

Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee - 4 December 2018

Minutes of the meeting of the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD - Islington Town Hall on 4 December 2018 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Champion (Chair), Khondoker (Vice-Chair), Bell-Bradford, Clarke, Hamitouche, Jeapes, Nathan and Russell

Councillor Rowena Champion in the Chair

240 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 2)

Apologies were received from Councillor Clarke-Perry.

241 DECLARATIONS OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

242 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item 4)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

243 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 5)

Members requested an officer update on the following actions listed below -

The Biodiversity action plan and in particular the Executive Member for Environment and Transport's comment that the plan would be incorporated into the Environmental Strategy. (page 3 of the minutes)

Comparison data for neighbouring authorities on the number of apprentices moving into employment. The officer's commitment that the Apprentice Strategy will be brought to Committee for consideration at a future meeting was noted. (page 4 of the minutes)

Information regarding the ethnicity of children participating in the summer reading challenge would be provided (page 4 of the minutes)

The breakdown of sickness data of Islington's working-age population (page 5 of the minutes)

The Chair informed the meeting that the Committee Clerk will follow up the above enquiries and that the recent officer responses to questions raised by Members outside the meeting would be circulated.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 5 November be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

244 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 6)**

The Chair informed the meeting that as part of the ongoing scrutiny review, a number of site visits have been arranged and urged members to respond quickly if interested in attending. A suggestion to include a visit to Penn Road as an example of volunteer engagement was noted.

A briefing or update from the Recycling Manager could be facilitated if members were interested in attending such a session.

Members were reminded of the public consultation regarding the local plan and the two drop in sessions in the Town hall.

In response to a question on whether the Committee as part of its remit would have an opportunity to consider the Transport Strategy, the Chair informed the meeting that this will be raised with the relevant officer.

245 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)**

In response to questions raised by a member of the public regarding the disposal and recycling of electronic devices, household solar installation and air quality measures in the borough, the Chair requested that the questions be sent to the Committee Clerk for officers' responses.

246 **QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT - EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS (Item B1)**

The Chair informed Members that officers had not been asked to attend this meeting. Any issues or queries arising from the report should be sent to either the officers or the Committee clerk.

247 **SCRUTINY WITNESS: ROLE OF THE ASSISTANT PARKS MANAGER AND PARK RANGER SERVICE (Item B2)**

Members received a presentation from Bhupesh Thapa, Assistant Parks Manager, and Sally Oldfield, Nature Conservation Manager, on their roles, day to day operations and the management challenges in Islington parks. A copy of the presentation is interleaved with the agenda.

The following points were noted in the presentation and in the discussion:

- The Area Parks Team consists of
 - the Nature Conservation Manager who manages the ecological centre and 3 nature reserves,
 - 3 Assistant Park Managers who are responsible for the day to day operations of the 124 parks across the borough, and are supported by 2 Community Rangers and 3 apprentices.
- The Area Parks Team is the first contact for residents, the press and event managers on a range of issues such as events in parks, anti-social behaviour and rough sleeping. Last year, 129 events were held in Islington parks with over 65,000 people attended. Along with the ground maintenance works, the team has the responsibility for managing projects which have been commissioned by other council services in the park. The team facilitates fun fairs in the summer months, which can be a challenge, especially in terms of public attendance and health and safety issues.

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- The Nature Conservation team safeguards the Biodiversity Action Plan by making sure that assets and infrastructure are well maintained.
- The Team regularly liaises with both internal and external stakeholders from formal groups such as Friends groups to institutions such as NHS in order to maximise the use of open spaces and parks.
- It plays an active role in facilitating community engagement through volunteering as it recognises the benefit in promoting public involvement in parks. Currently there are 36 friends groups.
- It engages with diverse groups and communities, in particular vulnerable groups such as those with learning difficulties, the NHS, schools and children. They also receive requests for work experiences from schools.
- There is a regular programme of volunteering for those who want to provide their services on a regular basis such as nature conservation groups. In addition, Park Rangers offer ad hoc volunteering session across the borough. Other volunteering groups include the Friends groups and companies who want to carry out team building activities for their staff.
- The team supports gardening groups in parks and on housing estates where residents offer to take up an area and develop it by growing food or planting.
- Residents volunteer for many different reasons such as improving their health and physical well-being, especially retired people, learning new skills and meeting people from different backgrounds and cultures.
- Volunteers are a positive benefit to the Council. Their activities go a long way towards achieving the objectives identified in the Fair Futures Commission report, they help maintain community space and prevent anti-social behaviour. Income is received from corporate volunteering when companies use the parks for staff team building exercises. Skills are acquired and shared by volunteers and the positive engagement with the community can only be welcomed.
- Managing the different activities in the parks can be challenging for staff as they are a small team. Safe-guarding and health and safety are paramount for all users of the parks and in particular for vulnerable users.
- Events and activities, organised by the Friends' and other groups, enhance community cohesion. Groups tend to take ownership of parks and are their eyes and ears. Groups are consulted about future developments in the park.
- The Team supports Islington Friends of Parks Forum which brings together representatives of Friends of Parks and Friends of Green Spaces groups, the Council and interested parties. They discuss a range of issues such as news about parks and green spaces and challenges they face. They are consulted about and informed of current and future plans. The support provided to the Friends of Parks Forum by the officers is purely administrative. The team assists in facilitating their meetings, booking rooms and supporting their fund raising activities. The Forum works with local resident associations, schools, community organisations as well as the Council.

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- Although the Forum's present activities are limited to local projects such as facilitating school book swaps, there are plans for the Forum to be engaged in a more strategic way by engaging in national campaigns, technology use in parks, social prescribing etc., in conjunction with partners such as community safety team, housing services, libraries, NHS and sports and leisure.
- The Team works in conjunction with partners such as the Garden Classroom who, through their community hubs in the heart of communities, help deliver high quality hands-on sessions in green spaces across Islington. They also work with the Octopus Network who support residents in designing gardens and open spaces, growing food to eat and also promoting wildlife in certain parks for school children to visit and learn about bees, butterflies, frogs etc. and their habitat.
- Greenspace are currently in discussion with Public Health on developing a physical activity strategy and this would include measures such as developing signposted walking routes. The meeting was informed that the Council in partnership with Hackney and Camden had put in a bid for funds which would enable them to accelerate healthy initiatives.
- The Council is in discussion with a company called SPYTAR, about the use of augmented reality in parks, as this could be another way of attracting a new audience.
- In response to concerns that some park events held in the summer could be creating tensions with local residents, the meeting was advised that the Council endeavours to engage with the public and councillors if such events are likely to attract an external audience. It will place restrictions on amplified music and control hours of operation.
- Permission to put on events in a park is not given lightly as there is a delicate balance to be struck. Events can bring in a diverse range of residents who might not otherwise use the park and generate much needed income given the cuts imposed by central government. However, this is weighed against the restriction of access to other park users, disturbance to residents and the potential for anti-social behaviour.
- As part of the Council's charter with the volunteer groups they are required to promote inclusivity, encourage engagement from diverse communities and, when promoting events in parks, leaflets and flyers should display photographs of a diverse community.
- In response to concerns that the Council website had no detailed information about volunteering and the participating groups, the meeting was advised that in the last few years a decision was taken to reduce the amount of information on the sections page as it was not cost effective, however activities organised by the volunteering groups tend to be promoted on their social media forum.
- With regard to discovering how people get involved in volunteering, a suggestion that officers survey present members who will be able to share their experiences was noted.
- It was acknowledged that although Islington Life promotes a number of council activities, more needs to be done to promote park activities.

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- On the suggestion of using a small section of the park for paid-for events, especially in the winter months, the Parks and Open Spaces Manager informed meeting that this was being considered and members should be receiving a briefing on a low impact noise event being planned in March 2019. However, parks in Islington are relatively small in comparison to neighbouring authorities and the physical damage to the field and the cost of restoring it are reasons for not scheduling events in parks in the winter period.
- On the issue of tackling rough sleeping in parks, there is a public perception that reported incidents are not quickly addressed. Police assistance and support is required and, with the limited resources available, this takes time to co-ordinate. Some rough sleepers have underlying issues such as mental illnesses and this has to be handled sensitively. A suggestion that incidents of rough sleeping could be reported on Street Links was noted.
- Evidence shows that young people can sometimes feel excluded as there is a perception that they are linked to anti-social behaviour. Residents from different background sometimes do not understand that the parks are a free resource. Also dogs in the park can be a deterrent to some people. There is need for some more in terms of outreach work so as to bring in more communities.
- In response to a suggestion that officers need to be more proactive in resolving anti-social behaviour, the meeting was advised that the Council continues to support number of activities to try to tackle such issues, for example in working alongside with the Arsenal football club. An active local community deters anti-social behaviour. There has been a transformation in some of the local parks in that anti-social behaviour has been moved away thereby encouraging other communities to use the park.
- A question about whether Friends of Garden groups could be interested in sharing their equipment, ideas and skills with other community groups, Assistant Parks Manager advised that this, among a number of issues, will be raised at the forum meetings.
- In response to a question, the Parks and Open Spaces Manager advised that it is important we welcome the activities of volunteers in the parks as it promotes community cohesion and improves the physical and mental well-being. It is important that the Area Parks Team and officers continue to maintain an oversight of the parks, potentially leaving some of the day to day operations to the volunteering groups.
- With regard to the sustainability of the present volunteering model, it was acknowledged that this would need reviewing as resources are stretched. For example, the cascading of skills and knowledge to newly established groups could be undertaken by established volunteering groups rather than the Team.
- Members were informed that in the latest edition of the Good Parks for London guide, Islington was ranked 6th, using a number of criteria. In addition, the borough was identified as a case study for good practice for community engagement. The link to the park guide will be sent to members.
- The Head of Greenspace & Leisure Services informed the meeting that some groups receive funding through a Service Level Agreement for the work they do. This work can range from maintaining a flower bed to taking responsibility for the

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whole park. The Council will pay the public liability insurance of all properly constituted groups which sign up to the Friends' Charter.

The Chair thanked Officers for their presentation and their responses to issues raised.

The meeting ended at 9.15 pm

CHAIR