

Report of: Executive Member for Environment and Transport

Meeting of:	Date:	Ward(s):
Executive	18 June 2020	All

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SUBJECT: Executive Member response to the E&R Scrutiny Committee Review of Resident and Volunteer Engagement in Parks and Open Spaces in Islington

1. Synopsis

- 1.1 On the 19th June 2019, the Executive received a report from the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee regarding Resident and Volunteer Engagement in Parks and Open Spaces in Islington.
- 1.2 The Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee's report contained fourteen recommendations, which have been reviewed by officers and the Executive Member for Environment and Transport.
- 1.3 This report recommends that twelve of recommendations are accepted in full and two are partially accepted (recommendations 3 and 4, see paragraphs 4.7 and 4.8 below)
- 1.4 This report contains a response to each recommendation and explains how the council will implement the recommendations it proposes. It also states where the Executive does not accept a recommendation and why.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 To agree the responses to the recommendations of the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee's report on Resident and Volunteer Engagement in Parks and Open Spaces in Islington, as set out in section 4 of this report.

3. Background

- 3.1 The main body of this report was written before the **Covid19 Pandemic** arrived. While still at an early stage in the pandemic, it is clear that this is likely to have a significant impact on the ability of the council to deliver these recommendations and on the timescales of delivery. It is still too early to assess the scale of the impact and as a result, we have not altered the report to reflect this. The report below is based on business as usual and shows how the council intended (and still hopes) to deliver on the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee. It is also hoped that that we can use the pandemic as an opportunity to build on the recommendations as parks and their importance to the public's health and wellbeing, have never been in the spotlight as much as they are currently. The Council will also seek to nurture and sustain the community spirit that has developed to engage more of the community in volunteering opportunities within our parks and open spaces.
- 3.2 In September 2018 the Environment & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee commenced a review of Resident and Volunteer Engagement in Parks and Open Spaces in Islington. The review ran from September 2018 until May 2019 and evidence was received from a wide variety of sources from within and outside the Council.
- 3.3 The objectives of the review were:
- 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).
- 3.4 The outcome of the Scrutiny Review was 14 recommendations. Responses to each recommendation are provided in section 4 below with responses to individual sub-recommendations provided as appropriate.

4. Recommendations and Service Update

4.1 The recommendations of the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee constitute a significant and comprehensive programme of work, which the Park Service Team will either deliver or lead on delivering. The recommendations have been reviewed in the context of whether they can be delivered within available resources and within a reasonable period.

4.2 Recommendations

4.3 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 did 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.

Please see **Appendix B** for a full update on the Parks for Health Project.

4.4 Section 2 - Volunteering and engagement

4.5 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 Executive accepts this recommendation

As part of the Parks for Health Project, there is a dedicated work stream that will provide communications and engagement support to the programme through the development of a communications strategy framework. This work stream includes officers from the Parks Service, the Parks for Health Project Management Team and Communication Team.

This strategy will include the development of an overarching mission statement to reflect the council's vision. A draft of this strategy is scheduled for June 2020.

4.6 Recommendation 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.

The Executive accepts this recommendation.

The Executive agrees that it is vital that developers and other bodies are aware of the benefits of attractive well-used community space. The Islington Local Plan already captures the importance of greenspaces and this is supported in planning guidance Policy CS 15 and Policy CS 16. The importance of these spaces has been further strengthened

and clarified within the draft Zero Carbon Strategy and Biodiversity Action Plan. The Parks for Health Project is also working with two leading companies who have developed toolkits that can assess the health benefits of open spaces to the community. As well as showing the health benefits certain spaces provide for community, they can also provide information on the economic benefits that can be realised by investing in these spaces. These will help to build a business case for encouraging investment by developers into parks and openspaces and build the evidence base. This will be developed as the Parks for Health project progresses.

4.7 Recommendation 3

Greenspace and, where appropriate, the Community Support team should be consulted during the early design stage of:

- 3.1 Council new-build, in respect of the location and nature of community open space;**
- 3.2 public realm projects.**

The Executive partially accepts this recommendation

3.1 The Tree Service and the Nature Conservation Team are currently consulted on planning applications where there is a potential impact on biodiversity or trees, and advice is provided. There is currently no capacity to consult on all projects for wider landscape design advice without additional capacity being created within the Parks Services Team. The Parks Service will work the Housing New Build Team to try and develop a workable solution to ensure that capacity can be found to deliver this recommendation. A potential solution to this would be for Parks Service to charge for advice, which could then be delivered through the Parks Projects Team.

3.2 All Public Realm projects now have to be presented to a Design Compliance Board made up of representatives from all areas of Public Realm. Currently the Head of Greenspace and Leisure and a Project Manager from the Parks Service (with Landscape design experience) sit on this group. Their aim is to ensure that Green Infrastructure is included in any public realm scheme (where possible) and opportunities for community participation are included.

4.8 Recommendation 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.

The Executive partially accepts this recommendation

The Executive agrees that there should not be any cuts to the core numbers of Greenspace Staff unless there is a strong business case for doing so. In light of the current financial challenges the Council faces, in particular with the response to the Covid-19 crisis, it is not appropriate to make any financial commitments to staffing levels at this time. We do acknowledge the vital services these staff deliver for the community and the role they play in delivering the council's core objectives. We will explore opportunities to add additional capacity through engaging and supporting third-sector organisations. This will be explored

through the Parks for Health project which is currently procuring a consultant to identify, map, develop and build our community infrastructure within our parks and open spaces

4.9 Recommendation 5

Review Greenspace's apprenticeship programme to ensure that it equips the participants with those skills that Greenspace finds difficult to recruit.

The Executive accepts this recommendation

The Parks Service currently has eight, 2 year apprentices. A review of the apprenticeship program will take place in 2020/21 with the aim of having the new program in place for the new intake of apprentices in 2021. The review will look which roles the Parks Service has skill deficiencies in and which apprentice training courses would provide the necessary training and qualifications to best meet these roles.

4.10 Recommendation 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**

The Executive accepts this recommendation

All of the above points will be reviewed as part of the Parks for Health Project. As part of this project we will be commissioning a company/organisation to:

- map the existing community, voluntary and social enterprise organisations involved in health, wellbeing and parks and greenspaces across the boroughs
- work with the aforementioned groups to develop a shared understanding of their current activities, ambitions and capacity
- support the idea generation and development of new activities, services, relationships and partnerships to deliver improved health and green space outcomes
- facilitate peer learning between groups working to develop new services and approaches within the boroughs and to learn from best practice being developed elsewhere.

This is still in the commissioning phase but the aim is to have work completed by March 2021.

4.11 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.

The Executive accepts this recommendation

This recommendation will be tackled as part of the Parks for Health Project and as part of the recently commissioned Food Growing and Community Gardening Strategy that the Parks Service have commissioned Octopus Community Network to produce.

Work will start in April 2020 and the draft Strategy is due in March 2021.

4.12 Recommendation 8

Retain SLAs or an alternative system of core funding for Friends of Groups.

The Executive accepts this recommendation

The council is committed to retaining the current spend levels on community SLA's but will also carry out a review of system to establish if:

- It is currently fit for purpose
- To identify any opportunities to improve it to better support Friends of and Community Gardening Groups.

This review will take place during 2020/21.

4.13 Recommendation 9

Provide seed funding from the HRA for estate groups.

The Executive accepts this recommendation

Housing Service have set up a new Council Tenants and Resident Groups Fund (TRGF).

The TRGF is available to resident groups on Islington Council estates to support activities that help achieve one or more of the following outcomes:

- Tackling loneliness and social isolation
- Residents have better chances in life with better access to training and development to improve their life skills.
- Stronger communities with more active residents working together to tackle their problems.
- Improved rural and urban environments which communities are better able to access and enjoy.
- Healthier and more active residents and communities

This fund is now in place and will be actively promoted from April 2020.

4.14 Recommendation 10

**Provide more focused help for groups to access funding opportunities
Grounds maintenance.**

The Executive accepts this recommendation

This action will be investigated as part of the Parks for Health Project and recommendations made as part of the final report.

4.15 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.

The Executive accepts this recommendation

This action will be investigated as part of the Parks for Health Project and will form part of the Workforce Transformation Work Stream.

4.16 Recommendation 12

Consult with community groups, including questions about the events app, to identify what the barriers there are to putting events on in parks.

The Executive accepts this recommendation

The Events Team will carry out a survey of all community groups and partners who utilise the parks for events and any groups linked to parks activities, to understand the barriers to putting on events in parks, provide feedback on the Event App system and the opportunities to streamline the process and improve the usability of the Event App. The survey will happen over the autumn and winter of 2020.

4.17 Recommendation 13

Identify opportunities for increasing diversity of events in park and open spaces.

The Executive accepts this recommendation.

One of the aims of the Parks for Health project is to develop stronger links with a wide range of community partners, especially those that are not currently utilising our parks and open spaces. The aim is then to identify and break down the barriers to them using the spaces either for normal use of community. We will work towards developing a diverse and varied programme of events and activities in our parks and open spaces.

4.18 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.

The Executive accepts this recommendation

As stated above in the response to recommendation 1, part of the Parks for Health Project involves a dedicated work-stream which will provide communications and engagement support to the programme through the development of a communications strategy framework.

This work-stream will also make proposals for improving the areas highlighted in recommendation 14.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial implications:

The recommendations in the report do not commit any additional council funds and will be met from existing budgets and / or resources within the Greenspace & Leisure service.

5.2 Legal Implications:

There are no specific legal implications arising from this report. Legal advice and support will be provided, as required, in the implementation of the recommendations.

5.3 Environmental Implications and contribution to achieving net zero carbon Islington by 2030:

There are no expected negative environmental implications associated with the recommendations or actions contained in this report. The outcome of the recommendations will lead to more residents of the borough actively engaged in community food growing or gardening which should result in an increase in cultivated land in the borough. Delivering on recommendation 2 will lead to higher levels of vegetation in the borough.

Vegetation has been shown to reduce the effects of raised urban temperatures through evaporative cooling, shading surfaces, and allowing natural drainage. This can work in reverse in winter where greenery such as green roofs and walls can reduce the heat lost by buildings by providing better insulation and thus lowering energy use. Street trees and urban greening are also a major contribution to the capture and storage of CO₂ and improvement of air quality. As well as vegetation, the presence of open bodies of water, such as ponds, can assist with the cooling of surrounding areas and in reducing daytime temperatures. The main driving force behind climate change is the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The natural environment can help mitigate climate change by storing and sequestering atmospheric carbon as part of the carbon cycle. Trees are a good example of the role that the natural environment can play in carbon storing and sequestration.

5.4 Resident Impact Assessment:

The council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The council has a duty to have

due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.

A Resident Impact Assessment was completed on 17 March 2020 and is attached at Appendix A. A summary is included below.

There is no negative impact on those in the community with protected characteristics from the acceptance of the recommendations within this report.

The report proposes to accept the majority of the recommendations which aim to improve access and opportunities to use our parks and greenspaces for the whole community. A number of the recommendations actively seek to provide better access to quality parks and greenspaces and to build support and capacity within the volunteering communities within those spaces. Through the Parks for Health project we are also specifically looking at how we can bring the people within our community who would benefit the most from using our parks and open spaces. This includes communities with protected characteristics.

6. Reason for recommendations

- 6.1 This report details the Executive Member's response to the recommendations of the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee on Resident and Volunteer Engagement in Parks and Open Spaces in Islington.

Appendices

- Appendix A - Resident Impact Assessment
- Appendix B – Parks for Health Project Update

Background papers: none

Final report clearance:

Signed by:



11.5.20

Executive Member for Environment and
Transport.

Date

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