNC's major parks and green spaces is used to cover the costs of delivering the service to West Northamptonshire's communities, it is imperative the park/green space-specific offer continues to meet the needs of its current users, but can also represent welcoming spaces for those people and communities who, for whatever reason, currently do not use them.

The proposals contained within this strategy are twofold. There are the ambitious, radical and innovative proposals which are not only seeking to make the selected parks increasingly popular destinations within West Northamptonshire and its surrounding localities, but also to people and communities further afield. In seeking to become "destinations", these proposals are also intended to entice people to come to West Northamptonshire who would have travelled elsewhere. Not only is the intention for these parks to become recognised as regional and national destinations that people from other parts of the country want to visit, but to also remind local communities about the beautiful environment and heritage that West Northamptonshire has to offer and to retain their patronage, rather than see them visit other places.

This strategy does not just focus on identifying innovative service offers that could be sympathetically incorporated into West Northamptonshire's current portfolio of parks and green spaces. It also recognises the existence of parks/green space "deserts" across our locality and identifies opportunities to create new ones, which will provide these communities with easier access to the natural world.

However, this strategy is not just about those potential headline grabbing bold, innovative and transformative proposals. It also includes a suite of what could be perceived as more mundane and low-key proposals. It is important that the importance of these proposals is not lost. Each and every proposal has been considered and is intended to improve WNC's parks and green spaces offer to both its communities but also to those people who have travelled to West Northamptonshire to access them. Whether the proposal is to enhance the safety of all the people who make use of our parks and green spaces by improving lighting and "sight lines", installing new/enhanced CCTV or deploying Public Spaces Protection Orders, or improving the "day out" experience by improving car parking, providing/improving toilet and baby changing facilities or providing/improving the onsite "offer" whether that be providing/improving cafés or offering services such as cycle or boat hire, we have had the park and green space user at the forefront of our thinking. The proposals in this strategy are clear. If WNC wants people to use its parks and green spaces it has to provide a considered, progressive offer that people choose to use. To do otherwise is likely to result in those people that have the means to travel further afield doing so and accessing the offers being provided by other local authorities or private sector organisations.

Where is the Council planning to implement / install these new proposals / developments?

The Parks Development strategy comprises three types of proposal development. They can be broadly described as being: new features / activities; new parks or; new amenities. Where WNC

is considering the introduction of a new feature / activity, no specific host park has necessarily been decided. These larger, increasingly innovative proposals would be hosted in a park/green space, where the identified site's character, environment and heritage alongside its topography and supporting infrastructure are environmentally and economically conducive, for example the existing railway track Hunsbury Hill Park could be utilised to support a velorail scheme. Any plans to develop / introduce a new major feature / activity within one of WNC's parks and green spaces will be underpinned by a detailed feasibility study, which will ensure its suitability prior to any works progressing. Where a feasibility study makes the case for developing / introducing a new major feature / activity within a specific WNC park and green space, WNC will consult and engage local people, communities and other stakeholders to seek their thoughts and opinions.

A similar approach will be adopted to support the development of new parks and green spaces. WNC's analysis has identified where gaps in provision currently exist. This information enables WNC to consider those localities where it would be beneficial to locate a new park and green space and to assess the viability of doing so. One of the challenges presented will be to identify interesting environment / green spaces that could be developed into a new park. New developments could be predicated upon seeking to better market places of historic and / or cultural importance, e.g. the Battle of Naseby site, which represents a site of significant historical importance or the former Great Central Railway line which could be used to create a new country / linear park along the lines of the existing Brampton Valley Way linear park. Again, any plans to develop / introduce any new park and green space would be underpinned by a detailed feasibility study, which will ensure its suitability prior to any works progressing. Following the emergence of a viable feasibility study WNC will, again, consult and engage local people, communities and other stakeholders to seek their thoughts and opinions.

The third tranche of proposals / developments are site specific. These would range from upgrading existing facilities to introducing new / additional facilities, based on identified / perceived need. WNC will develop business cases to shape and inform emerging proposals, ensuring they are capable of realising value and satisfying park and green space-specific user expectations.

How will local communities and other interested parties be engaged in the decision making process regarding site selection?

As plans emerge as to where WNC is planning to install new initiatives / proposals; create new parks and green spaces and; enhance or introduce new facilities across its current portfolio of parks and green spaces, it will seek to consult and engage local people and other wide-ranging stakeholders. Initiative-specific consultation and engagement will be influenced by its scale and potential impact.

Where WNC is looking to progress one of its higher profile proposals, e.g. the creation of a new park / green space within the locality or the introduction of a new feature / activity within one of its existing parks and green spaces, it will launch a detailed, eight to twelve week consultation exercises that will actively seek the thoughts and opinions of interested parties on the proposal. WNC will use the feedback received to revise its proposal(s), as appropriate. As with all WNC consultation exercises, every effort will be made to ensure those stakeholders who have a significant interest in a proposal are informed.

Where WNC is looking to upgrade and / or introduce site-specific facilities, e.g. car parking; lighting; toilets or; café facilities, the approach will be more targeted. Whilst WNC would use its consultation platform to launch such exercises, they will be more locally focussed, with an emphasis on using approaches that will enable park and green space-specific users, local people, locality-specific organisations have their say. WNC will review and consider the emerging outcomes when finalising its proposals.

Will planning permission be required to enable these proposals to progress?

Where an initial feasibility study or business case has confirmed the viability of a specific initiative, as part of its development WNC will comply with the requirements of all relevant planning legislation throughout the development and delivery process.

How much will it cost?

Currently WNC is not able to advise as to how much it would cost to implement the various initiatives / proposals contained within its Parks Development strategy. As part of any feasibility study and / or business case, WNC will consider the costs of delivery and operations. All initiatives that WNC elect to progress, potentially in partnership with others, will include a "Return on Investment" analysis which will identify how long it will take to "payback" the investment made.

Whilst WNC will not publish the exact costs that will be incurred to implement those initiatives / proposals it wishes to progress, because they contain sensitive commercial information, it will make a commitment to ensure that public money is being used efficiently and effectively delivering good value for local people.

Where appropriate, predominantly the introduction of new activities into existing parks and green spaces, WNC will deliver these initiatives / proposals with private sector partners, so it is able to leverage their knowledge, expertise as well as their financial support, thus minimising the risk to WNC.

What impact will the Council's proposals have on my community?

The intention of the Parks Development Strategy is to enhance communities across West Northamptonshire by protecting, maintaining and enhancing WNC's parks, ensuring they meet current and future community needs. In providing a framework for managing WNC's major parks and green spaces, one of its primary aspirations is to increase footfall and access to open spaces including volunteering opportunities, and community focused activities and events to develop greater social cohesion. We will aim to engage with local communities to help develop plans and proposals for their parks and green spaces that work for them.

Our parks remain an important asset for local communities, and we aim to ensure that West Northamptonshire parks offer something for everyone. Parks provide opportunities for improved wellbeing; physically, mentally and socially.

How will this strategy support and protect our environment and biodiversity?

WNC is committed to protecting the environment and biodiversity across West Northamptonshire, ensuring any initiatives / proposals are well considered and land management is fully understood. The Strategy will fully support and link to our other strategies including the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Tree Strategy, Estate Climate Strategy and Construction & Maintenance Climate Strategy. Plans include identifying where our parks can most effectively support biodiversity and ensure maintenance and improvement plan take these requirements and needs into account. We will also take opportunities to increase tree cover in our parks through improved management and maintenance and enhancing overall ecological benefits.