

 Brent	Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee 12 March 2020
	Report from the Strategic Director of Regeneration and Environment
BRENT PARKS	

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Non Key
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
No. of Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How to Create Quality Parks and Green Spaces. ODPM Publications. ODPM (2005). ▪ Mayor of London's Environment Strategy 2018 ▪ The London Plan ▪ Open Space, Sports and Recreation Study 2019
Contact Officer(s): (Name, Title, Contact Details)	Chris Whyte - Operational Director Environment Services, 020 8937 5342, Chris.Whyte@brent.gov.uk

1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of Brent Council's policy, strategy, management and performance for Brent Parks for review by the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 That the report on Brent Parks be noted.

3.0 The Parks Service

- 3.1. The Parks service within the council consists of seven officers. A Parks Manager, two Project Managers (who look after NCIL and s106 projects), a Senior Horticulture Officer (who monitors the grounds maintenance contract with Veolia), a Parks Officer (who looks after allotments, playgrounds, outdoor gyms and meadows), and two Support officers (who manage all sport bookings, tenancy agreements for allotments and answer all calls and enquiries).

- 3.2. The grounds maintenance operational side is provided by Veolia; who have 40 grounds staff split across 90 parks and open spaces. This includes five wardens. The five parks wardens are employed by Veolia and work on a shift basis. They have responsibility for open and closing park gates (where applicable, as not all parks are locked), opening pavillions for sports bookings and inspecting playground equipment. They also frequently are the first staff to identify and assist with resolving issues such as updating information in notice boards, spotting damage to items across our parks or patrolling parks where incidents of anti-social behaviour is happening or has recently occurred; i.e. illegal BBQ's in parks and illegal fishing in Welsh Harp.

4. Brent Council Priorities

- 4.1. Parks support the aim in the borough plan for a cleaner, more considerate Brent, with the development of increased biodiversity in the borough, as well as provision of areas where air quality is improved. Our Parks also support the council priorities by providing areas for increased tree planting. However, Parks are more than that. They are places where residents can improve their health by undertaking exercise in a structured way, by booking our football and cricket pitches or tennis courts, or partaking in a Park Run or informal event. They are places that include Children's playgrounds, outdoor gyms, where people walk their dog, take a breath from urban lifestyles, enjoy nature, breathe cleaner air, relax and have a picnic. They are places to manage rainwater and flooding and provide alternative methods for assisting to manage the detrimental and adverse impacts of climate change. There are so many benefits to the boroughs parks and open spaces that are available to all borough residents and visitors, whether human or birds, bees, insects or mammals.
- 4.2. There is no current Parks Strategy being prepared. Colleagues in planning recently produced an Open Space, Sports and Recreation Study to support the emerging Brent Local Plan, which highlights many of the challenges that are faced by the Parks Service at the moment. The aim is to produce a Biodiversity and Integrated Management Plan, rather than an overarching strategy. The current aim and focus of the Parks Service is to improve Brent's Parks by way of introduction of reduced pesticide use, increase biodiversity by way of different planting strategies and developing parks to meet the challenges of climate change, with flood management and alleviation, drought resistant planting and the provision of 'cool zones' where people are able to escape the heat of summer.

5. The London Plan

- 5.1. The prospective London Plan identifies issues such as Urban Greening and the supporting and enhancement of existing green spaces to allow the target set out in the Mayor's Environment Plan of 50% of London to be green by 2050. It makes mention of the need to reduce conflict for use of space and ensure that new developments seek to provide green spaces that are sufficient for local residents and enhance the local environment. None of this is at odds with the direction of the Parks Service; however, the real impact on existing parks and open spaced remains to be seen once the large housing projects are completed, with the potential for increased demand and usage.
- 5.2. The existing London Plan (2016) has support for the development of green areas designated as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) which allow our planning teams to fully consider locations that need to be protected. This impacts new developments with the requirement to conduct bat surveys, for example, in the local

area and ensure that new developments do not adversely impact our parks and green spaces by gaining an understanding of the existing levels of biodiversity in an area.

6. Brent Council's draft Local Plan

- 6.1. The protection and enhancement of the borough's parks and open spaces is of great importance and the draft Brent Local Plan includes planning policy on ensuring this protection particularly in response to significant population growth and increased development. The more flats that are built with no access to their own green space or limited access; the more people will visit Brent's parks. This is not an issue in itself as we welcome an increase in visitors to the parks and open spaces, however increased demand will potentially increase the requirement for more maintenance and a more careful balance of use of those spaces by all who wish to use them for differing purposes. In some cases where there are new developments, financial contributions from developers will be sought to improve local park facilities and/or improve access to local parks. The Parks team will work closely with Planning to ensure financial contributions are relevant in a way that will benefit all park users.

7. Health and Wellbeing

- 7.1. Whilst not measured specifically in Brent, unless by the Public Health Team, there is a wealth of supporting data and research available which confirms that access to green spaces actively reduces cortisol levels in people; cortisol being a stress hormone. Access to nature and green spaces have a reported and well-researched evidence base that demonstrates an improvement in both mental and physical health. Well-maintained green spaces are highly beneficial for Brent's residents, by providing spaces for nature watching and connection, being able to breathe cleaner air, see the sky and relax in a green environment. In addition, provision to areas where people can play games and improve their health by using our sports facilities or even just walking around the parks for free offer positive health benefits for residents.
- 7.2. The outdoor gyms that we have in our parks offer residents the opportunity to exercise for free, an opportunity that many residents utilise on a frequent basis. There are 19 free gyms, which assist many residents who would not otherwise join a paid for gym, exercise in the open air and also meet others; reducing social isolation.

8. The Local Transport Strategy

- 8.1. Brent Parks teams works closely with colleagues in Highways and Transport and as a result of the recent work undertaken by those teams, cycling prohibition bylaws in parks and open spaces have just been revoked. As a result, signage is being introduced in parks to advise residents that cycling is now permitted in parks. We fully support the use of parks and open spaces as facilitators of methods of sustainable travel. We need to ensure that cyclists using parks as a thoroughfare are not causing detriment to other parks users. Respectful use of shared paths is something that will be monitored by both teams. As there are many entrances to the majority our parks, they remain very easily accessible for walkers and joggers seeking to exercise for free.

9. Biodiversity and Climate Change

- 9.1. Our parks and open spaces are integral to the biodiversity and climate change agenda. We are developing a completely holistic approach to both aspects, to ensure that we have the greatest effect. Trees and plants that are planted are selected for their

biodiverse nature and to ensure that that they are resistant to climate change as much as possible, as well as disease resistant and offer flowers or fruit that are of benefit to insects and birds. We are looking at the balance of biodiversity in our parks, by ensuring there is a varied habitats for wildlife, including leaving dead trees; where they pose no health and safety risk, encouraging bats, planting hedgerows which provide food and shelter for birds and of course the meadows which provide habitat and food for bees and butterflies and other insects.

9.2. The recent implementation of the award winning Bee Corridor hugely affected the council's drive to increase biodiversity and made clear that a different approach was possible. The creation of meadow areas in 21 of our parks was the first step in developing areas of biodiversity. The second was to commit to a programme of wildflower sowing in the same areas. The creation of drifts; using only machinery and not pesticides was a break in tradition from the established practice of wildflower meadow creation and one that led to a large increase in colour, wildflower variety, insects, bees, butterflies and visitors to the parks who loved walking through the meadows. The meadows programme is having a huge impact on biodiversity, with butterflies visiting Brent's parks that have not been seen here for over 20 years. We are undertaking monitoring of our meadows year on year; to understand the positive impact that they are having on biodiversity. Even in some of the meadow areas where the grass has been left long; such as at Silver Jubilee, we have discovered types of grass that has laid dormant for years, which is now flowering, seeding, and increasing the range of diverse habitats in the meadows.

9.3. The largest challenge with increased tree planting is maintenance; with newly planted trees requiring three years' worth of regular watering to allow them to establish well. Parks generally do not water any plants in our parks, and planting of perennials and shrubs are undertaken in the autumn and winter to allow for the best chance for survival. An increase in planting of reasonable sized trees in our parks is possible, but these also require careful location and understanding of future impact and the need to balance the use of each space for all park users. We have planted over 800 saplings in our parks with local community groups in the last two years, which is a great achievement, but to have a sustained impact for climate change the size of the tree that is planted needs to be much larger.

10. Allotments

10.1. Brent has 21 allotment sites across the borough of varying size. There are long waiting lists for all sites and demand far outweighs provision. Since the departure of the dedicated allotments officer in 2016, there has been no permanent replacement. Instead, the allotments service is managed within the existing resources of the Parks Service, by one member of staff who has responsibility for this service as well as playgrounds and the meadow area programme.

10.2. There is no dedicated allotments officer any more. The officer who looks after allotments works on this as part of his role. His role involves maintaining the allotments and clearing disused plots, getting tenants on available plots, identifying non cultivated plots via a twice yearly inspection of all sites, carrying our site meetings to show people available plots, identifying and actioning improvements to each site, working with site representatives where we have them, ensuring the rules of each allotment site are adhered to. The Support Officers work in conjunction with him to update the allotments database, arrange site meetings, send out tenancy agreements and provide keys to new tenants.

11. Economic Development and Regeneration

11.1. How Brent's parks and green spaces contribute to economic development and regeneration is not something that is currently measured. However, it can only be assumed that economic development would be enhanced by the provision of well maintained, highly utilised green spaces.

12. Crime and Anti-social Behaviour

12.1. Crime is not a particular problem in Brent's parks, although the perception of crime is much higher. Crime is more likely to occur on the streets of Brent than in the parks directly and the deal is developing closer links with Community Protection to understand the issues of crime across our parks and open spaces.

12.2. However, some parks in Brent attract anti-social behaviour; such as drinking and littering, drug taking and dealing, rough sleeping, illegal use of BBQ's and the subsequent damage to the ground caused by these, flytipping, excessive feeding of wildlife; illegal use of motor vehicles; including quad bikes and dirt bikes and vandalism to property including the pavillions, fencing and outdoor gym equipment.

12.3. Public Space Protection Orders have recently been passed; which will allow enforcement action to be taken against most of the above behaviours by the Environmental Enforcement Team by the issuing of a £100 Fixed Penalty Notice. Signs are in the process of being installed and a communications campaign will launch in the spring to make visitors to parks aware of how they need to behave in our parks and open spaces. The effect of the PSPO's will be closely monitored this spring and summer.

13. Sports Activities

13.1. There are a number of training facilities and official marked sports pitches for use by clubs who pay to book a pitch for football, rugby, cricket or Gaelic football. These pitches are well used at weekends but not so much during the week. In addition to formal booked sports activities throughout the year, residents use our parks for Park runs, yoga and sports activities for young children.

14. Schools and Youth Associations

14.1. Brent schools use some of our parks more than others, for example Woodcock Park is well used by local schools. Unless we receive a formal booking for the use of parks land, we are not necessarily aware of usage of our parks by a particular group.

15. Community Cohesion

15.1. The demand on parks by many different users with different needs, means that as spaces they lend themselves to be areas where people have to respect the needs of others in those spaces. Key messages that will be communicated about our parks and the implementation of PSPO's this coming year will ensure that the key message is one of respect for all park users and we hope that this attitude is one which aids and supports community cohesion. Furthermore the involvement of members of the community from very different backgrounds in local Friend of Parks groups or even allotments, demonstrates what benefits are possible when a community comes together to improve a space or grow some plants.

16. Performance

- 16.1. Parks for London conduct an annual survey of all London Boroughs, and compile the findings in a report called Good Parks for London. It acts as a benchmark for London Boroughs across many areas of parks management. In terms of comparison, Brent is currently measured at the top of the bottom third, with Southwark as the top scoring borough. Consideration is given to the following categories: Public Satisfaction, Awards for Quality, Collaboration, Events, Health, Fitness and Wellbeing, Supporting Nature, Community Involvement, Skills Development, Sustainability and Strategic Planning. Our current position though allows for great improvement across our parks and open spaces in the coming years across all of these categories. It is difficult to identify similar local authorities as the types and size of park in each borough is vastly different.
- 16.2. Brent is not alone in not being able to identify how many visitors it has to its parks every year. Some boroughs use entry counters to determine visitor numbers; but these are not particularly accurate and almost impossible to use where there is more than one entrance to a park; such as is the case with most of Brent's Parks. Any indication as to increase in use can only be perceived rather than accurately recorded, but with the number of flats being built around our open spaces, demand for green spaces will only increase.

National Awards

- 16.3. A number of Brent's parks have been entered for the London in Bloom competition. We have won the following awards over the last two years.
- 16.4. 2018: 10 awards of which four were Gold awards, two were best in class, three were Silver Gilt and one was Silver for the borough as a whole.
- 16.5. 2019: 11 awards of which five were Gold awards, two best in class and two silver Gilt and two Silver of which one was for the borough as a Large City Award.
- 16.6. Furthermore, Brent won the Parks Innovation Award 2019, organised by the Association of Public Sector Excellence (APSE), a national award for our wildflower meadows/bee corridor initiative and the parks manager is giving many talks on a national scale to other authorities about the viability and success of our meadows. The Bee Corridor across 21 parks, has received international recognition.

Brent Residents Survey

- 16.7. The 2018 resident's survey suggested that Parks, Open Spaces and trees declined in its popularity as a priority for residents when spending council budgets from 22% to 14% of those surveyed. In fact, the service was seen as one of the lowest priorities of the sample surveyed. However, since the declaration of the Climate Emergency, there has been no follow up to see whether this perception has now changed. A Public Realm satisfaction survey undertaken by Veolia last year, which asked questions on parks as well as other areas including street cleansing and household waste collections, showed that 87% of those surveyed were satisfied with local parks.

17. The Budget for Parks and Green Spaces

17.1. The annual cost of the contract for Grounds maintenance as provided by Veolia is £1.6M This includes maintenance of all verges as well as parks maintenance. Veolia undertake all basic maintenance in parks and open spaces; which includes mowing the grass, maintaining and marking out sports pitches, planting, trimming hedges and emptying litter bins and clearing fly tips. They also carry out minor repairs to play equipment. Any improvements to be made to the Parks Service has to come from the council's parks budget, which is separate. This budget also has to cover the cost of any repairs due to vandalism or wear and tear of items such as benches, fencing, gates, securing access and preventing anti-social behaviour. The annual budget for the Council's Parks Service team is £470,000. There is no set cost for maintenance at each park as the amount spent depends on the size and type of park, the infrastructure at each site and the options for improvement as well as to maintain the park due to damage caused.

The Community Infrastructure Levy

17.2. The amount available from the Neighbourhood element of the Community Infrastructure Levy depends on how much the parks service applies for and what projects it is seeking to develop. We have recently been awarded £275,000 that has been spent in King Edward VII Park, Wembley from s.106 funds due to the development of Chesterfield House. The Parks Service works closely with the CIL team to identify opportunities for funding as and when the need arises. Community Infrastructure Levy money is very rarely solely available to the parks service; but we do encourage residents to submit Neighbourhood CIL bids. These are fantastic for getting new projects and improvements off the ground. However the challenge is finding suitable funding opportunities to be able to maintain new initiatives.

Income

17.3. The parks service receives around £60,000 income from sports pitches bookings and from filming, however this is not profit making. Implications with the quality of the pitches and the ability to maintain pitches in public open spaces, where people also walk their dogs and play informal games without paying, can mean it is challenging to meet income targets, as paying clubs have recently cancelled booked games due to problems with pitch maintenance, leading to a shortfall in income. There is scope to hire our pavillions in parks without the need to also book a sports pitch; but investment is required in the pavillions before they would be truly marketable assets for event hire. We are also working with the Lawn Tennis Association to develop our tennis courts across the borough, with the introduction of a new booking system and promotion of coaching opportunities, which has the potential to increase our income.

17.4. We receive around £50,000 from events currently booked in our parks. There is scope to allow more events to take place within our parks and open spaces, although there are limits to the size of the event we are able to support in each park. Large groups of people can lead to the requirement to reinstate the ground; particularly if there is adverse weather, which can occur at any time of year. There is no legal constraint to prevent the parks service from marketing its facilities through for weddings, photography and smaller events.

18. Future Plans

- 18.1. The future plans for our development of Parks in Brent involves a turnaround in the way they are managed. Reduced funding over the years has led to our parks becoming purely green spaces; with little colour. The aim of the service is to change the way that we plant in the borough. Introduce climate change resilient planting by the use of perennial plants that are hardier, but offer a brighter mix of colours and at the same time offer habitat for insects, birds and mammals. Our parks also need to facilitate flood alleviation measures and we are already looking at projects this coming year to be able to develop swales and bog garden meadows that will allow for the retention of water from wetter winters and allow for flooding from nearby highways to be utilised within green spaces. We are looking at becoming more sustainable; making our pavilions more environmentally friendly; for example by using grey water from the building to water the cricket table in one location where we have water pressure problems.
- 18.2. The designation of London as a National Park City is fantastic, as it offers Brent the opportunity to really share the benefits of its green spaces with all of its visitors. It allows a fantastic opportunity to raise awareness of our green spaces; for example, Brent are working very closely with Thames 21, the GLA, Canal and Rivers Trust and Barnet Council to make improvements to the Welsh Harp and Neasden recreation ground; the only SSSI in the borough and a location well known to bird watchers.
- 18.3. We are also looking to develop a biodiversity centre in King Edward VII Park, which will allow residents to learn the skills needed to grow plants and vegetables and to be able to teach those skills to others. The aim is to create a park mentality for any space within the borough for residents and empower them to turn around disused or misused pieces of land and create mini parks in alleyways and corners of land that are currently unloved. The Parks Service aims to be a catalyst for change in the mindset of residents towards the benefits of green spaces; however small they may be.
- 18.4. We are also looking to make improvements to the children's play areas and seeking to integrate them more with nature and a natural environment, as we have done in King Edward VII Park, offering an educational opportunity for young people as well as the provision for safe and engaging play.
- 18.5. The only downside to the designation of National Park City is that it provides no will to make parks a statutory service and no additional funding for any parks service in London. There are multiple opportunities to highlight the, now, well documented, health benefits to individuals who spend time in a natural environment and the cleared documented chemical reaction of a reduction in cortisol; the stress hormone; when people spend time in a meadow area or more particularly a forested area. These benefits will be championed to residents across the borough as well as our work to develop a database of flora and fauna that lives in Brent parks and open spaces. We also look forward to the recommendations of the Green Spaces Commission that was set up by the GLA as a result of the Mayors Environment Plan.
- 18.6. The suggestions above should provide some idea of how we aim to improve our parks service. Residents and visitors have many requirements of a park and open space; many overrun in the same space. People want to play sport, relax, meet with friends, enjoy time in nature, have a picnic, walk their dog or just sit in quiet contemplation in a natural environment. We also need our parks to be beacons of good practice for climate change and the actions designated in the Mayors Environment Strategy, by

being places that offer proactive flood alleviation and ways to manage climate change. We need to plant for climate changes, including wetter winters and drier summers, offer improved air quality, increase levels of biodiversity, be havens for all types of nature, including but not exclusively plants, bees, butterflies, moths, birds, foxes and bats. We also need to recognise that with an increase in population, many of whom will be living in blocks of flats, our parks will see an increase in demand and usage and this will involve an increase in the need to maintain the parks in the most cost effective manner and methods. Our parks need to be all things to all people as well as havens and sanctuaries for wildlife.

19. Financial Implications

19.1 None for the purposes of this report.

20 Legal Implications

20.1 There are no statutory requirements for parks. 7% of Brent has land with parks on it that are classified as Metropolitan Open Land (MOL); which is land that is intended to be protected as a basis for nature conservation or recreation. The land is protected in the same way as green belt land. The Parks Service uses the terms Park, Open Space and Pocket Park to define its green spaces, but there are no legally binding definitions behind these terms. The London Plan specifies a definition for a piece of green open space based on the size of the area. The categories are Regional Parks, Metropolitan Parks, District Parks, Local Parks and Open Spaces, Small Open Spaces, Pocket Parks and Linear Open Spaces.

21. Equality Implications

21.1 As we do not monitor usage of our parks, we are not currently aware of the cross sections of our community who most use our parks and open spaces. There is no record of complaints received suggesting that our parks are not accessible to everyone; irrespective of any protected characteristics. We seek to ensure that all members for the community can use our parks, for example, our most recently upgraded play area in King Edward VII Park has had equipment installed that is disability friendly.

22 Consultation with Ward Members and Stakeholders

22.1 There is no current park strategy, but if there were, the groups that would be consulted in the main would be Friends of Groups, Brent Parks Forum, Parks for London and members. Any document would be shared with colleagues who worked on climate change initiatives and flood management, as well as those in Public Health and planning and regeneration.

Report sign off:

**Amar Dave -
Strategic Director of the Strategic
Director of Regeneration and
Environment**