

THAMES PARKS VISION STATEMENT

Reading is almost unique amongst large Thameside towns. It has a ribbon of green space almost entirely free of development, to most of which the public has free access. In other large towns along the Thames, like Maidenhead and Henley, access to large stretches of the river was long since lost to private development. In spite of the financial pressures under which local authorities are operating, inappropriate development in the greenfield sites along the Thames in Reading must be avoided. This unique asset must be carefully managed for the benefit of future generations.

The Thames Parks Plan will contribute significantly to the delivery of the Cultural Strategy. The ability of open spaces to enhance a town's health, learning, identity and environmental sustainability is well-known. In the Thames parks, this potential has a distinctive opportunity for fulfilment. The Plan also specifically provides for access and inclusion, diversity, creativity, and economic sustainability, aiming to make the parks contribute in the fullest possible way to creating a modern European city.

The Thames Parks Plan aims to link physically the eight Thames parks in Reading into a single unit with new enhanced identity: a chain of quality green space with high amenity and landscape value. At the same time, it aims to respect the distinctive character of each of the parks, so that one's experience of the river changes with movement along it. This provides variety, and it is an opportunity to provide something for everyone.

The Thames Parks Plan aims to increase significantly the number and range of people using the parks. Because of its uniqueness in the Thames River Corridor, the Thames parks have the potential to become a regional attraction. The parks are however the particular heritage of the people of Reading, and better services are intended to attract more residents to use the parks.

The Thames Parks Plan aims to identify opportunities to generate income. A range of alternatives is proposed, from charging for some activities currently permitted free of charge (where charging is entirely justified) to seeking private developers of new facilities. In particular, more can be done to attract holiday-makers to this beautiful location, conveniently situated for London, Oxford and a host of other places of interest. Providing attractions does not mean creating a seedy, glitzy river frontage. Many 21st century holiday-makers are more interested in eco-tourism: 'green' activities during the day and all the benefits of a modern town at night. In the Thames Corridor, Reading has the opportunity to provide an experience unique in Britain.

The Thames Parks Plan proposes recreating the parks as an attractive and loved linear riverside parkland with a delightful promenade ambience. As with many other areas, urban parks need constant investment to improve and maintain facilities. Reading must consider how best to attract appropriate high-quality leisure related development which provides a sustainable way of providing high-quality green space that meets the needs of its inhabitants and attracts visitors - creating facilities worthy of a thriving town with city aspirations.

November 2004

1. INTRODUCTION

The Thames parks form a large area of open space bordering the River Thames as it flows through Reading. The Thames Parks Plan has been prepared by the Parks and Open Spaces Team within the Arts and Leisure Directorate of Reading Borough Council. It is intended to provide a strategy for management that the Council, can pursue over the next 20 years. The plan provides a framework that will enable Reading to reap the full benefit of the banks of the river for both local users and visitors to the town.

2. SITE DESCRIPTION

A detailed site description of each of the Thames parks is included later. This section provides an overview of the main features of the Thames corridor in Reading.

2.1 Location

Reading developed in the Thames flood plain along the banks of the Kennet River and Holy Brook. Originally, the Thames flowed (from west to east) to the north of the town centre, and, since it was navigable as far as Reading, formed a transport route from London to the interior, with the mode of transport changing at Reading. Subsequent expansion means that the river is now an integral part of the fabric of the town. As the Thames has a wide flood plain, the low lying land associated with it has developed into a series of parks and towpaths that form, within Reading Borough, a green riverside ribbon from Kennetmouth in the east to the Roebuck public house in the west. This pattern of development implies (i) that the town's focus/orientation is away from the Thames, and (ii) that the river is accessible along its entire length through the town (unlike the Kennet and Holy Brook, where dense development precludes access to certain parts of the waterways).

The string of parks consists of:

Northern bank from west to east:

1. Caversham Court Gardens
2. Christchurch Meadow
3. Hills Meadow

Southern bank from east to west:

4. The Coal woodland
5. Kings Meadow, which includes the former Nabisco sports ground
6. the Thames Promenade and Rivermead
7. part of Scours Lane

Islands:

8. View Island
9. Bucks Eyot

There are public rights of way along the southern bank towpath from Kennetmouth to the Borough boundary at the Roebuck and on the north bank from Mill Lane to Caversham Bridge. These link the parks on both sides of the river. The towpath is part of the 180-mile Thames Path from Lechlade to London, and the Sustrans National Cycle Network.

2.2 Overall nature, main features and access

The Thames Parks provide the largest single area of publicly accessible open space in Reading: approximately 80 ha. The variety of spaces includes formal gardens, allotments

and lawns at Caversham Court; woodland at The Coal; close-mown grass fields and a range of recreational and sporting areas at Hills Meadow, Kings Meadow, Christchurch Meadow and Scours Lane; a waterway; footpaths and cycle ways; and intermittently managed, semi-wild vegetation at View Island and Scours Lane.

2.3 Ownership, tenancies and leases

Reading Borough Council owns all of the public parks in this part of the Thames Corridor. Some privately owned areas of open space are included in aspects of the plan: Little John's Farm and private land at Scours Lane.

Very little of the land is subject to tenancies. The islands at Bucks Eyot are leased to residents, and can be reclaimed within six months. Roughly 2 ha of land at Scours Lane is leased to Reading Town FC.

2.4 Zoning and designations

The land is currently zoned for recreational and amenity use.

The towpath is a designated right of way, from Horseshoe Bridge to the Roebuck. There is a public right of way along the footpath and cycle way in Hills Meadow and Christchurch Meadows between Mill Green and Promenade Road. There is also a public footpath over Caversham Lock and weir via View Island to Mill Green, and another along Cow Lane from Richfield Avenue to the Thames Promenade.

2.5 Main problems and opportunities

The Thames parks are crucial to the landscape of Reading. The riverside is one of the town's most *significant natural features* providing it with a unique sense of identity.

The provision of space for *varied recreational activities* is the primary opportunity created by the parks. All nine of the main uses of major sites listed in the RBC 'Leisure and Arts Strategy' (1997:1) are provided at the Thameside parks. The Thames parks allow riverside walking without having to drive out into the countryside. They also have facilities for children's play, for BMX and skateboarding, for football, rugby, tennis and putting, for rowing, canoeing, cruising and mooring, for angling, for cycling, for picnicking, and for wildlife observation. They are used by families, office workers, young people and dog walkers, as a meeting place for the retired and those with toddlers, and by visitors. A variety of *events* takes place each year in the parks; there is scope for increasing the range.

Of the *facilities not provided* in the Thames parks, it is an objective of this plan to identify those which it might be appropriate to introduce. Examples are camping, residential mooring, catering and art-in-the-park. Not all of these are necessarily desirable, but their provision needs to be considered.

The Thames parks provide formal *learning opportunities*, through the creation of an outdoor education centre for use by schools and youths groups.

The parks provide an *opportunity to generate direct and indirect income*. An enabling management regime will allow private enterprise to provide leisure facilities.

Parks also contribute to *green travel* initiatives. A significant number of people travel through the Thames Parks, either on foot or by bike, to work or to town. Much more could

be done to make sure that parks themselves are both through-routes and destinations in green transport initiatives. Moreover, public transport connections will be essential in order to avoid a situation where most visitors arrive by car and need a car park.

The Thames parks are largely within the *flood plain*, and therefore have a key role to play in addressing increasingly frequent flooding. This is now subject to government guidance, which limits development in the floodplain (PPG 25).

There is a need for coordinated *promotion* of the parks, opportunities for recreation and the programme of activities. The plan makes recommendations about better publicity.

The growth of the Thames parks has been piecemeal. A *long-term strategy* for their future development is urgent, as many of the pressures they now bear were not envisaged by the original designers. The reasons for this strategy are considered next.

3. THE NEED FOR A PLAN

There is a range of reasons as to why it is necessary to develop a new overarching plan for the Thames parks now.

- Decline in park quality

Much of the fabric of the parks is now in need of investment: paths, riverbanks, play equipment and buildings. This matters, because, viewed as a whole, the Thames parks are one of the most heavily used facilities in Reading.

- Growth of Reading

Reading has grown rapidly in the past ten years, in wealth and in population. Its green spaces no longer meet the town's needs. The town now has aspirations to city status and good quality facilities may improve prospects for a change in civic status.

- Recent and proposed changes along the Thames

It is necessary to respond to the changing profile of the Thames in Reading caused by new office and residential developments.

Several new areas of land have come into the public domain in the last few years: the Huntley and Palmer sports ground at Kings Meadow, The Coal woodland, View Island, and some of the river frontage at Dean's Farm. These create an opportunity to widen the range of leisure facilities available along the river.

- Compliance with new legislation

The Disability Discrimination Act came into force in 2004, and local authorities need to assess all facilities for accessibility and compliance with this act.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) also has implications for the town's open spaces, including, for example, rights of way.

- The development of regional attractions

Many large towns and cities now have a major open space venue that is promoted as a regional attraction. The Thames parks, promoted and managed as a regional attraction, with a mix of locally, regionally and internationally recognised events, is a key objective.

- Changes in community priorities

Originally, parks were intended for human welfare and not ecological sustainability. Since the 1960s, there has been a growing concern about biodiversity, and perceptions of what constitutes human welfare now include opportunities to visit places of ecological interest. The riverside parks have an important role to play as both habitats and wildlife corridors.

In addition, there are growing concerns over the health of the human population. The need for regular exercise is becoming a higher priority. Public parks provide both space and opportunity for free access to a range of physical activities.

- The need to attract funding

One purpose of this plan is to provide guidance for the systematic assessment of funding needs and opportunities.

4. POLICY CONTEXT

4.1 Strategic Objectives

The Thames parks contribute to all three of the Council's strategic objectives:

- To develop Reading as a green city with a sustainable environment and economy at the heart of the Thames Valley
- To promote equality, social inclusion and a safe and healthy environment for all
- To establish Reading as a learning city and as a stimulating and rewarding place for residents and visitors

4.2 City 2020 Vision

The City 2020 vision sees Reading as the premier centre for the performing arts, leisure, sport and education in the Thames Valley, with the widest range of cultural facilities for residents and visitors. The Thames parks contribute to this vision by providing access to many water- and land-based recreational activities in a uniquely beautiful location. The aim of the Plan is to improve the quality and range of amenities offered.

The vision for the city as a whole is based around environmentally and socially sustainable communities, each providing the full range of day-to-day needs. The Thames parks enhance the environmental quality of Reading, providing an attractive landscape, mitigating air pollution, supporting wildlife, and providing a place for people to meet and relax. The Plan aims to enhance the capacity of the parks to deliver sustainability.

The vision for the city centre envisages links from the station to a wider range of cultural, leisure and business facilities. One of the long-term objectives of the Thames Parks Plan is to link the riverside parks to both the station and the city centre, so that access via bicycle, foot or public transport is easy and attractive.

4.3 Community Strategy

Seven key themes have been identified as chapter headings for the Community Strategy, all of which are addressed by the Thames Park Plan.

Accessible spaces: The Thames parks are accessible and flat, have wide paths, are on the Thames Path National Trail and the Sustrans National Cycle Network, and are well served by public transport and car parking. They are free to users, do not need to be booked for informal use, and never close. However, there are some areas that are difficult for disabled access; there are communities that are unable to access the Thames parks easily because of rail and road barriers; and the town centre and Thames parks are geographically close but not well connected for pedestrians at present.

Healthy people: Urban parks were originally created to meet the health needs of the urban population. The Thames parks play a role in improving health, by providing a beautiful location for sport, exercise, relaxation and social interaction. The Plan aims to ensure that these spaces are protected, improved, and increasingly used.

Inclusive society: The Thames Parks are a free and accessible resource for all, regardless of income, physical ability or ethnic origin. It is possible that some minority groups are not availing themselves of the Thames parks, and ways will be found to address this. There will be no barrier to anyone wishing to enjoy the parks.

Learning community: The Thames parks contribute to learning in a number of ways. They have local history interest, are home to a range of wildlife, can be used for canoeing and orienteering, and provide a range of subjects for art students.

Quality environments: Reading is almost unique amongst large Thameside towns, with its ribbon of accessible green space near the town centre. The Plan aims to manage this asset carefully for future generations, and to enhance the quality of the riverside parks.

Safe places: Incidents which threaten public safety are rare along the Thames. However, safety is a major public concern, and the Thames Parks Plan is concerned to ensure that visitors to the park are, and feel, safe.

Thriving economy: There is evidence that investment in parks leads to more investment in local communities. Quality urban environments attract businesses and visitors. The Thames Parks Plan aims to improve Reading's most prominent green spaces, and to raise the income-generating potential of the Thames parks themselves.

4.4 The Cultural Strategy

The Cultural Strategy promotes a vision of Reading as a leisure city, with cultural facilities that reflect its identity as a growing regional capital within a European context. In line with Government guidance its interpretation of the term 'cultural' is broad. The Thames Parks Plan is a vehicle for the delivery of all areas of the Cultural Strategy.

Access: providing informal sports, children's play, sport and passive recreation, as well as a venue for special cultural events, like the annual WOMAD and rock festivals. The range of cultural events will be expanded.

Health: playing a particularly significant role in improving health by providing venues for exercise, as well as psychological and therapeutic benefits of open space. There will be improvements to the Thames parks as venues for formal sport and informal exercise.

Learning: providing opportunities for observing wildlife or local history, and venues for training for a range of water and land sports. Promotion of the parks as a learning resource is included in the Plan.

Creativity: providing a large range of subjects for painting and sketching, and space for performance art and art installations. Greater use will be made of the Thameside parks for art-in-the-park.

Social inclusion: providing opportunities to bring different communities together in a way in which their cultures can be enjoyed. The parks will be assessed so that, as far as possible, there is no barrier to any one who wishes to enjoy them.

Diversity: providing a venue for a cultural activity and expression, reflective of the different communities of Reading and the wider world. All communities will be engaged to ensure that the sense of ownership of the Thames parks is felt by the whole society.

Environmental sustainability: providing wildlife corridors and habitats; influencing micro-climates; and mitigating air pollution. This facet of the Thames parks will be improved as part of the ongoing management of these sites.

Economic sustainability: contributing significantly to the value of Reading by providing small business opportunities, encouraging visitors, adding value to adjacent properties, and generating income. Partners will be sought to ensure adequate investment.

Reading's image and identity: defining the fabric of the town, as a significant natural feature, and forming an essential aspect of urban regeneration. It is essential that the quality of the landscape is enhanced and maintained.

City 2020: reflecting Reading's higher profile. Quality public spaces are an essential part of urban regeneration, and demonstrate a city's sense of civic pride.

5. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overarching aims of the Thames Park Plan are:

- To act as a vehicle for delivery of the Council's strategic aims, the City 2020 vision, the Community Strategy and the Cultural Strategy
- To protect and enhance the existing parks and open spaces
- To meet the leisure needs of residents of Reading
- To promote the Thames parks as an attraction of regional importance

The specific objectives are:

- To promote the Thames parks as a unique local feature, and to create a clear Thames parks identity
- To identify opportunities to bring more attractions into the Thames Parks
- To identify development opportunities that will bring both capital and revenue resources into the parks
- To improve the quality of the landscape, the standards of maintenance, and the attention to detail in the parks themselves
- To ensure that the biodiversity of the parks is enhanced
- To improve the sustainability of the management of the parks
- To generate community involvement in decision making about the management of the Thames parks

- To increase flood protection in Reading by increasing the water storage capacity of the flood plain

Not all of these objectives can be addressed at the same time. Improvements will need to be made as funds and opportunities become available, beginning with one or two key places, and progressing from these to encompass the whole area over time.

The main priority is to begin to establish a modern parks management regime to advance some new ideas. Following acceptance of the Plan, a management plan for each of the parks will be drawn up to provide a strategic framework for implementation of the overall Plan; to set standards for maintenance; to make explicit lines of accountability; and to provide a benchmark for monitoring progress.

6. RESOURCES

6.1 Finance

External funding is the most realistic opportunity to fund improvements to the Thames parks to allow them adequately to serve the growing and changing demands of the town. There are opportunities for identifying land for development that will generate an investment in the parks aspect of our essential public infrastructure. Other possibilities include, where appropriate, lottery grants, partnership arrangements with relevant agencies, licensing agreements to operate income-generating facilities, and private-public partnerships to increase the provision of facilities and to improve the landscape.

If the plan for the Thames parks is an element of the long-term vision for Reading, then resources can be attracted as part of the regeneration of the city. City 2020 will provide an opportunity for a completely new focus on the Thames parks, with the area between the two road bridges being substantially changed, and access from the town centre and across to the north of the river made much more attractive. This plan therefore needs to be linked to or incorporated into the City 2020 process to ensure that both initiatives dovetail together.

6.2 Staffing

The Parks service is exploring changing from scheduled work programmes to a performance-based system. For this to be successful, it is essential that staff have a measure of autonomy and are empowered to make improvements to the service provided. This will become increasingly important as more site-based staff are employed.

In 2002 a decision was made to base a few of the maintenance staff permanently in the parks. This was a change from the previous twelve years, when almost all grounds maintenance was carried out by mobile gangs. Where this has been done, the approach has created a sense of site 'ownership', and maintenance has improved. A summer time attendant has been associated with the Christchurch Meadows pool for many years. However, the creation of new posts to provide customer service should be sought. The role can range from providing information, running activities, managing and supporting events, dealing with misuse and anti-social behaviour, and managing revenue-generating schemes, like mooring and fishing. In addition, if an active tree management programme is considered necessary - as is recommended for several sites (see below) - resources will need to be identified to carry this out.

7. THE THAMES PARKS

7.1 Caversham Court Gardens



View towards St Peters Church

7.1.1 Features and use

Caversham Court Gardens is an historic garden on the north bank next to St Peters Church. It has lawns, annual bedding, specimen trees and shrub beds. The old kitchen gardens are now allotments. The site has substantial heritage interest. It is connected to a stable block, which was part of an old house now demolished, and a gazebo, which is 370 years old.

The gardens are used for passive recreation: bench-sitting and strolling. Young peoples sometimes use the lawns for football.

7.1.2 Problems

The historic features need restoration - and several trees require replacement. A risk assessment needs to be carried out on the old retaining wall in the allotment gardens.

The tranquillity of the site is sometimes disrupted by unruly behaviour.

Caversham Court is not directly connected to the other riverside parks. Signage to the garden needs to be improved, as it is currently somewhat isolated.

7.1.3 Recommendations

Detailed recommendations are contained in a separate management plan for Caversham Court, prepared to support an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for funds to restore the gardens. The proposals include:

- Historically authentic restoration of the gardens and structures
- Interpretation features that double as exploratory play areas for children
- A 'tea garden' catering facility, staffed by volunteers to raise funds for charity
- A landing jetty for pleasure boats and ferries

- A range of events
- A full-time site-based gardener

In addition, it is recommended that:

- The 'Friends of Caversham Court' group be revived
- Thames parks signage be installed to direct pedestrians to the gardens
- Road signage be installed to direct car users to the gardens

7.2 Christchurch Meadows



View across to Christchurch Meadows

7.2.1 Features and use

Christchurch Meadows, on the north bank between Caversham and Reading Bridges, is an area of close-mown grass with scattered specimen trees. Along the northern boundary is a small brook, lined with mature weeping willows. The brook separates the two areas of playing fields between the river and Gosbrook Road, although small bridges provide a link between them. A path, surfaced with tar, runs from the Promenade Road access in the west, along the bank, to Reading Bridge, with a secondary path through the children's play area. Other access points are from Wolsey Road, Elliots Way, and Gosbrook Road. The park is easily accessible to wheelchair users.

There is pay-and-display parking for both cars and coaches at Hills Meadows. This car park is already well lit, and has good road links with all parts of Reading.

There are significant new settlements that overlook the park, adding a sense of security. These are largely screened from the park by large trees along the boundaries, which soften the visual impact especially the northern boundary parallel to the river.

There are formal recreation facilities. The University of Reading boathouse is located to the west. There is mooring at the end of Wolsey Road for boats to load, and short-term/overnight mooring on the eastern stretch near Reading Bridge. A well-used children's play area and paddling pool are located near the river bank, together with picnic tables. The large, flat open space to the east is used for sport. East of this are three tennis courts and a small golf putting area, and north of the site are more football

fields. A degraded pavilion with changing facilities is located between the two areas of playing pitches near George Street, and a toilet block is on the northern boundary. The level of weekend sporting use, especially football, is high.

Informal recreation includes (dog-)walking, swan-feeding, jogging, cycling and sitting on the benches and grass. Christchurch Meadows is a very popular 'social' park, used regularly as a meeting place by both local residents and visitors from further afield (especially by young mothers and the elderly). The riverbank provides safe angling, is popular with children as well as adults, and is reasonably safe for wheelchair bound anglers. This popularity with disabled and young anglers is at least in part due to ease of access and adjacent car parking.

There are numerous businesses in the vicinity that hire out boats, and this adds to the attractiveness of the park as a mooring venue for visitors.

The landscape value is high, needs attention (see below). There are good views of the river from the park, and good views of the park from offices across the river, the bridges and George Street, and the river and towpath, which means that many people gain significant benefit from the presence of the park without even visiting it.

There is a very high level of commuter use between Caversham and the centre of Reading, largely because the park is a good through route for both walkers and cyclists.

Christchurch Meadows has a summertime member of staff on duty, to watch and collect any fees payable for the sports facilities, mooring, the children's play area and the paddling pool.

The site is liable to flooding in winter.

7.2.2 Problems

The landscape quality is in need of attention due to age and high levels of use and some degree of abuse. This manifests itself in a number of ways.

The grass along the footpath is patchy, mainly because of the swans and geese, which congregate in large numbers on the bank. The grass and path are covered with bird droppings, particularly in the part of the park closest to Caversham Bridge.

The banks are breaking down in places, due to erosion from boat wash, and the fact that parts of the river bank are many years old.

The pavilion and toilet facilities are dilapidated and regularly vandalised. Graffiti is a persistent problem.

The playing fields are often flooded in winter.

Rubbish collects in the brook, which suffers from a lack of flow, and its banks are overgrown, and very difficult to maintain. The tarmac pathway is breaking up and is regularly patched but needs resurfacing. The furniture, (signs bins benches and lamp posts) are in need of refurbishment or replacement.

7.2.3 Recommendations

- Consult the local community on specific and detailed park improvements. There is a large residential community immediately adjacent to the park, and the possibility of

creating a park management advisory group for Christchurch Meadows will be explored. In addition, there are several businesses with an interest in the park; these can be engaged in future improvements.

- Explore the opportunity created by the need to refurbish the pavilion for creating a light refreshment catering outlet. This might be constrained by seasonality, limiting its use to the summer season. A private developer should be sought for this venture, and the contract should incorporate service for events.
- Create a regional attraction for children, linked with the play area, putting area and catering facility, to enhance the park as a destination for a day out. The focus will be family-oriented physical and educational facilities in a landscaped setting. A brief will be drafted to make firm proposals and suggest how to proceed with the design and implementation.
- Re-landscape the area around the brook. The channel will be cleared of rubbish, widened and planted with marginal plants. This will add considerably to the landscape quality of the park.
- Plant more specimen trees along the northern boundary that runs parallel to the river. The trees are too sparse to feel like parkland, and a programme of tree planting now will mean that there are trees reaching maturity when the current trees senesce.
- Ways will be found to encourage the swans to congregate away from the bank. By changing the mowing regime, so that grass is longer further from the bank, swans and geese may be enticed to graze away from the path, relieving the grass near the path from both trampling and the constant addition of nutrients.
- Prepare plans for riverbank repairs. Over sections of the bank, treatment has recently been changed from a formal to informal one, for reasons both of cost and biodiversity.
- There are proposals to remove the winter sports use from the Meadows. This will make it possible to explore alternative uses for the pavilion, including community use or catering.
- Remove the existing toilet block, and provide new toilet facilities near the paddling pool and play area.
- Give site-based staff greater autonomy for making minor improvements. Since there are already staff based in the park, there is an opportunity to retrain them in working practices to encourage them to engage with park users, feedback information to management staff, and carry out minor changes on a day to day basis.
- Provide pleasure cruisers with an access point near to the play area and Reading Bridge. Given that there are difficulties with running steamers from the current Thames Promenade site (see below), a new site on Christchurch Meadows has the advantages of being conveniently located near to the Hills Meadow car park and allowing more space for cruisers and customers.
- Work with the property developer of the adjacent site in Patrick Road to improve the gateway from Gosbrook Road.
- Improve signage
- There may be an opportunity, associated with the redevelopment of the station site, to create better cyclist and pedestrian access across the river, terminating in Christchurch Meadows. This will be considered early in the planning stages.
- The approach to Christchurch Meadows could be made more visible, if a footbridge were built to link Pipers Island to the north bank. This would provide easier access to the northern parks from the car parking on the south bank near the Holiday Inn, and it would increase the accessibility of the Pipers Island restaurant.

7.3 Hills Meadow



Meadow

The skate park at Hills

7.3.1 Features and use

Hills Meadow, on the northern bank between Reading Bridge and Mill Road, is largely a pay-and-display car park, recycling site, BMX track and skate park. All of these facilities are well-used. About half of the site is not used as a park. It is currently laid out as a large tarmac and loose stone area. What is not used for other purposes is reserved for use by circuses and fairs. The brook that crosses Christchurch Meadows flows north of the BMX area, and joins the Thames at Heron Island. Vehicular access is from George Street; pedestrian and cycle access is from Reading Bridge, George Street, Mill Road, Queens Road and Heron Island.

7.3.2 Problems and opportunities

Hills Meadow is the least parklike of the Thameside parks.

The car park puddles, and is not visually or physically separated from the surrounding land, so that the edges simply disintegrate into stone chip and grass.

The skate park is a built structure adjacent to the car park. It is very popular and heavily used. It is in urgent need of replacement.

The BMX track is an old BMX racing venue, which was created and run by a BMX club. When the club closed, the track was handed back to the Council. It is used informally by cyclists of all ages but is relatively unmanaged. A more comprehensive cycling facility could be developed, including an additional trail around the perimeter of the existing track, and properly designed BMX jumps and ramps. It would benefit from extension and refurbishment.

The long grass surrounding the BMX track has high ecological value. It is diverse, and is managed as a mixture of frequently mown grass and conservation grass. The slopes of the BMX track provide an interesting habitat, and the site has a high score of wildflowers.

The recycling site was located at Hills Meadow as there was nowhere else available locally. This has degraded this part of the park, and, although recent attempts have been made to improve it with landscaping, it does not provide an attractive entrance into Caversham.

The river frontage has a range of trees that have not been managed for some time. A large number are willows, which are falling over the path as they collapse. These should be repollarded. Those nearest Reading Bridge were repollarded in the winter of 2001/2, and have since regenerated well. There are a number of sycamore saplings, which could be replaced with alder, a more suitable riverside tree, which is suffering a decline at the moment, but which has an interesting form and provides for wildlife in a number of ways.

While the system of paths and access is adequate, the quality is poor. This is particularly true of the local community entrances in Mill Road and Queens Road. These need to be improved to create a sense of place and restrict unauthorised access. Access from Christchurch Meadows needs some restriction to prevent inappropriate use, particularly by cars and motorcycles. There is a desire line from George Street along the banks of the ditch to the riverside paths. It may be appropriate to provide a non-metalled path here. A short link of path should be constructed to link the new wooden bridge that crosses the millstream, with the cycle path, and to improve the gap in the wall that was created to improve this access.

There is some bank subsidence by Reading Bridge which will soon need repairing.

7.3.3 Recommendations

- Resurface the car park, and enclose it to clearly define the park and non-park areas.
- Investigate extending and modernising the skate park. Alternatively, there are plans to build a mega-skate facility at Richfield Avenue to replace the Hills Meadow track.
- Investigate extending and modernising the BMX track. As part of the process, pursue the possibility of bringing in a new club to manage events and redevelop the circuit, and provide a young people meeting shelter.
- Relocate or screen the recycling site.
- Engage in active tree management, including replanting, on the site.
- As a priority, attention needs to be given to paths and access points: resurfacing of paths, permanent surfacing of well-used desire lines, and the prevention of unauthorised access are all important.
- A new crossing from Hills Meadow to the western end of View Island and on to the weir would make the pedestrian and cycle use of this crossing more direct and therefore

popular. This would also benefit any development of the Lock Island and Kings meadow by providing more passing trade and better vehicle parking for visitors.

- The stretch of bank by Reading Bridge is an alternative launching place for pleasure steamers (see the recommendations for Christchurch Meadows above). As for Christchurch Meadows, this location has good access to car parking, and there would be little or no conflict with other users. A landing structure would need to be constructed.
- Improve the ecological value of the site, providing a corridor between View Island and the stream at Christchurch Meadow. This would contribute to objectives laid out in the Biodiversity Action Plan. The area between the BMX track (and including some of it) and the rear of the private gardens in Queens Road is an ideal location for a wildlife habitat.
- In the longer term this might prove to be a potential site for a complementary new leisure facility. If this were the case, it would have to be recognised as an opportunity to improve the landscape in this area.

The Meadow is one of three currently being considered as a site for a replacement theatre and conference centre. If this project does not progress on this site, then alternative Leisure-oriented developments should be considered as a means of raising money to reinvest in the Parks infrastructure.

7.4 View Island



View across to View Island

7.4.1 Features and use

View Island is a large island in the river below the weir at Caversham. It is joined to both north and south banks by means of bridges, boardwalks and a causeway over the weir.

The island has been open to the public since 2000. It is accessible only by means of a boardwalk from the public footpath between Hills Meadow and Caversham Lock. Wheelchair access is possible from the car park at Hills Meadow.

The island is intended as an informal place: there are few facilities, and the grass is cut primarily to encourage wildflowers. There is a circular path, a pond, a canoe landing stage and some rustic benches. There are also five interpretation and educational signs, four of which are situated in the 'outdoor classroom', a rectangular group of trees surrounding the remains of the old tennis courts. The island provides a strong contrast to the formality of the more intensively managed parks along the Thames corridor. It is the only park in Reading from which dogs are banned.

7.4.2 Problems

This park is difficult to maintain. It is prone to flooding. In spite of prohibitions, there is misuse in the form of dogs, fishing and drug abuse. Because there is only one pedestrian access point, visitors feel intimidated if groups of young peoples congregate near the entrance or on the Mill Stream path.

7.4.3 Recommendations

In order to improve the considerable biodiversity potential of the site, it is proposed that a new reed bed be created. It is also important to add second entrance and to resurface the path. There are also plans to explore visitor mooring. The outdoor classroom could be used as a small scale performance venue.

It may be possible to explore changing the fishing situation to enable the island to be better managed.

Enforcement of the by-laws relating to dogs and to fishing would be undertaken by additional staff when resources permit more on-site employment.

7.5 Kings Meadow (including the former Huntley and Palmer sportsground) and The Coal woodland

7.5.1 Features and use

The Coal woodland is at the eastern end of the Reading section of the Thames corridor. It starts immediately adjacent to the foot of Horseshoe Bridge at Kennetmouth. It is a wooded area raised out of the flood plain. There is a towpath between the woodland and the river bank, and a small area of open space adjacent to the river which extends beyond the towpath and into the river. The woodland separates Tesco store from the river.

Kings Meadow, which includes the former Nabisco sports ground, stretches from the western end of The Coal to Meadow Road (near Reading Bridge). The park is open fields of short grass right up to the river bank, with some perimeter trees. It is prone to flooding. There is a car park in the south-west corner on Napier Road. In the northwest corner of the Kings Meadow is a dilapidated Edwardian river-fed bathing station. Opposite this, is an island and river lock, owned by the Environment Agency, the redevelopment of which is currently being considered.

The playing fields are used by football clubs throughout the season, although fixtures may be disrupted by flooding.

Events, like the annual fireworks display and a beer fest, and other large scale activities are held on the site.

7.5.2 Problems and opportunities

The park does not really cater for local residential users, and the future use of the park ought to be carefully considered to ensure that it caters for an increase in dwellings in surrounding catchment areas. There are no children's play facilities; sports use is by teams with no link to the area; and events attract people from Greater Reading and beyond.

The retail unit at the eastern end of King's Meadow has been developed as housing, which will mean a significant change in the use of the park. There are also large new housing developments on the south side of the railway in Kenavon Drive and Gasworks Road. This intensifies the need to create access across the railway. King's Meadow is the only major open space within easy walking distance of these new residences. There is an old railway underpass, which, if re-opened, would make the park accessible to the Gasworks Road and Kenavon Drive developments. Added advantages would be greater pedestrian and cyclist access to Sustrans National Cycle Network and Tesco.

The new housing development is visually intrusive. Some vegetative screening is needed to reduce the impact on the park, without eliminating the positive security effects that discreet overlooking can have.

The woodland to the east has a path network that does not reflect either the existing use or the needs of the new housing development near Tesco. The paths will need to be realigned with the clear desire lines through the woods.

The site is popular with travellers who frequently occupy the site illegally, damaging the perimeter security fencing to gain access and causing substantial disruption. Security of the site needs considerable improvement to prevent this happening.

There are internal boundaries within the park, and between the park and the riverside - a remnant from the time when parts of the park were not accessible to the public. They are no longer necessary, but serve both to break up the site and provide wildlife corridors. However, they do confine internal movement, and could be removed in places. In particular, the old car park and knee rail fencing situated in the middle of the park needs to be removed. The track that led to it should be resurfaced and extended to the towpath, improving links for pedestrians and cyclists.

There is a stand of large, very old London plane trees along the north-western boundary that are recognised as a significant tree belt. The Coal woodland is well wooded and contains many specimen trees. The woodland needs active management. There are other specimen trees in the park, and a significant amount of new planting has been done in the park over the last five years. Planned new planting needs to be continued.

The pay-and-display car park is an eyesore.

The prefabricated sports changing facilities are unsightly, in spite of recent refurbishment. The Edwardian Boe is currently derelict and had been used as storage. It is a listed structure. The Environment Agency yard on the island is also unsightly, and the pedestrian river crossing at the weir, which is well-used, is too narrow for wheelchairs and buggies. The site provides an opportunity for sympathetic development to improve the range of facilities available in the park, taking into account the listing.

The mooring platform adjacent to Tesco store is in need of a major overhaul.

Signs in the park are limited to some rather old entrance signs and signs indicating the public footpath, the Thames Path and the Sustrans route.

7.5.3 Recommendations

A substantial capital injection from the new housing development provides an opportunity to upgrade the park. Some of the objectives for the area can be achieved using this. Re-development of the swimming pool and Lock Island would also generate funds to enable improvements to the park to be carried out.

It may be necessary to draw up a new management plan for Kings Meadow, so that proposals are properly detailed. At very least, a brief will need to be created to attract potential developers to the area.

The following improvements are proposed:

- An inventory of accessible children's play areas and other facilities has been compiled for the Open Spaces Strategy. Where there are local deficiencies, consideration needs to be given to providing these at King's Meadow. The new residents should be consulted on park improvements, and on their interest in participating in a park management advisory committee.
- It is not viable for the council to restore the Victorian baths as a swimming pool; the costs would far outweigh any revenue generated from its use. It is very small, and would not accommodate any alternative revenue-generating activity without loss of open space. The objective is to find a commercial user that could operate from the location, and enhance the leisure value of the site. This could be a major new facility, incorporating the old swimming bath site, and the island, and providing a visitor centre, commercial leisure venture, river crossing and park staff base (see below).
- Upgrading the changing facilities for sports use could be considered together with and as part of the pool redevelopment. There may be a partnership opportunity with the redevelopment of the Lock Island site owned by the Environment Agency.
- The car park could be expanded but needs to be properly laid out and landscaped. This will need to be done as part of the Baths and Island redevelopment.
- There is a trend towards having staff working from sites (as opposed to mobile gangs). This creates the need for an office and store. The added need for a constant presence at new leisure and visitor facilities and at Caversham Lock could all be provided as part of a Baths-Island redevelopment.
- Because of regular flooding, regular winter football at King's Meadow will cease, and summer sport, like cricket, will be introduced. Australian rules and Gaelic football will remain, and ancillary facilities improved.
- Security fencing should be confined to the perimeter of the park. Unnecessary fencing should be removed.
- The railings between the towpath and The Coal woodland could be retained, because they may provide a sense of security to cyclists and pedestrians using the towpath.
- The bowling green should be eliminated, and its site made a part of the park.
- The path network needs some realignment, and the old road to the defunct car park in the centre of the park should be converted into a pedestrian and cycle link between Napier Road and the towpath.
- It may be possible to develop a beach front at the end of this path and use this for launching unpowered boats (canoes (canoes, Dinghies etc)
- An active tree management policy needs to be introduced.
- The bridge from the park to the lock (over which the Thames Path/Sustrans route and public footpath pass) needs to be wider and more attractive.

- Themed signage should be introduced, indicating parking and entrances, explaining mooring, fishing and links to adjacent sites, and naming the different parts of the park.
- Provide a high-quality park, by improving maintenance and cleanliness.

7.6 The Thames Promenade, Rivermead and Cow Lane



Thames Promenade

7.6.1 Features and use

The Thames Promenade and Rivermead extend westwards for about a kilometre from the Holiday Inn near Caversham Bridge on the south side of the river. They form all of the open space between the river and Richfield Avenue. The area is mainly close-mown grass with scattered specimen trees. A wide path extends all the way along the river a few metres from the edge. There are benches and bins. An old fountain provides a focal point near the boathouse.

This land has a range of well-established uses that may make any physical changes to the landscape harder to achieve. There are two major annual summer festivals (WOMAD and the Reading Rock Festival). These are well-established, well-attended - visitors come from mainland Europe as well as from all over the UK - and not likely to change. Other events, also well-supported, are more local in focus, like the annual Reading regatta and fairs.

The Thames Promenade is probably the most popular area for walking in Reading, especially for those with families, for those pushing prams and wheelchairs, and for the elderly. It is used every day of the year at all times of day, and is particularly busy over weekends in all seasons. It is used not only for picnics but by those who buy fast food elsewhere in Reading and then drive to the Thames Promenade to eat it. There is a boat club building near the Holiday Inn, and the pleasure cruisers currently launch from either side of Caversham Bridge. The main slipway along this section of the Thames is between the Holiday Inn and the boathouse. There is, however, no mooring permitted on this stretch of the riverbank, except during the two annual festivals. Other recreational pursuits include cycling, informal family games, swan feeding and bench-sitting. A small fast-food kiosk operates intermittently during the summer from behind the boathouse.

The area around the slipway is a congregating area for hundreds of swans. There is a large flock of Swans at this part of the river and it is easy for them to access land at this point. As vehicle access is fairly easy here people tend to dump large quantities of food from cars, which cause problems where swans and vehicles occupy the same area.

Rivermead has been developed for indoor leisure. The Council owns the leisure centre; private developers have built an hotel and restaurant in Richfield Avenue.

Parking is available both at Rivermead and behind the boathouse next to the Holiday Inn.

Access at both eastern and western ends is along the towpath, which is replaced by the path along the Promenade. Wheelchair access is straightforward from the car park near the Holiday Inn. There is pedestrian and cycle access from Caversham Bridge, from the car parks and from Cow Lane. Cow Lane is a public right of way that leads from Richfield Avenue to the Thames Promenade. It provides an access point for vehicles, if required.

7.6.2 Problems and opportunities

The area around the Holiday Inn and the Rowing Club has great potential to be a gateway to the river and the Thames Parks. It is, however, ageing, under-managed and a source of conflict between different user groups.

Its potential arises from the coming together of several important infrastructure features. It is well-served by roads: most of the main routes between Reading and the north funnel in to the river crossing at Caversham Bridge; Caversham Bridge is directly linked to the primary routes into Reading from the south (the A4 and the A33); local traffic must cross the river at either Caversham Bridge or Reading Bridge. The site is well-served by cycle and pedestrian routes, especially the towpath/Sustrans National Cycle Network. The site is accessible to visitors arriving by boat. There is currently a large area for parking, and there is land to expand car parking.

The hard surfacing is unsuitable and has worn. It is made of loose gravel, which makes walking difficult for the elderly, and which makes a bumpy ride for prams and wheelchairs. Between the Holiday Inn and the boathouse, it is completely covered with swans' droppings, which makes walking even more difficult. The bank wall is breaking down in places. The slipway is eroding from below. The whole area looks dirty. Further along the Promenade, young trees have died and have not been removed or replaced. Some of these problems arise from lack of management; some are simply the result of wear.

The area is cluttered with Reading Rowing club trailers and boats left on the paved area outside the boathouse. Cars litter the curb all round the turning circle. Information signs are old, and rows of bollards and patches to the surface add to the visual untidiness.

Conflicts arise from intensive use of the same area by swans and humans, and from incompatible human activities: elderly pedestrians use the same path as cyclists; path users and swans impede those trying to launch craft; queues for the pleasure cruisers block the slipway and the path; dog walkers have to control dogs to prevent them chasing swans; boat trailer parking is a problem; drinkers at the Holiday Inn pub spill out on to the path in busy periods; revellers in evening dress or wedding clothes tip-toe through the dirt to board the pleasure boats.

Existing furniture along the Thames Promenade needs replacing, and additional seats and bins need to be installed. The play area at Rivermead has been removed, and there is an opportunity for a commercially based leisure opportunity here.

During the festivals, which take place in the middle of the summer, there are fences, portacabins and security vehicles all over the site. The site therefore looks untidy in the busiest period of the year, before, during and after the festivals. Restoration following the events can be poor, and the result is that a large area of Thameside meadow is unsightly for several many weeks. Mooring for the festivals (mainly WOMAD) is a problem only in that there is potential for expensive damage to the riverbank caused by mooring pins driven into the bank.

The riverbank needs repair. Much of the upper course of concrete-filled bags has already fallen into the river. This could be repaired in stretches using natural techniques. A softer bank edge, with a gradual incline from the top of the bank to the riverbed planted with natural vegetation, would make an ecologically valuable habitat, and would both make the riverbank far safer for users and discourage casual boat mooring.

Much of the land surrounding Rivermead was a former tip, which creates problems. The filled area is covered with a clay cap, which makes any landscaping difficult, as trees will not grow, and the grass can remain waterlogged for months. This makes it difficult to use and to manage, and the result is a degraded landscape.

Cow Lane is prone to traveller occupation and flytipping. The southern end (at Richfield Avenue) requires rationalisation of gates and fences, a major tidy up, and clarification of responsibility for the land: currently Reading Sport and Leisure collect the income, although the Parks Department manages the area. The hedgerows adjacent to the lane provide a good wildlife corridor, and there is substantial bird nesting here in the weeks running up to the festivals. This brings into conflict the use of the area with the bio diversity.

7.6.3 Recommendations

The area between the Holiday Inn and the boathouse, around the fountain could become a gateway to the river: the Thames Promenade or River Thames Gateway. This is a long-term project, requiring an injection of capital. There are some things that can be done in the short term, which may help to attract or demonstrate the case for funding in the long term. Funding will be sought for this.

- The existing congestion and clutter should all be cleared and a genuine riverside promenade could be created as a high quality landscape.
- The surface should be consistently paved with brick pavers.
- Lighting should be installed from the rear of the Holiday Inn to beyond the western edge of the boathouse, and along the roadway towards the river from the road.
- New furniture should be installed.
- The Rowing Club should be moved to a new outdoor education centre at Cow Lane, and the building converted for an alternative use. The kiosk behind the boathouse currently sells snacks and sweets. The preferred alternative is to find a private-sector partner to refurbish the boathouse and operate an up-market restaurant, aimed particularly at morning-coffee and light-lunch patrons. The vision is for a restaurant to rival those at Henley, to draw clients from a wider catchment area than Reading. Given the popularity of the Riverside Restaurant on the east side of Caversham Bridge, the area may support a second high-quality evening dining establishment. The alternative is to expand the kiosk as an element in upgrading the area.

- More use could be made of the pleasure boat facility. A new structure built into the river as a pier or jetty would alleviate congestion.
- The slipway will be closed for normal private use. It will be gated, for use only in emergencies. Alternatives for launching private boats could be provided at Cow Lane, Scours Lane and King's Meadow (for non powered boats).
- Pedestrian access to the riverside is highly desirable, and should be maintained.
- Control of swan feeding should be implemented: encourage visitors to feed swans about 50 metres to the west and to do so only when they are on the water, and outlaw the feeding of swans with vast amounts of food. An alternative solution is to create a swan sanctuary on Bucks Eyot (see below).
- The grass-cutting regime could be reviewed so that the grass areas provide more interest, especially in the form of wildflowers. This is an area of wet meadow and could be planted with fritillaries, a declining but locally occurring species. The nearest fritillary meadows are at Magdalen College in Oxford and at Stratfield Saye. As an attraction, this is likely to be very successful, as fritillaries in particular generate large numbers of visits to the places where they do grow.

7.7 Scours Lane



Slipway at Scours Lane

7.7.1 Features and use

All of the land along the river to the east of Scours Lane is publicly owned, with the exception of the marina and the fairground wintering site. On the other hand, to the west of the marina, only a very short stretch of the land is publicly owned; the remainder, formerly railway property, is in private hands. This open space potentially provides access to the Thames parks for a substantial proportion of the population of West Reading. Eastwards, it is linked to the other south bank Thames paths by the towpath. Westwards, the towpath provides a link to Tilehurst Railway Station, the Oxford Road and The Roebuck public house. The towpath is a public right of way.

There are privately owned leisure facilities on both sides of Scours Lane: to the east are high-quality sports venues, the Rivers nightclub, and Reading Town Football Club; to the west there is a thriving boating business.

There is good biodiversity in this area.

7.7.2 Problems

A very dilapidated area by the river appears to be a permanent traveller encampment. The open fields are often abused by off-road motorcycles, disturbing both human enjoyment of the site and wildlife.

7.7.3 Plans

This area could be used to develop complementary leisure activities.

It is proposed that a campsite be provided. Advantages include proximity to Tilehurst Station, walking distance to the town centre, links with proposed mooring sites, and proximity to the proposed outdoor education centre. A campsite would provide an opportunity for a retail outlet to serve both campers and boaters. The erection of a barn for the purpose, and to house ablution facilities, would be sympathetic with the landscape.

The building of a marina, to serve residents and holidaymakers, on the Thames at Reading is being considered. A major development like this may mean acquiring more land, and private land near Scours Lane provides an opportunity. What is envisaged is an eco-marina, with a mooring basin and water channels that link attractive, low-key, energy-efficient chalets built of local materials, available for holiday hire or short-term rent. One advantage of creating off-channel mooring in a marina would be to provide additional flood protection. This would compensate for some of the additional development proposed for the Thames parks. A feasibility study will need to be commissioned, as the South Oxfordshire marina, only a mile from the Reading Borough boundary, is currently being extended. The marina may have the added benefit of increasing the amount of flood water storage in the area.

A privately managed facility provides mooring at Scours Lane. This could be extended into private land between Scours Lane and the Roebuck, providing particularly for houseboats. Advantages include a link to Tilehurst Rail Station (so that owners need not rely on car access); a particularly wide and straight section of the Thames, making mooring here more suitable than other areas where navigation might be affected; and pollution control: the landowner has proposed the building of a concrete wall to serve both as a mooring jetty and to contain polluted water that enters the Thames through a large storm water outflow (that drains most of Tilehurst) for filtration in a reed bed before controlled entry to the river.

7.8 Bucks Eyot

7.8.1 Features and use

Bucks Eyot is not really a park. It comprises three small islands, covered in willow, in the river near Caversham Bridge. Its role to play in the river landscape needs consideration.

7.8.2 Problems

The islands are eroding away, and may soon be lost.

7.8.3 Suggestions

One potential solution to the problems caused by swans, without losing the colony, may be to restore the islands and create a swan sanctuary on them. Remedial measures to restore and enlarge the islands would add value to the river, as islands are becoming more scarce. The spoil from dredging the river could be deposited around the islands, and fixed with quick-growing willow. Access could be created from Buckside, an old highway that leads down to the river from Church Street. It is overgrown and has been heavily used for garden refuse dumping. This could be opened up, providing access to the river. A boardwalk over the islands and on to the car park of the Griffin public house would enhance access. This would entail taking back two of the (Council-owned) islands from private tenancy.

8. ASSOCIATED THAMES CORRIDOR OPEN SPACE

The following areas are not Council-owned land, but are sufficiently closely associated with the Thames parks to warrant consideration in this plan.

8.1 Little John's Farm

Little John's Farm is an area of low-lying wet meadow, which lies between Rivermead and Scours Lane. Although strictly speaking not a part of the Thames parks, Little John's Farm is a major element of the Thames landscape in Reading. The meadows are grazed. They are also used as a campsite in the festival period. Access is via a road under the railway line, and, in the longer term, it may be possible to link the Thames Parks to the Oxford Road using this underpass

It may be possible to work more closely with the tenant in the future to provide visitor access arrangements, to identify sustainable farm management regimes and to manage the fields for their wildlife value. Opportunities to work with Community Farms should be explored in order to help achieve this.

A longer term aspiration would be to bring this into public ownership to achieve this.

8.2 Dean's Farm

Dean's Farm lies between Heron Island and the South Oxfordshire Marina on the north bank of the Thames. Much of the area is now a housing scheme, but some of the riverside is open space, and an area of meadow provided as a flood compensation scheme is now public open space. The flood compensation area is managed as a wildflower meadow and has comparatively high biodiversity. It is connected to the Amersham Road estate, and is used as a through route to and from the estate.

Sadly, it is also used as a motorcycle playground from time to time, as it is closely associated with the gravel pits in neighbouring privately owned land. However, the lake complex is to become the venue for the Redgrave-Pincent rowing lake. This will mean a substantial change of use, as the marina will probably relocate to the Dean's Farm end of the gravel pits. If this is the case, it may well help to address some of the abuse problems.

There is also a short length of riverside path provided by the landowners as a permissive path. This does give some access along the north bank of the river here, and could lead into the new lake development at the marina. Currently, this path officially stops at the borough boundary, but users have formed a route that extends further.

There is an opportunity to create a circular walk between the Amersham Road Estate, Dean's Farm, and the north bank of the Thames via the gravel pits and the woodland on the banks of the river.

8.3 The Thames towpath



The entire length of Thames riverside along the south bank in Reading, from Kennetmouth on the eastern boundary to The Roebuck public house in the west, is now legally accessible by means of the old towing path. Most of this also coincides with the park land, although the stretch between Caversham Lock and the Thames Promenade runs past a built-up part of the Reading Thames Corridor.

Although not a park, the towpath is an important local leisure facility. The Sustrans National Cycle Network passes over the stretch between Caversham Lock and the Thames Promenade, and the Thames Path Trail runs through Reading between Lechlade and London. The path also links the Thames Promenade and Kings Meadow for pedestrians and cyclists, without their having to leave the riverside.

Between Reading and Caversham Bridges, there have been some substantial improvements to the condition of the path. There has also been a significant enhancement of the environment, as the old industrial plots have been redeveloped and replaced with (luxury) housing and office blocks. However, the path is still sandwiched between the development and the river, and there is a shortage of publicly accessible open space on this bank. In order to address this problem, and to raise the visibility of the parks from the town centre and railway station, it is suggested that the underused space at the rear of these developments (especially the Norman Insurance Building) be developed as public space. If necessary, access could be limited to particular times; for example, gardens might be made available for events or over weekends as picnic sites). This would be better than having them closed off all the time. Preferably, public access might be more frequent, with the Borough taking some of the responsibility for maintenance and for security.

The remainder of the non-parkland towpath is from the Thames Promenade to The Roebuck public house. This section is largely rural with no proper surface. It is recommended that this part of the towpath resurfaced with compacted gravel to provide a surface of a sufficiently high standard to enable wheelchair and cycle access to this part of the river.

A picnic area could be provided on private land near Tilehurst Station. The landowner has proposed a picnic site adjacent to a wildlife pond, fed by the smaller of two storm water overflows. A carefully designed reedbed would enable this outflow to be cleaned prior to entry to the Thames.

The longer term aim should be to provide a very high quality surface from Caversham Lock to the Thames Promenade, a slightly less formal path along the Promenade, and a good quality but informal path for the remainder of the towpath to the west.

9. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AFFECTING THE THAMES PARKS

9.1 Access to the parks and green links

Access to the Thames Corridor from the town centre is not easy, in spite of its geographic proximity, because the railway, major roads, housing and industrial areas form a significant physical barrier, and neither paths nor roads link the two areas directly. Public transport routes need to include a loop between the town centre, rail station and Thames.

The rebuilding of Reading railway station should create an opportunity for a substantial redevelopment of the area between the town centre and the river. Funds generated by the large new developments adjacent to the railway and canal should be used to construct direct non-motorised access to the parks from the town. Attractively designed, well-lit underpasses would help. The most obvious and necessary is the now disused railway underpass from Kenavon Drive to Napier Road, which will provide an important link, not only to the park from the new housing developments on Kenavon Drive and Gasworks Road, but also to Tesco and the National Cycle Network (NCN).

Access to the western end of the parks from Tilehurst (Rail) Station needs to be created by formalising an agreement with the (private) owner of the riverside land and Network Rail for a public right of way.

The off-road link between the town centre and the Thames Business Park is via the Thames towpath. There is a programme of improvement to make it attractive as a green transport route for office workers to cycle to the town centre during lunch hour.

Links for pedestrians and cyclists with green spaces to the north and south of the parks need consideration. The linking of Balmore Park and Westfield Road Recreation Ground to the Thames parks, and the West Reading woodlands to Scours Lane, would increase the catchment area for recreational use of the riverside. The issue is being considered in the development of Open Spaces Strategy, will propose the drafting of a Green Links Strategy for Reading.

The Thames parks themselves are all linked by the river paths, and it is relatively easy to get from one site to the next. The journey between parks on foot or by bicycle is particularly enjoyable. Only Caversham Court is isolated. For visitors, it is not obvious that there is a chain of parks, nor that walking routes of different lengths are available. A key objective of the Plan is to ensure that all parks are linked and signed, so the links can be found. A long-term aim ought to be to enable Caversham Court gardens to be accessible directly from Caversham Bridge, opening up the river front at this point if the opportunity to do so ever arises, incorporating the Griffin public house, Buckside and Bucks Eyot.

Routes between sites will be identified by means of onward signing and waymarking, leaflets and inclusion into Sustrans NCN and Thames Path information. These routes will also be maintained so that the surface is of high quality and the path free of barriers to wheelchair users and cyclists.

Abuse of these routes by motorcyclists and quad bikers already happens. This problem is currently being tackled, although some solutions actually make it harder for other users to enjoy the river, as barriers to motorcycles will also be barriers to wheelchairs and buggies.

9.2 Access within the sites

The provision of paths suitable for easy access into and around the parks is important. In particular, the easy access into Christchurch Meadows along a tarmac path is very popular, especially with wheelchair users and people pushing buggies. Paths in other parks need to be equally smooth, particularly along the Thames Promenade. Currently the Promenade path is not adequately surfaced, and, beyond Cow Lane, it is effectively inaccessible to wheelchairs. In addition, the Thames parks are on the Thames Path National Trail and on the Sustrans national cycle network. This in itself is good justification for improvement.

The formal nature of the Promenade, at least as far as Cow Lane, suggests that a high-grade bound gravelled will be the most suitable surface. The towpath from the western end of the Thames Promenade to The Roebuck public house will also be improved, although here it will be appropriate to have a surface treatment more in keeping with the rural feel of the landscape.

The paths in Caversham Court will be replaced as part of the restoration programme, also with a high-grade bound gravel, and one set of steps replaced with a ramp so that there is a circular walk for people of limited mobility.

The creation of surfaced circular walks in King's Meadow and Christchurch Meadows would improve the recreational potential of these parks for elderly visitors. There is also an opportunity to create a circular walk between the Amersham Road Estate, Dean's Farm, and the north bank of the Thames via the gravel pits and the woodland.

9.3 Car parking

Car parking is currently provided at Hill's Meadow (350 cars), King's Meadow (110 cars), Thames Promenade (60 cars) and Rivermead (600 cars). The parking at Caversham Court has been closed, and alternative parking arrangements are being considered. King's Meadow and Hill's Meadow parking lots also effectively serve the town centre shopping area and commuters. There is pressure to increase provision, a pressure that will increase if the parks become a regional visitor destination.

A car parking strategy for the Thames parks will need to be developed, taking into account anticipated demand, related landscape issues, the identification of resources for establishment and maintenance, and a suitable charging policy to raise revenue.

9.4 The landscapes

All of the Thames parks suffer to some degree from intrusion by surrounding development. The degree of intrusion differs from park to park. For example, in The Coal Woodland, one can walk within 15 metres of the Tesco store and not know it is there; in Christchurch Meadows, external traffic movement and surrounding houses are more evident.

The objective is to provide landscapes that make the parks feel genuinely peaceful and attractive places, isolated from the pressures of the town, while also preserving some of the views into and out of the parks. Complete exclusion of outside development is unnecessary. For example, the two bridges add to the vistas, and, similarly, the views from the bridges reveal to those crossing them some of the parkland. In other words, the core area of the parks, with high quality leisure and sporting facilities, must feel secluded from the bustle of the surrounding area, while the parks remain very much a visible part of the town.

This objective could largely be achieved by planting on the fringes of the parks a mixture of trees, shrubs and long-grass meadows, concentrating the open areas towards the centre of the park and the river frontage. This type of landscaping can provide very valuable habitats for wildlife and the corridors that enable the wildlife to move from site to site.

The strategy is not without problems. Residential neighbours may be distressed by any loss of light and views, by leaves blowing into gardens, and by branches growing over them, and planting must be done to minimise nuisance. Secluded corners can be a security risk; some boundary treatment can make it easier for criminals to get into the rear gardens of properties; and dense vegetation intimidates many park users. New planting must not jeopardise safety.

The mature trees that grace the parks tend to be of a small number of species, and most date from the Victorian era. There have been spasmodic periods of interest in replanting, but it is only in the last ten years that there has been a sustained effort to replant trees. However, this has been done without an overall masterplan for tree planting, and one of the objectives of this plan is to draw up a 20-year replanting programme.

The landscape potential provided by the location of the parks in water meadows has not been exploited. A fritillary meadow, for example, could be created at Thames Promenade.

The content and style of each park should also be different in order to provide variety. Currently, the very formal landscape of Caversham Court contrasts well with the less formal but heavily used Christchurch Meadows and the natural landscapes of View Island. These differences are recognised as providing the diversity of the parks that helps to make them so attractive.

9.5 Waterside safety

Given the popularity of the Thames Parks and the nature of the river, the safety of people at risk from falling into the river has to be considered. Although drowning is a rare event, it does happen. Most often, it is the result of foolhardy behaviour. There are no staff employed in parks who would be readily available to effect any form of water-based rescue.

The traditional means of addressing the risk is by the provision of lifebelts but these are expensive to maintain, regularly go missing, and have dubious value in rescuing people who fall from the bank into the water. There is some evidence that users feel safer when waterside safety equipment is present, regardless of whether the equipment is actually suitable for lifesaving in all conceivable incidents that may occur. Currently there are a number of lifebelts situated at Caversham Lock and Christchurch Meadows. There are others along the towpath between the bridges.

The management of the bank can have a significant impact on safety, both by preventing people from falling in and by enabling them to get out if they do: steep banks with long

drops into deep and cold fast flowing water are potentially more hazardous than wide shallow sloping banks shelving gradually in warm still water. The presence of vegetation may also have an impact, by making it difficult to fall through a dense muddy bed of reeds.

It is a priority of Thames parks management continually to monitor and review waterside safety. A safety protocol will be drawn up.

9.6 River banks

The riverbanks are of considerable importance in the parks, providing a place for boats to moor, and a platform for people to fish. In the past many of them have been managed to protect them from erosion by the river. However, as they are almost all hard (stone, wood, metal or similar) and at right angles to the water and land (i.e., vertical), they are potentially hazardous to park users (there is an increased risk of falling in), they don't provide a particularly pleasing feature, they are expensive to maintain, and they are poor wildlife habitats.

The intention is to identify into which zones the banks should be divided. There are areas where the banks will have formal and hard features, where boats are intended to moor or where disabled anglers will be able to fish. There are also areas where the banks could be natural, where marginal wildlife can thrive, and where boats and anglers should be discouraged. In between, there could be a range of bank features, although the overall emphasis will be to move away from heavily engineered concrete stone or steel, and to use natural banks that can resist the erosion from boat wash. Since gently sloping, well-vegetated banks occupy a large area of land and river, and this will not be feasible everywhere.

A change of management will mean that the appearance of the riverbank will change in some places. Whatever regime is used, substantial sums are going to be required in the next 20 years for bank repairs. A more natural form will be more cost effective and safer.

In order to diversify attractions in the parks, it has been proposed that a beach be created at King's Meadow. This will provide a safe venue for children to paddle in the summer, and a place to launch unpowered, portable craft. Angling and powered boating may be restricted around the beach.

9.7 Outdoor education centre

One of the major new developments being considered for the Thames parks is the establishment of an outdoor education centre.

Rowing facilities currently spread along the parks, including, for example, Reading School Boat Club and Reading Rowing Club could be concentrated on the one site. It is also proposed that a young people's hostel be located near the activity centre to provide accommodation for those using the education centre for short courses or competitions.

A suitable site has been identified at the end of Cow Lane. A development brief for the education centre and ancillary facilities will be drawn up, and sources of supplementary funding investigated. Prior to this, the Parks Department will draw up - either in-house or using external consultants - a feasibility study to investigate the viability of creating a commercial venture that satisfies the Borough's needs for accessible young people activities.

9.8 Slipways

There are two slipways available for free public use in Reading, one at the Thames Prom Gateway, and one at Scours Lane by the chandlery. There are also several landing stages.

The Thames Promenade site is on the scouring side of the river, and frequently a step occurs when the river washes away sediment from the tail of the slipway. This causes serious problems for people attempting to tow out boats out of the water on to trailers, as the trailer wheels are below the step. The presence of swans exacerbates the difficulties, as vehicle wheels are unable to find grip on the wet swans' mess on slipway. The mere presence of the slipway at this point creates other problems. Trailers and cars contribute to the parking problem here, and there is user conflict with pedestrians, especially children, buggies and wheelchairs. The slipway at Thames Promenade will be retained but gated, for use only in emergencies.

The Scours Lane slipway will be retained, with gated public access. Although at present the Scours Lane slipway is locked, it is possible to launch a boat from here simply by asking at the chandlery for a key. There is currently very limited space here for car and trailer parking. It is intended that a parking area be created, and that RBC work in partnership with the chandlery owners to manage the slipway and car parking. Once established, the slipway at the Thames Promenade may be closed. Possible initial objections from boat owners are likely to be of short duration if the new location is made as convenient as possible. In particular, the provision of trailer storage will be a significant improvement for launch owners.

The problem with Scours Lane is the height restriction imposed by the railway bridge. This necessitates the building of at least one alternative slipway. It is proposed that new slipways be created at Cow Lane - associated with the development of the outdoor education centre - and at King's Meadow road. The King's Meadow road slipway could be gated with access by arrangement. This will make provision for launching craft too large to take under the Scours Lane bridge.

9.9 Reading Rowing Club boathouse

If Reading Rowing Club (RRC) is moved to new purpose-built facilities at Cow Lane, the existing boathouse will be available to provide alternative services.

It is an objective of the Plan to provide a high-quality visitor centre and restaurant on the Thames Promenade in the building currently used by RRC. The building could be refurbished on both levels, and leased to an up-market catering facility. Part of the ground floor could be used by RBC as a tourist information office and Thames parks visitor centre, providing information about attractions in Reading, a booking office for events, permits for fishing or mooring, and postcards and souvenirs. There is potential to increase the floor area of the building by about 20%, although this will require compensatory flood plain provision elsewhere on the site.

There are problems that require resolution. First, the site requires flood protection. Second, even with the boating facility removed from the site and the feeding of swans prohibited in the vicinity of Caversham Bridge, there remain conflicts of use: (dis)embarkation of pleasure boats; pedestrians, cyclists and dog-walkers; car parking; the hotel; temporary boat mooring; a visitor centre; and an up-market restaurant. Many of these are not mutually exclusive, but they create a user pressure that will need to be managed. Third, there will be health and safety issues relating to these potentially conflicting uses that will need to be anticipated and addressed.

A feasibility study and development brief will be drafted, and suitable private sector partners identified.

9.10 Thames Parks Mooring Scheme

Mooring is a big issue on the Thames. A large number of boats visit the area in the holiday season. Reading is a destination on the river between Henley and Pangbourne, with the potential to be a major destination in its own right, because of the range of amenities offered by the town. Very large numbers of boats - up to 100 - arrive for the WOMAD festival. Pleasure boats ply the river, and need to moor up for the access and egress by passengers, crew and deliveries. A large number of privately owned boats are moored in Reading when not in use. In addition to these, a number of boats are used for residential purposes.

The Council currently charges for summertime day mooring at Christchurch Meadows. There is currently no charge for mooring at the platform on Kings Meadows, outside Tesco. This mooring is intended for short-term visits only.

Private mooring is not permitted along the Thames Promenade, except for one weekend during the WOMAD festival. There is a platform used by the pleasure boats on the river and two launching jetties for rowing boats.

There are no formal residential moorings in Reading, although many boats (possibly as many as 30) are known to be used as a residence without a formal facility. These, and many other boats, spend extended periods of time moored against the riverbanks, with no specific management by the Council. The lack of management is primarily because there are no staff available to routinely check mooring status and collect fees - except in the summer period and then only at Christchurch Meadows.

It is proposed that a scheme be explored that simultaneously generates revenue from boat use of the river, provides a service to river users and maintains the river banks and mooring facilities. This might include:

- building a residential and private boat mooring facility, possibly an off-channel marina (see below).
- charging for casual moorings at Christchurch Meadows, Tesco and Chestnut Walk (on the River Kennet). Charges will be based on two tiers, a short-term fee and an overnight fee, with the possible option of a two weeks' visitor rate, from the beginning of May to the end of September. This will necessitate more assertive management of the moorings to reduce long-term use by residential boats. Fees will be collected by site-based staff. The assistance of the Environment Agency navigation section will be sought to enable this to be more effective.
- providing a mooring facility on Thames Promenade during WOMAD only and charging for it. This can be achieved by the use of removable mooring bollards that are in place for the event only. The price for mooring should be included in the WOMAD ticket price, and should be managed by WOMAD.
- providing additional moorings for use by pleasure steamers and river taxis only at Christchurch Meadows, Hills Meadow, The Coal and Scours Lane for use by commercial operators to collect passengers.
- providing additional mooring for houseboats on private land beyond Scours Lane, with a link to Tilehurst Rail Station (so that owners need not rely on car access). The Kentwood deeps is a particularly wide and straight section of the Thames, making their

location here more suitable than other areas where navigation might be affected. Additional temporary mooring on this site will be considered.

- preparing a costed programme of bank works and platform construction at Christchurch Meadows, Hills Meadow and The Coal.
- producing new signs for each site that explains the scheme and a leaflet to be made available at the staffed locks - Mapledurham, Caversham, Blake's and Sonning - to all boats visiting Reading. Leaflets could also be available from usual outlets: Reading Information Centre, leisure centres, marinas, etc.

A detailed costed scheme will be worked up as the next phase of this proposal, following consultation on the principles.

There are some mooring issues relating to specific parks:

- Christchurch Meadows: New bank repairs will limit the extent of mooring, which will be permitted on either side of the repaired stretches but not along the recently repaired riverbank. This is the first time a green repair to the bank has been carried out, and, after one year, it appears to have been both well received by park users and successful as a restoration strategy.
- Hills Meadow: A new launch platform for pleasure boats could be provided in the deep water adjacent to Reading Bridge. Otherwise, no moorings are permitted here, as the mill stream is very shallow and there will be disturbance to wildlife and angling.
- Kings Meadow: Long-term visitors regularly use moorings here. This will be restricted to short-term moorings along the platform along The Coal. No mooring will be permitted along the rest of the bank between Caversham Lock tail and Kennetmouth. The mooring platform will require refurbishment, and should be extended to cater for increased use. The bank between the platform and the towpath needs to be secure; it may be necessary to surface this.
- View Island: There are no moorings here at present. The provision of daytime visitor moorings is being considered, but this will need changes to the riverbank.
- Thames Promenade: There is no mooring in this park, except during WOMAD. It may be possible to provide a short-term facility for patrons of local restaurants who arrive by boat. In addition, the boathouse area is a launch place for pleasure boats. This needs a dramatic improvement in the form of the construction of a high-quality pier.
- Caversham Court is a possible destination for pleasure boats.
- A privately managed facility provides mooring at Scours Lane. This could be extended into private land between Scours Lane and the Roebuck, as suggested above. The landowner has proposed the building of a concrete wall to serve both as a mooring jetty and to contain polluted water that enters the Thames through a large storm water outflow (that drains most of Tilehurst) for filtration in a reed bed before controlled entry to the river.

Note that there are issues, outside the scope of this document, relating to the navigation of the river and its effects on the riverbank, which need to be considered.

9.11 Reading Thames Marina

The building of a marina, to serve residents and holidaymakers, on the Thames at Reading is a long-term objective of the Plan. There is a series of marinas on the Thames between Pangbourne and Henley. On both western and eastern borders between the Borough and South Oxfordshire, at Purley and near Dean's Farm, there are marinas providing mooring for boat owners. There is, however, no off-channel mooring within the Borough, and no marina serving holidaymakers.

What is envisaged is an eco-marina, with a mooring basin and water channels that link attractive, low-key, energy-efficient chalets built of local materials, available for holiday hire or short-term rent.

One advantage of creating off-channel mooring in a marina would be to provide additional flood protection. This would compensate for some of the additional development proposed for the Thames parks. It is a general target of the Plan to increase the water storage capacity of the flood plain.

A major development like this may mean acquiring more land, possibly near Scours Lane. A feasibility study may need to be commissioned, as the South Oxfordshire marina, only a mile from the Reading Borough boundary, is currently being extended.

9.12 Thames Parks Fishing Scheme

At present, free casual angling is permitted at the Thames Parks. No work has been done to estimate the number of users, but there are a considerable number of anglers, especially in the summer season.

The Council currently derives no revenue from angling beyond match fees. Clubs can book up to five stretches of the bank for competitions at £30 per stretch. This is managed externally, and generates about £800 per annum.

It is necessary to consider charging for angling. This is the result of a number of factors.

There are management problems. Cut swims are not provided, so anglers bash down marginal vegetation in June at the start of the season, sometimes in unsuitable places. Special attention has to be paid to areas used by anglers to collect rubbish, especially in the summer months. The angling code of conduct and information leaflet are out of date and out of stock. Money is needed for revision and reprinting. The signs at each fishing venue have been badly vandalised and painted over. Money is needed for replacement.

Some anglers cause considerable damage, especially in the summer. Not only is there a litter problem, but other attendant problems include the lighting of fires in parks, driving cars into parks, fishing throughout the night, stealing of fish and injury to wildlife, especially swans. There is currently no way of tackling these problems.

Moreover, the Council has to pay to rent the fishing rights between Scours Lane and The Roebuck (approximately £1,000 per annum). This fishing is then given away free.

The Council has established an Angling Development post in partnership with the Environment agency. This post will not be confined to the Thames parks, but as the Thames Parks provide the single largest angling opportunity in Reading it will have a substantial impact.

The purposes of the post will be:

- To encourage greater participation in angling,
- To target youngsters particularly to provide a distraction from anti social behaviour,
- To promote the angling in Reading to a greater audience,
- To develop and manage a permit scheme
- To manage parts of the river corridors as high quality fisheries
- To develop links with angling clubs and other organisations to broaden the remit of the scheme
- To run angling activities

9.13 Sport

The Thames parks play an important role in sports provision in the town. There are football pitches at Christchurch Meadows and King's Meadow. Gaelic football is also played at Kings Meadow.

The number of formal pitches at Christchurch Meadow will be reduced, as recommended in the Playing Pitch Strategy, although space to put the pitches back if demand increases will be retained. Because of regular flooding, regular winter football at King's Meadow will cease, and summer sport, like cricket, will be introduced. Australian rules and Gaelic football will remain. Ancillary facilities need improvement at both venues: the pavilion at Christchurch Meadows requires replacement, and ways will be investigated of building a small cricket-style pavilion at King's Meadow, possibly as part of the redevelopment of the old swimming pool.

Hills Meadow has a BMX track and a skate park, both of which need modernisation.

Rowing takes place along the Thames, from boathouses in Christchurch Meadows and the Thames Promenade. Proposals for water-based sports are included above.

There is a canoe platform at View Island for canoe rodeos in the weir pool.

Free fishing is provided along the whole of the Thames Parks with the exception of View Island, Caversham Court and up and downstream of Caversham Bridge. Three stretches can be booked for competition. Proposals for the angling scheme are included above.

9.14 Art

The role of the Thames parks in promoting the Arts is currently small. The biggest events are the annual WOMAD and rock festivals, which celebrate a variety of music genres, dance and ethnic crafts. There is an opportunity to institute an annual classical music festival. Increased use of the Thames parks for music festivals would be considered.

The parks themselves are a popular subject for local artists, but more could be done to bring fine art to the people. There is, at present, no venue in Reading for regular art-in-the-park displays. There are several ways in which this could be promoted. For example, local artists could display and sell art in one of the Thames parks during the summer. Another idea is to have a semi-permanent display in one of the parks over the summer, as is done at Hyde Park. The erection of a large marquee in which local art is displayed, with facilities for serving refreshments, could attract thousands of visitors. If this were combined with riverboat rides, it would make a very pleasant day out in the Thames corridor. Because of the large festival events at Rivermead in the summer, the more suitable location for a semi-permanent summertime exhibition might be Kings Meadow.

There are some works of public art in the Thames parks, like the fountain at the end of the Thames Promenade and the sculpted waymarkers for the Sustrans Trail. Efforts are currently being made to introduce popular art into some of the Thames parks by carving fallen branches and dead trees. There is, for example, a troll at the entrance to View Island and a duck near the outdoor classroom on the island. It would be highly desirable for the Thames parks to be used as an outdoor display area for public works of art.

9.15 Children's play

There is at present only one formal play area in the Thames parks, situated at Christchurch Meadows. The play area is designed for under 12s, although the adjacent paddling pool does attract older children.

There are new residential developments in the pipeline, and others have recently been built. These will have an impact on the demand for children's play, and provision will need to be reviewed. It may be necessary to provide a new play area at King's Meadow, with a rail underpass to the new residential developments in Gasworks Road and Kenavon Drive. The cost of both installation and maintenance of new play facilities is, however, significant. There will need to be an increase in or a review of revenue to ensure that they are maintained to the highest standard.

The skate park can be considered as a play facility aimed at older children, mainly teenagers, and the BMX track has the potential to be used by similar age groups. The Hills Meadow facilities require rebuilding. It is intended that a new mega-skate facility be constructed, to serve not only the Borough but to be a regional attraction. The Thames parks have been identified as the most suitable location for this, not only because they are accessible from all over Reading but also because they are more likely to be 'gang-neutral' (not associated with groups of young peoples from particular residential areas). The council has agreed to let an area of land to the Reading Wheels association. They intend to identify partners to design build and manage a new facility.

It is also intended that a regional attraction for children be created at Christchurch Meadows, linked with the play area, putting area and catering facility, to enhance the park as a destination for a day out. The focus will be family-oriented physical and educational facilities in a landscaped setting. Suggestions for the adventure playground include a themed educational trail with discovery locations (a heritage trail or astronomy scale trail); structures for viewing over the park; a human sundial; a maze; an area for smaller field sports, like volleyball; and a garden. The design of aspects (or all) of the scheme will be put out to competition. A brief will be drafted to make firm proposals and suggest how to proceed with the design and implementation.

9.16 Camping

Reading is situated midway between campsites which are 15 miles away in each direction along the Thames. The town is therefore ideally located to provide one. This would broaden the range of facilities provided at the Thames parks, attract more visitors to Reading, and, depending on the location, be an asset to the summer festivals. It is proposed that such a facility be provided to the west, near Scours Lane, within walking distance of the town centre. The usefulness of this site would then be even greater, since it has links with the proposed mooring strategy.

A campsite would provide an opportunity for a retail outlet to serve both campers and boaters. The erection of a barn for the purpose, and to house ablution facilities, would be sympathetic with the landscape.

9.17 Catering

The ability to buy refreshments adds considerably to the enjoyment of a park. At present, the options within the parks are very limited, although the Thames corridor itself has a number of very high quality restaurants, some of which are adjacent to the parks. There are also some opportunities to enjoy snack-type refreshments.

One of the most important ways in which the facilities of the parks might be enhanced is by providing more catering outlets. It is a key objective of the Thames Parks Plan to identify potential partners to build and run such an enterprise.

Some opportunities to be explored further include:

- Kings Meadow: this would be an excellent location for a high quality food and drink establishment, serving nearby offices and Greater Reading. It is unlikely to be seasonally affected, because of its location close to offices and the town centre. It would be necessary to seek a private developer for such a venture, and to work with the Environment Agency about its plans for the redevelopment of Lock Island.
- Christchurch Meadows: once its sports use has ceased, it may be possible to use the pavilion for a catering type outlet. This might be constrained by seasonality, limiting its use to the summer season. A private developer should be sought for this venture as well, and the contract should incorporate service to events and activities.
- Caversham Court is a potential venue for cream teas. An outlet is included as part of the plan to restore the gardens.
- The Thames Prom kiosk behind the boathouse currently sells snacks and sweets. The preferred alternative is to find a private-sector partner to refurbish the boathouse and operate an up-market restaurant, aimed particularly at morning-coffee and light-lunch patrons. Given the popularity of the Riverside Restaurant on the east side of Caversham Bridge, the area may support a second high-quality evening dining establishment. The alternative is to expand the kiosk as an element in upgrading the area.
- Tesco is an important food outlet. Its coffee shop serves the boating community, while the store provides food for boaters, cyclists and walkers to eat in the parks.
- There remains a role for the traditional ice cream van to tour the parks in summer.
- Other existing catering includes:
 - Scours Lane - Reading Marina: snacks and sweets
 - Gorge Café - traditional cafe
 - Chronicles - wine bar/restaurant
 - Piper's Island - pub/restaurant
 - Caversham Bridge - Riverside Restaurant

9.18 River transport

Pleasure steamers make scheduled trips between Reading and Henley and Reading and Pangbourne in the summer. They are also available for private hire. Pleasure steamers are launched on the southern bank either side of Caversham Bridge. A new jetty is proposed for Thames Promenade near the boathouse.

A ferry service operates between the south bank and Fry's island, serving the bowling club and the boat businesses on the island. A ferry link between Caversham Court and the car parks at Thames Promenade and Rivermead during peak demand times (events at Caversham Court and morning coffee and afternoon tea times) would relieve parking congestion at Caversham Court, and provide a pleasant way to reach the garden.

A more ambitious programme of a scheduled ferry service and water taxis on the Thames and Kennet Rivers will be explored. The potential routes would embrace Rivermead to Tesco and the urban Kennet route to the Oracle shopping centre. Logistical problems include creating a smooth transition for passengers at the locks, linking the water service with other public transport links, and finding sufficient funds to provide a regular, affordable service that caters for wheelchairs and could ferry bicycles.

9.19 Biodiversity

9.19.1 General wildlife

The Thames corridor has a unique ecology, ranging from a large flock of swans and other wild and semi-wild water birds, through to unusual dragonflies and scarce ant species. Little work has been done to record the fauna and to plan for its survival and expansion. This is a specialist piece of work that needs to be undertaken when resources permit.

In the shorter term, management of the land, and changes that are introduced, need to be assessed to see if they have a positive or negative impact on wildlife. Opportunities to increase habitats should be sought where it is not likely to adversely affect the use of the land for other purposes. More promotion of the wildlife of the river should occur as an integral part of promotion of the parks.

Recently, View Island was opened to the public, and, although accessible and very close to the town centre, this is an essentially wild place. There are several other parts of the Thames parks where wildlife is thriving. Indeed modern parks management, the retention of old trees, areas of less frequently cut grass, and vegetation sprouting from hard river banks has provided many niches for local flora and fauna.

The range of flora should be increased. This is good not only for wildlife but for visitor interest. Where the river floods, as, for example, along the Thames Promenade, the creation of a wet meadow would be an appropriate enhancement of the site. In particular, the planting of fritillaries would reintroduce a once locally occurring species and create a visitor attraction in the spring. Dry meadows planted further from the river, as, for example, around the BMX track, would make the parks more attractive and reduce maintenance. Places for new swathes of dry meadow should be sought. Another objective is to clear and plant the brook that runs along the northern edge of Christchurch and Hills Meadows.

9.19.2 Waterfowl

The spectacular swan population, of up to 400 birds, centred around Caversham Bridge is both a blessing and a curse. The birds are relatively tame, and a great number of people visit to see and feed them. They are also widely photographed, and appear in many images of Reading.

However, the swans congregate in a busy area, which causes conflict with other users. They are often injured by vehicles, dogs and fishing lines. In turn, they are responsible for a widespread, unsightly and inconvenient mess. In part, the problems arise from their being fed in the areas where it is most easy for people to gain access to the river, and where it is most easy for the swans to leave the river via the slipway or a low bank. Consequently, the largest congregation is at the east end of the Thames Promenade, in the vicinity of the fountain to the rear of the Holiday Inn. It would be preferable to redistribute some of the waterfowl pressure on that area and to prevent the swans from leaving the water here. This could be achieved by providing a new area for them to loaf and by encouraging feeding away from this busy area in a place that can easily be cleaned. It is therefore proposed that the Council restrict swan access to the bank at Caversham Bridge, prohibit feeding of swans for 100m either side of the bridge, and create an alternative swan sanctuary (see below).

Another popular feeding and loafing area is in Christchurch Meadows between the Promenade Road and Wolsey Road entrances. The conflict is less in this location, but there

is still a problem of widespread mess and damage to the grass. It would put too much pressure on this site if the swans from the Thames Promenade were relocated here. A more suitable alternative is to shore up the islands at Bucks Eyot and to create a swan sanctuary here.

Advice should be available to people visiting the Thames parks about feeding the swans, and those who turn up daily with sacks of food, in a misguided effort to keep the swans well fed, should be discouraged.

The Canada goose population has grown to pest proportions, and there are frequently up to one hundred grazing on the grass at the Thames Promenade and in Christchurch Meadows. Without action to move birds to other sites, there will, in a few years, be an unmanageable number of birds, both swans and geese.

9.20 Promotion

The Thames parks have never been promoted as a single entity. However, they collectively form a substantial and readily identifiable part of Reading. They will therefore benefit from being promoted together. A branding strategy will be produced.

Promotion will be included on the Reading Borough Council website, and the Thames parks will have a page of its own. In addition, a leaflet will be produced, for distribution at tourist information bureaux in Reading and further afield (for example, in Henley), at local hotels and for pinning up on community noticeboards.

On site, large information boards, with maps and some information about wildlife, facilities and neighbouring parks, will help to promote the sites. All branding associated with the area must relate to 'The Thames Parks'. Distinctive signage, showing directions to the parks, will be designed, manufactured and installed.

The learning opportunities presented by the parks will be promoted amongst local schools.

A strategy for managing events in the Thames parks will be prepared, together with a plan for monitoring both the success of events staged and the demand for others that might prove popular.

9.21 Interpretation

Information about the way in which certain areas are managed, the wildlife of the Thames, the history of the parks and the uses to which they can be put (for example, how to book a football pitch or how to hire a rowing boat) is not currently easily to the public. At the most basic level, people routinely refer to the parks by the wrong name. This needs to be addressed via a comprehensive interpretation strategy, with signs, leaflets and website information.

9.22 Misuse

Sadly, the parks are subject to misuse, which has a damaging effect on both the landscape and the enjoyment of it by visitors. For example, buildings and hard surfaces can be defaced with graffiti; benches, lifebelts and signs are damaged or go missing; visitors intimidated by people on motorbikes; dog walkers fail to clear up after their dogs; children occasionally harm wildlife, especially swans; visitors throw litter on the ground; cars are occasionally driven into a park; travellers and campers sometimes occupy sites for

days on end; boats moor up in places where they are banned; anglers leave discarded tackle; youngsters prefer to play football in the tranquillity of Caversham Court.

In order to tackle these problems resources will need to be found, along with improved working with the community in order to find cost-effective means of reducing the abuse. In addition, more attention to points of access are required, to enable legitimate users in whilst keeping cars, travellers and motorcycles out.

9.23 Lighting

There is a long-term objective to improve lighting in the parks to make them more secure at night. Fulfilment of this will be determined by the availability of funding, although new developments involving private-sector partners will include the provision of appropriate lighting as a requirement in the development brief.

9.24 Staffing

There is a long-term objective to employ site-dedicated staff, although the fulfilment of this will be determined by funding considerations.

Staff development

Patrols by street wardens, successful in other parks, could be extended to the Thames parks to provide a greater sense of safety for users.