Title: Parks and Open Spaces Strategy Update

Report of the Cabinet Member for Community Leadership and Engagement

Open Report For Information

Wards Affected: All Key Decision: No

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Summary

Barking and Dagenham has a great collection of parks and open spaces. Whether these are associated with historic houses or were created at a time of rapid housing development in the 1920’s, these spaces are a vital part of the fabric of the borough. Parks are places to get fit and healthy, to play, to walk the dog, to meet and make friends and to enjoy nature.

Barking and Dagenham is going to experience a period of rapid housing growth with over 35,000 new homes being provided at Barking Riverside, Castle Green and other sites over the next 20 years. As was the case in the 1920’s, new public open space will be at the centre of these new developments. But we want to be sure that all the borough’s existing parks and green spaces are also benefitting local communities as much as they can.

Recent research has clearly demonstrated the range of positive outcomes that good quality parks can deliver. Everybody understands that parks are places to become fit and active and enjoy sports, but parks are also places where people are employed, can learn new skills and can volunteer and they play a vital role in absorbing pollution and preventing flooding and urban warming.

We want Barking and Dagenham’s parks to deliver as many positive outcomes for the economy, for communities and for the environment as possible. However, we know that we have a lot of work to do to improve the quality of our parks so that they can deliver in the way that we want them to.

To enable Members to prioritise, plan and commit resources to improve green spaces across the Borough, the Council adopted a new Parks and Open Spaces Strategy in July 2017.
This report provides Members with an overview of the work that has been undertaken, since the strategy was adopted some 14 months ago, to deliver the agreed priorities for parks.

As can be seen, the progress that has been made in a relatively short period of time is a strong vindication of the new way of working that has been introduced by the Council: there are three major transformational schemes under development at Central Park, Parsloes Park and Abbey Green, the first since 2012; also innovative community food growing and healthy eating programmes are being introduced in several parks; effective partnership working with community groups and residents has enabled external funding to be secured for two new state of the art children’s play facilities; and community management opportunities are being actively pursued to make better use of existing facilities in the parks or to bring redundant facilities back into use.

Recommendation(s)

The Assembly is recommended to comment on the work to date in addressing the priorities set out in the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy and the proposed approach and themes for future work plans.

Reasons

To assist the Council in achieving its corporate priorities in relation to: Encouraging civic pride, Enabling social responsibility, and Growing the borough.

1.0 Introduction and Background

1.1 The Borough’s new Parks and Open Spaces Strategy was adopted by Cabinet on 11 July 2017 (minute 28 refers). The strategy is available at https://modgov.lbbd.gov.uk/Internet/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=180&MId=9411&Ver=4 (Minute 28)

1.2 The strategy outlines our ambitions for green spaces in the Borough for the next ten years and is intended to enable the Council to:

- Prioritise, plan and commit resources to improve green spaces across the Borough.
- Make the case to funders for increased external resources.
- Make informed decisions about the future management of the service.
- Ensure future development is informed by open space needs and requirements and is aligned with other corporate priorities.
2.0 Context

The distribution of parks and open spaces

2.1 Barking and Dagenham has a portfolio of 28 parks and open spaces providing 463 hectares of public open space and these are distributed fairly evenly across the borough but with a concentration of provision in a central belt running from Barking town centre in the west to Central Park and Eastbrookend Country Park in the east.

2.2 In the context of the GLAs 2011 public open space categorisation, the borough portfolio consists of eight ‘district parks’, 11 ‘local parks’, and nine ‘small open spaces’.

2.3 There is currently a deficiency of district and local parks in both the northern and southern areas of the borough but in the latter area, this will be addressed by new provision at Barking Riverside. This will leave a deficiency in local and district park provision in the north of the borough which will in part be addressed by the new park provision at Chadwell Heath.

The quality of parks and open spaces

2.4 The Green Flag Award is a national benchmark of good stewardship, with assessment based on a cyclical combination of desktop research and site visits. Green Flag evaluation is banded; all Green Flag sites in Barking and Dagenham are at the lower end of the quality banding. The Borough currently holds five Green Flag Awards for: Barking Park, Beam Parklands, Greatfields Park, Mayesbrook Park, and St. Chad’s Park.

2.5 There has been a decline in the quality of the borough’s parks and open spaces since the last strategy was adopted in 2003:

- No parks achieved a rating of ‘very good’; however, nor did any in 2003.
- Only two parks scored ‘good’ (Mayesbrook Park and Barking Park) in comparison to four in 2003.
- Mayesbrook Park’s ranking has improved the most (from 36% to 70%), achieving the best quality score in the borough.
- The number of parks scored as ‘poor’ has increased from eight to seventeen.
- Most of the borough’s parks are either of ‘average’ or ‘poor’ quality.
- The overall average quality score has fallen from 42% to 36% since 2003.

Resident satisfaction with parks and open spaces

2.6 LBBD residents are less satisfied with our parks than the London average. The Residents’ Survey tells us that 60% of LBBD residents consider the condition of parks to be good or better, this is a lot lower than the London average of 75%. Also:

- 18% of LBBD residents considered local parks to be poor or worse – three times higher than the London average of 6%;
- The gap between satisfaction with LBBD parks and London’s parks has grown – in 2004, 42% of residents were satisfied with the parks against a London
average of 52% - a gap of 10 percentage points which grew to 15 percentage points by 2015.

2.7 Clearly the quality of the borough’s parks needs to improve but these improvements need to be prioritised. The strategy advocates the development of a programme for investment and renewal over a ten-year period in order that the most serious issues are addressed as soon as possible.

2.8 Master plans, which seek to address the neglect of many years and guide the restoration of the Borough’s most important parks, have been produced for: Barking Park; Central Park; Greatfields Park; Mayesbrook Park; Old Dagenham Park; St Chad’s Park; Valence Park; Parsloes Park; Abbey Green; and the Eastbrookend Country Park.

2.9 A technical assessment was also produced which informed the strategy, incorporating the following:

- An ‘events in parks’ policy (section 6).
- A play strategy (section 7).
- Community food growing development opportunities (section 8).
- A playing pitch strategy implementation plan (section 9 - the overarching playing pitch strategy was adopted by the Council in 2016).
- Corporate Natural Capital Account (section 10).
- Public consultation and engagement (section 11).
- Capital investment plan (section 12)
- Future governance options (section13)

2.10 The technical assessment is attached here:


3.0 Proposal and Issues

3.1 When Cabinet adopted the new strategy, Members also endorsed the proposed improvement actions that will be prioritised for implementation over the first three years of the strategy's ten-year life span. These are set out in table one below.

Table 1  Parks and Open Spaces action plan – 2017 to 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref.</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Set up charitable trust to support development of friends' groups and volunteering activity across the Borough's parks.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Install more measured routes for walking, running and cycling in parks.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Clearly signed walking and cycling routes between and through parks.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Prioritise measures to promote perception of safety</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Provide better information on events through the web and social media.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Expand the current health walks programme and explore opportunities to align the programme with local surgeries and public health programmes.</td>
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ECONOMIC OUTCOMES
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<th>7</th>
<th>Initiate ‘quick wins’ programme of park improvements through direct consultation with local communities that will deliver a broad range of benefits and outcomes.</th>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Initiate programme of playground upgrades and repairs focussing on those areas that have the highest demand and are currently in the poorest condition.</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Develop and implement a strategy for s106 and CIL investment in parks across the borough.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Implement capital improvement projects for Abbey Green and Abbey Ruins and for a regional football and cricket hub at Parsloes Park.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Seek new partnerships to develop new facilities and entrepreneurial management model for Central Park.</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Seek to expand a variety of income generating opportunities in parks through developing the events programme.</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Seek to develop partnership with Capel Manor for the provision of new training and management opportunities at Eastbrookend Country Park.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Investigate opportunities to develop new and/or accommodate existing social enterprises within parks.</td>
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**ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15</th>
<th>Introduce a ‘peat free’ policy for plant stock and the sustainable sourcing of timber.</th>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Implement a programme of installing habitat enhancements, such as bird and bat boxes, across all parks.</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Explore the potential for developing nature trails and providing nature walks across parks with high ecological and natural capital assets.</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Undertake a programme of air quality monitoring across district and local parks, targeting investment where air quality is poorest.</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Promote generation of renewable energy through identifying opportunities for wind turbine installation.</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Develop partnerships with external organisations to develop a tree planting programme across the borough to improve air quality, biodiversity and community food growing opportunities.</td>
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3.2 A short summary of the key measures that have been undertaken over the past year to enable or deliver the agreed parks’ priorities is set out in table two below, with a more detailed description attached at appendix one.

3.3 As can be seen, the positive progress that has been made in a relatively short period of time is a strong vindication of the new way of working that has been introduced by the Council:

- there are three major transformational schemes under development at Central Park, Parsloes Park and Abbey Green, the first since 2012;
- innovative community food growing and healthy eating programmes are being delivered at Central Park, Barking Park and Pondfield Park;
- exemplary partnership working with community groups and residents has enabled external funding to be secured for two new state of the art children’s play facilities to be provided at Valence Park and Tantony Green;
- community management opportunities are being actively pursued to make better use of existing facilities or to bring redundant facilities back into use at Central Park, Leys Park, Mayesbrook Park and Barking Park; and
- over £11 million external funding has so far been secured or applied for to support park improvements.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Action Plan ref.</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| 8               | Collaborative working with community groups and residents has enabled funding to be secured to build two new state of the art play facilities to replace poor quality and life expired facilities at Tantony Green and Valence Park.  
  
  Both new facilities will be installed during 2018/19 and c£440,000 external funding has been secured to enable the schemes to be delivered. |
| 9               | Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a charge that local authorities can levy on new housing developments. The proceeds can be spent on infrastructure to support the needs of development anywhere in the borough.  
  
  Cabinet agreed (19/06/18) to Community Infrastructure Levy funding being allocated to the following strategic projects:  
  
  - Parsloes Park ‘Parklife’ project - £600,000  
  - Children’s Play Spaces and Facilities - £275,000 over five years  
  - Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2017 Implementation - £500,000 over five years  
  
  This funding will be used as Council match funding to support external funding bids for park capital schemes as well as to enable the delivery of a ‘quick wins’ programme of park improvements.  
  
  A s106 developer contribution of £350,000 has been earmarked from the Beam Park housing scheme for new sports facilities in Parsloes Park. |
| 10              | Abbey Green and Abbey Ruins  
  
  In December 2017 a funding bid was made to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), with the Council as the lead partner, for a £4.462 million improvement project with a £3,592,200 grant request from the HLF. The Council’s financial contribution will be £400,000.  
  
  The HLF rejected the application in March 2018 due to insufficient funds; however, following a positive feedback meeting the improvement programme is now being re-worked into a series of distinct projects that can be delivered in a phased approach. The first of the phased funding bids will be submitted in early 2019. It is not feasible to do this any sooner because the HLF is currently reviewing its grants framework, which will be re-launched in 2019.  
  
  Parsloes Park ‘Parklife’ regional football hub  
  
  Plans are progressing well to develop new sporting and community facilities in Parsloes Park. In brief the proposed facility mix will comprise: |
New changing facilities incorporating 8 team changing rooms (suitable for use by children and adult teams) and changing rooms for officials;  
- 55 station gym, dance studio and gym change;  
- Bar and café and social space  
- Public toilets and disabled toilets (to changing places standard)  
- 3 artificial grass pitches with floodlighting that can be used for 11-a-side football matches and compartmentalised to accommodate multiple mini, junior and five-a-side games being played simultaneously.

The total construction cost of the new facilities is estimated to be c£7 million. £1 million of this total is being funded by the Council (£400,000 capital funding and £600,000 CIL funding) and the balance has been or is expected to be secured from the Football Foundation, Sport England, London Marathon Charitable Trust, GLA, and s106 developer contributions.

It is expected that the planning application for the scheme will be considered in January 2019 and work will start on site in March 2019 with the new facilities operational in time to be used during 2019/20 football season.

**Central park masterplan**

A feasibility study has been undertaken to investigate how it might be possible to implement some elements of the Central Park masterplan proposals at no cost to the Council.

It outlines an innovative proposal to generate income from the importation of inert material from building sites across London and the South East, which will be utilised to create a new landscape in the park.

It is estimated that the income generated will be c£1.7 million. However, income and cost certainty will only be confirmed when planning approval has been given and the necessary licence from the Environment Agency has been granted.

It is proposed to utilise a proportion of this income to realise the following park improvements:

- Adventure play area
- Pump track (for BMX bikes)
- Toddler BMX facility
- Mountain bike loop
- Circular seat
- New pathways
- New trees
- Wild flower meadows

Consultation about the proposal will start in September 2018 and a report about the scheme will be presented to Cabinet in October 2018. It is expected that the planning application for the scheme will be submitted by December 2018, which would enable a licence from the Environment Agency to be awarded by July 2019, and for works to start on site in August 2019 and to be completed in 2021.
A review of leases, licences and other arrangements has identified 63 distinct usage agreements between the Council and third parties in the Borough’s parks and open spaces (including allotments). Alongside this piece of work, opportunities for social enterprises to take on the operation of redundant facilities or to make better use of them have been investigated.

The immediate outcome of this work is that long term leases will be offered to Barking Football Club and Barking Cricket Club in Mayesbrook Park and to Dagenham Rugby Club in Central Park (pending Cabinet approval).

Cabinet has approved in principle to lease the new football facilities proposed for Parsloes Park to the London Football Trust.

Also licences to occupy premises are being negotiated with: Growing Communities for the former-bowls pavilion at Central Park; Company Drinks for the former-bowls pavilion at Barking Park; and Box Up Crime for the Leys Pavilion.

Public health funding of £113,000 has been allocated in 2018/19 to enable the delivery of the Growing Food and Communities programme. The aim of Growing Food and Communities is to improve the physical and mental health and well-being of residents through increased participation in food growing and healthy eating activities. It focuses on intergenerational engagement activity with residents and training and development of volunteers to deliver a sustainable activity programme.

Growing Food and Communities is being delivered by a partnership comprising the Council’s Ranger team and two local community organisations: Growing Communities and Company Drinks.

The project will provide food growing and cooking opportunities with local residents of all ages, as well as providing permanent growing space and opportunities for fun, educational and community-building activities. There will also be opportunities for outdoor exercise and social activities, improving both mental and physical wellbeing including: the delivery of a park-based community programme of fruit tree and shrub planting workshops, skills training sessions, exploration walks across the parks, hands-on planting and environmental workshops and informal social activities.

One of the key outcomes will be that the activity initiated will be sustainable in future years primarily through the training and development of volunteers to support the ongoing delivery of participatory programmes and the sale of produce and refreshments.

4. Financial Implications

Implications completed by: Katherine Heffernan, Group Finance Manager

4.1 The strategy set out in the report would be delivered using funding received from the council’s general fund and any other funding secured during the period covered by this strategy. Year on year the funding will be reviewed as this may fluctuate if cuts are required or if any of the grants cease. Any major variation in the funding
may impact on the delivery of the strategy. Funding streams will be regularly reviewed to minimise this risk.

5. **Legal Implications**

Implications completed by Dr. Paul Feild Senior Lawyer

5.1 As set out in the report the Council will best develop and administer its parks and green spaces stewardship through the means of a forward-looking strategy reviewed on a timely and periodic basis to ensure it reflects local needs and the resources available to deliver it.

5.2 Where the strategy identifies a requirement for change in services particularly where there may be closure(s) or discontinuance of a service or services, appropriate consultation will need to be carried out. Any savings proposals that affect staff will require consultation with Unions and staff.

5.3 In addition, Members will need to be satisfied that Equality Impact Assessments have been carried out. In relation to the impact on different groups it should be noted that the Equality Act 2010 provides that a public authority must in the exercise of its functions have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination and to advance equality of opportunity between persons who do and those who do not share a relevant ‘protected characteristic’.

5.4 If at any point resort to constricting expenditure is required, it is important that due regard is given to statutory duties and responsibilities. In particular the Council must have regard to:

- any existing contractual obligations covering current service provision. Such contractual obligations where they exist must be fulfilled or varied with agreement of current providers;
- any legitimate expectations that persons already receiving a service (due to be cut) may have to either continue to receive the service or to be consulted directly before the service is withdrawn;
- any rights which statute may have conferred on individuals and as a result of which the council may be bound to continue its provision;
- the impact on different groups affected by any changes to service provision as informed by relevant equality impact assessments;
- having due regard to any consultation undertaken.

6. **Other Issues**

6.1 **Customer Impact** – Numerous studies have identified the capacity of parks to reinforce a sense of place and residents’ affinity with a neighbourhood. People will identify strongly with their local park as part of the fabric of their neighbourhood. Where a park is of high quality, this will foster a sense of pride in the places where people live and work. These feelings are particularly strongly expressed when parks have direct heritage value or contain cultural assets or activities of significance. Conversely a poor quality or neglected park can have a negative impact on perceptions of neighbourhood quality.
Through the delivery of the strategy action plan, it is expected that there will be a marked increase in the number and range of people who will use our parks for formal and informal recreation over the life of the strategy. And that over the life of the strategy satisfaction levels will rise and be as good as the London average.

6.2 **Safeguarding Children** – Parks and open spaces have long been used by schools to extend their play and educational offer. Parks offer opportunities for children to explore their perceptions of risk in a dynamic, free outdoor classroom.

A clear focus for the strategy is to improve access to parks by children and families and to support the delivery of health and well-being activities and cultural events.

All events or activities delivered directly or commissioned by the Culture and Recreation service will be covered by its safeguarding policy framework for children and vulnerable adults.

6.3 **Health Issues** – One of the priorities identified in the strategy is to harness the untapped potential of the borough’s parks to improve the health and well-being of local people.

DEFRA has calculated that the NHS could save £2.1 billion per year if parks and open spaces infrastructure encouraged people into more active lifestyles. Good quality parks and open spaces can have a significant impact on some of the most prevalent disease groups – coronary heart disease, stroke, type two diabetes, and mental health.

This strategy demonstrates how parks can develop as places where physical activity can be promoted through the principles of ‘active design’ and proposes the development of more opportunities for people to come together to socialise and to take an active part in the community through volunteering.

Targeted programmes will also be developed to support local people to lead healthy lives by improving self-confidence and reducing isolation as well as promoting fitness and good mental health.

6.4 **Asset management** – The strategy will help the Council to make the case to funders, like Sport England and national governing bodies for football, rugby and cricket, to secure investment in our playing pitches and pavilions.

The success of the Eastbrook May and Baker sports club is a great example of what can be achieved through community asset transfers. The club was established by the Council as a limited company with charitable status to manage the football, cricket, and rugby pitches and ancillary facilities owned by Sanofi and which were subsequently gifted to the Council. The estimated cost to the Council if the facilities were to be managed in-house was c£250,000 per year; however, the club is successfully managing these facilities at no cost to the Council.

It could well be the case that this delivery vehicle could be replicated elsewhere in the Borough, for example at Parsloes Park, where a Community Football Trust model for the management of the football facilities has now been approved. Over the life of the strategy, it is intended that approval will be sought for the transfer of
management responsibility for several parks’ buildings to community sports clubs via long term lease arrangements.

6.5 Crime and Disorder Issues - The Council has a statutory duty to consider crime and disorder implications in all its decision making. The strategy recognises that whilst the proportion of residents worrying about crimes is well above the London average, actual crime in Barking and Dagenham parks is relatively low.

In delivering this strategy and action plan, the Council will aim to challenge this perception in a constructive way by providing quality facilities and activities, which will provide positive activities for all residents and opportunities for families to enjoy their leisure time together.

Public Background Papers Used in the Preparation of the Report:

Barking and Dagenham Parks and Open Spaces Strategy

List of appendices:

Appendix 1  Parks and Open Spaces Strategy – action plan implementation