1. Summary

1.1 Sutton has a long-standing and well-earned reputation for its green credentials. Everyone working, living and studying in Sutton has a part to play in being Ambitious for Sutton and protecting the environment in our borough. As part of this ambition and following approval of a new Environment Strategy the Council has prepared a new Parks and Open Spaces Strategy which will enhance the experience of visitors to our impressive parks.

1.2 This report provides a summary of the approach taken to develop a new Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, which also includes a tree strategy and biodiversity strategy (formerly the Biodiversity Action Plan) bringing all land management information into one document and seeks approval to adopt the strategy for the Borough. It provides details of the parks user survey carried out in 2018 and the consultation on the draft strategy completed during summer 2019.

2. Recommendations

2.1 To agree the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy and adopt the Action Plan.
3. **Background**

3.1 This strategy provides a vision and clear objectives the Council will use to effectively manage, maintain and enhance the open spaces in the Borough. It will help residents understand what the Council intends to do over the next five years, how they can be involved and influence changes and the volunteering opportunities available. When fully implemented residents will be able to enjoy many more sports, activities and a well managed events programme. There will be organised volunteering for those who want to be hands on and enjoy an outdoor, active life, while gaining satisfaction from helping the community and the environment. The strategy explains the commitment to caring for wildlife and the planet by addressing loss of local habitat and encouraging tree planting to keep Sutton a green and pleasant place to live and work.

3.2 The new combined Parks and Open Spaces Strategy sits directly under the ambitious Environmental Strategy which was approved in March 2019 and helps to deliver the “being active citizens” priority within the Corporate Plan ‘Ambitious for Sutton 2018-2023’. It is the Council’s first combined parks and open spaces, trees, and biodiversity strategy, bringing together the Council’s plans for all open space throughout the borough. It will replace the previous Open Spaces Strategy, the Biodiversity Action Plan and Habitat Action Plans, and the Tree Strategy.

3.3 The London Borough of Sutton has more than 464 hectares of parks and open space, including formal parks, wildlife areas, lakes and waterways, and sports grounds, in addition to allotment sites, cemeteries, highway verges and greens that add to the green appearance of the borough.

3.4 Satisfaction with parks remains high and more than 90% of residents now say they visit parks and over 80% remain satisfied with the parks, but with residents’ lifestyles changing and the population increasing significantly, it is important that the borough’s parks and open spaces continue to be relevant to residents needs and expectations.

3.5 A cross-party task and finish group was established to oversee and guide the development of the new strategy, this involved Councillors Abellan, Clare, Green, Moral, Shields and Whitehead. They reviewed the existing strategies, agreed the scope of the review, guided development of the themes and level of ambition for the new combined strategy and agreed the draft communications plan. They agreed the vision statement and eight key objectives and guided development of the policies and actions.

4. **Issues**

4.1 The new strategy seeks to build on the four objectives of the existing strategy, further developing the approach of using open spaces for public health, working with community partners and volunteers, and improving generation of income through more effective use of parks assets. In addition the strategy will fully integrate the approach to managing and planting trees and caring for nature throughout all the Borough’s open spaces.

4.2 The Council’s Environment Strategy sets out a number of targets and actions relating to creating ‘A Greener Borough’ including:
• Write a new Parks and Open Spaces Strategy.
• Produce advice on suitable tree species, to guide developers.
• Identify opportunities for planting 2,000 new trees, including creating woodland
• Develop a way to help the community access and plant free trees
• Support the delivery of the River Wandle Catchment Plan to achieve Water Framework Directive targets.
• Run a ‘Sutton in Bloom’ competition each year to celebrate Sutton’s gardeners.

4.3 The proposed Parks and Open Spaces Strategy sets out the vision and eight key objectives (listed below) for parks, open spaces, trees and biodiversity in the Borough showing in some detail how these services will be delivered for the next five years. The objectives around wellbeing, sports, events and activities mean that open spaces will not just be attractive venues but will be vibrant, well used and relevant public spaces that help residents to have healthy lifestyles. The vision reinforces the Council’s commitment for Sutton to have good quality parks that meet residents of all ages, expectations and health needs and ensure they remain one of the reasons that residents chose to live in the borough. The support in the community for tree planting and caring for nature are also addressed.

Vision

The borough’s parks and open spaces and trees will be well-maintained; support good public health, local culture, social activities and biodiversity and where possible opportunities will be taken to improve access to open spaces, facilities and activities.

Parks and open space objectives:

1. Manage parks and open spaces in line with best practice and take opportunities to improve their appearance, enhancing local character through landscaping improvements as funding allows.
2. Improve access to open space throughout the borough by removing barriers to access, providing enhanced facilities and where possible creating new open space.
3. Support residents to be physically active by promoting the use of parks, offering social prescribing and by providing a range of sports, leisure and social activities, in partnership with sports bodies and clubs.
4. Maintain parks policing and enforcement activities to keep parks safe and free of anti-social behaviour.
5. Work with friends groups, the voluntary sector, sports bodies and the wider community to develop volunteering and fundraising opportunities.
6. Manage park’s assets to generate revenue to support the service and the local economy, including through leasing, events and developing paid for community facilities and licensing businesses to deliver services.
7. Enhance the appearance and character of the Borough by maintaining a safe, healthy, diverse and resilient tree population and encouraging tree planting.
8. Care for plants, animals and ecosystems and help them to thrive, by promoting an understanding of nature and through the delivery of the Biodiversity Strategy.
4.4 For each objective the strategy sets out the approach and provides a number of policies. An action plan summarises the objectives and policies and sets out the key actions that will ensure the objectives are delivered.

Consultation Feedback

4.5 In summer 2018 a survey of parks users was completed to gather information about how residents use their local parks and 690 residents participated. This information was used to help identify priorities of parks visitors and how they currently use parks. A key finding was that almost two thirds of visitors use parks for exercise and for around a third, this is their only form of exercise. The importance of land along the river Wandle was noted, with the walkways being in the top ten most used open spaces. This information has informed development of the eight new objectives.

4.6 During Summer 2019 the draft text for the strategy and a short version of the strategy were made available through Citizen Space as part of a consultation testing views on the vision and objectives and in particular where policies and actions are designed to lead to new outcomes. In total 343 residents responded to give their views either on-line, or by completing a form distributed through the Local Committees. In addition some participants wrote to the service on specific points of concern within the draft text.

4.7 More than half of respondents were between the ages of 34 and 55; only 11% under 35 and more than three times as many women responded as men. 10% of respondents said they had a long term health problem or disability.

4.8 The key findings help to show attitudes and priorities of the community.

- Wildlife and plants - 97% say that wildlife and plants add to their enjoyment of visiting parks and 84% support setting more land in parks aside for wildlife.
- Trees - strong support for more tree planting in parks (77%).
- Parks cafes - 65% say they are an important part of their visit and 67% support landscaping improvements around the cafes.
- Environmental enforcement - 91% say they support enforcement (including fines) to tackle litter, unlawful barbecues and dog fouling.
- Pesticides - 67.5% would like pesticide use in parks to stop even if that means more weeds on paths.
- Events 85% are happy for events to take place in parks.
- Activities - a quarter couldn’t find any activities for them.
- 59% would be willing to pay to take part in activities.

The full results of the survey will be provided on the Council’s website when the strategy is published.
4.9 This feedback has been used to further refine and develop the objectives, policies and actions, with rewording of policies and actions being amended within the strategy to ensure that as far as possible the strategy addresses the Ambitious For Sutton plan and community priorities.

5. Options Considered

5.1 Given our ambitions laid out in the Environment Strategy not producing a Parks and Open Spaces Strategy was not considered an option even though there is no legal requirement to do so. The recommendation is therefore to adopt the strategy attached to this report. This will ensure a consistent approach to issues and a coordinated and well managed service for the community that adapts to needs and requirements.

6. Impacts and Implications

Financial

6.1 The report proposes a number of actions and objectives (As stated in paragraph 4.3) which can be largely accommodated within existing budgets. In order to deliver the set objectives, there is a need to create two full time equivalent Biodiversity improvement Officer roles to be funded fully from Section 106 funding at no cost to the Authority’s General fund.

6.2 In addition there is a need to create a full time equivalent Volunteer Coordinator role. The Service aims to fund this post through the generation of increased lease income or though the bidding of a permanent General fund budget as part of the Authority’s 2021/22 budget setting process.

Legal

6.3 Local authorities have a number of different statutory powers in relation to parks and open spaces, including the Public Health Act 1875 which permits the purchase and maintenance of public walks or pleasure grounds; the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, which gives wide powers to provide recreational facilities; and the Local Government Act 1972, which gives power to authorities to allow entertainment events in parks. Part 1 of the Localism Act 2011 applies a general power of competence to local authorities to engage in activity which would promote and/or improve the social and environmental well-being of their area. The Open Spaces Act 1906 provides that local authorities shall hold and administer open space in trust to allow the enjoyment of it by the public and shall maintain and keep the open space in a good and decent state.

6.4 There is no statutory requirement for the Council to have a Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, however, once adopted, it may be taken into account as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications where relevant, and can inform the future development of planning policy. The Parks and Open Spaces Strategy also accords with paragraph 96 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2019 states that:
“Planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities (including quantitative or qualitative deficits or surpluses) and opportunities for new provision. Information gained from the assessments should be used to determine what open space, sport and recreational provision is needed, which plans should then seek to accommodate.”

6.5 The Parks and Open Spaces Strategy would therefore inform Sutton’s Local Plan process and ensure that policies are based on up to date evidence about the current and future supply of and demand for open spaces.

7. **Appendices and Background Documents**

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Parks and Open Spaces Strategy</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>Parks and Open Spaces Strategy - Action Plan</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Equality Impact Assessment</td>
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**Background documents**

None

**Audit Trail**

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**Consultation with other officers**

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