

East Herts Council Report

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 18 January 2022

Report by: Councillor Eric Buckmaster – Executive Member for Wellbeing

Report title: Parks and Open Spaces Strategy – 2022-27

Ward(s) affected: All

Summary

- This strategy replaces the outgoing Parks and Open Spaces Strategy and draws from previous parks improvements to outline the Council's commitment to parks and open spaces. It also sets out key areas of focus for the next five years.

RECOMMENDATION FOR OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

A) To review and provide comments on the strategy for the Executive to consider prior to Council.

1.0 Proposal(s)

1.1 To review the updated parks and open spaces strategy following the online consultation with the public and Members. The strategy has been reviewed and amended to reflect feedback which represents the wider views of our customers.

1.2 To note the accompanying set of Operating Policies and Guidance which underpin that strategy and day to day operation. There were no concerns raised regarding these in

the consultation.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The outgoing strategy was intended to cover the period 2013 to 2018 and so is overdue for replacement; other projects were prioritised such as contract re-tendering then the pandemic presented further challenges.
- 2.2 A new approach to the purpose and delivery of this strategy was conceived. This was outlined in a PowerPoint presentation to key stakeholder groups prior to public consultation going live.
- 2.3 This new strategy reflects on the excellent improvements already achieved to our parks and focusses on key priorities for all our green spaces and how the Council intend to deliver them.
- 2.4 The draft document was launched for consultation during Love Parks Week at the end of July 2021 during which our Friends Groups traditionally help us to deliver some park events. This year the events were primarily online and presented a good opportunity to introduce residents to the new strategy.
- 2.5 The strategy is designed to consider management of the Council's own parks and open spaces. The management of new open spaces through new developments across the district is dealt with as part of planning policy.

Overview of the new strategy

Parks are crucial places for residents and visitors to relax, play and keep fit, supporting our health and wellbeing, no better emphasised than through the pandemic experience. We offer

to ensure they remain fit for purpose; have good access, are clean and welcoming and that we continue positive engagement with users.

The strategy has been kept purposefully brief focussing on key outcomes. It is presented as an online document introduced by a video that showcases our wide variety of parks.

We will improve communication of our service through improved Frequently Asked Questions that work toward our customer self-serve initiatives. Our Operating Policies and Guidance set the basis to these answer (See Appendix 2).

The strategy explores sustainability providing opportunity for the council to improve biodiversity; tree planting where there is still space to do so, good woodland and riverine management, creating new habitats with long grass areas and meadows. We emphasise that the Council has invested in a wide range of improvements over the years and remains committed to our parks.

The strategy explores how to supplement our core funding by continuing to secure grant funding, looking at alternative delivery models and by commercialising more; hiring spaces out and developing funding streams such as tendering contracts for food vending pitches.

The strategy is summarised by an acronym; ACE which sets out three core aims:

1 Attractive and Accessible

Promoting equality and access for all. We will:

- provide access to more information about our parks and open spaces

- ensure our parks and open spaces are clean and welcoming with appropriate infrastructure to rest and move around them safely
- review our litter and dog waste provisions
- ensure we protect our natural assets- biodiversity and sustainability

2 Commercial

Finding ways to keep our parks financially sustainable, we will:

- work with local providers to secure income through hiring out our open spaces for vending, physical activity and events
- maximise the use of our open spaces to commercial providers to generate income
- source external funding to enhance our parks and open spaces
- manage the grounds maintenance contract efficiently and grow its capacity to deliver improvements
- seek further opportunities to engage the community in crowd funding for specific site improvement projects

3 Environmental and Engaged

Looking to our residents, we will:

- act upon recommendations from an independent audit of our parks that finds opportunities to improve habitats and increase biodiversity
- plant trees effectively informed by inspection data and the habitat audit
- identify locations within residential areas on Council owned land where tree planting can be increased

- develop a scheme to offer residents the opportunity to fund the planting of a tree in predetermined locations informed by the two previous initiatives
- develop verge/pollinator/wildflower initiatives
- provide electric hook up points that ice cream vans can plug into in our parks, providing ice creams without noise and air pollution
- communicate with our customers effectively and promote positive messages
- continue to commit to events such as love parks week
- work with providers to promote activity in our parks and open space which support health and well being
- continue to support our Friends of Parks groups to
- help us improve and develop our parks
- provide opportunities for residents to socialise, keep fit and look after their health and wellbeing
- contribute actively to the maintenance of our parks
- engage with visitors positively on our behalf and help us to monitor
- find ways to support smaller groups of volunteers where there may not be sufficient activity to create a fully-fledged Friends Group
- welcome community groups and organisations to support our objectives
- Secure economic vibrancy in our parks by increasing footfall and engendering a sense of ownership

A full version of the document can be found in Appendix 1. This version has been updated following feedback received through the consultation.

3.0 Reason(s)

- 3.1 The Council owns and manages over 120 open spaces including 45 significant parks. Updating the strategy provides an opportunity to share the Council's direction of travel in this

high profile area of service.

- 3.2 The parks and open spaces owned and managed by the Council contribute toward the delivery of corporate objectives as explored in the strategy.

4.0 Options

- 4.1 The Council could decide not to adopt a new strategy, however given the significant parks and open spaces infrastructure within the authority ownership it would be prudent to determine key priorities moving forward in line with the Council's overarching priorities.

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 This strategy does not commit the Council to any greater resource level than is currently available.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

- 6.1 The eight week consultation process finds that the strategy is largely accepted by consultees. We received 179 responses to the online questionnaire. 79% of these consultees agreed with the strategy vision that "our Parks and Open Spaces are highly valued by residents and used more and more to promote health and wellbeing and our sustainability ambitions."

95% either agreed or strongly agreed with our core aim 1,
Attractive and Accessible

63% either agreed or strongly agreed with our core aim 2,
Commercial

86% either agreed or strongly agreed with our core aim 3,
Engaged

The consultation asked what is important to our customers. Starting with a suggested list found the three most important things that people believe parks should offer:

Habitats for wildlife	61%
Places to walk	45%
Opportunities for play	43%
Accessible to all	36%
Somewhere to relax	30%
Woodlands	23%
Places to take dogs	22%
Rivers / lakes / ponds	21%
Meadowland	19%
Places to sit	18%
Opportunities to keep fit	16%
Somewhere to socialise	14%
Opportunities to volunteer	7%

A small number of other things were suggested by consultees under this section including cycling, events, affordable parking, toilets and safety.

The consultation asked “what is the one most crucial thing we should focus on to meet our customers’ needs in our parks and open spaces”. From a suggested list the three most chosen things were Biodiversity (25%), Cleanliness (21%) and Safety (16%). Less chosen options were Attractiveness (9%), Health and Wellbeing (6%) and Accessibility (6%). Other choices ranging from 5% to 1% were Quality, Welcoming, Financial Sustainability, Information and Public Engagement. 65% of consultees agreed that all the key aspects of parks and open space development are covered in the strategy.

The questionnaire invited additional written feedback (from 94 consultees containing 154 separate comments) containing some concerns which are summarised here:

- There is too much emphasis on commercialism. 5% of the comments expressed that there should be no commercialisation and another 4% asked that we retain some balance by ensuring this does not impact upon the peacefulness of some parks or make them less accessible. Whilst this is an understandable concern, the strategy does not propose any initiatives that would harm the character or function of our parks. Whilst some may prefer our parks to be funded without the need to generate some income, the Council must manage expectations by emphasising the financial constraints. The updated strategy attempts to soften some of the focus of commercialism following feedback.
- 3% of the comments expressed there should be no food vending, 1 comment expressed there should be more, 1 cautioned about affordability for some residents; potentially making it harder to bring children to a park where food vending is present. There was a request that ice cream vans are only accepted where they have adapted from diesel to electric generators.
- The document will be revised to emphasise that initiatives will consider these concerns and that the food vending tender will have a target period within which successful vendors should adapt to this requirement. The Council will install power points on sites where this is feasible.
- Physical access was noted as a priority as we develop our open spaces. The feedback mentioned better access for cyclists as well as specific points including disabled visitors and interventions to improve wet weather access.

Attention to footpath maintenance was also raised. These will be picked up in our individual greenspace action plans as these are continually revised.

- 3% emphasised that toilets should be provided in larger parks. The Council determined through its Community Toilet Scheme that toilets would not be provided directly by the Council. Two of our major parks provide access to toilets in our leisure centres, Hartham and Grange Paddocks. The former is located in the pavilion directly adjacent to the busiest area of the park; the young children's play space.
- 11% of the comments expressed that the strategy should make more commitment to biodiversity and improving the environmental sustainability of our open spaces such as more planting including memorial trees and opportunities to develop effective verge/pollinator/wildflower initiatives. One group response felt that the Council should be "actively working toward" such objectives and not "exploring a way to deliver" them.
- The document has been revised to express greater commitment to this area fitting more with the Council's strategic aim to keep: "sustainability at the heart of everything we do". The core aims; ACE have been updated to include Engaged whilst considering the Environment. The Council is already working with the County Council to identify highway verges that can be cut less frequently under the agency agreement and we have commissioned the Countryside Management Service to conduct an audit of our open spaces to identify further areas of potential improvement such as planting trees, creating meadows and reviewing the management of grass and hedges. Our tree risk inspection consultant has

been asked to include an assessment of opportunities to replace trees that have been lost where we have not already done so.

- A wide range of other singular comments were received ranging from support for wellbeing initiatives, hiring out e-bikes and scooters, more parking, more focus on provisions for girls and more emphasis on woodland and hedge habitats. We will consider these other comments as we continue to develop our individual greenspace action plans.
- Another group consultee provided detailed comments outlining a request for more definition between previous successful projects and ideas for new initiatives and greater detail of how these are to be achieved. The document will be modified to offer further clarity between past and present. This concise and aspirational strategy offers some commitment to further improvements but it is not designed to be a detailed action plan. Our ongoing greenspace action plans provide the detail of our intended improvements and will continue to be guided by this strategy.

Community Safety

- 2% of comments asked the Council to commit more resource to anti-social behaviour in our open spaces.

We support the police through our Community Wellbeing and Partnerships team as they deal with anti-social behaviour. The Council is committed to protecting our open spaces and we will emphasise this in our revised document. We will consider how we might find further resource within the wider public facing activities that the Council offer to encourage greater engagement on our smaller spaces. Increased littering as a form of anti-social behaviour

was raised as an issue. Our contractor has been adjusting their working methods to optimise their effectiveness and our litter bins are already under review as part of the Council's savings commitments this year.

Data Protection

No

Equalities

Yes – an equalities impact assessment was undertaken. No issues have been raised through the consultation process.

Environmental Sustainability

Yes – forms a large aspect of the strategy

Financial

Yes – commercial approach considered as part of the strategy

Health and Safety

No

Human Resources

No

Human Rights

No

Legal

No

Specific Wards

No

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

Appendix 1 – Parks and Open Spaces Strategy – 2022-27, Final Draft

Appendix 2 – Operating Policies and Guidance

Appendix 3 – Equalities Impact Assessment

Contact Member

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