



Report to:	Environment and Neighbourhood Committee	Date:	1 November 2017
Report title:	Proposed approach to preparing a parks strategy		
Report from:	Mary Morrissey, Strategic Director, Environment, Housing and Regeneration		
Ward/Areas affected:	Borough-wide		
Chair of Committee/Lead Member:	Councillor Jill Whitehead		
Author(s)/Contact Number(s):	Mark Dalzell, Head of Neighbourhood Services, 0208 770 4695		
Corporate Plan Priorities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Open Council • A Green Council • A Fair Council 		
Open/Exempt:	Open		
Signed:		Date:	23 October 2017

1. Summary

- 1.1 Parks are the most used Council facilities and satisfaction with the Borough's parks and open spaces has remained high throughout the last ten years. Sutton's residents value the contribution parks make to their lives and it is important to ensure the service offer remains relevant. The previous Parks Strategy was published in 2007 and this new report will review progress, develop the offer to residents and consider opportunities.
- 1.2 The report sets out the suggested approach to undertake the Parks Strategy review and develop a new strategy. The aim is to ensure the Council continues to provide high quality parks, with a range of facilities that meet local residents needs, at an affordable cost and that parks' contribution to meeting the Council's wider objectives, for example around health and wellbeing and local economy are considered.

2. Recommendations

The Environment and Neighbourhood Committee is recommended to:

- 2.1 Approve the process and timetable for the Parks Strategy review as set out in this report.
- 2.2 Approve a member task and finish group to meet twice to discuss issues in more detail before proposals are brought back to Committee for decision as set out in this report.



3. Background

- 3.1 The Council has published the Corporate Plan 2014/15 - 2018/19 stating that the priorities are to be: an open, green, fair and smart Council. Under the green Council heading the Council has committed to “Maintain the quality and attractiveness of the local environment”. This leads to a key action to “Deliver improvements to parks and open spaces to ensure they are accessible and safe for all residents”.
- 3.2 In addition parks can contribute to many other corporate priorities, including listening to and involving local people through friends groups, and helping to create inclusive communities through working on parks projects. Parks can also contribute to improving people’s physical and mental health and wellbeing by supporting people to make better lifestyle choices such as through volunteering in parks and biodiversity sites, or by visiting parks and enjoying an active lifestyle.
- 3.3 The Open Space Strategy published in 2007 identified levels of open space provision by area and established the quality of the spaces. The report noted the uneven distribution of open space and identified that although less affluent areas in the north east and southeast of the Borough had above average provision of open space, this was often of lower quality.
- 3.4 The provision of parks maintenance and administration of the cemeteries and allotment service was contracted out in February 2017 to Idverde. This contract includes provision for commercial activities to be proposed by Idverde and agreed by the Council to provide new facilities and generate income that is shared between Idverde and the Council.
- 3.5 The Council’s Parks Service has been incorporated into the newly formed Neighbourhood Services client team which also monitors street cleansing and waste collection activities. The team includes Biodiversity, Arboricultural and Technical teams and delivery of the Heritage Lottery Fund project.
- 3.6 The previous strategy set out the Council’s vision and objectives for parks as follows:
- Encourage healthy lifestyles by ensuring that there is a network of accessible open spaces.
 - Enhance the quality of the open character of the borough.
 - Target resources and secure additional funding to ensure best value.
 - Develop effective working relationships with our partners

4. Issues

- 4.1 The review of the Parks Strategy will require input from Council officers including those in Planning, Economic Renewal and Regeneration, Asset Management, Sustainability, Biodiversity, Highways and Transport, and Communications. It will also be important to take on board the views of external stakeholders including Wandle Valley Regional Parks Trust, South East Rivers Trust, Idverde and Ecolocal, the London Wildlife Trust and the Parks Alliance.



- 4.2 The review will need to establish if and how demand for and use of open space has changed over the last ten years and what impact this has demand for the service. Identifying trends in outdoor space use will help the Council make decisions about future provision, the type of facilities needed.
- 4.3 To inform decision making there is a need to gather data such as the number of residents using parks, how often and when they visit and why they choose specific sites, how they travel to the park and how safe they feel while visiting. It is also proposed to survey non users to find out what the barriers are to parks use.
- 4.4 The review will bring together data on the quantity of open space and there will need to be quality checks made on sites to assessed the quality of facilities provided and how well they are maintained.. The review will revisit the the issues of lack of access to open space and poor quality open spaces in some parts of the borough and in particular assess if the considerable capital investment in parks has significantly improved the range and quality of the facilities.
- 4.5 The review will then be able to look again at the objectives of the 2007 strategy set out above and test whether these are all still relevant or need to be amended.
- 4.6 The revised strategy will need to consider how parks can be managed to contribute to the Council's objectives for health and wellbeing, community participation and involvement in services, through friends groups and how to build on the considerable volunteer activity in parks and especially conservation areas.
- 4.7 There will be an opportunity to establish how parks can contribute further to the local economy whether that is by providing a home for small businesses such as parks cafes and children's nurseries or through community events. It will be timely to review the sustainability of existing facilities in parks and the process for dealing with any land or buildings which become surplus from time to time.
- 4.8 The review will need to consider the value of events including firework displays, boot fairs, country fairs, classic car shows and music and outdoor theatre shows that are popular with local residents and visitors from outside the Borough. These events are part of Sutton's offer as a destination and provide a way of supporting the local economy by encouraging local residents to spend their money within the Borough and by drawing in visitors from further afield. The value of parks as community event venues needs to be fully explored and evaluated.
- 4.9 The review will examine whether a more entrepreneurial approach to events should be considered and whether the Council's policies and procedures need to be more flexible and agile to ensure opportunities are not missed.
- 4.10 The grounds maintenance contract with Idverde makes provision to develop commercial activities and facilities and this needs further investigation as a way of both providing new facilities and activities in parks and to generate funds to improve and maintain parks.
- 4.11 Parks are not a statutory service and nationally funding for parks has fallen consistently. In addition to the revenue income mentioned above the review will need to look at alternative sources of capital funding and how best to access this. It will



identify opportunities for further Heritage Lottery Fund and Marathon Trust bids to improve facilities and explore opportunities for other sources of capital funding.

- 4.12 In addition to parks the strategy will need to set out a way forward for allotment gardening and outdoor sports provision including bowling to ensure that all sections of the community whatever their interest, age and background can access services that help them maintain social contacts and physical fitness.
- 4.13 The Borough’s Tree Strategy has close links with the Parks Strategy and will be reviewed in parallel to ensure full integration is maintained. Officers will also work with Merton colleagues where appropriate as the Borough’s share a contractor and Merton adopted Sutton’s existing Tree Strategy in 2016.
- 4.14 It is recommended that a task and Finish groups is convened for two meetings to:
 - Review the current Open Spaces Strategy and assess which elements should carry forward to the new strategy
 - Review and consider possible changes to policies and procedures
 - Consider proposals for commercial opportunities, links to the local economy and the role of parks in marketing Sutton as a destination
 - Consider opportunities for further volunteering and community involvement
- 4.15 The indicative timeline is shown below. A more detailed timeline including key actions needed to deliver a new parks strategy can be found at Appendix A with the new strategy will be brought to Environment and Neighbourhood Committee in Autumn 2019.

Date	Proposed activity
November 2017	Report to Environment and Neighbourhood Committee to agree parks strategy review and development process
Winter 2017 to Autumn 2018	Research stage - gather key data on quantity and quality of open space and survey residents on use, satisfaction and needs. Explore approaches in other Boroughs and with commercial partners.
Autumn Winter 2018	Stakeholder engagement and task and finish sessions
Winter to Spring 2018/19	Draft strategy produced for consultation
Autumn 2019	Final strategy brought to Environment and Neighbourhood Committee for approval

5. Options Considered

- 5.1 The Council could continue to rely on the vision and objectives of the 2007 Parks Strategy and continue to update individual parks management plans and action plans. However this piecemeal approach will not address the need to consider changes in the



community and how parks are used. Of equally importance it risks making decisions in isolation without considering the wider implications. In particular it is important to consider the risk of changes to funding and the opportunities for greater shared working with partners and volunteers to access external funding and new income streams.

- 5.2 The Council could adopt the process set out in this report to undertake a thorough parks strategy review to ensure the Council provides services which are targeted effectively and efficiently to meet corporate priorities and deliver the services the community needs in a sustainable way.

6. Impacts and Implications

Financial

- 6.1 The review process set out in this report is estimated to require approximately 25 percent of the Head of Neighbourhood Services time plus support from other team members. Minimal officer support will be required for other teams to input into the review (see 4.1).
- 6.2 The financial implications of the new strategy will be considered during the review process.

Legal

- 6.3 In order to determine whether there are any conditions or limitations which might affect proposals for the use of land included in the proposed Parks Strategy legal advice should be sought in relation to any covenants and/or restrictions on the title to such land. This will ensure proposals are feasible and lawful.
- 6.4 There is no legal obligation for the Council to undertake a review of parks strategy although this is recommended best practice.
- 6.5 Legal advice should be obtained in relation to any covenants or restrictions on the title of the land and whether this impacts on the intended use.

Other impacts and implications

Health

- 6.6 Being in parks and the natural environment is proven to have a positive impact on mental health. Access to parks and outdoor sports facilities is known to encourage active lifestyles that benefit health and wellbeing, benefiting residents and minimising the cost of health care.



7. Appendices and Background Documents

Appendix letter	Title
A	Detailed timeline for Strategy review process

Background documents
None.

Audit Trail		
Version	Final	Date: 16 October 2017
Consultation with other officers		
Finance	Yes	Peter May
Legal	Yes	Tracy Swan/ David Fellows
Other Officers:	Yes	Christopher Rhodes Andy Webber Amanda Cherrington
Equality Impact Assessment required?	No	N/A