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# MP4 WP1.3 Transnational Assessment of Practice

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Highways and  
green spaces,  
Telford

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### The context

Telford & Wrekin borough has three distinct areas: the urban area of Telford, Newport market-town and a large rural area (21,400 ha) of almost three quarters of the borough. Telford is named after the civil engineer Thomas Telford, and was built as a new town in the 1960s-70s on previously industrial and agricultural land. The Town Park was constructed at the town's geographical centre..

According to the 2001 Census, the population was 138,200 people: this increased to 167,000 in 2008 and is projected to increase by 20% over the next 20 years<sup>1</sup>. It is estimated that Telford will provide employment for over 100,000 people over the same period<sup>2</sup>. The output areas in Telford & Wrekin have an average ranking of 113 in England, where 1 is the most deprived output area in the country and 32,482 is the least deprived<sup>3</sup> (2007 figures). The vast majority of the population in Telford & Wrekin (2001 figures) is classified as white 95%, while 3% are classified as 'Asian' and 1% as 'mixed'.

The employment sectors in Telford & Wrekin (2005 figures) are<sup>4</sup>: distribution, hotels and restaurants (27%); manufacturing (including electronics and construction materials) (25%); public administration, education and health (25%); banking, finance and insurance (14%).

According to the UK's Office for National Statistics, 84% of the land area within the administrative boundary is categorised as green space (excluding domestic gardens)<sup>5</sup>. Environmental Services (hereafter the department) manage a significant amount of public space in the borough: for example, Telford has the equivalent of 80 football pitches of shrub beds.



### Managing public green space in Telford

Telford and Wrekin Council (hereafter, the Council), like many organisations and local authorities, manages large areas of various types of green space, such as traffic islands and grass verges which can be particularly prone to anti-social behaviour (ASB) such as litter and fly-tipping. These and other problems relating to ageing vegetation have led the Council to introduce innovative methods of land management of these green spaces in partnership with an academic partner, the University of Sheffield.

<sup>1</sup> Transforming Telford (2008): Telford Annual Review 2008. <http://www.transformingtelford.co.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> Transforming Telford (2007): Telford Business Prospectus. <http://www.transformingtelford.co.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics: Key figures for Telford & Wrekin, [www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk) accessed 11.11.09

<sup>4</sup> Transforming Telford (2007) Telford & Wrekin Economic Baseline Study Final Report <http://www.transformingtelford.co.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> Office for National Statistics: Key figures for Telford & Wrekin, [www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk) accessed 08.10.09

## Challenges of managing public green space for Telford and Wrekin Council

One of the legacies of Telford New Town is the now **ageing landscape**. Many of the shrub beds on the traffic islands and green space around the highways were planted in the late 1970s-early 1980s and have been identified by the Council as being in a poor state. While funding is allocated for everyday maintenance, the renewal of plants 25-30 yrs in the future is not included. The shrub beds also suffer from anti-social behaviour including fly-tipping and littering. The department annually receives approximately 86,000 calls largely complaining about issues including grounds maintenance, cleansing, vermin and anti-social behaviour in open spaces along the road networks and in housing areas.

In 1990, different land management approaches to the ageing shrub beds were evaluated. The idea of bringing 'cheap colour' into the functional landscape of traffic islands and roadside verges was introduced as an alternative to replanting with woody shrub material. After a similar approach was carried out in Telford Town Park in the late 1990s, the Council introduced 'Pictorial Meadows' (hereafter called Meadows) as a low-cost solution on the traffic islands in 2001. The 'Meadows' are colourful meadow-flower seed mixes which rapidly produce a visually vibrant display throughout an extended flowering season. This was a small-scale experimental approach to gain visual impact by using long-lasting, attractive flowers which proved successful: there are now 18,000m<sup>2</sup> of 'Meadows'.



There is considerable **pressure on open space** from property developers. The associated challenge for the Council is how to deal with changing uses of particular spaces post-development. For example, if Greenfield land is developed for residential use, there may be an increase in pedestrian use of the surrounding public space requiring some form of infrastructure (e.g. paths, planting and lighting). If space then becomes used by dog-walkers, this will have an effect on the biodiversity in the space. The quality of open space is associated with this: the Council is investigating how to use Section 106 monies gained from housing development to improve and maintain adjacent public spaces for all users.

A further challenge is the removal of a range of **residual herbicides**: an issue for all UK local authorities to address within the next 12 months due to changes in UK and European legislation on the use of certain chemicals. This is problematic as pesticides and herbicides deliver good weed control at an affordable price. The department is investigating the use of living clover mulch as a non-pesticide cost-effective alternative.

## Governance and partnerships

The 'place-making' process here can be considered an example of a key individual in an organisation with a good idea being given the freedom to develop it on a small-scale. This idea then became a part of the organisation's long-term management process as public interest and support increased. As a direct result of public interest, the 'Meadows' have also been introduced in housing estates, with 6-8 small schemes implemented to date.

The department establish, maintain and manage the areas of 'Meadows'. This involves strategic site management and organising contractors to carry out the works.

## Formal partnerships

In 1999, the Council externalised its grounds maintenance workforce and an 18-year contract was taken out with an external contractor in 2001 (subject to evaluation in 2010). Contract staff, managed by the department, conduct the 'Meadows' planting and maintenance, landscape cleansing and maintenance of the open spaces in housing estates and the road network. There was initial resistance to the 'Meadows' as a new idea but once the staff saw them *in situ*, they were considered a good solution.

Other partnerships exist between Council departments, strategically and operationally. There is liaison with other Council departments including Planning, Locality Management, and Transport mainly relating to operations. At a strategy level, communication is with the Biodiversity and Waste Management Officers.

There is some community participation/ engagement in the process, where requests are made by individuals/ Parish and Town Councils to have local meadows but the majority of meadows are created by the council, partly because problems were identified by the Council not via public opinion. For the 'Meadows', the underlying issues were the age and poor quality of the shrub beds. Unsolicited public response about the 'Meadows' received by the department to date are overwhelmingly positive.

Two other partnerships exist covering aspects of long-term management. Firstly, the Council partners Shropshire Wildlife Trust in managing the Granville Country Park, this partnership works well, involving community partners and volunteers. For Granville Country Park, a formal management agreement is in place (which is periodically reviewed for value for money). There is scope for further partnership opportunities with the Trust who have been particularly helpful in assessing and surveying road verges which have been left to grow long (using volunteers). On one road verge, 43 different wildflower species were found, including patches of orchids, indicating the importance of road verges as species-rich small-site habitats. The Council is also a partner with Natural England for Newport Canal, a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

## Finance

Internal budgets (i.e. a combination of revenue budgets (Council tax) and Section 106 budgets) fund the long-term management and maintenance of open green spaces as part of the department 'everyday' activities: no supplementary funds were made available. Money that in the past would have funded the shrub beds on the traffic islands was redistributed to other land management techniques. If the 'Meadows' had been dealt with as a 'new project' through the proper Council channels, it is argued that it probably would not have happened.

The Council is examining their own benchmarking procedures for assessing resources, the organisation and staff costs to establish an accurate breakdown of spend on landscape. An example of this is a comparative cost analysis:

- 'Meadows': £1.23 per m<sup>2</sup>
- Shrub beds: £1.28 per m<sup>2</sup>
- Bedding plants: £9.00 per m<sup>2</sup>
- Grass cutting: £0.21 per m<sup>2</sup> (based on 16 cuts per year)

Such a cost analysis would differ between local authorities (because weighting is applied to particular services) and it is therefore not possible to compare directly local authorities. The above analysis shows that while 'Meadows' is not as cheap as grass cutting, it is a cost-effective land management technique compared to other alternatives.

## Policy

There were no policy drivers behind the long-term management of traffic islands and associated green spaces apart from the need to improve the appearance and maintenance of the traffic islands as identified by Council staff.

The Council is actively developing/ delivering Local Biodiversity Action Plans. In the past there would be a site and management plan for biodiversity which would, in effect, not be put into practice. Going forward, electronic contract management software will allow for 'living management plans' linking the Planning and Environmental Services departments with ecologists/ other related interested parties with information on the current state of the sites, which would also inform the contractor's instruction.

There is pressure from APSE (the UK's Association for Public Service Excellence) to provide wide-ranging information for national benchmarking. The Council is consistently at the top of the local authority list on per capita spending on landscaping. Having said this, Telford's particular context (low residential density with large amounts of green space) must be taken into account: the Council should not necessarily spend less money on landscaping.

## Valuation and evaluation

The Council is assessing its own evaluation methods and employing new software to improve knowledge exchange/ transfer to inform maintenance and management of spaces.

Geographical Information Systems (GIS) are being used increasingly by the department. When the Council collect fly-tipped refuse, it is recorded via GPS into the Council's in-house computer system (installed in November 2008) and plotted onto a GIS. Fly-tipping hotspots are then identified to help target where resources are urgently needed. The GIS is a critical tool for monitoring and linking up the collected information and present it in a clear manner.

The department has had a significant volume of compliments about their land management techniques (on the whole relating to the 'Meadows'), The Council codes, logs and monitors telephone calls from the public. Numbers of positive comments were high in the past (specifically 2004-06), but have reduced recently because the 'Meadows' have been *in situ* for some time.

It might be useful to conduct questionnaire surveys around the housing estates; also, Parish Councils could gather data on perceptions and attitudes. However, resources are limited and directed proportionately to issues which are high priority and identified by the public.

## Long-term management strategy

It is difficult to ascertain the long-term management strategy – in part, because it is not clear how 'long-term' long-term management is. However, thinking longer-term (more than three years) does not form part of the Council's overall culture, however this is now changing with the development of the Green Infrastructure Strategy (due 2011). In the current absence of this strategy, The department tries to take a longer-term approach where possible (e.g. there is a 50-year plan for trees) but this can be problematic where 'place-keeping' is carried out on a contract basis.

An ongoing aim of Environmental Services is to develop a long-term management strategy for open space, including a landscape strategy, which has not yet been achieved due to changing management responsibilities within the department. A Tree Strategy is in place but not a Green Space Strategy. In reality, a year-on-year approach is taken to open space, and

it is argued that not enough Council staff members take a longer-term view, largely because of the short-term nature of council planning and funding.

A further aim is to establish a toolkit according to a set of specifications for different green space types. This set of 'off-the-peg' specifications could be used as a starting point when, for example, housing developers need to develop green space. A toolkit could be used with site-specific information to ascertain the most appropriate type of green space in a given urban context and the associated costs. Cost estimates could inform planning decisions to ensure more appropriate green space development. Initially the toolkit developed for CABE could be used<sup>6</sup> however such a toolkit would need to be adapted to the local context.

While the public and Borough councillors are in favour of converting more traffic islands to the 'Meadows', this is not desirable from a land management perspective: there arguably needs to be variety in the management techniques applied, for visual variety. With hindsight and growing knowledge, the team assesses the contribution of plans for new open spaces to sustainability and long-term management, as ultimately the Council takes on the management of those spaces.

Expertise and knowledge on possible courses of action with the ageing shrub beds would also be beneficial for the department. Ideally, trials could evaluate the establishment, viability, longevity and cost of different landscape management options, without the use of herbicides. This should be possible in the future via collaboration with the University of Sheffield.

### Key factors for innovation and success

The advice is to 'just go out and do it'. Imaginative staff members should be supported to act on good ideas to innovate put them into practice on a small scale and ideally achieve public support. There is a great deal that can be done by questioning how revenue is currently being spent and recycling it into other initiatives. If a policy has to be written to get a project off the ground, it may be accompanied by high expectations, costs and time constraints: in some cases, such a project may not happen.



According to the department, the innovative method of the 'Meadows' has put Telford and the Council 'on the map' when it comes to land management. The Council is seen as a national leader in innovative land management and is often contacted by other local authorities for advice and guidance.

The Council considers the positive visual impact of the 'Meadows' to form part of their success. The ease of establishment of 'Pictorial Meadows' and the planting reliability contribute to their success: to date, the planting has not failed. The department has found that residents acknowledge that 'Pictorial Meadows' have a cycle of growth and accept that the colour and flowers will return in the spring after a period of no growth. A further advantage of the 'Pictorial Meadows' is that this land management technique calls on

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<sup>6</sup> CABE Space (2006) *Making contracts work for wildlife: how to encourage biodiversity in urban parks*, London, CABE.

agricultural skills, including crop-sowing. There are several ex-farm workers on the team who are accustomed to this activity.

While not measured formally, anecdotal evidence suggests that anti-social behaviour has reduced where the 'Meadows' have been introduced into housing estates and around car parks. Schemes were introduced, in part, to alleviate community tensions and are claimed to reduce fly-tipping and visually improve the landscape where shrub beds were removed.

### **Barriers to 'place-keeping'**

A barrier to 'place-keeping' relates to the structure and re-structuring of the Council. In the past, 'Environmental Maintenance' was within the same department as 'Leisure, Culture and Tourism'. Ten years ago, 'Environmental Maintenance' was combined with 'Cleansing', while 'Leisure, Culture and Tourism' took on the management of parks and recreational open spaces, such as skate parks, allotments, sports pitches and play areas. In 2010, parks and open spaces are once again located in the new Environmental Services service area: a logical change as one department will manage all of the borough's open space.

Communication between departments is good but could be improved. It is also difficult to present the ecological perspective (represented in another department) to the Planning department: formal mechanisms are needed to ensure that this and other perspectives are taken into account to fully understand the impact of housing development on long-term social, economic and ecological sustainability of neighbourhoods.

UK national policy is considered to be a potential barrier: for example, it requires the use of key performance indicators, which creates large amounts of data which are time-consuming to develop and analyse. While national policy is perceived to have improved, how realistic and practical the policy aspirations are (e.g. liveable, sustainable communities) is questionable.

Funding allocation within the Council is competitive as funding is limited. It is felt within the department that Council departments should join together both inter-departmentally and with outside agencies (such as Primary Care Trusts) which would benefit residents and improve green spaces. There would be real benefits if the Council linked up with the Highways Agency and Environment Agency. For example, the Environment Agency does not actively deal with removing Japanese knotweed on riverbanks. Nor does the Highways Agency help in removing ragwort when the Council spends time and money removing it (by hand). If different agencies joined forces to address these problems, it would increase the collective impact on addressing the problem and its ongoing maintenance. It should be noted however, that such joined-up approaches should not apply to funding as, for example, the Primary Care Trusts should focus on delivering health benefits and not be involved in open space provision.

## Notes on this report

This report forms part of the output from MP4 Making Place Profitable – Public and Private Open Spaces, a project funded by the EU through its Interreg IVB North Sea Region programme 2007-2013.

This report is based on the findings from a face-to-face in-depth interview carried out in 2009 with the Senior Strategy Development Officer for, Environmental Maintenance, Telford & Wrekin Council, who granted permission for MP4 members to use his responses in this report. This interview was semi-structured and conducted using the question schedule used in the data collection for all the case studies. In addition, the sources of secondary data which provided the contextual information are referenced in the footnotes. All photos are reproduced with the owners' permission.

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## Glossary

**'Place-making'**: creating high quality places that people want to visit, experience and enjoy. It implies a people-centred approach which emphasises designing spaces that promote health, wellbeing and happiness. Such spaces engender a sense of belonging and connection for those who use them.

**'Place-keeping'**: relates to maintaining the qualities and benefits – social, environmental and economic – of places through long-term management. The management required to maintain these qualities and benefits, the approach adopted and the timescale will depend on the 'place-making' aims, the available resources and the life span of the 'place'.

**Partnership**: is defined as agreed shared responsibility between public, private and community sectors. It is a relationship which, in this context, is normally formed between governmental and non-governmental sectors – i.e. it is a manifestation of governance relationships.

**Engagement**: is a cross-cutting issue which describes successful models of working with communities and encouraging appropriate use. Engagement is an aspect of governance particularly relevant in forms of participatory governance and is intrinsic to the concept of 'governance' as defined below.

**Governance**: relates to the relationship between and within government and non-governmental forces. The term implies wider participation in decision-making than representative democracy or other forms of government, recognising a wider range of actors other than the state, and allowing for varying governance contexts and processes.

**Finance**: describes financial models for efficient long-term management.

**Policy**: is discussed within the context of embedding best practice into spatial planning and other policy.

**Valuation**: describes the economic impacts of improvements to open spaces, but also relates to wider socio-economic and environmental benefits.

**Pictorial Meadows**: are colourful meadow-flower seed mixes which rapidly produce a naturally vibrant display throughout an extended flowering season. The mixes have no grass content to allow the meadow-flowers to establish themselves.

**Section 106 funds**: are negotiated when housing developers construct new housing in areas where the existing level of open space provision within the vicinity of the site is below national guidelines.

**Site of Special Scientific Interest**: the best of the UK's wildlife and geological heritage. 'They are special' for their plants, animals or habitats, rocks or landforms, or a combination of such natural features.

**Council tax**: a property-based tax based on the relative value of property and levied to fund local Council services.

**Local Biodiversity Action Plan**: involves organisations and communities in the conservation and enhancement of local biodiversity, enabling local action to contribute to the achievement of national targets.

**Primary Care Trust** (England): manages the services required when a health problem is first encountered to provide health and social care locally.

**Highways Agency**: is part of the Department for Transport (England and Wales) and has responsibility for managing the core road network.

**Environment Agency**: has the aim of protecting or enhancing the environment as a whole and so promote sustainable development and is part of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (England).