

Access to Open Space

Background

Good quality, accessible open space that is fit for purpose serves many functions. Open spaces provide areas to exercise and opportunities for sport and physical activity, enable people to interact with each other and nature and to promote active lifestyles by contributing to active travel routes. Access to open space, however, is not evenly distributed among every community in this county. There needs to be a variety of open spaces to reflect the diverse needs of the community, based on recreational, leisure, sport and food growing needs and habitat.

Examples of open space could include:

- Parks and gardens;
- Amenity green space;
- Natural and semi-natural green space areas;
- Local Green Spaces (designated by Neighbourhood Development Plans);
- Children's play and facilities for young people (including equipped play areas);
- Cemetery space;
- Allotments areas/community gardens;
- Civic spaces;
- Bodies of water for rowing and canoeing.

Examples of areas for sport and physical activities could include:

- Facilities such as playing pitches (both grass and artificial turf pitches);
- Sports halls;
- Swimming pools;
- Health and fitness suites;
- Tennis courts;
- Lawn bowling facilities;
- Village/community halls.

Numerous studies have concluded a direct link between the quality of living environments, particularly those with access to green space, and happiness. The physical and mental wellbeing benefits of accessible open space is reported by Public Health England (2020) in their [Improving Access To Greenspace](#) review, saying that greener environments are '*associated with improved health and wellbeing outcomes such as reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and fatigue*'. This can also bind communities together to reduce loneliness. In addition to this:

- Physical inactivity is responsible for one in 6 UK deaths and is estimated to cost the UK £7.4 billion annually (including £0.9 billion to the NHS);
- Thirty-four percent of men and 42% of women are not achieving recommended levels of physical activity as recommended by UK Chief Medical Officers.

Sport England (2020) [reported](#) that almost two-thirds of adults consider exercise to be more important than ever, as a result of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis. The impact sport and physical activity can have on mental wellbeing is every bit as important as the physical benefits. As well as developing individuals, such activity can help build stronger communities by bringing people together.

Open spaces can also have other invaluable uses relating to the preservation of species and tackling climate change, as part of flood mitigation strategies and carbon reduction. Crucially, nature has been in decline across the UK as a result of a number of factors. In response to this, the wheels have already been set in motion for the creation and improvement of green space in England, with the biodiversity net gain requirements set out in the [Environment Act 2021](#).

New developments should promote inclusivity by integrating nature and green space. This is a sustainable approach, and delivers important environmental, physical and mental health and social and economic benefits. Public awareness of the importance of open space has been heightened as a result of the climate and ecological emergency and the experiences of living with Covid-19.

The following sets out how open space is addressed through the County Plan and the Local Plan 2021-2041 draft vision and objectives.

Herefordshire County Plan

There are key community and environmental-based ambitions of Herefordshire Council's adopted [County Plan](#) (2020-2024). Namely:

Community- *'...open spaces are integral in the aim of putting physical and mental health at heart of what the council does, also placing importance on ensuring children have a healthy and active start in life.'*

Environment- *'We will...improve residents' access to green space in Herefordshire.'*

Developing policies which enable these through new development will be crucial to achieving this.

Local Plan Draft Vision

The draft Local Plan 2021-2041 has environmental, community and economic themes to its draft vision, which state:

Environmental- *'By 2041 Herefordshire will be a place where planning has helped to create an environment where all of its residents have an exceptional quality of life and are able to live and travel in a more sustainable way. In addressing the climate and ecological emergency, the county will be carbon neutral, and biodiversity here will be thriving. The rich landscape and cultural heritage will continue to be protected and valued for all to enjoy.'*

Community- *'Rural settlements and market towns to have resilient communities.'*

Economic- *'Inclusive infrastructure will be provided, to ensure that people are able to live active and healthy lives.'*

Policies that improve residents' access to open space and sporting facilities will be important to realising this vision.

Local Plan Draft Objectives

The need to provide opportunities for physical exercise and recreation is also supported in the community and environmental themes of the draft Local Plan draft objectives.

- Community - *'To support good-health and wellbeing, through ensuring easy access to open space, sports facilities, and active travel options.'*
- Environment – *'To enhance and extend Herefordshire's natural capital, green infrastructure and nature recovery networks to ensure good access and proximity to open and wild spaces for all residents.'*

National Guidance

[National policy](#) defines *'all open space of public value, including not just land, but also areas of water (such as rivers, canals, lakes and reservoirs) which offer important opportunities for sport and recreation and can act as a visual amenity'*. Moreover, the process for the replacement of any lost open space, including sports and recreational buildings and land (including playing fields) is also addressed, in addition to the protection of public rights of way.

National policy also addresses the designation of Local Green Space. This is a mechanism that allows local communities such as Neighbourhood Planning groups to protect green spaces of local importance. This can be designated through local or Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs), where it can be demonstrated that the space in question is of value to the local community.

National guidance provides more detail on the [Local Green Space designation](#). This details how green space is designated in local plans or in NDPs, how this relates to development and to existing designations, as well as avenues to be registered as an Asset of Community Value. Assets of Community Value are community-owned assets which have value to the community, and are protected from being lost to redevelopment. 50% of Herefordshire's adopted NDPs have one or more designated Local Green Spaces.

Local Considerations

Herefordshire is a rural county, with rich countryside and around half of its population living in rural areas. However, access to open space is still something that some communities benefit from more than others, with place-based variations in recommended levels of need for access to open space identified in the [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment](#) (2021).

Physical activity helps to improve the wellbeing of individuals and the wider community. In 2017/2018, approximately two thirds of Herefordshire adults met the recommended level of physical activity per week, according to [Understanding Herefordshire](#) statistics. Physical activity rates within Herefordshire are similar to England's average, although over 20% of the population are considered to be physically inactive. The impact of Covid-19 could result in a further reduction in these figures, which will need to be considered in planning policy formation.

It is important that there are a variety of types of open spaces available in a local vicinity. This is to ensure that mental and wellbeing needs can be addressed, and opportunities through our open spaces to tackle climate change are taken, both through preventative and mitigation measures, and to preserve and enhance biodiversity. Open spaces form part of the wider Green and Blue Infrastructure network. These are interconnected. So, for instance, the ecological status of the River Lugg and Wye will impact the quality of open space for wildlife, as well as residents along these corridors. These form the spine of our green and blue corridors that feed into more urban areas.

As well as providing formal and informal recreation opportunities, open space also has multiple benefits in:

- Tackling poor air quality – there are two Air Quality Management Areas in the county: along the A49 (T) corridor in Hereford and in the Bargates area in Leominster. Tree cover being integrated into open space can contribute to reducing carbon out of the atmosphere.
- Mitigating the impacts of flooding - With the prevalence of flooding around the county's rivers becoming more frequent, the role that flood mitigation strategies play as a part of open space is important.
- Attracting habitat and attracting biodiversity – such natural spaces also offer the opportunity for species done, in the right way, to thrive. This restores functioning ecosystems which bring many benefits in terms of the variety of species, for wider resilience against disasters and for a greater variety of crops.
- Providing local growing spaces – [Herefordshire is a Sustainable Food Place](#), through its Herefordshire Food Alliance, which is a partnership of stakeholders from various sectors dedicated to working together toward a more sustainable food system, promoting affordable, healthy and environmentally friendly food production.
- Bringing communities together – the activities associated with open space allows members of the community to come together through projects such as markets, community gardens and as mentioned above, growing spaces. [Haygrove Community Gardens](#) has two gardens in Herefordshire – in Leominster and Ross-on-Wye – which reaches out to those who would benefit from the 'therapeutic nature of horticulture' as well as being a place for wider public enjoyment.
- Helping to reduce health inequalities including among children and elderly people – Haygrove also engages with school children in the growing of fruit and vegetables. A report produced by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) on [Child Friendly Planning](#) in the UK provides a framework through which open space is suitable for all children and young people, to enable active and fulfilling lifestyles. The county also has a higher than average elderly population, some of whom suffer from health problems. According to a [King's Fund study](#) on access to green and open spaces and the role of leisure services, access to green space can reduce years of expected health problems among the elderly. Recognition of ageing populations staying active for longer means that specific facilities for over 55s with regard to indoor sport facilities should be considered.

[Fields in Trust](#) provides some guidance to ensure that the right kind of open space is available to residents as part of new developments. It centres on the quantity and quality of open space, walking distance from peoples' homes to open space, with specific regard to factors hindering access to open space, and buffer zones. Buffer zones work to ease the possibilities of overlooking and potential disagreements which may arise between groups of people with seemingly conflicting priorities.

These factors ensure that new developments can provide open spaces which are inclusive, in that they are accessible, fit for purpose and meet the needs of all age groups. This benefits both new and existing residents to an area. [Sport England](#) has a specific role in the planning system as a statutory consultee on planning applications for development affecting or prejudicing the use of playing fields and indoor sports facilities requirements. The organisation will be instrumental in developing playing fields policy further.

It is also recognised that open space is not always designed with the safety of women in mind. Gender mainstreaming is the process by which issues that affect females when navigating around the built environment are reflected in all processes of planning policy and decision-making. Such issues relating to open space include unlit routes, infrequent benches and a lack of natural surveillance. Natural surveillance is a strategic planning method that reduces crime through the placement of housing and businesses around open space or walking routes in order to create activity and footfall in that area.

Evidence Base

- [Open Spaces Study](#) (2006) was an assessment of open space, outdoor sport and recreational facilities in the county. It looked at local needs for provision and opportunities for enhancement, development or replacement of current facilities.
- [Play Facilities Study 2012](#) assessed the provision across the county of play areas and provided guidance to developers on enhancement opportunities.
- As part of the [Playing Pitch Assessment 2012](#), existing facilities were reviewed for each area, in order to forecast future playing pitch requirements.
- Additionally there is also the [Sports Facilities Framework](#) (2010) by Sports Partnership Herefordshire and Worcestershire. This reviewed the major indoor built facilities in the county, and took account of demographic changes over time.

As part of the local plan update, the council has commissioned the Herefordshire Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sports Strategy and Built Indoor Sports Facilities to cover 2021-2041. This is to ensure that the evidence is accurate and up to date to guide policy formation.

This assessment will provide a detailed and bespoke study to review current playing pitch and indoor facilities, and outdoor sports facilities, and the potential impacts on these of future development within the plan period. It will also be beneficial to have a combined study to ensure that the approach will be the same for providing both playing pitch and indoor facilities. It is expected that the indoor sports facilities assessment will be completed by Autumn 2022 and outdoor sports facilities by September 2022.

The 2022 Open Space update will provide a land use framework to promote opportunities for new and improved open space and recreation facilities and for the protection of existing facilities. In particular it will identify priorities to:

- Address deficiencies in recreation facilities in main areas of population;
- Meet needs arising from new residential development;
- Develop a network of green space, taking on board the principles of green infrastructure;
- Develop sustainable facilities which cater for a wide range of users;
- Identify existing contribution to nature conservation, and promote opportunities for improvements.

Existing Policy

Policies OS1 to OS3 in the Core Strategy address the provision of open space.

Policy OS1 outlines the provision for appropriate open space, sports, and recreation facilities. These will arise for all planning applications concerning all new residential dwellings, retail and employment proposals, where there is need to provide informal areas of amenity greenspace for the use of employees and visitors, and residential institutions, student accommodation, assembly and leisure, hotels or hostels. The need for such facilities will need to be considered on a site by site basis with either on-site or off-site provision, where appropriate.

Policy OS2 states that, in order to meet the needs of the community, these facilities will be sought (where appropriate), with any new development that creates a need for it. It must be in accordance with all applicable set standards of quantity, quality and accessibility. The provision of these facilities should be also located on-site unless an off-site, or partial off-site contribution, would result in an equally beneficial enhancement for the community.

Policy OS3 addresses the loss of open space, sports, or recreation facilities. In determining proposals which result in the loss of these facilities, clear evidence is required to show that this is surplus to requirements, the loss results in an equally beneficial replacement or enhanced facility, the loss is for an ancillary development which improves the functioning of existing open space, sport or recreation use, or that the loss will not result in the fragmentation or isolation of sites which are part of a green corridor.

Neighbourhood Planning

Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs) have played a role in ensuring that the important open spaces across the county valued at a local level are safeguarded, through the Local Green Space designation. 60% of Herefordshire's adopted NDPs have one or more designated Local Green Spaces.

Access to Open Space Policy Options

In developing new policies relating to open space in the Local Plan, there are a number of suggestions on what will need to be considered:

- How the policy works alongside developer contribution policy – as the population ages, but retains an active and sociable lifestyle, specific provision for sports for people over-55 must be considered, in line with new extra care and other supported care facilities.
- How open space and sports facilities can contribute to the extension of green and blue infrastructure networks, promoting active travel, improving physical and mental wellbeing and providing habitats for wildlife.
- Provide more growing spaces and tree cover as part of the provision of open space, in line with the wishes of the local community.

To ensure that open space aspirations are taken into consideration in the Local Plan, a decision will have to be taken as to how open space issues can be addressed in the new plan. Some proposed options are outlined below:

Option OS1- Maintain the overall approach of the existing policies, but updated with the benefit of new evidence

Continue with the general requirements to provide open space within residential, employment, retail and specialist housing schemes.

Option OS2- Restructure the policy framework, to seek to address the following:

- Improve access to open space, recognising that not all communities across the county have easy access to good quality open space which is fit for purpose.
- Ensure that open space is accessible for vulnerable groups, such as elderly residents, those with dementia, residents with disabilities and children and young people, recognising the importance of open space in physical and mental wellbeing.
- Consider gender mainstreaming in provision of open space, ensuring, among other factors, that open spaces are well-lit and enable natural surveillance.
- Extend and strengthen green and blue infrastructure networks.
- Capitalise on opportunities to 're-wild' parcels of land as part of developments, and provide local growing spaces for communities such as allotments and planting wild flower meadows.
- Make sure that sports needs of the community are fulfilled through recognising the need for a variety of indoor and outdoor sports facilities.
- Harness the role of open spaces in mitigating against the effects of climate change, by integrating sustainable drainage systems and attenuation ponds into and alongside spaces which also have recreational and sport functions.
- Integrate national guidelines with regard to tree-lining streets to develop a policy to provide canopy cover as part of open space provision.
- Actively seeking out opportunities for wildlife corridors as part of open space provision, to help species thrive.