



## Bristol Walking Alliance response on Parks and Green Spaces Strategy

### Introduction

1. The Bristol Walking Alliance (BWA) is a consortium of organisations and individuals which campaigns to improve the city's walking environment. Parks and green spaces are vital for walking as:

- places where it is enjoyable to go for a walk;
- attractive destinations to which to walk, because of their beauty and/or activities that may be found there;
- part of longer walking routes, followed for a range of reasons. Walking is an important means of transport, not just recreational.

2. We welcome the production of this strategy. We were pleased to have an opportunity to discuss it with council officers in the course of preparation. We are delighted that the public generally has now been given an opportunity to comment. As the strategy recognises, Bristol's parks and green spaces are an enormous community asset enjoyed regularly by most Bristolians. But their benefits are not evenly and equitably distributed: it is right that everyone should be able to contribute thoughts on the future.

### General points

3. We applaud:

- the vision for parks in 2039 (p 8)
- the emphasis on engaging a wider range of stakeholders (p10 – strategic principles)
- the emphasis on inclusivity, by geographical area and social group
- the commitment to review the strategy after five years (p 48)
- many of the proposed actions (see following section for details)
- the proposed research into use of parks (p 53)

4. We have major concerns about:

- **priorities.** As the strategy's vision recognises, the city's parks and green spaces are primarily for people to enjoy, where they can take part in "activities which make them healthier and happier." We therefore feel strongly that health and well-being should be the overarching and main aim. It should not be placed fourth in a list of seven priorities, coming after nature and climate, children and young people, and community participation.

Bristol's parks and green spaces are too small to make a significant contribution to the planet's climate and ecological emergencies: nature in them should be primarily for people to enjoy. Children and young people are a sub-set of the health and well-being theme, as is culture. Community participation, together with employment and skills, are means to an end, not an end in themselves. Bristol is not under siege and so has no need to be self-

sufficient in food. Food growing and allotments are instead one of many forms of recreation that contribute to people's health and well-being.

We note that financial sustainability comes ahead of all the priority themes in the list of key actions (chapter 7). This is understandable but the reference to commercial opportunities raises concerns that these will be the top priority.

- **the omission of walking.** We could see no reference in the strategy to walking, although it is by far the most popular informal recreational activity in the city's destination parks and in many other green spaces. It requires no equipment, nearly everyone can do it (we include 'wheeling' in our definition) and it has proven benefits for health and well-being. We would have expected walking to be mentioned, together with actions to encourage it. (We set out some of our own ideas below). We would also have expected the Transport Board's ambitions for walking to have been included in references to the One City Plan.
- **the lack of meaningful targets for health and well-being.** We recognise that the intention is to produce a targeted response plan following research. Meanwhile, none of the key actions listed on p 53 has a specific measurable outcome, apart from the satisfaction of people living in disadvantaged areas, and that is only relative. The outcome could be achieved by people elsewhere becoming more dissatisfied.

The aim that by 2039 "More people visit our parks and use them more consistently for active recreation" is particularly unambitious, given that the city's population is set to grow significantly. Parks and green spaces would have to become more unattractive for this target to be missed. It would be better to express it as a proportion of the population eg "The proportion of of the city's population visiting our parks and the proportion using them more consistently for active recreation both increase by at least ten per cent."

Where there are quantified ambitions for 2039, such as providing access to quality green spaces, multi-use games and 'wheels parks' within a certain distance, it is not clear how they will be achieved.

- **'harder' targets for other priorities.** The strategy includes firmer targets for other priority themes eg helping to meet the council's objective of managing 30% of its land for nature by 2030, even though over half the land in parks and green spaces is already managed for this. Similarly, it is proposed that all council owned land suitable for food growing will be used for that purpose, irrespective of its recreational value. 20% of food consumed in the city is intended to come from sustainable producers in the city region. These harder targets appear to have been adopted uncritically, without considering their impact on other uses of parks and green spaces. With the amount of open space per person set to fall dramatically (see para 5.3), it is essential that as much space as possible is retained for "activities that make [people] healthier and happier".

5. We also share the main concerns set out as below in the response from the Bristol Civic Society:

- 1) **a lack of clarity as to how the strategy will be delivered and what the consequences of following it will be:** it is not clear how tensions between the various principles will be resolved nor the weighting that will be given to any one principle if it is in conflict with another. Nor is it clear how will such difficult decisions be managed, particularly if there is to be greater community involvement. *BWA is especially concerned because participants in informal activities such as walking tend to be under-represented in community groups.*

*Wildlife enthusiasts, participants in organised activities, business interests and allotment holders are more vocal.*

- 2) **the number of missing key documents, the loss of an explicit link between the strategy and the near final local plan, and differences in definition of open space between this strategy and the supporting paper (a confusion which in turn affects the draft Local Plan).** *BWA is especially concerned that this strategy has been prepared in advance of the Green Infrastructure Strategy and the Blue Green Infrastructure Strategy, which we hope will contain proposals for an accessible network linking green spaces.*
- 3) **a much-reduced open space provision per person:** the proposed dramatic reduction in the open space available to the city's inhabitants and the very small area of new open space proposed, given population growth, especially in the centre. *This will clearly limit walking opportunities.*
- 4) **the potential reduction in available open space through use for new infrastructure and more big events.** *BWA's concerns go more widely than this. Other uses which the strategy promotes are also likely to limit the space for walking. The creation of wildflower meadows or simply leaving grass uncut to protect wildlife can reduce walking opportunities (although wildflower meadows in the right place can enhance them). New allotments and food-growing areas are likely to be fenced off and inaccessible.*

## Specific points on the strategy

6. We recognise that many of the actions proposed should benefit walking. In particular we support:
  - **continuing investment to improve access (p48)**
  - **the provision of toilets in destination parks (p49).** Lack of toilets is a major deterrent to walking. BWA is part of the current campaign to improve provision in the city.
  - **the creation of cool corridors (p50).** Shade is important for walkers in the summer. Cool corridors need to be provided on routes to parks, not just within them.
  - **online information hub (p50).** We would like this to include walking routes.
  - **creation of playable landscapes (p51)** Assuming these will not be exclusively for children and their families, there should be benefits for walking. Grass kept short enough to kick a ball around will be short enough for walking.
  - **improved perceptions of safety (p 52).** Potentially of great benefit to walking.
  - **inclusive recreation spaces (p52).**
  - **research followed by a targeted response plan (p 53).** It may be hard to get information from walkers and others who engage in informal recreation. BWA and its member organisations may be able to help.
  - **the medium term health and well-being actions (p53).** All fine as far as they go. Would like to see a wider range of organisations involved. The Ramblers, for example, already run health walks and might do more.
  - **promotional activities about culture and heritage( p54) .** These are likely to encourage more walking anyway, ad might do specifically.

## Other ideas

7. BWA recognised the importance of green spaces in its publication *50 Ways to Better Walking* (see <https://bristolwalkingalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/BWA-50-Ways-to-Better->

[Walking.pdf](#)) (see p11 in particular). Other issues in parks and greenspaces have emerged subsequently.

8. We would like to see the following additional proposals in the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy:
  - **a network of 'green 'pedestrian routes.** These should link parks and other green spaces using quiet and tree-lined routes wherever possible. They should extend to major transport, shopping and work destinations. We assume that the Green and Blue Green infrastructure Strategies will cover this.
  - **safe and attractive walking routes to parks and green spaces.** From all directions, not necessarily part of a network.
  - **improved signage and walking routes in destination parks.** It is easy to get lost on the Blaise Estate, in Ashton Court, and even on the Downs. (Signage and walking routes could meet some of the demand for eco-friendly transport mentioned in the Blaise case study on page 35). Bristol Ramblers or other groups might be invited to prepare routes.
  - **maintenance of mown paths along 'desire lines' where grass and other vegetation is allowed to grow too long for walking.**
  - **management of dogs.** The 2008 strategy addressed the management of dogs. There are many more now, causing a range of problems. They are not mentioned in the strategy (nor are van and tent dwellers, another live issue). For example, all walkers are being prohibited from enjoying the Ashton Court Wildlife Meadows because dogs might disturb the ground-nesting birds. Similarly, the path through the red deer park has been closed on occasions because dogs chase the deer. This is unfair to most walkers.
  - **commitment to consult BWA (and other city-wide groups).** The emphasis in the strategy is, rightly, on consulting local community groups. Consultation with groups with a wider geographical remit and specialist interests is also important, particularly in relation to the destination parks.
  
9. We would also like a clear statement that where there is a conflict between activities such as walking that contribute to health and well-being and other land uses, health-giving activities should take precedence.
  
10. BWA would be very happy to discuss these points.

Bristol Walking Alliance  
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