



Scrutiny review
**Resident and volunteer engagement in
parks and open spaces**

**Report of the Environment and
Regeneration Scrutiny Committee**



London Borough of Islington

19 June 2019

Foreword

Islington's success in Britain in Bloom demonstrates the importance the Council and residents place on our parks and open spaces, and is a recognition of the impressive partnership between the Council and the volunteers who work together to provide safe and attractive community spaces.

Parks and open spaces, and the opportunities they provide, contribute to the Council's priorities, particularly in:

- creating a safe and well-organised borough;
- making Islington a great place for young people to grow up;
- making the borough an attractive, welcoming and healthy environment for everyone;
- ensuring that our residents are able to lead healthy and independent lives.

In times of austerity, however, the parks service must have a clear vision that makes the most of its contribution to the lives of Islington's residents. While it must be able to justify its funding, its value must also be appreciated. We believe that the best way of ensuring a sustainable future and, incidentally, securing safe and attractive parks and open spaces, will be to return it, primarily, to a public health function – supporting residents' health and well-being.

A recent study by the University of Exeter found that two hours a week in a natural environment significantly improves health. Being physically active in that environment, volunteering or socialising with others, brings immense health and social benefits.

A 2017 report, Natural capital accounts for public greenspace in London, by Vivid Economics in co-operation with the GLA, the National Trust and HLF, estimated that green space enables Londoners to avoid £950 million a year in health costs: the value of recreational activities is around £926 million a year and for every £1 spent Londoners enjoy at least £27 in value. Areas of higher deprivation derive the greatest benefits: "Since populations in deprived areas may be less able to afford substitutes for green space, investments targeting those areas may deliver the largest gains to London's population" [para 5.2.2].

Council teams, principally Greenspace and the Public Health Team, have already started down this route. Funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Trust, together with support from the GLA, for a two-year Parks for Health project with Camden Council, will provide the opportunity to transform the service. It will be an exciting two years.

The involvement of volunteers will continue to be as important as it is now – without them the parks and open spaces would be less attractive and welcoming, and the value the volunteers add cannot be overestimated. In addition, volunteering has a positive impact on

mental and physical health and social exclusion and creates opportunities to develop skills. While widening the pool of volunteers to include harder-to-reach groups will be a challenge, it would bring immense benefits.

We thank the staff of Greenspace for their dedication and for their willingness to help us with this scrutiny. We also thank the officers, residents and groups who gave evidence or showed us the work they do. Finally, we thank the volunteers who make our parks and open spaces such attractive community spaces. We hope that the recommendations we make will support them and will encourage others to get involved.

Scrutiny Review – Islington’s Parks and Open Spaces

The aim of the review is to increase the engagement of residents and volunteers in Islington’s parks and open spaces; to understand the current role our parks and open spaces play in meeting the Council’s core objectives; and to recognise the opportunities that exist for increasing this role.

The review, from 10 September 2018 to May 2019, received evidence from a number of sources.

Witnesses

The Garden Classroom

Octopus Network

Chair of Friends of Paradise Group

Chair of Caledonian Friends Group

Dr Coleman, Clinical Lead of NCL Personalisation

Park Manager and Park Rangers Service

Council Officers

Andrew Bedford, Head of Greenspaces and Leisure Services

Barry Emmerson, Parks and Open Spaces Manager

Site visits

Friends of Parks Forum

Penn Road

Plant Nursery on the Hollins & McCall Estate

Volunteering in Caledonian Park

Gillespie Park Ecology centre

Skip Garden – Octopus Community network meeting

Garden Classroom

King Henry’s Walk

Bingfield Park

Meetings with Council officers

Parks Events team

Grounds Maintenance

Assistant Director, Public Health

Head of Neighbourhood Services, Homes and Communities

Head of Communities, Homes and Communities

Community Development Team Manager and Community Development Officer, Homes and Communities

Objectives

1. To understand the barriers to use and volunteering, and to examine whether there are effective measures that can be taken to increase participation, particularly by children and harder-to-reach and vulnerable residents.
2. What, if any, barriers there are to residents, volunteers and community groups holding events and activities in parks and open spaces, and whether these barriers can be removed or reduced.
3. To understand how parks and open spaces are used by other council teams to meet core council priorities, including building resilience and tackling social isolation; to understand whether existing opportunities meet the needs of other Council teams; and to discover if further opportunities for cross-team working exist.
4. To understand to what extent our parks and open spaces are contributing to health and wellbeing, and to identify what changes could be made to make the offer more attractive to bodies such as the public health team, NHS and other commissioning groups. In addition, to understand the value of such opportunities.
5. To understand the way the council engages with the third sector, to discover what capacity exists to increase the value of that engagement, and to increase the activities available to the community (with a particular focus on young people).

Recommendations

Section 1

Maximising the contribution of parks to health and well-being – prevention, early intervention and promotion.

Given the wholesale review that is to be carried out, the Committee does not feel it appropriate to make specific recommendations, but asks that a report on the progress of the project is provided as part of the update on the scrutiny recommendations that are made below.

Section 2

Volunteering and engagement

1. The overall communication strategy should include an overarching mission statement or brand to reflect the Council's vision and to help increase participation.
2. The provisions of the local plan and other relevant policies should be applied rigorously. All developers and other bodies that are involved in planning in the borough should be made aware that the long-term health and well-being of its residents is integral to the provision of homes. Attractive, well-used community space is fundamental to development.
3. Greenspace and, where appropriate, the Community Support team should be consulted during the early design stage of:
 - Council new-build, in respect of the location and nature of community open space;
 - public realm projects.
4. Maintain existing levels of those Greenspace staff whose roles are focused on developing and supporting community engagement, and look for opportunities to increase capacity, either in-house or through third-sector organisations.
5. Review Greenspace's apprenticeship programme to ensure that it equips the participants with those skills that Greenspace finds difficult to recruit.
6. Homes and Communities and Greenspace, with the assistance of the Friends of Parks Forum, representatives of estate gardening groups and, if their remit allows, Octopus, should carry out a review with a view to:
 - providing more integrated support, where appropriate;
 - ensuring that they should have access to the same information and training opportunities; and
 - there should be a network of mutual support that includes the opportunity to link local groups, through a local hub, or otherwise.
7. Greenspace and Homes Communities working with the Friends of Parks Forum, representatives of gardening and third-sector organisations, should develop support and training opportunities for community groups and strengthen local and borough-wide networks.
8. Retain SLAs or an alternative system of core funding for Friends of Groups;

9. Provide seed funding from the HRA for estate groups;
10. Provide more focused help for groups to access funding opportunities.
11. Communication links between the grounds' maintenance teams and the Friends of Groups/Gardening Groups should be improved and formalised, and opportunities for joint working should be identified.
12. Consult with community groups, including questions about the events app, to identify what the barriers there are to putting events on in parks;
13. Identify opportunities for increasing diversity of events in park and open spaces.
14. Review the communications strategy to ensure that information and advice on volunteering, and on community opportunities and events in our parks and open spaces, reaches the maximum number of residents. The review should include a range of methods of disseminating information, such as through community networks and social media platforms, as well as up-to-date and easily accessible information on the Council website and other channels.

Summary of main evidence and recommendations

Section 1

Maximising the contribution of parks to health and well-being – prevention, early intervention and promotion.

The Committee heard compelling evidence on the health and well-being benefits of parks and open spaces, and on the way they can transform lives. It also heard how the NHS now considers social prescribing to be a vital tool and – although it is still in its early stages – is likely to become mainstream.

During the scrutiny, the “Parks for Health” project was adopted by Greenspace, the aims of which, set out below, broadly accord with recommendations that we would have made. The Committee strongly believes that the opportunity afforded by social prescribing, and the health and well-being benefits of localities-working that are afforded by parks and open spaces, should be embedded in the Council’s core services.

To ensure that the opportunities and benefits afforded by this project are understood, we would like to see the involvement, including that of corporate directors, of all the Council’s teams that work with Islington residents.

Greenspace aims for the “Parks for Health” project are as follows.

“Parks for Health will involve a transformation of the service which will place health and well-being at the core of the service and will contribute to the early intervention strategy. The aim of the project is to deliver

- *A systems transformation so that parks and green spaces become central to our local strategies for promoting health and wellbeing.*
- *Greater use of parks and green spaces by those in our communities who are currently making least use of them and are also the least active.*
- *A sustainable future business model for the delivery of parks as public health assets for the 21st century.*

This will be achieved by:

- *Creating Insight – to understand the current value of our green spaces as health assets in terms of physical and social infrastructure and to create a strategic Greenspaces for Health Strategy to frame the next phase creating pathways to health initiatives.*
- *Partnerships & workforce transformation – to build new partnerships with the health sector and transform the workforce to re-focus their role to support health and well-being outcomes.*
- *Building the physical and social infrastructure of parks through co-design and innovation – to maximise the current usage of parks to achieve health and well-being benefits”*

Given the wholesale review that is to be carried out, the Committee does not feel it appropriate to make specific recommendations, but asks that a report on the progress of the project is provided as part of the update on the scrutiny recommendations that are made below.

Section 2

Volunteering and engagement

The evidence the Committee heard from witnesses showed the commitment and enthusiasm of Greenspace and Homes and Communities staff, third-sector organisations, such as Octopus and Garden Classroom, and the residents and volunteers who are active in our parks and open spaces, as groups or individuals. In a borough, which has the second-smallest open space and which is home to many adults and children who have no access to it, there is a passion for our greenspaces and for nature. We heard of the many opportunities afforded to volunteers and of the way in which community and other events can attract new people into our parks and open spaces.

We also encountered some residents who were unaware that they could become involved in our public spaces and others who felt there were barriers to their full engagement. We also heard about children who would not eat produce they helped to grow because they expected food to come in a package.

The Committee supports the Council's vision of making our borough an attractive, green place in which to grow up and live, one which has community parks and open spaces – land in housing estates, forgotten corners, tree pits, or on our streets – that include the active involvement of residents and volunteers.

There appears to be no overarching mission statement that articulates this vision, one that encompasses the different aspects and volunteers, and makes it clear to residents that they are welcome to become part of it.

The Committee heard about Islington's success in the national "In Bloom" scheme and how important that is for engaging greenspace volunteers and groups. "Islington in Bloom" could be used in this way, although some residents thought that it would not give the desired message and could cause confusion.

Recommendation

- 1. The overall communication strategy should include an overarching mission statement or brand to reflect the Council's vision and to help increase participation.**

The Committee understands that, in a borough such as ours, there are many competing demands on open space. It recognises that the inclusion of good-quality community space in new housing developments and public realm schemes can be challenging the ambitious provisions of the draft local plan.

We have been told that there are instances in which community space is provided, but is not in areas where it can be used as intended and does not, therefore, contribute to the health and well-being of the residents. As a result, it cannot be used to reinforce a sense of community.

The Committee also believes that more green infrastructure could be built into public realm schemes, with more community participation. We accept that green structure would have to be sustainable and appropriate to the space.

Recommendations

2. **The provisions of the local plan and other relevant policies should be applied rigorously. All developers and other bodies that are involved in planning in the borough should be made aware that the long-term health and well-being of its residents is integral to the provision of homes. Attractive, well-used community space is fundamental to development.**
3. **Greenspace and, where appropriate, the Community Support team should be consulted during the early design stage of:**
 - **Council new-build, in respect of the location and nature of community open space;**
 - **public realm projects.**

Provide welcoming, well-maintained and safe parks and open spaces that provide a wide range of opportunities for public engagement.

The work that Greenspace and Homes and Communities do with residents and volunteers is impressive and greatly appreciated. Without the support of the experienced and well-resourced teams, much of the volunteers' work would not be possible or would be much harder, and the benefits would be greatly reduced.

The Committee heard from Greenspace and the CSOs about how much they value residents' and volunteers' contribution, and how areas and lives have been transformed by the creation of a Friends' or gardening group.

This collaborative working not only benefits the volunteers, but the way they transform spaces can also benefit all residents. Parks and open spaces play a significant role in social cohesion by bringing together residents from different age-groups and backgrounds.

We heard evidence from the public health team that the biggest gain to health and well-being would simply be to get residents out into greenspace – getting them active is a bonus.

We also heard that some residents are unwilling to use parks because they think they are dangerous or unwelcoming. The provision of a safe, attractive, well-used space is essential in encouraging more people from diverse communities to use parks or greenspace on the estates. It is also essential to encourage families who bring their children to playgrounds, to stay longer and to keep returning when their children are too old for the swings.

We heard how areas that had been blighted by anti-social behaviour have been turned into well-loved and well-used spaces, how working in our greenspaces has given residents a sense of belonging and has turned the spaces from passive areas into active community spaces.

There is a recognition within Greenspace that budget cuts mean that staff have little time to do more than routine essential maintenance and, partly as a result, that there is some deficiency in skill levels among the maintenance teams. While steps are being taken to recruit staff with horticultural skills, it is proving difficult. Apprentices attended a college

course but we understand that a decision by the college to end the programme means that apprentices no longer attend.

Many people who are involved in groups are highly skilled gardeners and, in some cases, garden and landscape designers. The most attractive, and bio-diverse areas in many greenspaces are there because of the volunteers. Biodiversity brings health and well-being benefits to residents as well as wildlife and these benefits will be reflected in the new Biodiversity Action Plan which is currently being drafted.

Third sector organisations such as Octopus and Garden Classroom also have a real impact on the opportunities available for residents. Octopus is working with Homes and Communities to support gardening groups on the estates, who also have the support of a dedicated Community Support worker and are providing training and plant-growing opportunities at their nursery in Tufnell Park. They have recently organised networking meetings to bring together community centres, gardening groups and friends' groups.

In evidence to the Committee, Octopus and Garden Classroom both mentioned that attracting funding is greatly helped by their association with Islington Council and by the enthusiastic support of Greenspace, which is very open to new activities and ways of engaging residents. Their relationship with the officers is key to the effectiveness of their work.

The Committee is well aware that all departments are under financial pressure and have to manage their budgets while keeping all their responsibilities in mind. We are, therefore, wary of making recommendations about funding. What we have heard, however, combined with our experiences as ward councillors, indicates that a reduction in staff working with the community would be extremely detrimental to the Council's core priorities.

Recommendations

- 4. Maintain existing levels of those Greenspace staff whose roles are focused on developing and supporting community engagement, and look for opportunities to increase capacity, either in-house or through third-sector organisations.**
- 5. Review Greenspace's apprenticeship programme to ensure that it equips the participants with those skills that Greenspace finds difficult to recruit.**

Friends of Parks Groups and Gardening Groups

The Committee believes that as part of the "Parks for Health" project there should be a focus on increasing the capacity of community groups. We reiterate that we believe the role played by volunteers is crucial to delivering the Council's core priorities on health and well-being and in making the borough an attractive place in which to live. Having listened to the views of a number of volunteers and groups, as well as to those working with them, we are of the view that some measures could be taken to help groups and to reduce the workload of staff and volunteers.

First, the current hard division between the estate gardening groups, supported primarily by the Homes and Community Teams and, currently, Octopus, and the non-estate groups, supported primarily by Greenspace, wastes opportunities and, in some instances, officers' time. Second, if there were a greater focus on common experiences and on increasing groups' and individuals' capacity, it would benefit the Council as well as the volunteers.

Reducing barriers between estate and non-estate groups.

The Committee was encouraged to hear the commitment from Homes and Communities to improve the quality of greenspaces on the estates, with the aim of raising them to the standard of our parks. This creates opportunities for the further engagement of residents and volunteers.

There will continue to be a different support structure and, in some circumstances, it is entirely appropriate that there will be differences in the way the groups are treated. We believe, however, that there should be much more integration of support, and increased opportunities for the groups to provide mutual support.

Recommendations

- 6. Homes and Communities and Greenspace, with the assistance of the Friends of Parks Forum, representatives of estate gardening groups and, if their remit allows, Octopus, should carry out a review with a view to:**
 - **providing more integrated support, where appropriate;**
 - **ensuring that they should have access to the same information and training opportunities; and**
 - **there should be a network of mutual support that includes the opportunity to link local groups, through a local hub, or otherwise.**

Strengthening Friends and Gardening groups

Throughout the scrutiny we were told how much the groups appreciate the support given by all levels of officers at Greenspace and, in particular, by the three area managers and their teams of rangers. Despite the pressure on human and financial resources it is apparent how much those officers enjoy working with the volunteers and are committed to helping them.

The Committee believes that reorganising the way that some of the help and support is delivered could enable the officers and the volunteers to make more effective use of their time and, therefore, financial resources.

The Committee believes that a centrally provided programme of capacity building, which includes more effective information sharing, training and a focus on working with the groups to identify and help resolve common problems, would be of benefit to officers and volunteers alike. There is already peer-to-peer support, but it is *ad hoc* and, to some extent, depends on personal contacts.

The Committee would like to see a support package developed that gives new groups the ability to identify and carry out their priorities. At present the support depends on groups knowing who to ask and what they can ask for. This can be confusing and, at best, iterative. The goodwill and commitment of volunteers and officers alike generally makes this work, but it is not an effective use of resources. In the vast majority of cases, groups need assistance with the provision of equipment and/or support to access funding.

The VCS team recognises that Greenspace volunteers are not integrated into their work and is keen to investigate how this can be improved so that volunteers can benefit from the support offered to other community volunteers.

Recommendation

- 7. Greenspace and Homes Communities working with the Friends of Parks Forum, representatives of gardening and third-sector organisations, should develop support and training opportunities for community groups and strengthen local and borough-wide networks.**

Steps should include:

- an easily accessible source of current information for Friends and gardening groups. This would replace or be in addition to email;
- an information pack on how to set up and organise a Friends' Group, including information on, for example, how to procure insurance, easily accessible funding sources (such as LIF, community chest), and simple fundraising suggestions, such as coffee mornings;
- a similar pack for new estate gardening groups
- targeted support for new groups
- peer-to-peer support, including a mentoring system for new groups;
- identifying and, where possible, helping to solve common problems, such as mulching, fund raising and capacity building;
- promoting and facilitating the sharing of resources, such as equipment and plants;
- assisting groups to link to external initiatives, such as the free seeds, plants and funding opportunities provided by the Mayor of London;
- encouraging groups to put biodiversity at the forefront of their activities;
- developing simple guidance for managing wildlife-friendly spaces and for putting on small activities;
- encouraging third-sector organisations to bid for funding to provide practical support and share expertise;
- better integration of greenspace volunteering into the VCS service

Funding

Once again, the Committee acknowledges that departments budgets are under pressure. It is, however, firmly of the view that Friends of Groups and gardening groups need a consistent source of funding. The majority of Friends of Groups that garden in parks are given an annual grant under a service level agreement (SLA) that is equal to the estimated cost to Greenspace of the work they carry out. They use the money to pay for plants, compost, and other equipment and material for maintenance and community events. Groups told us that without this grant they would not be able to maintain their community spaces adequately.

Greenspace, and Islington residents, benefit because most, if not all, of that grant is spent on improvements to the park rather than the cost of labour. Friends of Groups that do not garden do not receive SLA funding, and only a few gardening groups have them. Homes and Communities are considering this issue in relation to estate groups.

There are funding sources which can grant funds to these community groups, including Council schemes, such as the Local Initiative Fund, which is controlled by ward Councillors and Community Chest, and is administered jointly with Cripplegate. The Committee heard from long-established groups who were, however, unaware of them. While external funding opportunities are also available, they can require technical information that not all groups have the capacity to provide. The funding opportunities are constantly changing and currently groups find it difficult to keep up to date. The Committee believes that supporting groups to access funding should be a priority, and that new groups should be provided information and, if necessary, support for funding applications.

Recommendations

- 8. Retain SLAs or an alternative system of core funding for Friends of Groups;**
- 9. Provide seed funding from the HRA for estate groups;**
- 10. Provide more focused help for groups to access funding opportunities.**

Grounds maintenance

There are, in some cases excellent links between the grounds' maintenance teams and groups, but because there is no formal procedure for information sharing on their respective priorities for the same space, there can be misunderstandings. The Committee believes that more collaborative working would benefit both parties, but recognises that this must not add an unmanageable burden to the grounds' maintenance teams who are already stretched.

Recommendation

- 11. Communication links between the grounds' maintenance teams and the Friends of Groups/Gardening Groups should be improved and formalised, and opportunities for joint working should be identified.**

Continue to provide and promote a range of opportunities for residents and communities to be involved in, and take ownership of, parks and open spaces.

The Committee heard how important it is to provide a range of opportunities for residents to get involved in parks and open spaces, and, despite the pressures they can bring, how commercial events, such as funfairs, attract new people into parks. The Committee is very keen to ensure that the events put on in our parks and open spaces are inclusive and diverse – open to all ages, and appealing to different ages, backgrounds and interests.

While it is clear that Greenspace and community support officers do support groups and individuals to put on events, and that there is a dedicated events team that is committed to helping them through the process, some witnesses raised concerns that there are unnecessary barriers and that the information required for small events is too onerous. We were told that this has led to some groups limiting their activities.

The events team told us that it is very keen to encourage activities in parks, but that it has to make sure that events are safe. The events app, through which the applications are made, is not bespoke and may appear, in some regards, to be too prescriptive. The team

would be happy to consult with groups to see whether there are steps that can be taken to assist.

Recommendations

- 12. Consult with community groups, including questions about the events app, to identify what the barriers there are to putting events on in parks;**
- 13. Identify opportunities for increasing diversity of events in park and open spaces.**

Communications

Finally, the Committee is concerned that the many opportunities available to residents and volunteers are not easy to find, although we acknowledge that there are many pressures on the communications team, not least the financial cost of hosting information on websites.

Our own experiences, as well as evidence, suggest that if current communications were improved, many more residents would benefit. Giving officers the ability to publicise their own events would help.

Recommendation

- 14. Review the communications strategy to ensure that information and advice on volunteering, and on community opportunities and events in our parks and open spaces, reaches the maximum number of residents. The review should include a range of methods of disseminating information, such as through community networks and social media platforms, as well as up-to-date and easily accessible information on the Council website and other channels.**

Appendix 1

Key evidence

The Committee considered evidence from Garden Class Room and Octopus Network on their activities, particularly within the community, and their use of open spaces and parks. The following points were noted.

- **Octopus Network**, a small charity, initially held most of its activities in community centres, where it offered and hosted a range of services and events. Over the years it has expanded its activities to open spaces and parks, and welcomes the support provided by the Parks Department.

The network received more than £900,000 external funding over a number of years, enabling it to carry out a range of borough-wide activities to support residents in designing gardens and open spaces, growing food, and running workshops in community centres.

The Committee noted that a successful Octopus activity is the Environmental Summer Schools, for children ages 5-11 and their families, which are run in partnership with Islington Green Space for Children.

The “Trail Blazer”, which is run in partnership with Islington Community Hubs Network, aims to create unique living/learning spaces that provide new outdoor environments to enable local communities to design, develop, manage and enjoy learning activities.

In promoting “Urban Wild Places” in parks, the Committee was informed, that with the support of Islington Parks, Octopus would endeavour to establish wild-life areas in parks to enable young children to learn about bees, butterflies, frogs, etc.

- **The Garden Classroom (TGC)** comprises volunteers who have a passion for, and understanding of, outdoor life to deliver high-quality hands-on sessions in green spaces across Islington.

TGC works in partnership with Islington Council, other councils, community gardens, schools and businesses, to bring true benefits to the community, which it believes will boost staff morale and engage client and/or customer bases. The Committee was advised that TGC works with schools to deliver its curriculum through outdoor learning in parks and gardens.

Since TGC began its activities, more than 62,000 children have been involved in various outdoor activities; this accounts for 28.5% of what TGC offers. TGC recognises that city dwellers are subject to myriad challenges, including overdevelopment, pollution and insufficient open space. As a result, TGC not only

offers outdoor activities for city dwellers, but also engages with disadvantaged children and visits schools.

TGC works with other departments, but currently has a particularly positive working relationship with Public Realm. It helps to deliver more than 200 hours of activities in the Ecological Centre, instead of the 60-70 hours agreed in the service-level agreement.

- **Challenges** include lack of shelter and toilet facilities for schoolchildren in the parks. There is, however, a noticeable decrease in anti-social behaviour and dog fouling, particularly after community engagement in the spaces.
- **Engagement of housing-estate residents.** Urban Wild Places organises workshops on the Harvist and Bemerton Estates, where residents are encouraged to grow their own vegetables and set up garden clubs. An example of successful planting activities on the Andover Estate was highlighted, but this had been suspended after the start of the new-build programmes.
- **A Biodiversity Action Plan**, together with a budget would be welcomed by TGC and Octopus because it would help to deliver and promote diversity in the borough. The Head of Green Space and Leisure Spaces reported that a concise briefing paper, which focuses on habitat, is currently being drafted.
- The Committee was informed by Officers that although the **Council's Nature Conservation Team** continues to ensure that Islington has integrated parks, it is important to strike a balance between residents who prefer well-manicured parks and those who want wild-life to be promoted.

TGC and Octopus Network both welcome the support of, and recognition by, ward councillors since this gives small charities credibility with external funders when seeking financial support.

The Committee was informed that organisations work with Community Development Officers and the Housing Communities' team to identify which housing estates to work with and where to run activities. Since some estates already have garden clubs in place, while others are looking for help to set them up, the level of support varies from estate to estate.

- **Longevity and sustainability**, TGC and Octopus both acknowledged that although external funding is important for their operations and activities, their model is based on being facilitators for other groups.
- **Advice and support.** The Committee was advised that although no financial support is provided to community centres, or for any of their activities, other types of support would include providing advice about the design of gardens, or planting of seeds to grow food. The essence of any support is to ensure that it provides a living space for its residents to develop their space. In addition, it provides an environment in which skills are cascaded and enables residents to identify areas of

interest.

The Committee received a presentation on 4 December from the Assistant Parks Manager and Ranger Services. The following points were noted.

- **The Area Parks Team** comprises the Nature Conservation Manager, who manages the ecological centre and three nature reserves, together with three Assistant Park Managers, who are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the 124 parks in the borough. They are supported by two Community Rangers and three apprentices.

The Area Parks Team is the first point of contact for residents, the press and event managers on a range of issues, such as events in parks, anti-social behaviour and rough sleeping. In 2018, 129 events were held in Islington parks with more than 65,000 people attending. Together with the ground maintenance works, the team is responsible for managing projects in the park that are commissioned by other council services. The team facilitates fun fairs in the summer months, which can be a challenge, particularly in terms of public attendance, and health and safety issues.

- **The Nature Conservation Team (NCT)** safeguards the Biodiversity Action Plan by ensuring that assets and infrastructure are well maintained. In addition, it liaises with internal and external stakeholders, from Friends groups to institutions, such as the NHS, to maximise the use of open spaces and parks.

Since NCT recognises the benefit of promoting public involvement in parks, it plays an active role in facilitating community engagement through volunteering. There are currently 36 friends' groups. It also engages with other groups and communities, in particular groups for vulnerable people, such as those with learning difficulties, the NHS, schools and children. NCT also receives requests for work experience from schools.

There is a regular programme for people, such as nature conservation groups, who want to volunteer on a regular basis. In addition, Park Rangers offer *ad hoc* volunteering sessions 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 develop an area by growing food or planting.

Residents volunteer for many reasons: in particular retired people want to improve their health and physical well-being, learn new skills and meet people from different backgrounds and cultures.

The Council welcomes volunteering. By helping to maintain community spaces and to prevent anti-social behaviour, it makes a significant contribution to achieving the objectives identified in the Fair Futures Commission report. In addition, income is generated 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 is to be encouraged.

The small size of the team makes the management of the various activities in the parks challenging. Safe-guarding, health and safety are paramount for all users of the parks, particularly for vulnerable users.

Events and activities which are organised by the Friends and other groups, increase community cohesion; the groups, which are encouraged to take ownership of parks, and are their “eyes and ears”, are consulted about future developments.

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 other interested parties. They discuss a range of issues, such as news about parks and green spaces and the 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 helps in facilitating meetings, booking rooms and supporting their fund-raising activities. The Forum works with local resident associations, schools and community organisations, as well as the Council.

The Forum’s current activities are limited to local projects, such as facilitating school book swaps, but there are plans for it to be engaged in a more strategic way – in conjunction with partners, such as the community safety team, housing services, libraries, the NHS, and sports and leisure facilities – through national campaigns, technology use in parks, social prescribing, etc.

The Team works in conjunction with partners, including the Garden Classroom which, through its hubs in the heart of communities, helps to deliver high-quality hands-on sessions in green spaces across Islington. It also works with the Octopus Network, which supports residents in designing gardens and open spaces, growing food to eat, and promoting wildlife in certain parks for schoolchildren to visit and learn about bees, butterflies, frogs, etc, and their habitat.

- **Greenspace**, the Committee was informed, is currently in discussion with Public Health on developing a physical activity strategy, which would include measures such as developing signposted walking routes. Committee was advised that the Council, in partnership with Hackney and Camden, had bid for funds that would enable them to accelerate healthy initiatives.

The Council is in discussion with SPYTAR about the use of augmented reality technology in parks, since this could be a way of attracting a new audience.

- **Events**. The Committee was informed that to avoid tensions with local residents over events held in parks, particularly during the summer, if an event is likely to attract an external audience the events team engages with the public and councillors beforehand to place restrictions on amplified music and to control the hours of operation.

Decisions to grant permission for events in parks are not treated lightly and require a delicate balance. While it is important to generate much-needed income (given the cuts imposed by central government) by promoting events that will attract a diverse range of residents who might otherwise not use the park, it is equally important not to restrict access to other park users, and to minimise 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, to display leaflets and flyers that include photographs of a diverse community.

In response to the suggestion that sections of parks could be used for paid-for events, particularly in the winter months, the Parks and Open Spaces Manager informed the meeting that this was being considered and Committee members would be receiving a briefing on a low-impact noise event being planned in March 2019. Parks in Islington are, however, relatively small in comparison with those in neighbouring authorities and the cost of restoring physical damage to the field is a reason for not scheduling winter events.

- **Volunteering.** The Committee noted that the Council's website had no detailed information about volunteering and participating groups. This was as the result of a decision taken in the past few years to reduce the amount of information on the sections page because it was not cost effective; activities organised by the volunteering groups tend, however, to be promoted on their social media forums.

To discover how people get involved in volunteering, it was suggested that officers ask current volunteers to share their experiences.

It was acknowledged that although *Islington Life* promotes a number of council activities, more needs to be done to promote park activities.

- **Rough sleeping.** On the issue of tackling rough sleeping in parks, there is a public perception that reported incidents are not addressed quickly. 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 illness, which need to be handled sensitively. A suggestion that incidents of rough sleeping could be reported on Street Links was noted.
- **Anti-social behaviour.** Evidence shows that young people can sometimes feel excluded because of a perception that they are linked to anti-social behaviour. Residents from different backgrounds do not always understand that the parks are a free resource. In addition, dogs can be a deterrent to some people. There is a need for more outreach work to involve different 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 a number of activities, including working with the Arsenal football club, in an attempt to tackle it. An active local community deters anti-social behaviour. There

has been a transformation in that anti-social behaviour has been moved away from some of the local parks, which has encouraged other communities to use them.

- **Friends of Garden groups** indicated that they would be interested in sharing their equipment, ideas and skills with other community groups.
- **The Parks and Open Spaces Manager** acknowledged that the activities of volunteers in the parks promotes community cohesion and improves the physical and mental well-being of residents. It is important, however, that the Area Parks Team and officers continue to oversee the parks, potentially leaving some of the day-to-day operations to the volunteering groups.

It was acknowledged that resources are stretched, and that the sustainability of the current volunteering model would need to be reviewed. The cascading of skills and knowledge to newly established groups could, for example, be undertaken by established volunteering groups rather than by the Team.

- Members were informed that in the latest edition of the *Good Parks for London* guide, Islington was ranked sixth, 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 Committee noted that some groups receive funding because they have a Service Level Agreement for the work they carry out, from maintaining flower beds to taking responsibility for the whole park. The Council will pay the public liability insurance of all properly constituted groups which sign up to the Friends Charter.

At the meeting on 22 January, Members heard evidence from representatives of The Friends of the Parks Forum, and Islington's Event Officer and Park Service Manager, on the volunteering activities held in the parks and how they are managed. The following points were noted.

- **The Friends of the Parks Forum** (an umbrella organisation for Friends groups throughout the borough) was set up in 2010, with the assistance of the Greenspace Team. It meets twice a month to exchange ideas, information and expertise.
- **Friends of Paradise Park (FPP)** was formed to address anti-social behaviour in the park and, following discussions with the Greenspace team and residents, a decision was taken to take over the management of the park.

Since its inception, FPP has facilitated community events that have attracted new families with children into the park. As a result, anti-social activities have been diverted.

FPP promotes and facilitates events to encourage local residents to use the parks, particularly in the summer and at weekends. FPP has a Service Level Agreement with the Council. It relies on volunteers, some with gardening experience, to carry out routine maintenance tasks, such as weeding, planting small plants, litter picking and tidying up.

FPP organises weekly activities and holds a monthly meeting in the community centre to discuss a range of issues and programmes, often with Greenspace officers in attendance. Members were informed that, while some friends groups are an offshoot of their Tenant Resident Associations, FPP comprises a small group of local residents.

- **Sharing information and resources.** In response to questions about information sharing among members of The Friends of The Parks Forum, members were advised that gardening and planting are discussed. Friends' groups promote their events, share ideas and experiences, and, if required, the forum could be used as place to undertake consultation by the Greenspace team.

With regard to providing compost to groups, there had previously been the option of a large delivery from the North London Waste Authority (NLWA), which was very welcome. As a result of policy changes at NLWA, however, this may no longer be possible. In addition, storage near residential properties can be a nuisance.

- **Engaging residents, promoting and publicising events.** The meeting was informed that events are crucial to encourage residents to go into the parks. Groups advertise their events differently, but the simplest method is posters on park railings. Publicity for larger community events in the summer, is often done through leafleting by volunteers, social media, and administrative support from Park Services.

At a recent Friends Forum, it was noted that some friends' groups had not been aware of initiatives, such as the Mayor of London's tree planting or free bulbs. The Chair noted that information sharing was an issue and that it would be helpful if it were improved,

Barry Edwards acknowledged that the Service Level Agreement FPP has with the Council was valuable since it enables the group to manage Paradise Park. In addition, FPP supplements its income with funds from local businesses and Arsenal Football Club, which enables it to put on events. Funds are used to purchase seedlings and plants, although in facilitating larger events, the cost is shared with Greenspace.

- **Fundraising.** Groups such as FPP are run by a small number of volunteers who find it challenging to complete bid application forms that request a great deal of information.

The Events Officer and Park Services Manager explained the application process and the challenges experienced by both the public and officers. The following points were highlighted.

- **Events in Islington Parks** were previously managed by Green Space admin staff, but the increase in the number of event applications, and health and safety regulations, has resulted in it being transferred to the Community Engagement Officers.

In 2015 the event-applications process went online. A dedicated events' team now manages more than 200 annual events held in the parks.

Committee members were reminded that the council has a duty of care to all park users. It is, therefore, necessary to understand and manage events in the parks and to ensure that they are safe and appropriate.

- **The application process.** The Events Officer explained that the application process involves completing a questionnaire and providing information, including a risk assessment. Officers then consult with other in-house departments for advice and approval.

Council officers explained that where licenses or permits are required, particularly for food and drinks to be sold, amplified music being played, or the size of the stalls or gazebos being erected, it is imperative to enlist the expertise of other departments and that their recommendations are implemented.

In response to a question, the Events Officer advised that events that are deemed to have any risk will be required to submit evidence of public liability insurance.

The meeting was informed that events that have more than 50 attendees, that have catering, involve performances, the showing of a film, or the use of a gas BBQ require an application. Smaller events, such as picnics, history or nature walks, professional dog walking and charcoal BBQs, do not require an application.

The officer advised that larger events of 1,000 or more attendees take at least 90 days to process; small to medium events, take between 30-45 days.

- **All applications are made through EventApp**, which enables supporting documents to be uploaded. EventApp automatically creates an event calendar to avoid clashes and to assist other teams affected by park events. The app is used throughout the process, to communicate with the event organiser on issues such as fees and consultation with the various teams, and it issues the event permit. Since each action is logged there is an audit trail.

Despite initial teething issues, the app is much more efficient than the previous booking system. Delays could arise in some instances, particularly if the application is dependent on other sections, such as licensing, whose timescales are not always in line with those of the Parks Service.

Delays can also arise because not every Council department engages with EventApp and, in some cases, departments consider park events to be low priority in comparison with their day-to-day responsibilities. In addition, IT doesn't always work efficiently, and the level of support received from Digital Services is inconsistent.

Because EventApp is web-based, some applicants find the system difficult to work with and others are initially unaware of the time and effort required to get approval for an event. Changes in regulations can cause delays, particularly when they result

in a request for additional licences or certification and incur extra costs. In addition, Officer support to help applicants can fluctuate due to capacity.

Despite the challenges highlighted above, the team continues to offer support and advice through the application process. In addition, Greenspace advocates with other teams on behalf of applicants, for example when a Temporary Structure Licence may be required for the use of gazebos.

Officers continue to work with Apply4, the developers of EventApp, to improve the application process. Officers from different teams are invited to review the entire process.

Waste management in parks. The Committee was advised that applicants are encouraged to put on sustainable events. In the case of a big event, applicants are encouraged to liaise with the Council's commercial waste team and to promote recycling by ensuring that containers are in position.

EventApp is used by many London boroughs. In response to a suggestion that the App could be internalised and used by other Council services, the meeting was advised that the system was built to deal with events in parks (and film applications) and is unlikely to be used by other Council teams.

There has been an increase in event applications processed through the App. The App serves as a "one-stop shop"; applicants who hold regular events are required to upload documents only once.

Safety Advisory meetings are held with applicants, particularly if the event is likely to have a significant impact on the site or surrounding area.

In response to some concerns that the process was about gathering information and was too complicated, the responsible officer advised that the essence of the application process was a concern for public safety.

- **Increasing the capacity of park activities.** The Committee was advised that a balance needs to be struck between raising income and ensuring that events do not have an adverse effect on residents and park users.

The demand for commercial events is increasing. Event Officers will ask event organisers to incorporate elements in their activities that benefit the local community by, for example, inviting local groups to participate or enjoy activities, or by donating to the Mayor's charity.

On 23 February the Committee heard evidence regarding Social Prescribing

The Committee received a presentation on social prescribing from Dr Katie Coleman, Clinical Lead of NCL Personalisation about Social Prescribing. In addition, the Chair of the Caledonian Park Friends Group shared her experience of being involved in a friends' group and the health benefits arising from the use of open and green spaces. The Parks and Open Spaces Manager contributed to the item. The following points were made.

- **Members were reminded of the value of parks in improving health and wellbeing.** In the current economic climate, it is important that the Service maximises and promotes the benefits of parks for its residents. The fact that it is not a statutory service gives it some protection from cuts.

Park Services submitted a joint bid, with Camden Council, for the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Accelerated project, which aims to transform park services into a health and welfare service.

A key part of the project would involve working with the health sector to establish core links and partnerships. If the bid were successful, the service would be funded for the transformation. If it were not, the transformation would be a slower process.

- **Social prescribing (SP).** Dr Coleman informed the meeting that the NHS is promoting SP, which refers people with social, emotional or practical needs to activities or community groups. GPs recognise that there is an increasing level of complex, long-term ailments that require a different approach. Up to 70% of patient appointments are at least partly the result of socio-economic issues and would be better treated with non-medical intervention.

SP could be described as a “listening and connecting” service, under which patients are helped to build on their personal strengths. A link worker introduces them to their local resources; parks could be one of the resources available.

Although it is too early for a definitive analysis of the benefits, SP is gaining traction and is included in the NHS England Long Term Plan and Universal Personalised Care Model 2019, which stipulates that GP practices should come together as a network to employ a social prescribing worker.

Dr Coleman advised that evidence indicates that SP results in improvements in residents’ emotional and physical wellbeing. A link worker could direct them to the appropriate service or support, including for financial advice, education, training, volunteering and physical activity.

Following consultation with the patient, the link worker, trained with skills and knowledge, would be able to produce a personal health care plan, such as facilitating a park run, referring them to knitting classes, or signposting them to the appropriate benefit support, that could address long-term needs.

The Committee heard from Dr Coleman that, by developing this person-centred care, link workers plug the gaps that exist in the current system. SP aims to change the discussion from “what is the matter with you” to “what matters to you”.

Anecdotal evidence shows that referrals to community services result in reduced GP visits and emergency services appointments, which releases resources to support those in immediate medical need.

In Islington, ten health navigators work in multi-disciplinary teams across eight GP networks to communicate with people who have complex issues and to refer them to the appropriate support service. If necessary, the link worker accompanies a patient to their first appointment, particularly if they lack confidence or are experiencing anxiety.

The Committee was advised that, for SP to be effective, the infrastructure would need to be in place and staff trained. Although mapping out the opportunities available is a big task, it is vital for the system to work. The use of parks and open spaces, and the opportunities they offer, is currently underdeveloped.

Referrals to the SP link scheme would be from clinicians, social care providers, VCSE organisations and self-referrals.

The Committee was informed that SP currently focuses on adult services, but that there is a recognition that children and young people also experience mental illness, obesity and social isolation, which cannot be ignored, particularly as no statutory services currently exist to support them.

Committee members heard evidence from the Chair of Caledonian Park Friends Group on how her life had been transformed by her decision to participate in park activities following an illness. She became involved in the Friends Group because she wanted to spend time in her local park. Meeting other volunteers and being instrumental in getting things done restored her confidence. She indicated that since her involvement in the park she has been medication free and has not visited a GP for two years.

The Chair of the Caledonian Park acknowledged that referral for those suffering long-term conditions, such as obesity, loneliness and mental illness, would be beneficial to their well-being.

In terms of GP involvement in SP, Islington currently has a number of navigators in the listening and connecting service, which has resulted in an increased number of referrals. The primary purpose of health navigators is to engage with GP practices and promote what they can offer on a regular basis. The Committee was advised that Age UK has recently employed a person to promote the service.

The Committee was informed that if the HLF funding application were successful, it would enable work to be done to identify what offer is available and, importantly, for a coherent offer to be presented to GPs. The project would create the links and

infrastructure to support participants and to ensure that the staff and, where appropriate, community groups are skilled, trained and able to manage vulnerable patients.

The Committee noted that although the transport department is not directly involved in the Parks for Health agenda, there is some input from other council departments, such as planning, leisure, housing and highways, who are involved in delivering health outcomes. Islington is promoting cycling and walking. The Healthy Streets initiative was mentioned, together with initiatives in other boroughs, including Waltham Forest.

The Committee also noted the funding challenges experienced by volunteering groups. Resources are finite, but local authorities support community groups by, for example, charging peppercorn rents for the use of facilities, including community rooms, toilets and cafés. The Parks and Open Spaces Manager advised that the Accelerator Fund project would consider ways of unlocking funds. Parks' services must be able to prove the benefit of parks and open spaces, and associated cost savings, that will arise as a result of investment in health and wellbeing.

The Chair of Caledonian Park Friends Group welcomed working with CCG and GPs and suggested that working with the Friends Forum would be beneficial.

The Committee heard evidence that although the Service engages in positive activities, such as working with special needs schools, mental health charities and facilitating guided walks, there is no structured programme. A successful bid would, however, enable this work to be more formalised.

The Committee noted that there is still room for improved communication and Information sharing between Greenspace, groups, and the public about the opportunities available to them. This would maximise the value of the work that already takes place in the parks and would help over-stretched staff.

The Committee was informed that, in an attempt to attract new audience into parks, the Park Services will be trialling an interactive App in Caledonian Park, which highlights the positives of the park.

Conclusion

The Committee thanks all the contributors to the scrutiny for a most enjoyable year.

Membership of the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee

Councillors – 2019/20

Councillor Rowena Champion (Chair)
Councillor Roulin Khondoker (Vice Chair)
Councillor Santiago Bell-Bradford
Councillor Tricia Clarke
Councillor Paul Convery
Councillor Mouna Hamitouche
Councillor Clare Jeapes
Councillor Matt Nathan
Councillor Caroline Russell

Substitutes

Councillor Osh Gantly
Councillor Satnam Gill
Councillor Anjna Khurana
Councillor Angela Picknell

Acknowledgements

The Committee thanks all the witnesses who gave evidence to the review.

Officer support

Ola Adeoye – Democratic Services
Lead Officers – Barry Emmerson and Andrew Bedford
Bhupesh Thapa

TERMS OF REFERENCE (SCRUTINY REVIEW INITIATION DOCUMENT)

Review: Resident and Volunteer Engagement in Parks and Open Spaces and understanding the wider value of our parks and open spaces.

Scrutiny Review Committee: Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee

Lead Officers: Barry Emmerson

Overall aim: to increase the engagement of residents and volunteers in Islington's parks and open spaces.

To understand the current role our parks and open spaces play in meeting the council's core objectives and what opportunities there are for increasing this.

Objectives of the review:

1. To understand the barriers to use and volunteering and to examine whether there are effective measures that can be taken to increase participation, particularly among children, harder-to-reach residents and vulnerable residents.
2. What, if any, barriers there are to residents, volunteers and community groups putting on events and activities in parks and open spaces, and whether these barriers can be removed or reduced.
3. To understand how parks and open spaces are used by other council teams to meet core council priorities, such as building resilience and tackling social isolation; to understand whether the opportunities offered meet the requirements of other Council teams and whether there are further opportunities for cross-team working.
4. To understand to what extent our parks and open spaces are contributing to the health and wellbeing agenda, and to identify what changes could make the offer more attractive to bodies such as the public health team, NHS and other commissioning groups. To understand how much such opportunities are worth.
5. To understand how the council engages with the third sector and to examine what capacity exists to increase the value brought in, and to increase the activities available to the whole community (with a focus on young people).

Scope of the review

This review will focus on:

1. Why parks and open spaces are important in an urban environment, both for individuals and the community.
2. How parks and open spaces currently function and whether there is a clear vision for them.
3. The way parks and open spaces are currently managed and the resources that are available.
4. How parks and open spaces are used as community spaces and whether they could operate more effectively as such.
5. How residents and volunteers wish to engage with the maintenance of, and decision-making on, our parks and how they are currently supported to do so.
6. Whether parks and open spaces can more effectively meet the needs of certain groups such as 12- to 18-year olds.
7. How the Parks Service partnership works, including:
 - a. cross-team working to support the Council's core objectives;
 - b. work with third-sector organisations;
 - c. work with commissioning groups.
8. The role of Greenspace staff and whether they could be better supported to help achieve the Council's core objectives and to support engagement.
9. To understand how the community is kept informed of:
 - a. volunteering opportunities in parks and open spaces;
 - b. events and activities in parks and open spaces.

Additional Information:

Appendices

Meetings

XXXXXXXX

Presentations to the Committee:

XXXXX

Islington Council documents:

XXXXXXX

Reference:

XXXXXX