



an independent force for a **better Bristol**

Introduction

The Bristol Civic Society supports in principle the goal of at least 30% land in Bristol being managed for nature, and welcomes the opportunity to comment on the more detailed consideration of management issues and policies outlined in the “Managing more green spaces for nature” document. We do so from the perspective and experience of the local Civic Society rather than any other expert body.

Individuals will make more detailed comments – ours are largely to ensure that the primary goal (30%) is achieved and maintained in the long term, and that the public have access to any green spaces managed for nature as a public benefit. To achieve this the goal needs widespread public support and the right financial and legal framework to maintain beneficial stewardship.

The document does not consider these vital issues. To give examples of the sorts of complexity that require further consideration:

- it is not clear the scale and overlap of the different target actions on page 1. Thus “verge management” seems a relatively “low hanging fruit” in many locations, but verges may have developed other significant local uses, not all of which might be undesirable (e.g play, decorative borders and even some food growing where pollution and road use is in decline).

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We aim to encourage a robust approach to ensure Bristol achieves the 30% goal. We make 2 substantive points:

1) It feels unsatisfactory to consider one use of parks, etc., in isolation without considering other uses at the same time.

We are particularly concerned that there is little in the document that links “nature issues” with “people” issues. Unless this approach is now predicated on “Nature” having a unique personality which is itself a stakeholder in Bristol’s future, it seems illogical to disconnect “nature” from “people”.

Many of Bristol’s open spaces were set up specifically for the benefit of people, with considerable voluntary effort and public and philanthropic investment. Bristol’s parks have a finite amount of space to be shared and our city has significant populations pressures to cope with. So, for instance, in Easton there are large numbers of residents who live in HMOs and need green space to both play and convene often in extended families or out of school groups. There is nowhere else. Other spaces have been rescued by people for

community benefit with nature as part of the “offer” such as Narrowways (a celebrated wildlife haven), but they were intended and supported to remain part of our developing public realm as Bristol grows.

Bristol’s Director of Public Health published “[Investing in Bristol’s Mental Wealth](#)” in 2020 which celebrates the importance of the various ways in which citizens can convene and interact in shared public space, alongside the well-recognised benefits to people’s physical health and the cultural value of social space. Nationally, a Public Health England [report](#) on the value of physical activity backs up our local experience, with holistic and powerful evidence. It suggests the main benefits from access to green space come from increased physical activity. It also cites recreational activities and community and social cohesion as important, as well as connection with nature. It certainly isn’t enough to know that “nature is there” and being managed: it can be connected to, enjoyed and valued as part of peoples’ lived experience.

We think there may still be a consultation coming up on the Parks Strategy review as a whole. Perhaps that is where a coherent plan of provision for all the different park uses will appear, but the current consultation does not confirm that. None of the proposals in the current consultation can be fully assessed in any particular location without considering their impact on other uses. We would greatly favour a more symbiotic approach communicated to all (especially the general public), to the development of this work – more “win-win” and less “silo”.

2) Public access to green space needs protection and that means a robust approach and polity.

With significant population, housing and special economy issues facing Bristol, crystallising, for example, in recent discussions around major development areas such as St. Philips Marsh and Filwood, we have the opportunity to emphasise the potential of “managing for nature” and other uses of public green spaces – whether strategic and pocket parks, allotments, verges or difficult-to-develop “waste” land.

The consultation material does not express as a Council goal that of reviewing whether the statutory protection of green spaces for nature could be enhanced. If the policies under discussion are to be of value, then Bristol needs to have as robust as possible mechanisms for protecting green spaces, both now and those that are developed in the future. Planning restrictions and covenants may have their role but they are often weak and unenforceable in practical terms – so a “managing for nature strategy” should include full blown statutory protection for local authority and publicly entrusted public recreational land and effort should be committed to achieving this on a national basis. For the present, it is vital to promote and build capacity for legal and technical assistance to support more robust protections such as Town Greens, SNCIs etc. This does happen in analogous sectors of public endeavour and we do have [Your Park](#), [Voscur](#) and other capacity options to develop in Bristol.

To meet the targets effectively a more communicative approach is needed to ensure that residents can engage with and benefit from a managing for nature approach, so “buy in” and more diverse investment can happen.

The consultation refers to budget decisions this February, but the goal is for all land in Bristol, and not just this budget cycle. We want this to be the beginning of a long-term approach that includes actively managing green space for nature, for the whole city area, not just that affected by BCC budget decisions. This could include development planning and negotiations.

Making the case for investing in green space – by public, philanthropic and other bodies - will be helped if the value of the green space was quantifiable (and to a degree monetizable e.g. following the public health and social investment agendas). It is important to value our “assets” in terms of places to protect and develop and people to support (and not just as beneficiaries). Some research has been done on this (see <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1070200/full>): we suggest that the Council, and the other partners to “Managing more space for nature” should make use of such data when it develops credibility. Negotiations with potential sources of investment should be informed by the positives of 30% goal. Similarly, the partnership with volunteers and voluntary bodies should be quantified (including parks friends and other amenity groups). We are not an expert body in this field but others have done some relevant ground work (see: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value_of_Volunteering_Working_Paper_Final.pdf).

Taking a strategic “valuing people and places” approach will help make more investable propositions for funding and (for instance) commercial leverage. It could make the difference between a “list of good things” and a real improvement in our experience of place and the future of our ecology, etc. It may also mitigate any apparent culture of “nature versus people.” Thus, we will be more likely to achieve the 30% of land managed for nature goal.