



Managing Green Space for Nature: Bristol Walking Alliance comments

Bristol Walking Alliance

1. Bristol Walking Alliance (BWA) is a consortium of organisations and individuals which campaigns to improve the walking environment. We keep in close contact with councillors and officers at Bristol City Council: we have had useful discussions with officers about both these wildlife proposals and the emerging strategy for parks and green spaces as a whole.
2. We published our own proposals in *50 Ways to Better Walking* (see <https://bristolwalkingalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/BWA-50-Ways-to-Better-Walking.pdf>). On parks and green spaces we said (p11) : ‘Access to nature and green space is important for physical and mental health. As well as maintaining existing parks and green spaces, these should be linked to each other and to where people live by further greening of pedestrian routes’.

General comments

3. We are concerned about considering one use of parks in isolation. Managing parks for nature needs to be part of an overall plan for the different uses of these valuable spaces. We understand there may be consultation soon on the parks and green spaces strategy review. We hope that issues of compatibility and competition will be fully dealt with then.
4. Meanwhile, this is a clear account of how land can be managed for nature, especially by changes to operational maintenance regimes. It recognises the potential problems in terms of additional costs and fire risks. It also acknowledges the need to take some account of recreational use and in particular to avoid an adverse impact on linear walking routes. ***But BWA is concerned that both habitat creation and new maintenance regimes will significantly reduce the areas that are walkable and available for recreation generally.*** The city’s green spaces are important places for people to be able to wander freely and their recreational value makes them key walking destinations.

Detailed comments

5. BWA is concerned about:
 - **the scale of the proposals.** It is not clear how much land is likely to be proposed for habitat creation or for changes in maintenance regimes, nor what contribution this will make to achieving the 30% target the council has adopted. (It would help if the meaning of this target were clarified: 30% of all land in the city seems over-ambitious, given that much land is developed and most not under the council’s control).

Reductions in grass cutting and increased roping off to protect wildlife have already resulted in significant – and sometimes excessive - losses of walkable areas in the city's green spaces. How much expansion is intended?

- **the selection of sites.** Selecting sites to manage for nature according to their ecological value sounds logical but ecological value needs to be set against value for other purposes, especially recreation. Apart from the cliffs of the Avon Gorge, Bristol's parks and green spaces are not of sufficient national ecological interest to justify statutory protection as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) designation that spaces such as the Downs enjoy has been conferred by ecologists locally. SNCI status is expected to be taken into account in planning decisions, but carries less weight than statutory requirements. On the Downs there is a statutory requirement to manage in the interests of recreation. The council cannot choose to manage primarily for wildlife here. The Downs enjoy further statutory protection from enclosure as common land, while other green spaces, such as Redland Green, have town and village green status, reflecting their historic value for recreation. Elsewhere the SNCI designation is intended to be balanced against other considerations. There is little sign of balance in these proposals.

Parks and other green spaces are important mainly as an amenity *for people*. Studies have shown that public benefit derives chiefly from opportunities for physical exercise, with benefits too from other recreational activities, and social interaction, as well as connection with nature. Sites should be managed for wildlife only where this is compatible with recreational use. Such sites should have been identified first. In this consultation people should have been asked to identify sites that they no longer wished to be left unmown or managed for nature in future, not just the reverse.

- **impact of proposed maintenance regimes.** We understand that changes in maintenance regimes are not going to be proposed where grass is currently cut twelve times a year, but we assume these are mainly playing fields. Playing fields are not usually the best places for walking or informal recreation.

Three of the four management regimes proposed will make areas unwalkable and unsuitable for recreational activities such as ball games, picnicking and exercise classes. Young children and dogs will no longer be able to experience the joy of running around freely. Tussocky grass will be 'out of bounds' year-round, while species-rich grassland will be unusable from spring to late summer. While species-rich grassland can be a recreational asset, significant areas have already been set aside for this. In places such as Ashton Court it has been made increasingly difficult for people to get close enough to the flowers to enjoy them.

The impact on walking of the fourth regime – flowering lawn – would be less serious. Longer grass could, however, be a deterrent, especially when wet.

- **habitat creation.** We are concerned that habitat creation will also lead to loss of walkable areas. We would like recreational value to be considered, and to be included in the consultation that is promised.