

## 5.10 Access to safe sport and play environments

### Importance of safe access to green space

A study undertaken by DEFRA<sup>1</sup> into creating sustainable communities used green space as an indicator of wellbeing and found that people place great importance on having parks as part of their wider neighbourhood. The vast majority of people (95%) thought that it was very or fairly important to have green spaces near to where they live. A similar figure was recorded by Groundwork in a related Ipsos MORI Survey<sup>2</sup> which found that 'nine out of 10 adults (93%) identify parks, playgrounds and green spaces as important in making somewhere a good place to live or work'.

The UK Chief Medical Officers in their report Start Active, Stay Active (2011)<sup>3</sup> have identified important health benefits from participation in sport and play. For children in their early years these include development of motor skills, improvement in cognitive development, contribution to a healthy weight, enhanced bone and muscular development; and supporting the learning of social skills. For older children and young people participation in sport and play benefits cardiovascular health, helps maintain a healthy weight and improve bone health, improves self-confidence and supports the development of new social skills. Adult participation in sport and activities reduces the risk of a range of diseases including coronary heart disease, stroke, and type-2 diabetes. It also helps to maintain a healthy weight and to maintain the ability to perform everyday tasks with ease, as well as improving self-esteem and reducing depression and anxiety.

A UNICEF report in 2007<sup>4</sup> found that Britain's children were the unhappiest in the western world because of their lack of access to free, outdoor, natural and risky space to play ('risky' play provides a child with positive emotions and helps overcome fear; it is not intended to put the child at risk). This led to the preparation of the first National Play Strategy<sup>5</sup> and in the borough, adoption of a play strategy<sup>6</sup>. Parks are play areas in themselves and also provide opportunities for free informal sport, recreation and play.

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<sup>1</sup> DEFRA (2010), Creating sustainable communities and a fairer world. See <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/sustainable/government/progress/national/68i.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Neighbourhoods Green (2012). See <http://neighbourhoodsgreen.org.uk/moirpoll>

<sup>3</sup> Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity from the four home countries Chief Medical Officers. [http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_128210.pdf](http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_128210.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries, UNICEF, 2007 [http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.playengland.org.uk/playstrategy>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.lbbd.gov.uk/AboutBarkingandDagenham/Documents/PlayStrategy.pdf>

## Sports pitches

The borough's current Playing Pitch Strategy (2015)<sup>7</sup> was produced in April 2015. It updates the previous strategy which was produced in 2005 and, in accordance with Sport England's guidelines, has become out of date and cannot be used as a robust source of evidence for assessing playing pitch needs of the borough.

In summer/autumn 2016 the new strategy will be refreshed to ensure that the pitch and club data is up to date and any associated recommendations and actions are based on accurate supply and demand information. The Strategy will then be presented to Cabinet for adoption, and approval of an implementation plan in response to the key findings and recommendations.

The Playing Pitch Strategy has significant implications for the delivery and management of the borough's sports pitches and also the health and wellbeing of residents. It will also guide future decision making in a time when the council faces significant financial challenges alongside a growing need to achieve and maintain high quality services.

The strategic priorities that the refreshed Playing Pitch Strategy seeks to address include:

- (a) Understand local need and enhance local usage of pitch sports.
- (b) Ensure the Council's strategies and priorities are up to date.
- (c) Ensure pitch maintenance is in line with the latest Sport England and relevant National Governing Body guidance.
- (d) Provide accurate evidence to attract and justify external funding for pitch and ancillary facility improvements.
- (e) Provide valid evidence in order to support site allocations and develop suitable management policies.

The Strategy identifies the key issues arising from the supply and demand assessments and aims to:

- (a) Summarise the current supply and demand
- (b) Report on the current demand for playing pitches
- (c) Identify key issues for each sport
- (d) identify key issues for each site
- (e) Assess the overall adequacy of provision in order to meet present and projected future demand.

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<sup>7</sup> London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sports Facilities Strategy 2015

Unsurprisingly, given the financial challenges facing the Council, the biggest single issue that will impact on the successful delivery of the strategy is funding.

There is, for example, investment of c£2.1 million needed in the next three years to simply maintain existing parks' buildings (pavilions, changing rooms, etc). However, the committed funding in the Council's Capital Programme for the period 2016 to 2021 for playing pitch related works is limited; and £500,000 prudential borrowing earmarked to part fund artificial turf pitch provision at Parsloes Park, which would need to be financed from additional income generated from the new pitches.

It is also inevitable in the light of Government funding cuts that Council revenue funding for parks will reduce during the lifespan of the Strategy.

Therefore, it is anticipated that playing pitch and related facility developments will be dependent on securing external funding and adopting alternative delivery models including:

- Planning gain through section 106 agreements and Community Infrastructure Levy contributions
- Prudential Borrowing
- Third Party Investment
- Grant Aid
- User income
- Council revenue funding
- Community Asset Transfers

### **Children's play areas**

The Council currently manages 31 children's' play areas, but with the exception of the development of a new 'traditional' play area in Central Park in 2014, and the refurbishment of the existing facility in Old Dagenham Park in 2015, there has been no significant or sustained investment in children's play areas since the completion of the Play Builder initiative in 2011.

The current 2016-17 capital programme includes a modest allocation of £30k but this will only be sufficient to address a number of existing repair and maintenance priorities in a limited number of parks.

Play equipment has a limited life expectancy, and the combined impacts of high levels of use, old age and inevitable abuse means that many of the Boroughs' existing play areas contain equipment which will need to be either replaced or removed over the next 1-5 years. This current position is unsatisfactory in terms of quality and financial sustainability, and therefore an urgent review of children's play provision is required.

## Current facilities and recent improvements to play environments

In terms of provision the borough's parks support the following range of facilities:

- 45 football pitches
- 2 cricket pitches
- 3 bowling greens
- 10 rugby pitches
- 19 tennis courts
- 9 multi use games areas
- 3 outdoor gyms
- 6 skate parks
- 1 BMX track
- 31 children's play areas
- 15 sports pavilions

In several parks a range of facilities and improvements have been introduced in recognition of the concerns of local people and to increase the opportunities to participate in safe and enjoyable recreation.

These include:

- State of the art community hub at the heart of Barking Park with fully accessible children's play area, café, classrooms, boating lake, miniature railway, public toilets, baby change facilities and a ranger-led events and activities programme.
- Four renovated tennis courts at Barking Park to provide easily accessible and high quality facilities for all.
- Transformational improvements at Mayesbrook Park with new community, sporting and recreational facilities, and increased access to water for boating, and recreation.
- Encouragement of greater community use by offering a range of park based community activities including weekly fun runs, conservation activities, ladies Park Fit classes, Tai Chi and yoga, cycling initiatives, and various ad hoc sessions such as Active Age Taster Days.
- Improved green connectivity between parks and play areas (through tree-lined streets, improved cycling networks and river corridors).
- Dog DNA Scheme and responsible dog ownership - Proactive and innovative response to the problem of dog fouling in the borough's streets, parks and open space, combined with a sustained programme of education, events and activities.
- Coordination with the Parks Safer Neighbourhood Team is yielding year on year improvements in reducing crime and antisocial behaviour in parks.

- A safe and structured programme of ranger-led educational events and activities.

## **Current challenges**

The Heritage Lottery Fund State of the UK Public Parks 2014 Report<sup>8</sup> provides clear evidence that public parks are at a point of transition and are now facing many significant challenges. As public spending has fallen parks have faced large cuts in their funding and staffing levels over the past three years, and these cuts are expected to continue over much of the rest of this decade. If the neglect and disinvestment typical of the 1980s and 1990s is repeated locally, and further cuts are made to budgets and staffing levels, then the impact on access and utilisation, and Barking and Dagenham's parks and green spaces as a whole, will be significant.

In the UK as a whole there has been a significant reduction in staffing levels over the last three years, and 77%<sup>8</sup> of park managers report cuts to operational or front-line staff. There has been an even higher loss of management staff with 81%<sup>8</sup> of council parks departments reporting cuts to skilled management staff.

The pressure on budgets will inevitably result in increases in fees and charges for facilities in the borough's parks with the aim of achieving full cost recovery. However, there is a risk that introducing charges or dramatic price increases will exceed the ability of park users to pay.

The combined impacts of austerity, population change and government policy mean that the Council must change the way it is currently run, and find new ways of delivering service, including safe sport and play environments.

## **Recommendations for Commissioners**

Safe sport and play environments can help achieve the Council's Encouraging Civic Pride priority and make an important contribution to the health and wellbeing of the local population, with a positive impact on both physical and mental health.

Barking and Dagenham has actively developed these environments in recent years. However, positive action is needed to maintain and continually improve the quality of the borough's parks as safe environments for sport and play now and in the future.

These include

- Recognise the value of parks and green spaces and ensure that appropriate budgets and staffing levels are maintained to manage and care for these valuable and treasured community assets in the future.

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<sup>8</sup> State of UK Parks 2014 – Research Report (July 2014), Heritage Lottery Fund

- Focus on retaining high standards and good access to parks. This is the key to ensuring that the borough's green spaces deliver all their beneficial outcomes for individuals, communities and places.
- Adopt the Playing Pitch Strategy 2015 and develop a positive response to the key findings, recommendations and action plans.
- Initiate and complete a review of Council managed children's play facilities..
- Identify additional sources of funding and income to enable improvements to parks and related buildings and to address deficiencies in playing pitch and informal play equipment provision
- Identifying opportunities to realign existing revenue resources to ensure good standards of management of parks, sports pitches and play facilities are maintained.
- Review the current use and availability of the visitor centres at Barking Park and the Millennium Centre and other park buildings, and the associated resources required to achieve the full potential of these valuable community assets.
- Secure external sources of funding where available and appropriate for investment in parks.

Focus on the creation of assets (things that will help generate income) and revenue generating enterprises, and apply for revenue funding as well as funds for capital improvements. This will help fund the cost of 'liabilities' (things that cost money) including facilities such as play areas also exist to look at different arrangements for park management including grounds maintenance in parks to achieve greater efficiencies and effectiveness.

These could include:

- Develop a range of effective and sustainable park management and maintenance models that support community action and volunteering and partnerships between the local authority and the private sector, Trusts, Social Enterprises and the voluntary and community sector.
- Increase biodiversity such as letting grass grow into meadows in some areas
- Focus attention on priority parks and priority areas within parks, relaxing regimes in other areas.
- Data on current usage of parks and facilities such as play areas is limited. Better data would help to identify those sites and facilities which should be prioritised for improvement and maintenance.