

READING OPEN SPACES STRATEGY UPDATE NOTE 2018

January 2018

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The 2007 Open Spaces Strategy (OSS) set out the aims and approaches that Reading Borough Council adopted in its role as custodian of Reading's Public Open Space. Rather than producing an entirely new Open Spaces Strategy, this brief note considers changes in the ten years since 2007 and assesses the degree to which the conclusions of the OSS remain relevant.
- 1.2 Public Open Space helps to achieve various Council aims including improving the quality of life for residents, providing good access to open space and waterspace, adapting to climate change, enhancing the natural environment to contribute to economic success, ensuring Reading is healthy and enhancing biodiversity and wildlife. The town's open spaces contribute significantly to defining its character.

2. VISION

- 2.1 The original OSS was based on the Reading 2020 Community Strategy vision for public open space (POS) in Reading:

Everyone will be able to enjoy high quality public open spaces that are clean, safe and well-maintained. Our rivers and canals will be the focus for an interconnected series of accessible and desirable public spaces, providing a range of natural and urban experiences. In addition there will be a choice of accessible, high quality public parks and open spaces that together will provide places to meet, play and relax. These open areas will incorporate a range of habitats that will help maintain and enhance the diversity of local wildlife, and provide for a better overall quality of life.¹

- 2.2 The Community Strategy is no longer in place, but the overall message from its vision for open space remains valid. The current Corporate Plan 2016-2019 refers to keeping the town clean, safe, green and active. The longer term Reading 2050 project, which is led by Reading UK together with the University of Reading and Barton Willmore identifies a key stream of work as being "Reading as a City of Rivers and Parks with the example of the Thames between the Caversham and Reading Bridges". Therefore, there has been no change in the overall direction of the vision.
- 2.3 In terms of policy objectives, the OSS is based on the following three main policy objectives:
- Safeguard Reading's environmental endowment
 - Ensure that there is no net loss of recreational POS
 - Secure additional open space where opportunities arise
- Again, there have been no changes within the last ten years that would render these objectives out-of-date.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Since the OSS was produced in 2007, virtually all of the documents referred to within the policy context have been replaced. Planning Policy Guidance Note 17, along

¹ Reading 2020 Community Strategy <http://www.reading.gov.uk/strategiesplansandpolicies>

with all other planning policy guidance notes, has been replaced by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Regional Planning Guidance was replaced by the South East Plan, which itself was revoked some years ago. The Reading Borough Local Plan was replaced by the adoption of the Core Strategy in 2008, Reading Central Area Action Plan in 2009 and Sites and Detailed Policies Document in 2012.

- 3.2 There are too many differences in terms of policy context to look at individually, so it makes sense to consider at a high level whether the overall direction of policy has changed. In 2007, policy could be summarised as follows:
 - a) National policy required production of an Open Spaces Strategy;
 - b) National and regional policy emphasised the positive contribution which open spaces can make to urban areas in terms of recreational, nature conservation, and wider environmental and social benefits;
 - c) Local policy included a general presumption against loss of open space unless it could be justified in terms of adequate replacement in terms of quality and/or quantity.
 - d) In addition, specific open spaces were protected in policy and shown on a proposals map.
- 3.3 In general, the overall policy context message remains valid, even if the individual documents have changed. The NPPF still ensures that the need for open spaces be assessed to support local plans (paragraph 73), as well as emphasising the importance of open space for a wide range of functions including recreation, biodiversity and flood risk mitigation. Local policy still contains a presumption against loss of open space other than in exceptional circumstances (policy CS28 of the Core Strategy, proposed to be replaced by EN8 of the new Local Plan), and still lists a number of sites which are subject to specific protection over and above that general presumption (policy SA16 of the Sites and Detailed Policies Document, proposed to be replaced by EN7 of the new Local Plan).
- 3.4 Perhaps the main change in planning policy has been the introduction of the concept of Local Green Space within the NPPF. Local Green Space is a definition that should be used for local communities to identify green spaces of particular significance. The main criteria for its definition are set out in paragraph 77 of the NPPF as follows:
 - where the green space is in reasonably close proximity to the community it serves;
 - where the green area is demonstrably special to a local community and holds a particular local significance, for example because of its beauty, historic significance, recreational value (including as a playing field), tranquillity or richness of its wildlife; and
 - where the green area concerned is local in character and is not an extensive tract of land.
- 3.5 Although the principle of defining key areas of open space is hardly new, what is new is that the NPPF in paragraph 78 essentially gives such spaces the same weight of protection as Green Belt.
- 3.6 The emerging Local Plan, in paragraph EN7, identifies a number of important spaces in Reading as Local Green Space, based on an assessment against the three criteria above, and informed by consultation with local communities about the spaces which are important to them. The remainder of the most important open spaces remain protected as Public Open Space. The background to that policy is set out elsewhere, but the key message is that the key open spaces remain protected.

3.7 Therefore, there is not considered to have been sufficient change in the planning policy context to render the OSS out-of-date.

4. HOW MUCH PUBLIC OPEN SPACE SHOULD BE PROVIDED IN READING?

4.1 Between 2001 and 2011 the population of Reading Borough grew 8.8%, higher than the national rate of 7%. Large new residential developments across the urban area continue to put pressure on existing facilities. Large developments such as Battle Hospital and Kennet Island offer opportunities to provide on-site open space, but much of Reading's housing is delivered through smaller developments where the potential to achieve this is more limited. A high proportion of new housing occurs at high-density in the town centre, often without direct access to private open space, making the quality of the associated public realm more crucial. Most recently, a large number of dwellings have been, or are being, delivered through permitted development rights to change buildings, particularly office buildings, to residential, and, as there is no planning application, there is no scope to consider either on-site or off-site public or private open space provision within such developments.

4.2 The 2007 OSS took account of a GreenSTAT survey undertaken in 2005/6, which looked at use and perception of open space in Reading. This survey emphasised the importance of the recreational function of open space, and contributed to the focus of the Strategy on recreational public open space. Whilst in an ideal world this survey could have been updated, available resources have meant that this was not possible. There is not therefore any more up-to-date information to take account of.

4.3 In terms of standards of provision, there is not any particular defined standard that supersedes those considered in the OSS. The 0.4 km radius catchment area for local parks and 1.2 km catchment for larger parks remains a reasonable rule of thumb for assessing the distribution of open spaces in urban areas. The standard of 0.2 ha minimum local park size is also widely used. By these measures, Reading's provision of green space is close to average, but at the lower end of the range.

5. HOW MUCH PUBLIC OPEN SPACE SHOULD BE PROVIDED IN READING?

5.1 One area which it is possible to update on since the 2007 Strategy is the supply and distribution of public open space in Reading. Table 1 below sets out the main changes that have occurred since 2007, most of which were as a result of new development. The changes are to the three categories of open space mapped in the 2007 Strategy and shown on figure 2.1 of that document.

Table 1: Changes in Public Open Space 2007-2017

Site	Unrestricted		Limited		Restricted		Description
	Gain	Loss	Gain	Loss	Gain	Loss	
Amersham Road Depot - development	0.155						Three small formal open spaces
Avenue School - development	0.043			2.268			Small informal open area
Bath Road Reservoir - development	0.591					2.154	One formal open space, one landscaping and informal wildlife area
Battle Hospital - development	0.725			12.93			One formal park, one informal open area
Chatham Place - development*	0.134						Small town square
Clayfield Copse	6.008			6.008			Change from agricultural to part of public open space
Dee Park - development		1.376		0.622			Loss of some open areas, justified by qualitative improvements elsewhere
Denbeigh Place	0.023						Addition of play area
Fairview Community Centre	0.08						Removal of community centre and reinstatement as open space
Fobney Island	2.695			2.695			Establishment of nature reserve part open for public access
Green Road - development				1.61			Development including former undeveloped area
Kenavon Drive - development	0.116						Two new areas of open space
Kennet Island - development	1.954						Three formal open spaces, two informal open areas and a SuDS/wildlife area
Kennet Walk	0.075						Opening up of games court and open space after development
Lorenzo Quelch/Cadugan Place - development	0.117			0.87			Loss of former playing field for new development with new play area.
Meadway Sports Ground		0.068	0.068				Part closure for extension to Moorlands Primary School
Palmer Park		0.051					Closing off part of open space for nursery
Patriot Place	0.02						Closure of play area
Railway Depot Works - development				1.946			Development including former undeveloped area
Reading Station - development*	0.77						Two new town squares
Rufus Isaacs Road	0.021						Addition of play area
Tofrek Terrace		0.784	0.784				Part closure for use as school play space
TOTAL	11.248		-28.097		-2.154		

*Open space is in the form of town squares and places rather than green space

- 5.2 In addition to the table above, there are ongoing developments under construction that will also bring areas of recreational public open space into the public domain, including at Elvian School, Coley Park, Worton Grange and Green Park Village.
- 5.3 Table 1 shows an increase in unrestricted open space over the last ten years, with unrestricted open space being open space without restrictions on public access. For the most part, this constitutes recreational public open space. There has been a significant loss of areas previously mapped as public open space with limited access. However, it should be noted that a large proportion of this loss, including almost 13 ha at Battle Hospital, actually constituted brownfield land, with Battle Hospital itself having been demolished shortly before the OSS was carried out, so is not a genuine loss of open space as such.
- 5.4 It is clear, however, that the provision of new public open space with unrestricted access between 2007 and 2017 has not been of the scale of provision between 1995 and 2005 listed in the OSS. In part this has been down to the types of development that have been occurring over that period, with a much greater emphasis on high-density, town centre residential development where options for on-site provision are very limited. Instead, there has been a greater emphasis in these areas on upgrades to existing squares and spaces, with improvements to areas such as Market Place and Town Hall Square. Therefore, the conclusions of the 2007 OSS in terms of amount of open space remain valid, and are brought into even sharper focus by the increase in population in Reading, particularly in places such as the town centre.
- 5.5 In terms of distribution, the 2007 OSS included maps (figures 5.1 and 5.2) which look at access to recreational public open space from different parts of the Borough in terms of 400m (equating to 5 minutes' walk) and 600m catchments, and it is worth considering how these have changed in the last ten years, in particular with the provision of new parks and gardens in particular at Kennet Island and Battle Square. This does not include most of the new spaces shown in Table 1, as the focus is on larger areas formally laid out as parks and gardens.
- 5.6 Figure 1 shows 400m buffers at 2007, overlaid on the areas of Reading with permanent residents. It can be seen that there are a number of gaps, in particular in areas immediately to the east, south and west of the town centre, as well as some more suburban fringe areas in south, west and north Reading. The total coverage of areas with residents is around 84%.
- 5.7 Figure 2 shows the equivalent map at 2017, and it can be seen that some of the gaps in inner west Reading and south Reading have been closed. However, there is little change in east Reading or in the suburban gaps, where there has been little development of particular scale that can deliver new spaces. The total coverage of areas with residents (including those areas that did not exist in 2007) is around 87%, so a slight increase in coverage.
- 5.8 When 600m buffers are considered, much more of the Borough is covered. Figure 3 shows the situation in the OSS, with virtually the entire residential area of the Borough within 600m of recreational public open space. The proportion of the residential areas of the Borough within a 600m catchment at 2007 was 98%.
- 5.9 Unsurprisingly, this proportion does not significantly change by 2017. Figure 4 shows the coverage in 2017, and the proportion of residential areas now within a 600m buffer is 99%.

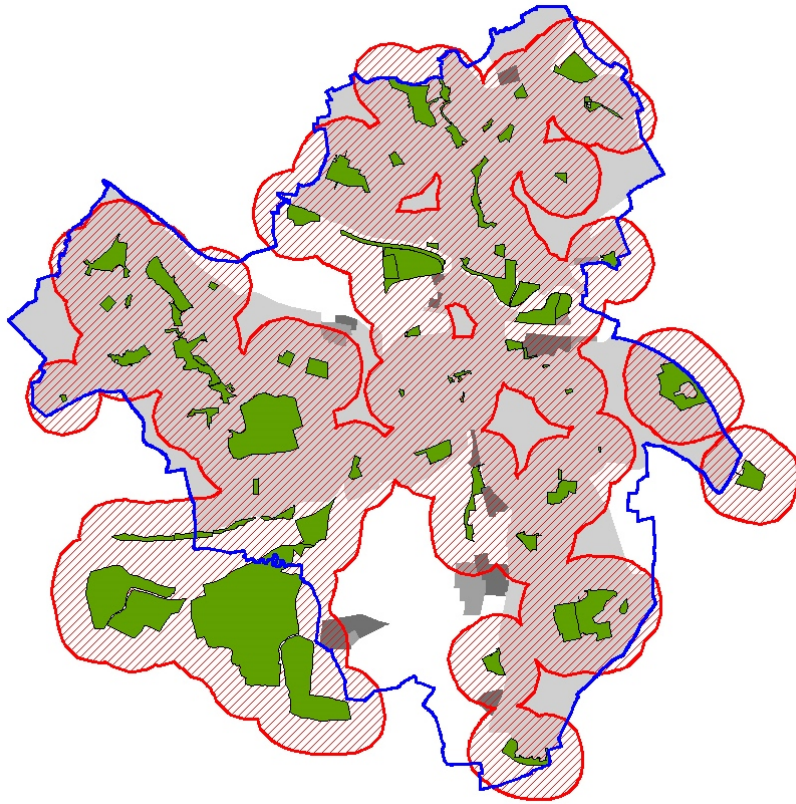


Figure 1: 2007, 400m buffer of recreational open space

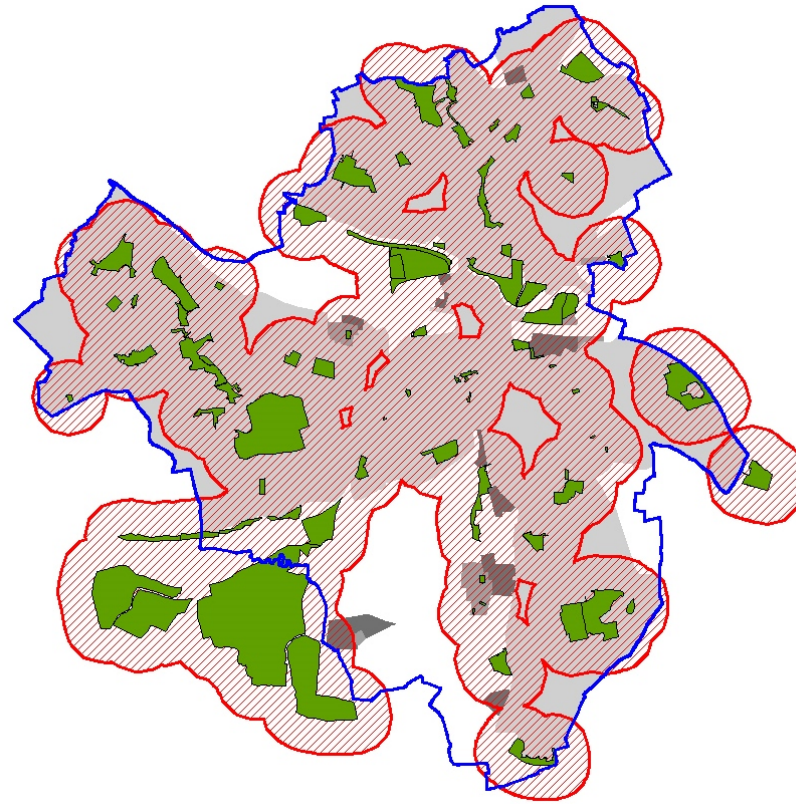
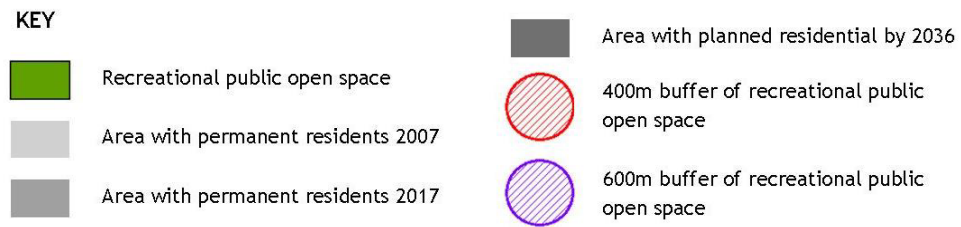


Figure 2: 2017, 400m buffer of recreational open space



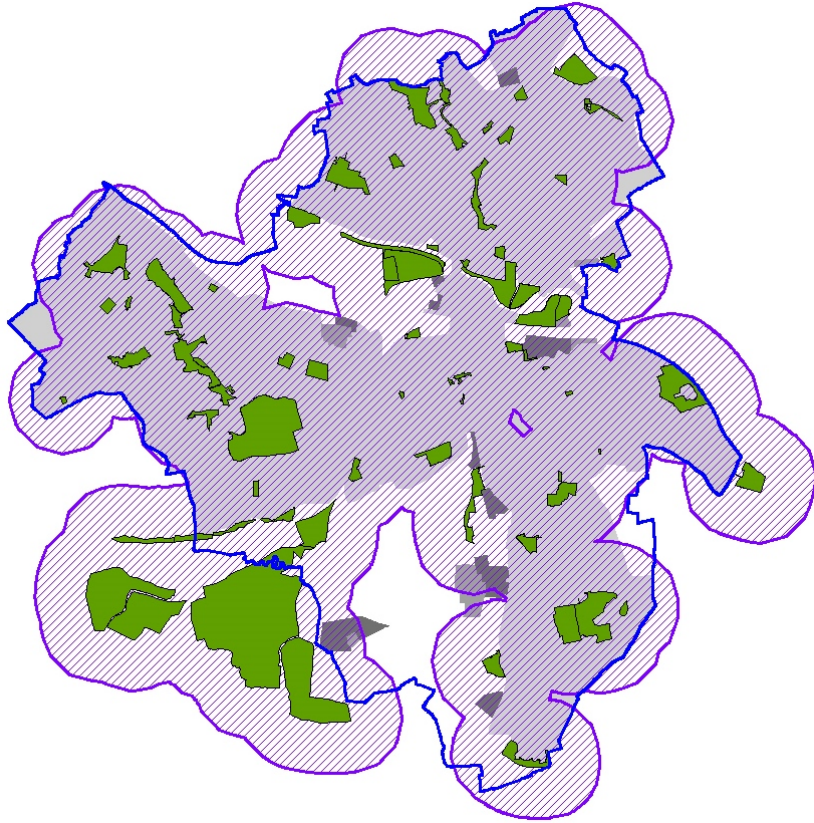


Figure 3: 2007, 600m buffer of recreational open space

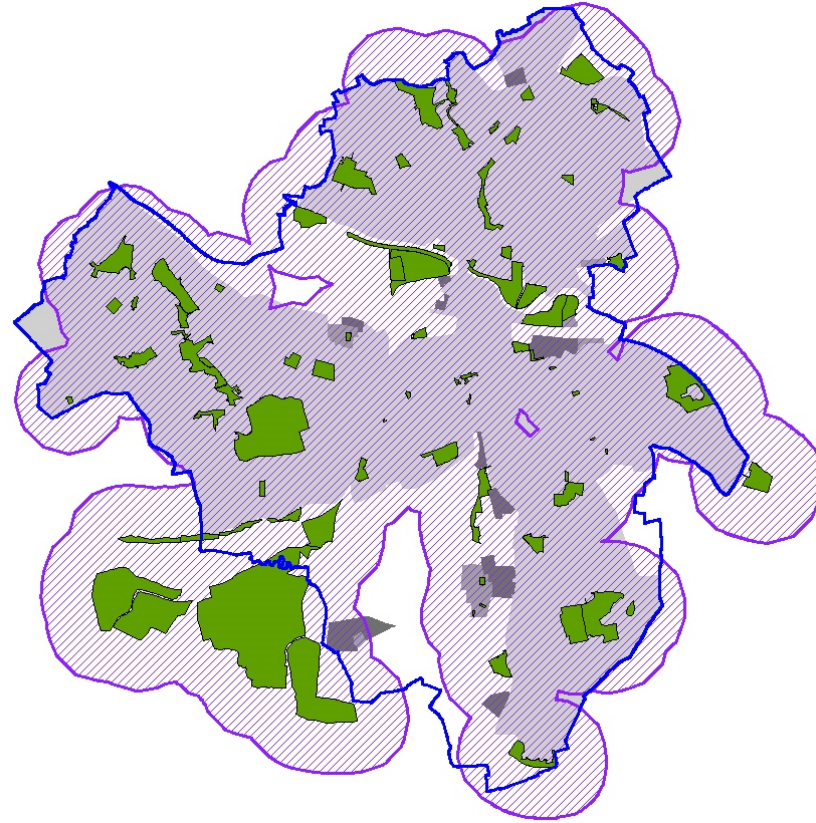








Figure 4: 2017, 600m buffer of recreational open space

KEY

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|---|------------------------------------|---|---|
|  | Recreational public open space |  | Area with planned residential by 2036 |
|  | Area with permanent residents 2007 |  | 400m buffer of recreational public open space |
|  | Area with permanent residents 2017 |  | 600m buffer of recreational public open space |

- 5.10 The maps show that some areas of new housing planned but not yet delivered at 2017 would fall outside the 400m buffer of existing recreational public open space in 2017, specifically parts of Green Park Village and Worton Grange, both of which are currently under construction. However, these planning permissions include provision for on-site recreational public open space, so this will not be the situation at the end of the plan period.
- 5.11 The 2007 OSS also considered the issue of severance lines, which divide residents from nearby open spaces and make access more difficult. In this sense, there have been some changes, in particular in the town centre. The opening of the underpasses under the railway at Reading Station and Napier Road, as well as the new pedestrian and cycle crossing of the Thames, have made it easier for the burgeoning town centre residential population to access the significant open spaces along the Thames. Nevertheless, severance remains an issue in many parts of Reading, particularly the south as a result of the A33 and the west, related in particular to the railway.

6. DOES READING BOROUGH HAVE ENOUGH PUBLIC OPEN SPACE?

- 6.1 Although Reading's total amount of recreational public open space remains broadly in line with the national guidelines, having only slightly increased since the last assessment, it is still unevenly distributed across the town. Residents in and around the town centre are still further away from POS than residents in outer wards. In the town centre, historical development patterns make it difficult to introduce new areas of POS without large-scale redevelopment. Due to the high cost of land in the town centre, the Council is unable to acquire land outright for new POS. Thus, POS is normally achieved as part of wider development proposals.
- 6.2 While the total provision is adequate, the main issues for Reading remain as identified in the 2007 Strategy:
- Access: the distribution of POS leaves some areas underprovided. In central Reading, POS is where residents are not. Areas immediately to the west, north-west, south and east of the town centre are amongst the most poorly supplied in the Borough and the problem is exacerbated by very dense housing.
 - Quality: some existing parks and open spaces are of poor quality.
 - Green links: open spaces are fragmented and wildlife corridors are incomplete.
- 6.3 Many of these issues are common to urban areas in the UK. This suggests that the current amount of recreational POS needs to be protected and access needs to be expanded.

7. OTHER CHANGES

- 7.1 One of the main changes related to open space in Reading within the last ten years is the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy in April 2015 as the primary source of financial contribution to open space from development, replacing Section 106 agreements in most cases. The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a planning charge introduced since the last Open Spaces Strategy which allows local authorities to raise funds from developments to pay for infrastructure that is needed as a result, including open space. The Council's Infrastructure Delivery Plan includes a detailed list of what open space infrastructure will be supported by CIL.
- 7.2 Whilst the effects of using CIL when compared to S106 varies from site to site, it is considered that it on average results in less money being available for off-site open

space contributions, although as CIL is a single infrastructure pot, that will depend on where the Council chooses to direct CIL funds. This underlines the importance of on-site delivery where that can be achieved.

7.3 The OSS identified a particular issue in that the South of Reading has no upper tier, 'district' park, but it highlighted the potential for upgrade of the large John Rabson Recreation Ground and the adjacent Cowsey area (totalling around 28 ha) for a multi-functional green space to fulfil that role. Since the OSS, there has been considerable investment in this site, in particular a 2009-10 revamp of the play area with a new toddler area and new junior play (funded by a Playbuilder grant, S.106 contributions and Housing investment), making it one of the largest and most varied play areas in Reading. There was also an upgrade to the multi-use sports pitches. The status of this park has therefore been considerably enhanced.

8. CONCLUSION ON STRATEGY

8.1 This note has identified the following:

- Although planning policy documents have changed, the overall approach of local and national policy remains the same;
- There has been a small increase in the amount of recreational public open space in the last ten years; and
- Access to open space has slightly increased with a slightly greater proportion of Reading falling within a 400m buffer of recreational open space, and with some severance lines in the town centre being overcome, but the key findings of the 2007 Strategy remain.

8.2 For this reason, it is considered that the overall strategy that was set out by the OSS is still generally valid. This includes the hierarchy of open space provision standards as follows:

	Description	Size	Transport mode	Radial catchment
Borough park	Varied character and facilities; open parkland, natural, formal, sport, play and relaxation; catering	60 ha	Car; public transport; cycle	
District parks	Varied character and facilities (but fewer than above); natural, formal, sport, play and relaxation	20 ha	Car; bus; cycle; foot	1.2 km
Local parks	Relaxation, play and ball games	2 ha or 1-2 ha equipped	Cycle; foot; wheelchair	0.8 km
Neighbourhood park	LEAP (local equipped area for play) + informal space	0.1-.02 ha equipped	Foot; wheelchair	0.4-0.8 km
Small recreational open spaces	'low-grade' recreation	0.1-0.2 ha	Foot; wheelchair	0.4-0.6 km
Linear open spaces	Relaxation; green link		Foot; cycle	
Semi-natural sites	Comparatively undisturbed sites, managed for wild flora and fauna		Cycle; foot; wheelchair	1.5-2.0 km

- 8.3 In some areas, open space is privately owned and has limited access. Should these areas become available for conversion or redevelopment, the Council aims to establish public access. For example, at Caversham Park, which the BBC are seeking to dispose of, any development or conversion proposals should open the park to public access and reinstate historic public footpaths. This represents a potentially very significant contribution to access to open space in this part of Reading.
- 8.4 Policies EN7, EN8, EN9 and EN10 in the new Local Plan state that the Council will not normally allow development proposals that will result in the loss of open space, except in exceptional circumstances, and providing that replacement open space is made available or the quality of existing open spaces serving the same area can be upgraded.
- 8.5 Areas identified as major areas of open space with specific attributes defined in the NPPF have been protected as Local Green Space and others as Public Open Space. On these sites, the Council will not normally allow any development or change of use on an adjacent site that would result in loss or jeopardise enjoyment.
- 8.6 The OSS notes the contribution that planting on the street frontage can make to increase street tree cover. It has been difficult to achieve this in some cases on development sites, but it remains an important consideration and is included within policy EN14 of the emerging Local Plan on trees, hedges and woodlands.
- 8.7 It should also be noted that an updated Playing Pitches Strategy is currently under development. The Playing Pitches Strategy looks at future provision and management of sports fields and improvement in their quality. More detail will be available soon.

9. MONITORING

- 9.1 The Pre-Submission Draft Local Plan outlines relevant indicators and targets for monitoring the total amount of public recreational space, loss of open space to development and new public open space brought into use through development. All data will be included in the Annual Monitoring Report, published each December on the Council's website².

² Annual Monitoring Reports can be found at: <http://www.reading.gov.uk/readingldf>