

## CABINET

11 July 2017

<b>Title:</b> Parks and Open Spaces Strategy	
<b>Report of the Cabinet Member for Community Leadership and Engagement</b>	
<b>Open Report</b>	<b>For Decision</b>
<b>Wards Affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Yes
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<b>Accountable Director:</b> Paul Hogan, Commissioning Director for Culture and Recreation	
<b>Accountable Strategic Director:</b> John East, Strategic Director: Growth and Homes	
<b>Summary</b>	
<p>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.</p>	
<p>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.</p>	
<p>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. In the strategy, we've looked at a new way of assessing the value of these benefits (Corporate Natural Capital Accounting - CNCA). We can use the evidence that CNCA provides to support the case for more investment in the borough's parks and green spaces.</p>	
<p>We want Barking and Dagenham's parks to deliver as many positive outcomes for the economy, for communities and for the environment as possible. To help us plan this, we have assessed the current quality of the borough's parks and compared this with the quality assessment we carried out in 2003. This has told us that we have some work to do to improve the quality of our parks so that they can deliver in the way that we want them to. Equipped with this quality assessment and the CNCA report, we can look at ways in which we can improve our parks over the next 10 years. We'll look at how we can use the council's own resources and at what funding we can bring in from outside to pay</p>	

for these improvements.

We think the best way to improve parks is to work in partnership with local communities and organisations. To prepare the strategy, we've consulted widely across the borough, gathering the views of residents, whether they use our parks or not. We've incorporated what we've been told into the strategy recommendations and will continue to work with residents to deliver these by establishing 'Friends' groups for parks and by supporting volunteering and training initiatives.

In common with many councils, the borough is facing a significant challenge in terms of funding and we need to consider the best way to deliver and sustain the benefits we all want to see. The strategy looks at new ways of doing things and considers if there might be different ways to run and pay for parks in future.

These are exciting times for Barking and Dagenham and we want parks to be a key part of the future borough just as they have been in the past. By committing to this strategy and Action Plan, we can be confident that parks will continue to tell a great story about Barking and Dagenham as a place to live, learn and work.

### **Recommendation(s)**

The Cabinet is recommended to adopt the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy at Appendix 1 to the report.

### **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 Parks and Open Spaces Strategy outlines our ambitions for green spaces in the Borough for the next ten years.
- 1.2 It will 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.
- 1.3 Building on and updating existing plans, the new strategy assesses the quality, quantity and accessibility of existing provision for parks and open space and associated facilities. It has been informed by extensive resident consultation and provides an assessment of future needs and establishes locally derived standards.
- 1.4 The Strategy connects with a raft of strategic initiatives and research so that this vision for our parks and open spaces is joined up with national and local thinking. Included is a set of commitments, deliverables and actions.

## **The distribution of parks and open spaces**

- 1.5 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.
- 1.6 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'.
- 1.7 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**

- 1.8 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 four Green Flag Awards (Abbey Green, Barking Park, Mayesbrook Park, and Valence Park), having lost two Awards in recent years.
- 1.9 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**

- 1.10 LBBB residents are less satisfied with our parks than the London average. The Residents' Survey tells us that 60% of LBBB 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 LBBB residents considered local parks to be poor or worse – three times higher than the London average of 6%;
  - The gap between satisfaction with LBBB 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.

## **2.0 Proposal and Issues**

- 2.1 There is currently no coherent dedicated parks service managing these assets. Most parks have few visitor attractions of note; basic facilities such as refreshments and toilets are of variable quality and in some cases non-existent.
- 2.2 There is no current visitor intelligence, volunteering infrastructure is weak and capacity building potential through the Ranger Service is minimal following previous service reductions. Current staffing is focused on maintenance of the parks and on enforcement activity.
- 2.3 The Borough's parks are currently dilapidated with significant outstanding financial liabilities and there is an urgent need for capital and revenue investment. The lack of a strategic framework makes it difficult to attract investment which exacerbates the risk of further deterioration of the infrastructure of parks, as well as the buildings and facilities in them.
- 2.4 Our aspiration is to see our parks and open spaces as assets that help deliver the Borough's growth ambitions. We are seeking to become a destination of choice and it is vital that the public realm looks the best it possibly can.
- 2.5 We want to restore and enhance these green spaces so that they offer a better quality and wider range of services and facilities to encourage formal and informal recreation and provide a rich and diverse visitor experience.
- 2.6 The value of increasing and enhancing the range and quality of services and facilities and realising improvements to the wider infrastructure will encourage visitor use and will be a fundamental factor in improving the health and well-being of residents.
- 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 of the strategy in order that the most serious issues are addressed as soon as possible.

### **Methodology**

- 2.8 The scope of the strategy development process has been wide ranging and has included a robust quantitative and qualitative assessment and audit of the Borough's parks and open spaces and associated assets and facilities. This has informed the production of a comprehensive database of park infrastructure that identifies strengths and weaknesses and gaps in provision.
- 2.9 A consultation exercise with residents, stakeholders and partners about the Borough's parks has been undertaken to establish levels of satisfaction and identify current and emerging needs, expectations and aspirations. This has helped us understand how the parks and open spaces can make a greater contribution to the quality of life of residents and how best this can be communicated.
- 2.10 A desk top exercise was implemented to review the Borough's existing Parks and Open Spaces Strategy (adopted in 2003) and related green space strategies, studies and plans (both local and national). This included a critical assessment of

the value and benefits of existing open spaces, especially in terms of regeneration health inequalities, flood mitigations, crime and anti-social behaviour, and to provide clear evidence to support the need for changes to the parks.

- 2.11 There has also been an evaluation of opportunities for additional community involvement and responsibility in caring for and improving the Borough's parks. And an exploration of new uses and activities within parks and open spaces and the identification of opportunities to attract investment either through existing schemes or new funding sources and/or commercial partnerships.
- 2.12 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; Abbey Green; and the Eastbrookend Country Park.
- 2.13 A master plan for Parsloes Park was produced in advance of the strategy development process to enable a significant funding bid to be made to the Park Life scheme and to support the planning application process in relation to the Youth Zone.
- 2.14 In conjunction with, and informed by, the development of this strategy, work is underway by Barking Riverside Limited to produce a masterplan for the green spaces that will be created as part of their extensive housing development programme, which will ultimately comprise part of the s106 agreement for the site.
- 2.15 The strategy, master plans and action plan is attached at Appendix 1.
- 2.16 A technical assessment and evidence base document accompanied the main strategy document and can be found at <http://moderngov.barking-dagenham.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=180&MId=9411&Ver=4>). That document incorporates 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 (section 13)
- 2.17 Members are asked to note that the 'events in parks' policy includes the proposal to encourage and enable faith groups in the Borough to hold events in parks.
- 2.18 The masterplan for Parsloes Park is attached at Appendix 2.
- 2.19 The proposed improvement actions that will be prioritised for implementation over the first three years of the strategy's ten-year life span are set out in table 1 below. The primary focus will be on identifying opportunities to increase income and reduce costs through commercial activity in the parks and to build on the success of the Public Health supported tree planting and community food growing initiative.

**Table 1** Parks and Open Spaces improvement priorities – 2017 to 2020

<b>Ref.</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>SOCIAL OUTCOMES</b>	
1	Set up charitable trust to support development of friends' groups and volunteering activity across the Borough's parks.
2	Install more measured routes for walking, running and cycling in parks.
3	Clearly signed walking and cycling routes between and through parks.
4	Prioritise measures to promote perception of safety
5	Provide better information on events through the web and social media.
6	Expand the current health walks programme and explore opportunities to align the programme with local surgeries and public health programmes.
<b>ECONOMIC OUTCOMES</b>	
7	Initiate 'quick wins' programme of park improvements through direct consultation with local communities that will deliver a broad range of benefits and outcomes.
8	Initiate programme of playground upgrades and repairs focussing on those areas that have the highest demand and are currently in the poorest condition.
9	Develop and implement a strategy for s106 and CIL investment in parks across the borough.
10	Implement capital improvement projects for Abbey Green and Abbey Ruins and for a regional football and cricket hub at Parsloes Park.
11	Seek new partnerships to develop new facilities and entrepreneurial management model for Central Park.
12	Seek to expand a variety of income generating opportunities in parks through developing the events programme.
13	Seek to develop partnership with Capel Manor for the provision of new training and management opportunities at Eastbrookend Country Park.
14	Investigate opportunities to develop new and/or accommodate existing social enterprises within parks.
<b>ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES</b>	
15	Introduce a 'peat free' policy for plant stock and the sustainable sourcing of timber.
16	Implement a programme of installing habitat enhancements, such as bird and bat boxes, across all parks.
17	Explore the potential for developing nature trails and providing nature walks across parks with high ecological and natural capital assets.
18	Undertake a programme of air quality monitoring across district and local parks, targeting investment where air quality is poorest.
19	Promote generation of renewable energy through identifying opportunities for wind turbine installation.
20	Develop partnerships with external organisations to develop a tree planting programme across the borough to improve air quality, biodiversity and community food growing opportunities.

### 3.0 Options Appraisal

- 3.1 The options available to Cabinet are to agree that the strategy and the associated masterplans and action plan (with any direction on amendments to be made) or to reject it.

- 3.2 If Cabinet do not adopt the strategy, this will mean that there is no strategic framework to drive improvements in green space provision in the borough, which would also impact on our ability to lever in external funding to support service delivery and capital developments.
- 3.3 Therefore, Cabinet is recommended to adopt the strategy with any amendments, removals, or additions as they consider appropriate.

#### **4. Consultation**

- 4.1 The development of the draft strategy has been informed by consultation with ward councillors and Cabinet members, key council officers, and external stakeholders, such as: Dagenham Rugby Club, St. Chads Bowls Club, BAD BMX club; Barking Riverside Ltd; and the volunteers at Greatfields Park.
- 4.2 We have also considered the views of the wider community gathered from an on-line survey as well as holding public consultation meetings in Barking and Dagenham.

#### **5. Financial Implications**

Implications completed by: Katherine Heffernan, Group Finance Manager

- 5.1 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.

#### **6. Legal Implications**

Implications completed by Dr. Paul Feild Senior Lawyer

- 6.1 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.
- 6.2 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.
- 6.3 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'.

6.4 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

## 7. Other Issues

7.1 **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.

7.2 **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.

7.3 **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.

- 7.4 **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 considerable potential. 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.

- 7.5 **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:**

- Parks & Open Spaces Strategy Technical Appendices and Evidence Base (<http://moderngov.barking-dagenham.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=180&MId=9411&Ver=4>)

#### **List of appendices:**

- Appendix 1 Parks and Open Spaces Strategy (in two parts)  
Appendix 2 Parsloes Park masterplan