

5.9 Access and utilisation of green space

There is now widespread recognition by the wider health community of the important links between health and the environment, the need to develop environmental strategies as a way of taking a more holistic view of health and wellbeing.

Accessible green space has long since been recognised as a wider environmental determinant of good health, and having access to green spaces such as parks and public gardens can improve the quality of life for local people. National and local studies have shown that investment in parks to ensure that they provide high quality environments with a range of accessible facilities such as toilets, refreshments, informal and formal recreational facilities, activities and events will result in increased usage, and therefore increased opportunities for health improvement.

‘Access to a park or green space can have wide-ranging benefits for our health and wellbeing. A safe, natural environment can be a break from our busy lives – a place to get some fresh air, to exercise or play – a place to go and relax’¹

According to the 2011 Survey of Public Attitudes and Behaviours Towards the Environment, funded by the Department for the Environment and Rural Affairs, over 9 in 10 (92%) adults aged 16 and over in England reported that it was very or fairly important to have public gardens, parks, commons or other green spaces nearby.

London’s green spaces (private gardens, public parks, wild spaces, urban forests, river and transport corridors) perform a range of functions that improve the quality of life in London. These include providing places for recreational and leisure activities that improve health. They moderate the temperature by off-setting the urban heat island effect (the creation of areas that are hotter than the surrounding areas due to the retention of heat by building materials) and help reduce noise and pollution. They also reduce flood risk by absorbing and temporarily retaining rainfall. They are especially important Boroughs that have a high population density.

Green spaces in an urban environment play a vital role in encouraging people to take more exercise and hence to improved health and wellbeing and a reduction in obesity and cancers.

However, it is also important that shaded areas are provided as they change summer urban micro-climates for the better by creating shade and allowing cooler air to accumulate and circulate at ground level. Planting trees and vegetation and the creation of green spaces to enhance evaporation and shading, help keep areas several degrees cooler than their surroundings. Trees also reduce pollution, reduce flooding and noise.

Prioritising green infrastructure is therefore essential. High quality and well-maintained parks and open spaces are integral to keeping Barking and Dagenham healthy, happy, moving and functioning.

By providing free access to nature, relaxation, play, exercise, sports, education and social cohesion; parks and green spaces impact on population health and health inequalities, and therefore they contribute significantly towards physical and mental wellbeing in the borough.

- With 34 million people estimated to make regular visits, parks are one of the UK's most heavily used public services
- 68% of park users consider spending time in their local park as important or essential to their quality of life. This rises to 71% in urban areas and 81% for those with children under 10
- 70% of park managers have recorded increased visitor numbers to their principal parks over the last year²

5.9.1 The national picture

Despite the contribution parks make to the quality of life of local people and the high level of usage, nationally parks are under direct threat:

- 86% of park managers report cuts to revenue budgets since 2010, a trend they expect to continue over the next three years. This could mean: park facilities such as cafes and toilets are closed or opening hours reduced; grass left uncut, flower beds left empty, play areas less regularly cleaned and inspected and more anti-social behaviour due to less park staff
- 45% of local authorities are considering either selling parks and green spaces or transferring their management to others. This could mean: loss of some parks, parts of parks and other green spaces, management of parks being divided between different organisations, community groups being asked to take on larger parks and needing support to do so effectively
- 81% of council parks departments have lost skilled management staff since 2010 and 77% have lost front-line staff¹

² State of UK Public Parks 2014, Heritage Lottery Fund

5.9.2 The Barking and Dagenham picture

Population growth and pressure:

- Barking and Dagenham has a population of 194,352³. However, in the past decade there have been some significant changes in terms of growth rate and demographics.
- The borough's population is growing at a faster pace than in London and England as a whole. The growth rate is 16.6 per cent and has gone up more than twice that of London (8 per cent) and England (8 per cent). National statistics forecast a population of 220,000 by 2020, and up to 275,000 by 2037.
- 34% of the borough's surface has green space coverage. But within Barking and Dagenham, more than 50 per cent of households in 4 out of 17 wards have deficient access to nature
- The borough covers an area of 3,611 hectares⁴, equating to a current density (number of people per hectare) of 51.5 compared to 52 for the London region, and 41 for England as a whole. The borough has 492 hectares⁵ of parks and green spaces for its population, equating to 2.65 hectares per 1,000 population.
- However, major new developments including Barking Riverside, the University of East London and Lymington Fields mean that the growth in the borough's population is set to continue, and so access to new green space will be required to maintain the current 'standard'.

Health inequalities:

- The residents of Barking and Dagenham are not as healthy as they could be, compared to other parts of the country with life expectancy for both men and women amongst the lowest in London. 117 deaths would be preventable by increasing physical activity levels amongst 40-79 year olds.
- 6.6% of Barking and Dagenham residents aged 16-64 believe that their day to day activities are limited considerably because of a health related problem or disability including problems relating to old age, compared to the London average of 5.6%.
- In Barking and Dagenham 27.5% of children in reception and 40.6% of year 6 children are overweight or obese (**NEW reference – 2014-15 data, National Child Weight Management Programme**). The levels in the adult population are significantly worse with 63.5% of the adult population classed as overweight or obese (**NEW reference - Active People Survey, Sport England. Excess weight in adults 2012**) **These New references replace the previous source i.e. (3)**⁶

³ ONS, Mid-2013 Population Estimates for UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland - Mid-2013, available at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/pop-estimate/population-estimates-for-uk--england-and-wales--scotland-and-northern-ireland/index.html> - last accessed 14 April 2015

⁴ Barking and Dagenham Local Plan 2010-2025, Office of National Statistics, Census, 2011

⁶ Better Environment, Better Health – A GLA Guide for London Boroughs 2013, Mayor of London

Community safety:

- Personal safety is a known barrier to the use of parks and green spaces. Studies about the use of parks show that residents want to see a visible staffing presence in parks along with control of dogs, increased lighting and systematic gate-locking.
- However, thanks to the dedication of the Parks Safer Neighbourhood Team the borough's parks and open spaces are now much safer places for the local community to visit and enjoy. The results of a survey of residents in late 2015 confirmed that locally 70%⁷ of adult residents now report satisfaction with their local area, compared to 86% for London residents generally, and 84% feel safe in the local area during the day.
- However, the Parks SNT does much more than just deal with incidents of crime and anti-social behaviour. The team attends community events, provides advice and the visible presence of uniformed officers helps reinforce the message that the borough's parks are safer places for people to visit and enjoy.

5.9.3 Sites and facilities

- The borough covers an area of 3,611 hectares, and 34% of the borough's surface has green space coverage.
- There are approximately 25 designated parks and green spaces distributed fairly evenly throughout the borough.
- The borough has 17 statutory allotments, covering 629 plots. These sites are leased to 10 allotment societies.
- As part of the Mayor of London's Capital Growth initiative in 2011 the Council signed up to a commitment to identify 60 new community food growing spaces by 2012, and against this ambitious target an estimated 35 additional spaces were created.
- Team sports provide a number of obvious health benefits for participants, and contribute to social confidence, interaction and cohesion. The Council manages and maintains a total of 45 football pitches, two cricket pitches, two bowling greens and 10 rugby pitches.
- In addition the borough's parks also provide local people with access to various fixed play facilities including: 31 children's play areas, 19 tennis courts, 9 multi-use games areas, 3 outdoor gyms, 6 stake parks and a BMX track.

⁷ LBBB Residents Survey Research Report 2015

5.9.4 Current challenges and action

Over the last few years there has been a significant transformation of several of the borough's parks, and significant investment has already been made to address the need to improve local green spaces. However, in response to the challenges currently facing the Council, positive action is required to avoid a repeat of the experience of the 1980s and 1990s when many UK parks went through a spiral of decline and under investment.

Taking a bench mark from the Audit Commission that calculates that government funding to local authorities has reduced by an average of almost 20% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2013-14, many parks departments have faced a higher percentage of cuts than the national average. Local authority budgets are expected to continue to fall perhaps for the rest of the decade, and the impact on the borough's parks could be significant if spending on parks is reduced even further.

The Council has sustained the deepest cuts in government support in the last few years, and further government cuts mean that the Council is facing a shortfall of £63m, a third of our remaining budget, by 2020.

Planning gain (the resource realised from the meeting of planning obligations) has historically provided a large source of additional income for parks services with almost 90%¹ of park managers having benefitted from this resource. However, with changes to planning gain and the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy just over 60%¹ of managers expect to continue to receive funding through this source in the future, and this could potentially equate to a 30% cut to this important source of funding for parks.

In addition, sources of external funding are now fewer, and there is greater competition for the schemes and the funds that remain.

In these challenging times the focus must be on working more efficiently and effectively, identifying savings where they exist, creating assets and generating income where possible, and adopting new and sustainable models of park management and maintenance. There is also a need to use strategic frameworks like the Green Flag (the benchmark national standard for public-run parks and green spaces - the borough currently holds 3 Green Flag Awards) and Green Pennant (the equivalent award for community and charity run public spaces) to realise further sustainable improvements.

Health and Wellbeing Boards can make a significant difference through mapping the links between environmental issues, health and wellbeing at a local level, increasing awareness amongst partners and focusing on both immediate and long term actions. However, a purely local focus is both a potential strength and a weakness as many

key environmental issues clearly have impact beyond electoral and geographical areas. Therefore, partnerships must be developed which go beyond organisational boundaries.

Recommendations for Commissioners

Parks and open spaces are important assets and can help achieve the following Council priorities:

1. Encouraging civic pride
2. Enabling social responsibility
3. Growing the borough

Green spaces already make a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of everyone living in the borough. However, investment is required to deliver and maintain high quality improvements to existing parks and help create new green spaces to meet the needs of future population increases. There is also scope to develop community based solutions for the management of some of the borough's parks and open spaces, which could incorporate health improvement initiatives.

Specific actions which should be addressed include:

- Increase recognition of the unique contribution that high quality parks and green spaces can make as a catalyst for community participation; and for improving health and well being, cultural integration, the environment and local economy.
- Recognise not just the recreational, amenity and heritage value of the borough's parks but also their potential to be designed and managed to provide additional services such as: sources of income generation; flood management; improving air quality; and, providing walking and cycling routes that alleviate the demand on the local transport infrastructure.
- Position quality green space provision at the heart of preventative health strategies and encourage health providers to acknowledge its value.
- Reducing the distance residents have to travel to reach a good quality open space and improving access to very local parks (those within 400m of people's homes) could help improve the health of a fifth of the population.
- Promote increased participation in physical activity in outdoor spaces through high quality facility provision, including sports pitches, pavilions, play equipment, outdoor gyms; and outreach activity programmes such as 'guided walking exercise prescription'.
- 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.

- 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 buildings, children's play areas and other recreational facilities such as multi use games courts etc.
- Provide support for the development of Friends Groups and other community/voluntary groups, and recognise the important role they can play in the resourcing of the borough's parks.
- Recognise the importance of parks and green spaces as valuable assets and apply the same asset management protocols as employed to manage other essential infrastructure.
- The lack of geo-demographic health statistics related to utilisation/benefits of parks and limited data on usage, satisfaction and equalities and diversity needs to be addressed.
- Encouragement of more formal sporting use of the borough's parks and open spaces by improving the quality of playing pitches and changing facilities.
- Encouragement of more opportunities for informal recreation, physical activity and community cohesion through events and access to good quality play and health improvement programmes, like walking for health.
- The south of the borough, which already has significant income and health deprivation, should be a priority area for creation of new green space.
- Certain population groups should be targeted for access to green space to secure the greatest overall health improvement for the borough.
- The groups whose health is most at risk should be targeted to reduce the most extreme health inequalities.
- Improving the quality and cleanliness of parks, the availability of events and activities within parks, will benefit the community, in particular young people.
- Review the current position in relation to the use of the borough's parks for third party organised community events, and the Council's support for these events.
- Recognise the importance of maintaining a visible staff presence in the borough's parks, and consider ways in which the number of park based staff can be increased and maintained in future.
- Improve perceptions of parks and open spaces as being safe places to visit. Increasing the visible presence of park based staff such as rangers, and the Parks Safer Neighbourhood Team would significantly address the perception of safety, which is of particular importance especially to women, young people and families.
- Maintain the effective partnership with the Metropolitan Police Service and recognise the benefit and importance of the Parks Safer Neighbourhood Team in terms of helping to make the borough's parks safer places for the community to visit and enjoy.

- Maintain support for the Green Flag Award and Green Pennant schemes to improve and maintain the quality and accessibility of the borough's parks and green spaces.
- Identify and seek to address barriers (physical, mental, logistical) that prevent or restrict access to parks and green spaces especially for people with disabilities and children.
- Promote allotments and community food growing and use these activities to reconnect local people, especially young children, to the food system, and engage them in issues such as healthy eating and where their food comes from.
- Encourage investment in the skills required to manage quality parks and green spaces in a changing and challenging delivery environment.