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## The importance of the design process

Parks are a part of the built environment within which we live, work and play. As parts of Auckland become more densely populated, private properties will have less open space, placing higher emphasis on quality design for public parks.

A good design process will ensure:

- the values of our communities are considered
- parks contribute positively to the experience of those using them
- parks are vibrant, attractive and accessible to people of all ages and abilities
- environmental qualities are protected and enhanced
- heritage and cultural values are protected and celebrated

To create a new space or improve an existing one, it's important to start with a clear understanding of the design process, including:

- engaging with the community and stakeholders
- developing a brief
- selecting a design team
- designing the space
- obtaining the necessary consents and authorities
- construction
- completion and handover

## Establish a need for the project

The council's Local Boards make decisions about the parks in their communities. All funded projects will be identified in a local board plan or in Auckland Council's Annual Plan.

The council may also have a current initiative, policies or plans for different areas that identify the need for new public spaces or improvements to existing spaces. Linking to an existing initiative, policy or plan may give your project access to funding and resources.

Once you have established the need for a project, identify its scope. What sort of space or facility is being developed, what is the budget and what are the limitations?

## Selecting a site

If the project involves providing a new facility or infrastructure work, the biggest challenge is finding an appropriate location within the park.

Evaluate potential sites based on:

- accessibility for all users
- the intersection of any paths
- whether the size, shape and contour of the land can accommodate the proposed use in a way that won't have adverse effects on the character or values of the park or the wider landscape
- what affect locating the facility in that location will have on other uses and users of the park
- any significant landscape features, such as a hill, floodplain or stream, and the effects that the facility will have on these features

Remember to check the District Plan and Unitary Plan to see if there are any planning designations that may restrict the use of the site. If you are unsure, check with the council's planning help desk. All new facilities and infrastructure work in parks requires the approval of the landowner. This authority is delegated to the area's Local Board and is administered by council's Parks, Sport and Recreation Department.

## Understanding the site

To get to know your site and its surroundings, begin by assessing its qualities. Some attributes such as views, topography and built features will be evident from visiting the park. Others, such as previous uses and events relating to the site, may not be as visible, but are just as important to the final design.

It's a good idea to visit the site during the day and at night, at different times of the week and in different conditions to get a 'feel' for the place. This will help you understand how the local community uses the space, the area's strengths and weaknesses, local and wider connections to the site and the best-loved local features.

You will also need to get a good understanding of the site's history, relevant plans and policies (including reserve management plans and conservation plans if they exist) and the District Plan and Unitary Plan zoning and designations. It is important that the responsibility for obtaining this information is agreed between the project sponsor and the design team so that it can be sourced as early as possible.

At the start of any major park design project, you should gain a good understanding of the physical characteristics of the site. Unless it is a particularly small site or a renewal project, obtaining an accurate scaled site survey and a land survey will be helpful. You should also investigate if there is any scheduled maintenance or works to be undertaken by council departments, council-controlled organizations or other infrastructure providers. Study the site and surveys and note any potential difficulties, safety issues or areas that need particular attention. The surveys will give information on existing physical features, including services and infrastructure (covers, pipes, cables and lines) which will help inform the site's layout.

Some parks will have physical constraints, such as steep, friable cliffs or be contaminated landfills. It is important that these constraints are considered as they can have a significant

impact on designs. It may be useful to obtain geotechnical reports to get a better understanding of these constraints early on in the design process.

Identify who currently uses the space, how it is used and how people come and go from the space. Think about:

- how the site fits into its broader setting
- how the space links with the surrounding streets, spaces and ecological areas
- who are the likely interested people, groups or stakeholders

This is also the time to consider how the site will be maintained when the project is completed. Careful attention needs to be paid to the forecasted routine maintenance budget for the park. Council's Park Advisor for the area should be the first port of call to find out the park's maintenance expectations for the future. The design should be appropriate for the level of maintenance that is expected for the park in the future. The criteria of the Green Flag Award scheme (<http://greenflag.keepbritaintidy.org/judges/judging-criteria/>), which is the English standard for parks and green spaces, reflect the essential factors of a well-maintained space.

If the selected spaces, or features within it, have historic heritage value, contact Council's Heritage Unit so that they can advise how the historic heritage values can be protected and celebrated during future work. An example of this would be to obtain an Evaluation of Historic Heritage Values, which will help to provide this historic heritage framework.

Most, if not all, parks in Auckland will have some cultural value to iwi due to their history and association with the park's location. It is important that Council's Te Waka Angamua unit is contacted prior to starting the design to find out what iwi may hold cultural values in the park and how they can be contacted. In some cases, a Cultural Values Assessment may be the best way to get a better understanding of the cultural values that iwi have and how these can be protected, celebrated and interpreted through design.

In many cases, a Conservation Plan will need to be completed before any work can begin. These are particularly useful for large and complex sites that comprise one or more types of heritage assets.

The Conservation Plan will outline:

- what heritage assets are present
- why the assets are significant
- how vulnerable or sensitive they are to change
- what policies will be adopted for retaining that significance in any future use or development

A council heritage specialist, as well as a range of stakeholders should be involved or consulted the preparation of the Conservation Plan. Once adopted, the plan becomes a statutory document under the Historic Places Act, and provides a benchmark against which to assess any proposals for the site.

Depending on the site, it may be useful to obtain other professional reports in order to inform the design process, such as:

- user survey - to find out how people use, perceive and value the park
- arborist report - to assess the value and health of trees
- structural engineering report - to assess the stability of existing structures
- reports from a geologist, archaeologist or ecologist

A file note scoping sheet should be prepared by the design team's project lead and the internal project manager, in order to ensure that appropriate consultation and background info has been obtained for the project. You can download a helpful checklist at the bottom of this page.