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MAKE SPACE FOR A SPECIALIST

One of the principle aims of any local authority is to improve the quality of life for residents and visitors. It is widely recognised that the experience of living in a town or city is greatly improved where there is ample provision of green spaces. Here Robert Donald, Managing Director of White Horse Contractors explains the raft of measures driving this activity and what landscape specifiers should consider in their implementation.

With a broad range of activity driving more green spaces for leisure, sport and recreation into Britain's towns and cities, it is important for those responsible to draw on the right expertise in order to ensure that projects are not only developed in a sustainable and environmentally-conscious way, but also to deliver schemes that are sustainable in the long-term too. That is, that they are cost-effective to maintain, with relatively low life costs, that they continue to represent a positive addition to their locations and that they are durable and long lasting.

It is undisputed that great parks, squares and streets make for a better quality of life for all concerned. A recent study found that the presence of even small parks in urban areas improved the wellbeing of those living there by cutting stress or boosting exercise (Dr Richard Mitchell from Glasgow University and Dr Frank Popham, from the University of St Andrews). It comes as no surprise then that, according to CABI, 91% of people say that parks and open spaces improve their quality of life and that 40% of people living in towns and cities visit their local green space at least once a week.

The government's Sustainable Communities Plan also recognises the importance of improving access to green areas within towns and cities. Three years on from the inception of the £38billion Plan, which set out an ambitious and long-term vision for creating thriving and sustainable communities in all regions, the 'Cleaner, Safer,

Greener' programme has delivered a step change in the provision of quality green space.

Some of the highlights here include; 309 Green Flag Award winners in 2009 (representing a 26% increase on 2008), 71% of people are satisfied with the quality of their green space (up 8% over the last 3 yrs) and £24.7m has been awarded to 1,100 Living Spaces community projects, 820 projects have been completed involving 63,000 local people.

At a statutory level open space is now firmly part of the community planning process. It is recognised that a shared, strategic approach to open space maximises its potential to contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable future at local, regional and national level.

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 introduced a new spatial planning system comprising regional spatial strategies and local development frameworks. The Planning Policy Statements, which are replacing the Planning Policy Guidance notes, highlight the importance of open space in the spatial planning process.

The most relevant national planning policies are contained in PPG17: Planning for open space, sport and recreation (2002). This has been under review this year as part of the process of streamlining national planning policy.

In addition, Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 places a statutory duty on all public authorities to conserve biodiversity. Supporting this there are a host of recent initiatives which are driving the creation of more open and green space in urban areas. These include the National Play Strategy for England (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2007), Building Schools for the Future (BSF), the children's plan: building brighter futures (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2007) and Communities in control, real people, real power (Communities and Local Government 2008).

It is in this light and wide range of influences that more and more local authorities are developing their own strategies to improve the green spaces in their areas or to introduce new facilities for the provision of open green spaces.

The basic aim of any strategy is to understand supply and demand for open spaces, identify deficiencies and to secure new areas. These provisions will also feed into local development frameworks and can also serve as material considerations for the determination of planning applications.

For example, the Mayor of London has published best practice guidance on preparing a play strategy and is also working with partners to develop guidance for tree strategies too. In fact CABE recommends that all types of open spaces, apart from private gardens, are considered within an open space strategy, irrespective of ownership and public access.

A common obstacle for many organisations during implementation is in accessing the right level of expertise at the early planning stages of any development work. For the local authority or landscape architect it is a question of exploring what services and knowledge different landscaping specialists can bring to a project and where the margins in terms of value engineering and environmental input can be gained for cost effective project delivery.

Often a project presents challenging obstacles, such as existing natural features, for example a stream or river that needs to be incorporated into a new public space. The type of work involved requires specialist equipment, techniques and input to ensure the long term success of the scheme.

This is exemplified in the modifications to the river Ray through Swindon town centre. This was required to help control the flow of water and improve the state of the wildlife areas. A complex process saw the specialist contractor, in this case White Horse Contractors, removing the retaining walls to improve river movement, installing minor meanders to enable flow change, erosion and deposition zones and direction changes. In addition the installation of riffles within the stream base to hold back water to the high side to help provide slack areas for fish spawning and to increase the speed and water movement over and below the riffles. Once this had taken place, hazel spilling and faggots were installed in order to provide habitat improvements and protect the new channel from excessive erosion, contributing to the sustainability of the scheme. Finally

the existing flood plain was lowered to provide wetland areas away from the main stream, increased floral habitat areas and bird breeding areas.

It is this attention to the biodiversity and environmental impact of the work being undertaken that a specialist landscaping contractor can bring to a project. Where work on this scale is being implemented in a town or city setting it is experience of similar work that will guide a specialist to solutions that will ensure the project has minimum impact on the local area. For example by reusing the excavated arisings elsewhere on a site the contractor can reduce the number of lorries moving into and out of the town or city, so keeping carbon emissions under control and enhancing the environmental agenda for the project.

Green spaces are a means for local authorities to improve the living experience for residents and visitors in towns and cities. By consulting with landscape architects and in turn securing the advice of a specialist at the earliest stages any scheme that promotes green spaces ensures it can be developed in a cost effective and compliant way, with an eye to the positive environmental and sustainable impact it can make.

For further information visit www.whitehorsecontractors.co.uk