

Mayoral Candidate response to Questions from Bristol Parks Forum

From George Ferguson - Received 4th October 2012

1 – Do you agree that Bristol's green spaces are one of the City's greatest assets and that, given the proven health benefits, investing in their maintenance and improvements should be a high priority for the City?

There is no doubt that many of the green spaces in and around the city are enormous assets in many ways. The 'blue spaces' within the city are of added benefit and should not be underestimated for the contribution that they make to the city as a whole:

Visually the numerous downs and surrounding hills provide a fantastic setting for the city, made more visible and attractive due to the surrounding topography. The blue spaces add sparkle and delight not just for their reflective quality but also the activities they attract.

Recreationally the green spaces are enjoyed by many Bristolians and visitors especially at weekends and during the various festivals. The 'blue' water areas within the city are also important and should be recognised as such and given similar status to our parks and open spaces.

Biodiversity can be enriched by looking after and enhancing the natural environment across the city. The green spaces across the city could be enhanced in many ways to achieve this to provide both visual and practical benefits.

In health terms there is plenty of research that demonstrates the importance of daily contact with the natural environment in terms of mental health (Reading University) aggressive behaviour & violence (Kuo & Sullivan) and general well being (Ulrich).

2. Do you support the 'Vision for Green Space in Bristol' and the eight objectives as set out on page three of the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy (P&GSS) as adopted by the Council in 2007?

Response:

Yes, but I would go further, and suggest Bristol should have an "**Open Space**" strategy, not confined to parks - this would include:

- Parks
- Open land
- Semi-private land (i.e around tower blocks / other social areas)
- Private, communal play spaces (i.e as in Clifton)
- Temporary play spaces (i.e temporary road closures for residents)
- Blue spaces - water and watersides.

In response to the specific items identified by the Bristol Parks Forum '**Vision for Green Space in Bristol**' and the eight objectives:

1. Raise the quality of parks and green spaces.

I agree, but in the context of an "Open Space" strategy as defined above.

2. Encourage greater use and enjoyment of Bristol's parks and green spaces by all sectors of the community.

We need to be careful how we define "all sectors" of community. I would prefer "responsible sectors of community". No motorbikes, no Pit-bulls chewing bark from trees, no irresponsible dog owners failing to pick up dog mess.

3. Contribute to the wider planning of the urban fabric of the city by providing a range of good quality parks and green spaces, which play a significant role in meeting the needs of balanced and sustainable communities and enhancing the urban landscape, to help make Bristol a green and sustainable city.

See initial response above.

4. Protect needed green space from development.

As a general principle I agree that needed green space should be retained and enhanced wherever possible, although we have to balance the need for inner city development and places to live with the desire to protect our Green Belt.

5. Rectify shortage in particular types of green space across the city to ensure all residents have access to formal, informal, natural, sports and children & young people's spaces.

I agree, but this is not always necessary by fully 'public' open spaces. Careful planning of future developments can provide efficient and safe private or semi-private environments for communal use which benefit residents, without affecting the wider provision of open space.

6. Provide a clear basis for beneficial investment in green spaces - identifying those areas of Bristol where investment and improvements in green space are most needed - helping the council 'spend better'.

This is an ambition I would support, especially in areas where the city currently lacks decent facilities.

7. Encourage active and healthy life-styles and promote social inclusion.

As part of my commitment to health and well-being throughout the city this would be an intrinsic part of my vision.

8. Encourage community participation in the improvement and management of green spaces.

Community engagement and local determination is fundamental to my vision of creating the future spaces neighbourhoods require, including communal orchards and local food growing initiatives.

3. If elected, will you uphold the decisions made by Cabinet and Neighbourhood Committees in respect of possible disposal of sites covered by the P&GSS and guarantee that none of the sites will be sold except those where disposal has already been agreed by Neighbourhood Committees?

I would not recommend actively looking to sell off any further sites. However, the process seemed to be all or nothing and maybe it should be given some further thought and time. For example some spaces are underused and uncared for because they aren't overlooked and therefore can attract undesirable behaviour.

It might be that sensitive small scale partial development in some locations could provide an optimum solution - maybe funds could be raised by permitting a proportion of development to pay for green space improvements. Each site would need to be considered on its merits and the aspirations of the local community.

4. Do you agree that successful Park Groups involving local people are vital to ensure that our parks and green spaces fully achieve their potential to benefit the health and well-being of Bristol's residents? What is your view of the way Neighbourhood Partnerships should work with Park Groups to achieve this?

Yes, so long as the Park Groups and Neighbourhood Partnerships have strategies to engage with the whole community. Whilst toddlers and infants are fairly well catered for across the city, teenagers and young adults have few places to go. The 13-17 year olds should be encouraged to speak out for what they would like. There should be opportunities to engage school children and members of the local community through vegetable and fruit growing, bulb planting and suchlike - all of which can bring about further community cohesion and engagement i.e. planting an orchard >picking & harvesting apples > making cider/toffee apples/cake > Wassail... I would like to see every schoolchild in the city having 'ownership' of a tree.

5. If elected, will you ensure that sufficient funding is allocated to revenue budgets to ensure that the standard of maintenance in Bristol's Parks is improved year on year as envisaged by the P&GSS? Do you agree that appointing Park Keepers to individual sites, giving them a say in how the park is managed and encouraging them to engage with users and Park Groups is beneficial to the maintenance of parks and to the public perception of the way parks are managed?

Maintenance of parks and associated budgets should be reviewed. Many of our parks and open spaces were conceived decades ago when concerns for sustainability/biodiversity/health & well being etc were not issues for concern. We therefore have many large open spaces that are primarily laid to grass that is expensive to mow and maintain placing pressure on maintenance budgets. Whilst it is desirable to have some areas of mown grass for informal games/picnics/barbeques/football etc there are many areas that could be identified for reduced maintenance regimes such as slopes too steep for the sort of activities that require a mown grass surface. These areas could be sown with perennial flower mixes (similar/equivalent to those developed for the Olympic Village) that would not only require mowing just once a year, instead of 10 or 15 times, but would also increase the biodiversity and attractiveness of the area.

6. If elected, will you use your position as Mayor to work with Park Groups and Council officers to find sources of capital funding for Bristol's Parks to bring about the improvements needed to ensure that everyone has access to high quality green spaces in their neighbourhood?

We should work together not just to achieve high quality green spaces but also green streets. We should also focus on high quality 'blue' spaces and recognise their value and benefit to Bristolians and visitors to the city.

7. Dog walkers are major users of Bristol's green space and dog walking has proven health benefits. While the majority of dog owners are responsible and clean up after their dogs; dog fouling is one of the greatest source of complaints from park users. As well as being unpleasant it presents a risk to health, particularly to children. Do you have any innovative ideas to address this issue?

Most dog owners are responsible and management of dog fouling should be their responsibility, however a minority seem to turn a blind eye. Although difficult to enforce, one possible recommendation would be to keep all dogs on their leads during the hours of darkness.