



Parks management scrutiny review – parks visit - 8 August 2019

Overview

On Thursday 8 August Councillors from the Sustainable Development Select Committee carried out a visit to gather evidence for the Committee's 'Parks management in-depth review'.

Attendees

Councillor Patrick Codd
Councillor Mark Ingleby (until noon)
Councillor Louise Krupski
Timothy Andrew (Scrutiny Manager)
Vince Buchanan (Service Group Manager, Green Scene)
Nick Pond (Ecological Regeneration and Open Space Policy Manager)
Nigel Tyrell (Director of Environment) (until noon)

Locations visited

Manor House Gardens
Hither Green Crematorium
Blackheath
Deptford Park/Deptford Park Community Orchard
Brookmill nature reserve
Luxmore Gardens

Questions arising from the Committee's key lines of enquiry

At its meeting in June 2019 the Committee discussed a scoping report for a 'parks management review'. The Committee agreed a number of 'key lines of enquiry' to focus its evidence gathering. Principally, as regards parks management the Committee seeks to understand:

What good practice should Lewisham seek to retain and which areas could be strengthened further?

Further to the agreement of the scope of the review (and in advance of the visit) the Committee discussed key issues it wished to raise about the management of parks. Members on the visit also put forward suggestions for key questions, as follows:

- What are the differences between management of big/small parks/pocket parks?
- How businesses/cafes are managed in parks?
- Is there a process for creating links/routes/signage between parks?
- How is the upkeep of formal areas/monuments/sports facilities managed?

- Are there examples of projects that have encouraged significant increase in parks use/successful park improvement projects?
- What's the process for staff training/tree management and planting/use of equipment and minimisation of carbon emissions/use of glyphosate?
- What are the processes for improving biodiversity in parks?
- What are the opening times for parks/how is the accessibility of cycle routes and the policy for lighting in parks managed?
- How is the maintenance and management of play areas for children managed?



Findings

Key points from discussions between officers and councillors during the course of the parks visit are outlined below:

- What are the differences between management of big/small parks/pocket parks?

It was reported that all parks are subject to regular monthly inspections. This included a 10% random sample of planting and other features within the park. Some parks are weighted higher within the monitoring process and any areas found below specification incur higher performance deductions. Members also heard that parks with 'friends groups' benefited in a number of ways - but in particular - active groups of friends could alert the parks service to issues that needed to be resolved.

- How businesses/cafes are managed in parks?

Glendale manages the contracts for cafes on behalf of the Council and receives all income generated from parks concessions. Figures on turnover and usage are not readily available. Anecdotally, some cafes are more successful than others. Where there have been issues with cafes in parks (such as anti-social behaviour or break-ins) the Council has worked collaboratively with Glendale to support operators. It was noted, that at the end of the existing Green Space contract, there might be options for the Council to more closely manage cafes in parks. This might provide financial benefits as well as contribution to the Council's policy objectives (such as sugar smart and the living wage) It was also noted that capital funding from the Rushey Green Renewal has been made available to support the

development of a new café in Mountsfield Park. It was being considered whether rents should be related to a business's turnover alongside a mechanism to share profits.



- Is there a process for creating links/routes/signage between parks?

Members heard that there are good examples of projects which link green spaces in the borough – the most notable of these being the Waterlink Way – which runs the length of the borough.

North Lewisham links is a project to link green spaces in the north of the borough – to make cycling and walking more enjoyable. It was noted that work had started on the development of a 'south Lewisham links' project. Members were interested to hear more about this.

Members also heard that linkages between green spaces had to work within the constraints of the borough's fundamental characteristics. It was noted that the borough was divided by its principal road and rail routes. There was discussion on the visit about the potential to safely open railway cuttings for active travel and to create green links using management of residential streets – following from the healthy streets initiative.



- How is the upkeep of formal areas/monuments/sports facilities managed?

Members visited tennis courts in Manor House Gardens as well as a recently laid cricket pitch; football pitches and an outdoor gym in Deptford Park.

The Council operates a pin based access system for tennis courts. Users are required to pay a fee for access. The fees are collected by the council using an online system. Part of the revenues collected are held in a sinking fund for future repairs. Glendale receives a payments for the routine maintenance of the courts.

Members also heard that there were plans to apply for funding from the FA (football association) community fund for improvements to playing pitches. On the visit, Members were approached by the manager of a youth amateur football club – who had concerns about the provision for football. Officers emphasised the work being carried out to ensure that there was sufficient access to sporting facilities as well as a balance between parks usage.



Work between officers was taking place to deliver the 'playing pitch strategy' which has been developed by officers in the Council's community services directorate.

Members heard that there were fees for usage of facilities by sports groups.

It was reported that sports equipment (such as outdoor gym equipment) is often paid for using section 106 funds – and maintained by Glendale.

Memorial sites in the borough are managed by Glendale. They are subject to regular inspections by the Council. Sites on 'red routes' are managed by Transport for London. Glendale is also responsible for the management and maintenance of monuments in parks as well as formal borders, beds and gardens.

- Are there examples of projects that have encouraged significant increase in parks use/successful park improvement projects?

Members heard about planting initiatives supported by friends groups. For these projects, Glendale provides training, plants and equipment for community groups. It is believed that there are multiple benefits – including: the support for community groups; the increase in the sense of ownership and belonging for parks users and the freeing up of parks staff time to carry out other projects.



- What's the process for staff training/tree management and planting/use of equipment and minimisation of carbon emissions/use of glyphosate?

Members heard that the Council directly maintains and manages mature trees (in green spaces inside and outside of parks) but the tree maintenance budget is under pressure. This is particularly the case when it comes to routine maintenance. It was reported that the maintenance programme is prioritised based on risks. Regular assessments and prioritisation of works are carried out by the Council's two tree service officers. An independent assessment of all of the borough's mature trees is carried out every four years.

There was an extended discussion about the management of young trees. Members reported that they had received specific complaints in relation to grass cutting and damage

to trees in Mountsfield Park. Officers from Glendale acknowledged the concerns and highlighted that there might be multiple causes for damage to trees and that problems should not always be attributed to grass cutting works. They also outlined the work that was taking place to address complaints related to Mountsfield Park.

Complaints from parks user groups and members of the public are investigated and if a complaint about the work carried out by parks staff is founded then parks staff receive further training as well as instruction on the best use of machinery and tools.

Officers in the parks service were confident that – aside from the specific concerns being raised in Mountsfield Park – there was not a trend of complaints about grass cutting and tree maintenance in parks.



Members heard that there were sometimes options to increase the level of meadow area around trees in parks (which might reduce the potential for damage) however- the parks service reviewed planting in parks on a case by case basis to ensure that the appropriate mix of meadow, open space and tree planting was maintained. It was also reported that meadow land could not predominate in parks - in order to meet the standards required for the Green Flag standard.

Members heard that turnover of staff in the parks service is low – so the majority of staff working in parks are experienced. It was also reported that staff who work on shorter term seasonal contracts during busy periods regularly returned to work for the service. Glendale uses very few agency staff – as the majority of seasonal workers are directly employed.

- What are the processes for improving biodiversity in parks?

There were discussions throughout the day about the growth of meadow in parks. It was reported that an extra 35 thousand square metres of meadow land had been created on Bleackheath – in part to balance the cutting required for the OnBlackheath festival. It was noted that there were limitations to increasing the levels of meadow in parks. There were several opportunities on the visit to see areas that had been left to meadow – with close cutting delineating paths – or boundaries – in order to demonstrate active management. It was reported that in hot summers areas of dry meadow could become a fire risk.

Members were in agreement that meadow land was an important new element of parks and green spaces. However, it was felt that more work may need to be carried out to ensure that residents were aware of the rationale for reducing cutting and the benefits of doing so.

Members heard that an increase in ponds and other water features had the potential improve biodiversity. However, it was recognised that additional water features would not be appropriate in every park – and that they could be costly to maintain. It was also recognised that there were long term challenges with the management of ponds and other bodies of water because they tended to change significantly over time.

Other approaches to improving biodiversity were discussed – such as engaging members of the public with bird feeding and encouraging them to act as bird champions. Officers also emphasised the importance of ensuring that contributions from developers towards biodiversity projects be carefully planned. It was believed that features could be useful if they were in the right places with the right kind of management. Major schemes (such as the Quercus project in Ladywell Fields) to open up rivers (de-culverting) could also help to improve bio-diversity by providing new habitats and nesting grounds.





- What are the opening times for parks/how is the accessibility of cycle routes and the policy for lighting in parks managed?

Members and officers had a discussion about the accessibility of cycle routes. Members were concerned that some parks were locked too early – foreshortening cycle routes though Mountsfield and Forster parks. It was reported that the were costs associated with locking parks each evening but that previous proposals to leave parks open had not been welcomed due to potential issues with anti-social behaviour. It was also reported that during negotiation of the new lighting PFI it had been agreed that parks and open spaces would not be routinely be lit – given cost, sustainability and biodiversity implications.

There was a discussion about the potential different options for helping cyclists safely navigate parks after dark – including: luminescent tarmac; low level lighting and ‘cats-eye’ reflectors.



The timing of the route for locking parks was also discussed. It was agreed that a straightforward solution to the closure of parks that limited cycle routes might be to include Mountsfield and Forster Parks (as well as any other that were integral to cycle routes) to the end of the 'locking up' route.

- How is the maintenance and management of play areas for children managed?

Members received a comprehensive account of the management and maintenance of play equipment in parks. An asset database called 'PSS live' is used by the parks service to log issues with play equipment and quickly escalate issues. In addition to a daily visual inspection - on a fortnightly basis inspectors qualified to the British Standard examine play equipment in parks and carry out minor repairs as necessary. Any larger repairs that are identified are allocated to the in-house



maintenance team for action. A quarterly inspection of all equipment is also carried out by different inspectors to ensure that a range of qualified operatives have reviewed all play equipment. In addition, there is an independent annual inspection of all equipment each summer, which is carried out in depth in compliance with EN117 standards. Any issues identified by this inspection are added to a risk register and prioritised for remedial action. It is believed that Lewisham's playgrounds are very safe, which is evidenced by the low number of complaints received.

Other findings of interest

How the overall contract runs

The contract for parks and greenspaces management and maintenance is worth approximately £2.5m a year. This does not include Beckenham Place Park, which is managed in-house and has its own budget. The annual contract was originally worth £3.5m but at that time it also included Lewisham Homes. There is also an efficiency mechanism built into the contract. Funding for parks improvement had been reduced due to the cuts.

The Council had been successful at accessing funding from external sources and notable examples included the Heritage Lottery Funding for Beckenham Place Park and the funding for the improvements to Ladywell Fields and the Waterlink Way.

Members heard that every month a 10 % random sample of parks facilities is carried out to determine how well the contract was operating. Scoring was weighted to prioritise the maintenance and upkeep of Lewisham's principal parks and green spaces. There was

discussion between councillors about future options for ensuring quality was maintained, should the form of the contract change. Members recognised the importance of investing in staff building on the dedication of grounds staff to the areas they worked in. Examples were provided during the visit to Hither Green Crematorium of the dedication and commitment of grounds staff – and the sense of ownership felt by long serving officers.

Complaints

Members heard that complaints were driven by seasonal demand. The majority of complaints were dealt with by Glendale and were usually straightforward to resolve. Members expressed an interest in seeing up-to-date data.

One issue discussed in depth was that of people driving mopeds through parks. It was recognised that there were no simple solutions to this problem. This is particularly the case because any physical barriers to access in parks would limit the accessibility for all park users (but potentially wheelchair users and pushchairs).

