REPORT OF THE SUSTAINABILITY REVIEW COMMITTEE

London Borough of Islington

March 2008
FOREWORD FROM THE CHAIR

Whether you are a resident or a visitor, the condition and utilisation of the green spaces around and between the buildings of an Islington housing estate might be inspiring - or depressing. With 32,000 homes and 51 hectares of green space in the council’s estates, the size of the challenge cannot be exaggerated.

The use and abuse of green space on estates can best be summed up as a juxtaposition of the curate’s egg (“Good in parts!”) and the sherpa’s dream (“A mountain to climb!”). Our mission was to find out what could be done, by whom and how, to improve the daily lives and pleasure of the residents and visitors to this important part of our environment.

In our investigations we met and listened to people from social housing organisations inside and outside the borough, our own Greenspace organisation, and tenants and residents. Our ambition was to pull together the ideas and experiences we found, to give the whole issue a boost and to encourage the players involved to work together with a sense of urgency to get things moving.

With public and social housing being a major part of our common environment, none of us can ignore how our lives are affected by the quality of the green spaces within and around the estates.

In terms of this survey, we had in mind any housing arrangement which involves a significant amount of common outdoor space. This covers other Registered Social Landlord properties. As you will see from the report, we questioned and listened to many players. They were all very helpful and forthcoming – and had good, useful and encouraging tales to tell.

We went to see some interesting examples of good practice in making outdoor space more pleasant, healthy and enjoyable. What was also encouraging was that the subject is not yet constrained by procedure and cliché. The people we met had a sense of mission and achievement… some might say these are rare commodities these days.

In order to make the improvements we are proposing, it’s important that the responsible players have the authority and motivation to see things through. A common purpose should help keep the mission on track.

It is essential that as well as the professionals taking an active and committed part in this, residents and other interested parties are involved fully. In other words, post-hoc consultation is not an acceptable substitute for continuous and influential involvement.

There will be some actions which need even more ingenuity and single-mindedness. For example, the financing and ownership of some activities will need not just the will to succeed but also imagination and excellent negotiating skills. Leaseholders will need to be kept involved and treated with consideration and respect.

I’d like to thank all of the contributors to our scrutiny, our committee officers who organised the review and kept us all on track, the members who came on the visits, and Sean McLaughlin, the senior council officer who acted both as a visionary of the broader picture and a helpful interpreter of detail for us.
Thanks to all of these players I believe we have brought a useful set of recommendations and mission to the council’s Executive to implement for the benefit of all of us - particularly the residents who live on our estates.

Councillor Wally Burgess
MEMBERSHIP OF THE SUSTAINABILITY REVIEW COMMITTEE

Councillors:
Wally Burgess (Chair)  Rhodri Jamieson-Ball (Vice Chair)
Mouna Hamitouche  Anna Berent
Barry Edwards  Tracy Ismail
James Murray  Stefan Kasprzyk
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Julia Williams  Gary Doolan
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Kelly Peasnell  Richard Watts

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The sustainability review committee would like to thank all the groups and individuals who assisted the scrutiny process and helped to shape the recommendations in the report.

OFFICER SUPPORT

Scrutiny & Democratic Services:  Katie Cohen  Peter Murphy

Environmental Sustainability:  Sean McLaughlin
THE COMMITTEE’S RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sustainability Review Committee recommends:

1. That the maintenance contract for the green spaces on Council estates should go to a contractor who can facilitate opt-outs for TRAs and other resident groups who have the capacity to take over management.

2. That the quality of open space on estates should be maintained to the same standards as parks as far as is possible given constraints of leaseholders. Negotiation should be carried out to ensure that leaseholders’ share of any increase in costs that may be associated is fair and reasonable.

3. That the Council seeks to minimise the financial burden to leaseholders especially to improvements made using third party funding e.g. planning gain.

4. That the new contractors should have a contract for maintenance of both estate open space and parks in each area to ensure consistency of approach and cost benefits.

5. That clear guidance should be in place for estate tenants and residents on who is responsible for the maintenance of their estate. There should be one contact point who can liaise with residents and communicate between the residents and any contractors.

6. That the possibility of transferring some estate open space to the Council’s general fund to be managed by Greenspace be investigated. Some of the current open space on estates is very public and the possibility of this being transferred with all the associated implications should be looked into. One such area the committee identified was an area of open space which was part of the Trecastle Way estate, N7.

7. That award schemes should be promoted to help encourage residents to get involved and take ownership of their area as well as providing guidance and best practice advice to resident groups.

8. That all redevelopment of open space should be done in partnership with local residents and key stakeholder groups. The Committee has seen that this is key for ensuring the long term success and maintenance of any redevelopment. Detailed ongoing consultation should be carried out with all stakeholders and their ideas incorporated into design and maintenance as far as possible. Ideas from residents could include community allotments and vegetable patches.

9. That residents and volunteer groups are provided with support, guidance and advice to help them with maintenance and best practice.

10. That the possibility of developing schemes which could draw on volunteers from the private sector, including large city institutions, be looked into. Organisations such as Notting Hill Trust manage very successful volunteer projects which provide valuable expertise and a workforce to the local community and a challenging and rewarding experience for the individuals who volunteer. The possibility of Council staff or Councillors volunteering as part of managed schemes or "away-days" could also be looked into.
11. That work should be done to encourage greater biodiversity in future redevelopment of greenspaces. This had environmental and social benefits as well as often helping to lower maintenance costs.

12. That guidance be issued to Hfl area officers on how development, design and use of green space can be used to improve community safety.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Overview Committee approved the priority topics for scrutiny at their meeting on 12 June 2007.

1.2 The Overview Committee agreed that the Sustainability Review Committee should undertake a scrutiny review to consider sustainable ways of improving green space on Council estates.

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1 To consider sustainable ways of improving green space on council estates.

2.2 The objectives of the review were as follows:

- To review standards of maintaining green spaces on council estates and how they can be improved.
- To examine best practice in maintaining green space in Islington and elsewhere, and consider how to extend it to all estate green space.
- To make recommendations for consulting and involving residents and the wider community in improving estate green space, resolving the needs of different groups of residents and maximising resident buy-in to ensure long-term commitment and support.
- To consider the most cost effective approaches to improving green space on estates, bearing in mind the impact on tenants and leaseholders.
- To consider opportunities for improving estate green space, including the principle of transferring land to the council’s general fund for wider community use.
- To ensure proposals for improvement are sustainable, particularly in the light of climate change and community safety issues.

3. METHODOLOGY AND TIMETABLING

3.1 Following the agreement of the Scrutiny Initiation Document, a work programme was designed for the Committee to receive presentations and witness evidence at Sustainability Review Committee. A number of visits were also organised including to housing estates within the borough and to estates managed by other registered social landlords including Peabody and Notting Hill Housing Association.

3.2 The submissions received are detailed in the minutes of the meetings of the Sustainability Review Committee and the written evidence available on the Islington Council democracy web pages (www.islington.gov.uk/democracy) or from the scrutiny section of the Town Hall (Tel: 020 7527 2000)
4. BACKGROUND

4.1 There has been an increasing amount of importance placed on the quality of green space and open space in recent years. Green space on council estates has a significant impact on the quality of life of estates' residents and makes a significant contribution to the general environment.

4.2 Islington has the second lowest density of green space of all local authorities in England and therefore open space on housing estates can play an important role. A very high percentage of residents in the borough do not have access to their own private garden meaning that public open space on estates and in parks is very important to many residents.

4.3 Homes for Islington (HfI) directly manage 23,000 tenancies and 9000 leaseholders. The total size of all open space on housing estates (including housing associations) in the borough is 51 hectares compared with 82 hectares of open space that is currently managed by the Council's Greenspace team.

4.4 The issues around cost implications of any recommendations will be significant. Some changes could have cost implications which may have an impact on leaseholders and this has to be considered. Strict financial regulations require the Council to recharge leaseholders for improvement works in most situations.

4.5 The possibility of land being transferred to the general fund from the housing fund would also be looked into.

4.6 Land Use Consultants (LUC) and Groundwork were commissioned in June 2007 to audit and assess the quantity and quality of Islington’s housing open space sites (sites managed by HfI and housing associations) and to develop a strategy for their ongoing management and development. The results of this audit will be looked at in conjunction with the scrutiny review.

4.7 The committee would look at best practice within Islington and from Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and other local authorities. The report would address methods of identifying and consulting stakeholders and consider the best and most cost-effective ways of redeveloping open spaces. The report would also look at issues of sustainability of future redevelopments and planting schemes.
5. THE COMMITTEE’S FINDINGS

5.1 At the meeting on 11 October the Committee heard from Abena Asante, Housing Environmental Officer, Hfl. She explained that she was the environmental coordinator for estate services and was responsible for policies and procedures and ensuring coordination between estates. The Committee heard that LBI Greenspace provide the maintenance to the grounds, trees and playgrounds including leaf and litter collection. The day-to-day supervision of maintenance was managed by quality assurance officers based on the estates.

5.2 The 2007/08 maintenance budget for Islington estates was £700,000 with an additional £5,500 to each area for ad hoc maintenance such as garden clearance and building works.

5.3 The Capital Works programme was ongoing and sponsorship was being looked at for green areas. Groundworks had also provided further maintenance funds.

5.4 The committee heard evidence from Carol Johnson, Chair of Burder Close Tenants and Residents Association (TRA). She spoke to the committee on her experiences and cited the importance to residents of having quality open space on estates as many residents had no balconies and lived in high-density accommodation. Many TRAs had been working very hard to secure additional funding to spend on improving the quality of estates.

5.5 Examples of the type of project undertaken included creating community spaces, football pitches and play areas. Carol felt that the projects really helped to build community cohesion. The committee’s visit to estates also highlighted the key role that TRAs play in ensuring quality open space and this will be discussed in more length later in the report. Carol felt that in order to improve green spaces, the main issues were related to maintenance, which she felt was currently inadequate.

5.6 The Committee also heard from Zem Salassi e, Homes for Islington, who spoke to the committee on the financial impact on leaseholders of raising spending from the current level of £700,000 to 1.1 million. The charges could be implemented either as repair charges or on-going charges.

5.7 The average service cost for residents would rise from £38 per year to £62 per year. Sean McLaughlin, Assistant Director, Housing and Adult Social Services, explained that the figures quoted were based on the costs of maintaining the open space to the same standard as that of parks.

5.8 Sean McLaughlin informed the Committee that changing the mechanism of funding estate open space to the Council’s general fund could be a recommendation of the scrutiny. This could however cause problems, as some measures may not be popular with residents, such as lawns up to windows becoming general public space.

5.9 Leaseholders had challenged some schemes as they objected to being recharged for them and legal advice was being sought by the Council as to whether the policy on section 106 funding needed to be amended in order that money from nearby development could be used towards improving open spaces on estates.
5.10 Bob Gilbert, Assistant Director, Environmental Sustainability informed the Committee that there were currently three grounds maintenance contracts, two for parks and one on housing estates - the housing estate contractor was in the in-house Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) and the parks contracts were outside contractors.

5.11 The housing grounds maintenance contract operated to a lower specification and there were also other things that were carried out on housing estates by other organisations or not undertaken - for example leaf collection. The new grounds maintenance contract would commence in 2009.

Evidence from James Gilchrist, Head of Greenspace

5.12 The Committee received evidence from James Gilchrist, the Head of Greenspace, who explained that he welcomed the scrutiny and believed it to be fundamentally important. He explained that Islington’s parks and green spaces tended to be in the more affluent areas of the borough whilst the housing estate green space tended to be in the more deprived areas of the borough. Therefore any disparity in the maintenance between the housing estate green spaces and the parks and open spaces emphasises this deprivation.

5.13 The Councils CPA score is partly based upon satisfaction with Parks and Open Spaces and it was likely that residents of estates would also be commenting on their estates when answering MORI surveys and thus affecting the Council’s score.

5.14 The Head of Greenspace had two distinct roles in relation to housing and Greenspace. The Greenspace team within Public Realm manage the contractual elements of the housing grounds maintenance contract, including monitoring the contract and making payments. Homes for Islington pay for this management time through a management fee. In addition, the actual physical work that is part of the housing grounds maintenance contract is undertaken by Greenspace’s internal front line staff workforce. This contract was won as part of a competitive tender process.

5.15 The grounds maintenance contract for housing estates is currently a completely separate contract from the grounds maintenance contract for parks and open spaces. They are both performance specifications, this means that the contract does not indicate how many times the grass should be cut, but a minimum and maximum length the grass may be. However, the specification of the two contracts are noticeably different. The maximum length of grass permissible in housing estates is double the length allowed in parks before the contractor must cut the grass. In indicative terms this means the grass will probably be cut somewhere in the region of 34 times a year in a park compared with 16 times on a housing estate. Other variations also exist. The collection of litter on housing estate grounds is undertaken both by caretakers and grounds maintenance operatives but who carries this out depends on whether it’s a shrub bed, grass or path. This can also be confusing in terms of who is responsible. The other difference is that the collection of leaves in the winter is not part of the housing estate grounds maintenance contract. Another area to consider is that the small fenced and gated grass spaces are often used by irresponsible dog owners who shut all the gates and allow their dog to run free, the space soon fills with dog faeces which is often not removed.

5.16 The Committee were informed that grounds maintenance contracts were currently being reviewed and the intention is to go out to competitive tender. This would include
both housing estates and parks and open spaces. Rather than the current situation of one contract for housing estates and another for parks and open spaces the proposal is for four contracts. They would mirror the area committee/area housing office areas and include all land types in that area. James Gilchrist felt that this was an ideal time to review the grounds maintenance on housing estates and felt that ideally on the 1 January 2009 with new contracts in place, housing estates will be maintained to the same level as parks and open spaces and would also include the leaf collection on estates as part of the same contract.

5.17 The reason for this is that a single contractor would be maintaining to the same specification across a neighbourhood regardless of whether it is a park or housing estate. From the public's perception this will mean that the maintenance will be the same regardless of who manages the land, the contractor will not stop at seemingly non-existent boundaries. James stated that one of the current frustrations voiced to him by residents is that one contractor collects leaves in the park; if the resident asks the housing estate gardening staff when the leaves will be collected they're told its not their duty. Then another contractor comes in to collect leaves on the estates. This makes no sense to a resident especially as it will usually happen on different days and the leaves are blowing about all the time. The aim of these new contracts is to have a much more joined up approach to the public realm regardless of who manages it.

5.18 This highlights the issues around the grounds maintenance specifications and the contractors and offers a way forward. However, raising the specification of grounds maintenance on housing estates will obviously require a raise in the budget.

5.19 The other issue, which the Head of Greenspace felt needed to be considered in relation to green spaces on council estates, was the management of the spaces. At the moment, he felt that it was not necessarily clear who would make some of the day-to-day management decisions to tackle issues that arise. To a certain extent it is the caretakers and the Quality Monitoring Officers within Hfl, but green space is only part of their duties and the structure does not allow them to influence changing the contract, so no one is actually in control. With no one clearly managing the improvements and engagement activity on estates it is therefore not as effective as it might be.

5.20 Housing Estate green spaces have been improved - e.g. projects replanting shrub areas - but this is often in an ad-hoc way which gives little time for planning the improvement itself. It is also not in anyone’s remit to actually consult with the residents.

5.21 The Parks and open spaces are managed in day-to-day terms by the Greenspace Rangers. Not only do these staff monitor the contractor and their performance on site but also engage with the community; identifying improvements and organising events. In order to improve the management of green spaces on estates. James suggested that Hfl identify four members of staff to manage the estate green spaces, one for each contract. They would work with residents and be based at least some of the time within the Greenspace Team of Public Realm. This would allow the contract to be changed to react to situations; they could engage with residents over improvements and events. This would naturally lead to a re-negotiation and reduction of the management fee, as they would also monitor performance.
5.22 The Greenspace Rangers are a relatively new service within the parks and open spaces of Islington. But the impact of the rangers has been significant with much higher levels of community engagement and resolved issues. This approach has led to the development of community contracts where Friends of Parks groups take on a community contract. They take on the maintenance of the site, or certain aspects of the maintenance and in return they receive the same payment that we previously gave to the contractor. The Friends obviously get greater value than a commercial contractor from the funding available. A similar model could work with residents associations.

5.23 Some of the housing estate green spaces are intrinsically public and some are even called parks. These should definitely be considered for transfer to the Greenspace Portfolio so that they can be managed as true public open spaces. The vast majority of the housing estate green spaces are grass – this offers little biodiversity and is in effect a green desert. Some of the land could be considered for alternative green space usage; for instance a relatively modest capital injection could turn some of the underused green spaces into allotments. This would also obviously then reduce maintenance costs.

5.24 Playground maintenance and play value varies hugely with some being quite poor. Some evaluation of playground provision needs to be considered as some of the estate playgrounds are very close to parks ones. It could be that there is some rationalisation.

5.25 The proposal was to seek bids from contractors based on a 4-area approach based on the current area committee divisions of North, South, East and West. The purpose of the division of the contract into areas was to enable future local management standards to be able to influence particular areas.

5.26 Assessments could be done to remove certain areas from the contracts if local residents or “friends of” groups wanted to be involved. The Council could provide the equivalent cost of the contractor to the local group. This was currently working successfully with parks and it would be beneficial if it could be expanded to housing estates. The groups would be involved in maintenance but not the overall management and strategic decisions. The “friends of” groups could share knowledge and expertise with TRAs and other residents’ organisations to help them in this area.

5.27 The quality of the contractor was very important and performance indicators were being developed that the contractor would be assessed on. These could include public and workforce satisfaction.

Evidence from James Littlewood, Groundwork

5.28 At the meeting of 29 November, the Committee heard from James Littlewood of Groundwork. He explained that Groundwork was an environment/regeneration charitable organisation that had been working in the borough for about 7 years and the majority of work was on housing estates in the borough.

5.29 The organisation worked with local residents to help people turn neglected open space into valuable, attractive areas. This could be small community gardens or allotments or major new parks and sports facilities. The aim was to create landscaped areas that are
safer encourage community participation, biodiversity, health and promote sustainable living through renewable energy and local food production.

5.30 Groundwork were involved in physical improvement projects to housing estates and looked to maximise resident involvement. They felt strongly that maximising community involvement helps to ensure that improvements last. They looked to improve play areas, community gardens, and community safety issues and had worked on 17 estates in the last 18 months. The schemes would range in cost from £1000 to £500,000.

5.31 Groundwork would start with a detailed consultation and design stage phase which would usually last approximately 6 months. Following initial consultation with all residents where they would be able to identify problems with external spaces, Groundwork would look to develop plans for improvements. Residents would then be re-consulted with these plans before they were amended and finalised and cost estimates drawn up.

5.32 The next stage was the fundraising stage which usually took just over 1 year for funding to be secured to implement all or part of the plans. Following on from this was the construction phase which typically took 6 months to one year. Plans could still be revised and permissions needed to be secured. There would also need to be consultation on any possible re-charging to leaseholders. The work would then be tendered to contractors and carried out.

5.33 The final stage would be maintenance and defects phase where the contractor would be responsible for this for 1 to 2 years before it was handed over to the landlord.

5.34 James Littlewood provided the committee with information on the works at Brecknock Estate as an example of the type and timescale of a groundwork project. The project involved the development of 2 run down courtyards. £176,000 was fundraised (Big Lottery, NRF, s106, Tenants Compact, Awards for All) for new play equipment and renovation of some existing play equipment. The works included; landscaping works, including new surfacing, new gates, new benches, new bins, new railings and the restoration of existing facilities, e.g. painting of railings and buildings, repair of pergola, repair of surfacing, etc. They also included soft landscaping, including planting of new trees, turf, plants and shrubs and the maintenance of existing specimens. The community were very involved and much of the planting has been carried out directly by themselves.

5.35 The audit of housing open spaces had shown that out of 333 housing estates audited, there was 51.62 hectares of open space on the estates (compared to 81.79 hectares in the rest of the borough). Within this space there were: 140 play areas with an average of 3 items of equipment; 63 "youth spaces" including 52 MUGAs, 6 rebound walls and 8 kickabout areas; and 323 other social/ informal recreation areas. Common problems included litter which was found in 61 of the 63 youth areas and many of the spaces being in a poor condition.

5.36 The audit also indicated that of the informal recreation areas, between 15-20% were in poor condition and those with planted areas were rated worst with 20% being of poor condition. 6% of recreational areas were rated as poor in terms of clenliness and graffiti and vandalism were present at 7% of sites and dog fouling was evident on 6% of sites. 23% of sites were considered as having poor visual quality and approximately
half were considered as fair. In terms of security, 83% of sites were considered as feeling open and secure and had good natural surveillance. This would be important in terms of redevelopment.

5.37 The audit also provided suggestions for enhancement. These included:

- Enclosed garden areas could be improved to provide community gardens for residents only;
- Areas had been poorly designed and maintained. Redesign should consider purpose and relationship with adjacent spaces and wider estate;
- Communal play areas and recreational space could be provided;
- Where the access is limited, consideration could be given to making the area into enclosed allotments or private garden areas;
- New additional planting should be introduced to reduce harshness of space;
- Seating and bins should be provided.

5.38 With respect to community engagement, the Committee heard that Mayville Community Gardens had been a very successful project. Groundwork had completed the work in March 2007 and the community now maintains raised beds within the gardens, growing vegetables and plants. Groundwork in conjunction with local residents organised a series of summer activities which saw over 55 children and 30 adults accessing the gardens in the summer holidays. There had also been good attendance at gardening club meetings including 7 residents and 1 non-resident. The whole area (except the lawn) totalling 120 square meters, was maintained by the community. The residents were very dedicated and the space had won awards including Islington in Bloom Runner up; and Conservation Foundation Green Corners Award Nominee.

5.39 The committee heard that Stafford Cripps Estate TMO had worked to improve an overgrown area of green space that was being used as a dog toilet and not used by the community. The TMO had tried to maintain the site, but found that it was too large for them to do this without additional help. The grounds were planted mainly with shrubs which had suffered due to lack of maintenance, leading to them becoming overgrown. The site was relatively safe but the grounds are not used at all by the residents. Lack of links into the community prevented the TMO from getting funding and support.

5.40 In September 2007, Groundwork funded a corporate volunteering event with Lehman Brothers who involved 90 people clearing brambles and general improvements. Following the event the residents became more engaged, expressions of interest in joining the gardening group rose from 2 to 7 adults and work started on fundraising to start a community allotment. By introducing better links to other organisations such as EC1 New Deal for Communities and St. Mungo’s, it has meant that the garden is now being maintained.

5.41 The Committee also heard that there were however constraints to community maintenance of green spaces. These included: a lack of water within 50 meters of the site; problems with space for tool storage; the overall suitability of the site; the need for a strong TRA or gardening club; and the need for support and encouragement both from other residents and from estate landlord.
Evidence from Heather David, Notting Hill Housing Association

5.42 Heather David, Notting Hill Housing Association, gave a presentation to committee on the work Notting Hill Housing Association were doing on developing open spaces and how they were working to involve local communities.

5.43 Heather explained the work they had done on Curry Rise in Barnet. Resident involvement with the project had been very important, and the ongoing participation of residents had helped to make it a big success.

5.44 Consulting people on their views on a one-off basis would result in far fewer benefits than involving people in an on-going process of participation. It was important to involve key stakeholders such as: landowners; local council departments; funders; resident bodies; police and fire authorities; amenity groups; young people; visitors; access groups; local politicians; and the voluntary sector.

5.45 The importance of listening to all those concerned was key and would help to ensure that the project will serve the needs of users. A detailed consultation plan at the outset was important. Challenges included engaging with all sectors of the community including those who don’t currently use the site. The community itself could also be difficult to define.

5.46 It was also essential to involve young people to ensure long-term success. They could be involved in design and maintenance and it could also help them to learn new skills.

5.47 The Neighbourhoods Green project is a three-year project funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). It is aimed at: highlighting the importance of green spaces for the social housing sector; auditing and evaluating social housing green space management, design and status in London; promoting best practice; and providing guidance and training. The project would review and monitor 10 case studies within London and establish a network of champions within the social housing sector.

5.48 Notting Hill Housing Association worked with Neighbourhoods Green to provide good quality open spaces. The importance of open spaces in terms of improving the quality of life of residents was becoming increasingly important with housing associations and local authorities looking more and more to improve the quality of open spaces.

5.49 For the project at Curry Rise, the internal spaces were also essential to the overall success of the project. The success was dependant on residents’ attitudes towards their entire area. Consultation was key at all stages, including discussions with TRAs and young people.

5.50 Some of the problems experienced included conflicts of interest between different user groups and intergenerational considerations. In organising the consultation it was very important that clear boundaries were set and expectations were managed.

5.51 Notting Hill Housing Association worked with volunteer groups and successfully targeted large business such as Goldman Sachs and Disney to offer volunteering packages for their staff to support vulnerable people. The projects had been a big success and had helped to transform neglected open space and gardens into attractive user friendly outside space.
5.52 NHA had found that involving residents to change their own environment had had a very positive effect on crime and antisocial behaviour. The Neighbourhood Officer at Elgin Close reported that they had previously experienced high levels of Anti-social behaviour (ASB) and graffiti but since the summer projects with young people to enhance the estate, ASB had reduced dramatically and there had been no new graffiti during the summer months.

5.53 Other ways in which estates could be transformed with lower cost implications included providing seeds and bulbs for local residents to transform run down open space into meadow-like area. There had been a very successful project on Clapton Park Estate where residents had transformed their area for very little cost.

5.54 The future maintenance of these spaces was very important and had to be considered at all stages of project planning. Organisations such as Neighbourhoods Green were able to provide a lot of useful information on community involvement.

Visits to Estates

Curry Rise

5.55 Members of the committee met with Heather David, Head of Community Regeneration, Notting Hill Housing (NHA), John Baldwin, Director of Housing Management, Hannah de Lasti, Volunteers Project Coordinator and Chris Norton, Senior Neighbourhood Officer to visit Curry Rise and estate in NW7.

5.56 The estate had had problems with vandalism and antisocial behaviour and residents had lost interest in where they lived. There was also a lack of youth provisions and a lack of police presence and growing insecurity amongst residents about living in the area.

5.57 NHA worked with residents including children and young people to understand what they perceived the problems to be and what they would like for the future of their estate. NHA also engaged other community groups such as the Police Panel and a development plan was drawn up involving the comments from all these groups. NHA also helped to set up a residents association which in turn developed youth groups and gardening clubs.

5.58 NHA felt that by having as many residents involved as possible, the activities organised were able to stay relevant to what residents wanted from their green spaces and communal areas.

5.59 Activities organised for children and young people included a bike clinic, graffiti workshops, painting and decorating workshops, football and mural painting. Activities such as the painting and decorating helped young people to learn new skills but also helped to install a sense of ownership. One communal corridor which had been re-painted had remained graffiti and mark free and the caretaker felt that young people had changed their attitudes towards the communal spaces and would not only not damage them intentionally themselves but would also encourage others not to.

5.60 By working in this way NHA and local residents were able to work together to transform the estate. Previously underused areas of open space were transformed and
the community took ownership and became involved in all aspects. The importance of community involvement in all stages of the process was key.

**Notting Hill Housing Elgin Close, W12.**

5.61 Members of the Committee visited Elgin Close, W12 and met with Sue Suther who was Resource Centre Coordinator. Elgin Close is an extra care housing scheme providing 33 one-bed and 3 two-bed flats for older people who need some support to live independently who live in Hammersmith and Fulham. A day service is also attached to the scheme and tenant can use this to access planned activities.

5.62 Certain areas of open space had become drab and underused. Staff at the centre consulted residents and customers on how they wished to see the grounds of the centre improved.

5.63 Through NHA’s volunteering programme a group of volunteers from the BBC spent a day working at the centre to undertake the necessary work to transform the gardens. Staff from the centre provided them with a wish list of what the residents wanted and then worked with the residents to manage expectations. The work undertaken by volunteers included installing a recycled rockery, raised vegetable patch, an English herb garden, a wildflower meadow, an improved pond and a water butt.

5.64 NHA works with businesses in this way to offer managed projects for their staff as part of their team building and corporate responsibility programmes. The works help vulnerable communities and also help to promote sustainability by the planting programme.

**Lancaster West Estate, Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea**

5.65 Members of the Committee met with Ian Cann, North Kensington Neighbourhood Manager, RBK&C, Dominic Davies and Terry Guppey, Landscape Surveyors and Keith Stevenson, Estate Maintenance Manager.

5.66 Work had been done on improving the communal spaces on the estate and resident’s views had been incorporated into the design and planting scheme.

5.67 In order to try and design out antisocial behaviour particular plants had been chosen for certain locations. Spiky grass plants had been used in borders which had the effect of discouraging children from running through them or pulling them out. Cactuses had also been used. The cactuses required less watering and also provided an interesting change to other types of planting. Monkey-puzzle trees had been planted on some of the green spaces at the request of residents.

5.68 The regeneration of the Greenspace was not done in isolation to other initiatives to increase the usage of areas of the estate. Former garages which had suffered from ASB had been redeveloped into shops and studios and the central corridor area made brighter and cleaner. Consultation and resident input were key at all stages of works.

**Kensington Memorial Park**

5.69 Members of the committee also visited Kensington Memorial Park, W10 which had been refurbished to increase usage and reduce anti-social behaviour. The areas had
been designed to include a large range of children’s play equipment and the paddling pool had been refurbished to make a water play area. A member of staff was on site at all times when the play area was open. Staff had reported a large increase in usage and reduction in problems of antisocial behaviour since the refurbishment.

New River Green Estate

5.70 Members of the Committee met with Carol Sloman, Quality Assurance Officer, Upper Street Area Housing Office, HFI who showed them the work that had been done on the estate. This included a previously paved area on the estate which had been full of rubbish had been changed to green with new planting around it. Relighting on the estate had been undertaken to prevent ASB. New planters had been placed strategically which served to improve the appearance of the area at the same time as preventing mopeds from taking shortcuts over the pavement area. Designing out crime was an important feature of the landscaping of the green spaces.

5.71 Schemes like the “Islington in Bloom” awards had a positive effect on the estates and helped to get residents involved by offering incentives to maintain window boxes and front gardens and awarding the best ones.

5.72 The local TRAs were very involved in the works and in highlighting key areas to be improved. This was seen as essential in insuring the long-term maintenance of areas and to get an increased usage. There were no schemes currently that offered advice to residents on garden upkeep but advice could be given via the local newsletter. For future maintenance issues it was essential that residents had support and advice to help maintenance interest and standards.

5.73 It would be beneficial if ICSL and caretakers worked in a more coordinated manner. Lack of coordination could lead to duplication of work and wasted resources.

5.74 Dog fouling was a big problem on some of the green spaces. A square had been recently refurbished and fenced to protect from dogs and ASB. The caretaker held the key and any residents were able to access it when requested. The design had no permanent seating areas to discourage ASB. The type of approach to design had helped to encourage local residents to be more respectful of their green spaces.

Brecknock Estate, Dalmeny Avenue and Upper Hilldrop Estates

5.75 Members of the committee met with Ernest Okrah, the Estates Services Coordinator for the Holland Walk Area. Two courtyards on the estate had become very rundown over years. The TRA worked with organisations including Groundwork to raise money for new play areas and landscaping.

5.76 The importance of active TRAs was highlighted with many working with the Police and SNTs over issues of ASB as well as working to maintain green areas by participating in planting and organising funding. It was important to continue to support TRAs and it could be important looking at how they can be further funded and whether additional incentives could be introduced.

5.77 There was an area of wasteland off the Trecastle Way estate which needed developing. Additional funds were being sought to make it into an attractive green space. A recent study on the estate had shown that 80% of residents would like it to be
a play area. Councillors met two Police Community Safety Officers who said that there were a lot of problems with rubbish and ASB on the area.

5.78  A lot of work had been done to improve the quality of some of the communal green areas on the estates. This had been most successful where there was active engagement by the local community.

Peabody Trust

5.79  Members of the committee met with Matthew Frith, Landscape and Regeneration Manager, Peabody Trust. He explained that Peabody Trust was founded in 1862 and was the oldest and largest housing association in London. Their estates varied enormously and they included diverse sizes and styles as well as diverse demographics.

5.80  The residents of the estates often had competing demands for the use of green space. For example young families often preferred the option of play areas, whilst older residents were looking for increased tranquillity.

5.81  On the Palmer Estate the trust had worked very closely with residents to transform the Palmer Fields. Residents themselves had secured additional money from Peabody and Groundworks.

5.82  Peabody organised a funday and consultations to inform residents of the proposals and get residents involved. Other events included a bat and bird box day for residents which was organised by Balfour Beattie.

5.83  Peabody had tried to foster a greater sense of ownership amongst residents and saw that as key to successful estate management. Peabody had tried to engage residents and felt working through local residents was important. Sometimes a third party could be used to organise community events to engage local residents.

5.84  There was a ten-year landscape improvement programme on going covering 43 Peabody's estates. Three landscape architects were working on this and were engaging a panel of residents to be involved to help decide priorities and scope.

5.85  Although Peabody did have leaseholders and freeholders, the majority of residents rented. The issue of service charges could be problematic and there was an important emphasis on managing the estates in a cost-effective manner. The residents often had a low level of awareness of costs and benefits of works.

5.86  Guidance on green spaces on estates was available from organisations such as “Neighbourhoods Green” and “Natural England”.

5.87  The publication “A Natural Estate” provides simple techniques to encourage biodiversity on the spaces managed by social landlords, and highlights examples of good practice.

5.88  Methods to encourage more resident participation and ownership include organising workshops on gardening and publishing a guide to simple gardening.
5.89 Having resident outreach workers could have a very positive impact. They would have face-to-face contact with local residents and work with them to secure additional resources. They would also organise workshops, have competitions such as window box competitions and look at solutions for problem gardens.

5.90 The possibility of having a greenflag award scheme for estates was currently being looked into. Most social housing organisations would find it difficult to meet their current criteria but if there were an adapted version for estates it could be beneficial. Greenflag were currently running a pilot scheme based on assessing 7 estates.

5.91 Estate management plans were important in managing estate green space and in greenflag criteria.

5.92 Green pennants could be used as an incentive scheme if residents were involved with the work.

King Henry’s Walk Allotments

5.93 Members of the committee also visited King Henry’s Walk allotment, a project created and managed by local residents who had worked to transform a previously rundown piece of land into a community allotment and gardens.

5.94 Local residents managed and organised the scheme themselves and had sought funding and advice from Islington Council. Organisers have attracted celebrity endorsements of the scheme and Jo Swift from gardener’s world was involved in the initial design.

5.95 The garden will have between 40 and 50 raised bed allotments which also have full disabled access. 70 applications from local residents had been received for these allotments. Members of the local community could pay £10 to be a key-holder and therefore have access to the garden at any time or £15 to have an allotment.

5.96 It was intended that there would be a supervisor on site 2 days a week meaning the gardens will be open to members of the public at that time.

Leanne Brisland, Ecology Centre Manager, LB Islington.

5.97 The Committee heard from Leanne Brisland, Ecology Centre Manager, who discussed the importance of biodiversity on green spaces.

5.98 Leanne stated that biodiversity was important in improving the quality of life of residents and it could be made relevant for estate residents. There was a biodiversity duty as part of the Local Authority targets. It was also important in terms of creating “green corridors” by linking up parks to estate open spaces. It could also bring about savings in management costs as flower meadows etc had very low maintenance requirements.

5.99 There were some constraints to implementation. These included competing demands for usage of space; perception that vegetation can cause ASB therefore having to ensure this is considered at the design stage; health and safety issues; and lack of maintenance expertise. Other issues included possible problems with contract specifications for maintenance as they were currently not always supportive of wildlife.
It could also be difficult for contractors to deal with different management problems in individual estates. Possible ways forward included using the planning system to promote biodiversity.

5.100 Increasing engagement with HfI and with incentive schemes such as Islington in Bloom was also important.

5.101 A Natural Estate is a best practice guidance document for managing housing estates and improving their ecology, put together as part of a three-year project. It highlights the importance of green spaces for the residents of social housing and raises issues of quality of design, sustainable management and safe use amongst social landlords.

5.102 Green spaces were very important and had the potential to provide tranquillity, communal space or safe play areas. They also provided health benefits to residents and provided a connection with the natural world.

5.103 Leanne stressed that wildlife and natural planting were very important on estates as they helped to improve the quality of life for local residents, they had a very high potential for promoting and increasing biodiversity. They also help to contribute to the wider environment and were crucial for a number of species. They offered high quality green spaces with potentially high saving through less intensive maintenance and management schemes. They help to contribute to sustainable communities and encouraging community involvement in their design. Planting and management helps to empower residents and strengthen community cohesion.

5.104 Leanne felt that ways forward to help promote biodiversity and a natural estate included working to ensure flexibility in management styles and working with contractors and stakeholders. Using space for allotments and community gardens would also bring about significant gains for the local community.
6. CONCLUSION

6.1 In conclusion, the committee has seen the importance of open space on Council estates and the positive effects good quality green spaces can have on people’s health and well-being.

6.2 Open spaces on estates were being redeveloped and a greater importance was being placed on this issue. The Housing Open Space Strategy audit had shown that there was still a number of open spaces on estates that were not fit for purpose or being maintained to an adequate standard. This represented a great opportunity to improve and develop these areas and this would have a positive impact on the lives of residents. The committee felt that redevelopment of these areas and reviewing the overall maintenance contract was important.

6.3 During the consultation and design phase of any redevelopment, the committee has seen the importance of working with organisations to help identify key stakeholders and draw-up consultation plans. The evidence has shown that long-term successful projects are those that involve local residents and amenity groups and where the key stakeholders have been identified and consulted with.

6.4 The committee welcomed the introduction of greenspace rangers and the fact that this has facilitated increased levels of feedback from residents and involvement by “friends of” groups. Facilitating the involvement of these groups in maintenance and design of green space is very positive and helps to ensure continued levels of high standards and public satisfaction. For these reasons, the committee feel that future contracts should facilitate the possibility of opt outs for local residents through TRAs and “friends of” groups.

6.5 The Committee felt that the work organisations such as Notting Hill Housing and Groundwork carried out with corporate volunteers was impressive. The organisations provided the management structure and expertise to enable corporate volunteers to work for a period of time on a project to transform an area. It would be interesting to look at whether this type of volunteer schemes could be used on open spaces on housing estates in Islington.

6.6 The issue of sustainability was important. The Committee felt that care should be taken to try and promote biodiversity through planting and to encourage areas not to be paved over where possible to ensure maximum drainage. The type of plants used should also be considered as is currently happening in the parks. It would be important to encourage drought resistant varieties to help cater for the potential of dryer summers.
APPENDICES TO THE REPORT

APPENDIX A - Scrutiny Review Initiation Document
APPENDIX B - Witnesses and Organisations consulted during the course of the scrutiny review.
SCRUTINY REVIEW INITIATION DOCUMENT (SID)

Review: Improving green space on council estates

Scrutiny Review Committee: Sustainability

Director leading the Review:
Gwen Ovshinsky, Director of Housing and Adult Social Services

Lead Officer:
Sean McLaughlin, Assistant Director of Housing and Adult Social Services

Overall Aim
To consider sustainable ways of improving green space on council estates.

Objectives of the review:
- To review standards of maintaining green spaces on council estates and how they can be improved.
- To examine best practice in maintaining green space in Islington and elsewhere, and consider how to extend it to all estate green space.
- To make recommendations for consulting and involving residents and the wider community in improving estate green space, resolving the needs of different groups of residents and maximising resident buy-in to ensure long-term commitment and support.
- To consider the most cost effective approaches to improving green space on estates, bearing in mind the impact on tenants and leaseholders.
- To consider opportunities for improving estate green space, including the principle of transferring land to the council’s general fund for wider community use.
- To ensure proposals for improvement are sustainable, particularly in the light of climate change and community safety issues.

Scope of the Review
The review will consider in principle how all council estate green spaces can be improved in a sustainable way. Specific sites will be examined in detail if general principles and good practice can be learned from them.

Types of evidence will be assessed by the review:
1. Documentary submissions
   Groundworks’ audit of green spaces on council estates.

2. Witness Evidence
   - HFI: Operations, Property Services, Home Ownership Unit, Board Member
   - Greenspace and the Sustainability Unit
• Groundworks
• Tenants and residents
• Other boroughs, ALMO, housing association or private landlord (Jon or Abena to advise)
• Community garden organisations (for example Culpepper)
• Community Safety or Safer Neighbourhood Team

3. Visits
• Brecknock Estate
  • Peabody
  • Dalmeny Avenue
  • other landlords
  • good practice in other boroughs

4. Area Committees
All Area Committees and Area Housing Panels have a stake in this review.

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Programme

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<th>Key output:</th>
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<td>2. Timetable</td>
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This SID has been approved by the Overview/Review Committee.

Signed:                                                  Date:
Chair
APPENDIX B

WITNESSES AND ORGANISATIONS CONSULTED DURING THE COURSE OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW

Abena Asante  Housing Environment Officer, HfI
John Baldwin  Director of Housing Management, Notting Hill Housing Association
Leanne Brisland  Ecology Centre Manager, LBI
Ian Cann  North Kensington Neighbourhood Manager, RBK&C
Heather David  Head of Community Regeneration, Notting Hill Housing Association
Dominic Davies  Landscape Surveyor, RBK&C
Hannah de Lasti  Volunteers Project Coordinator, Notting Hill Housing Association
Matthew Frith  Landscape and Regeneration Manager, Peabody Trust
James Gilchrist  Head of Greenspace, LBI
Bob Gilbert  Assistant Director, Environmental Sustainability
Carol Johnson  Chair of Burder Close TRA
James Littlewood  Groundwork
Ernest Okrah  Estate Services Coordinator, Holland Walk Housing Office
Marnie Rose  King Henry’s Walk Allotments
Zem Sallasie  HfI
Carol Sloman  Quality Assurance Officer, Upper Street Housing Office, HfI
Keith Stevenson  Estate Maintenance Manager, Lancaster West Estate
Sue Suther  Resource Centre Coordinator, Elgin Close