

Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission

18 January

Green Infrastructure Strategy and Parks & Green Spaces Strategy

1. Overview

1.1 The Council has long recognised the significant impact that green infrastructure (including quality parks and green spaces) can have on the achievement of its vision and objectives, and has therefore placed a high priority on developing and improving them over the last decade.

1.2 Green infrastructure is integral and essential to the borough's resilience, meeting its future challenges and the delivery of its wider strategies, both at a community and individual level. Green infrastructure has a key role to play in:

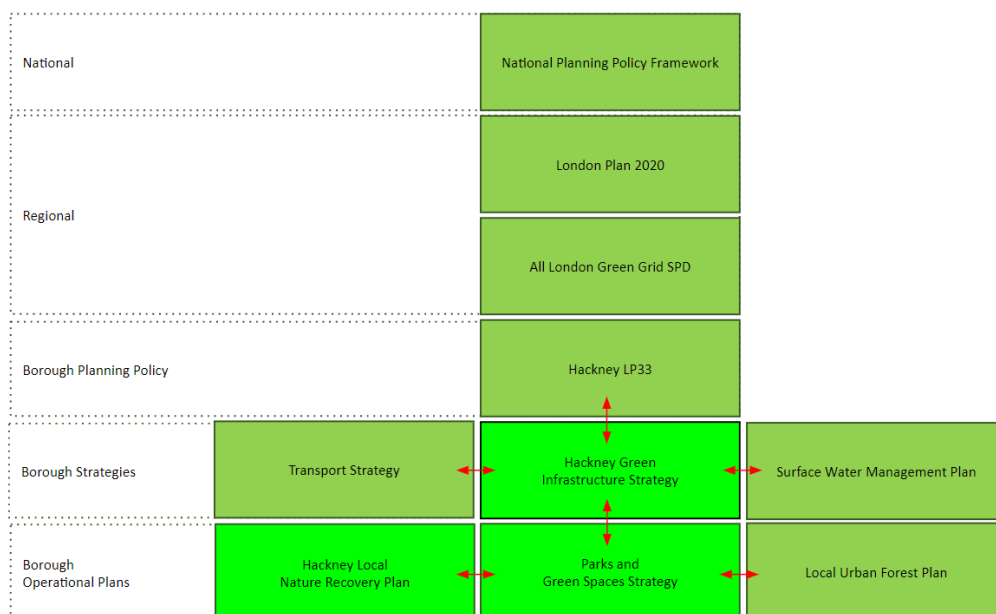
- **A Changing Climate - Cooling the Urban Environment and Improving Air Quality:** Urban green infrastructure, particularly spaces with significant tree cover and/or large water bodies, have always played an important role as places to seek respite from high temperatures and large canopied trees can significantly reduce temperatures at street level by providing shade;
- **Community Food Growing:** There is a growing body of research demonstrating the benefits of gardening and community food growing for physical and mental wellbeing;
- **Encouraging Walking and Cycling:** Walking and cycling more results in better physical health and is the main way Londoners get their physical activity. Green infrastructure in cities can promote alternative transportation methods - pleasant quiet or car free routes can encourage people to walk or cycle instead of driving. Parks and green spaces play an important role in providing through-routes / active travel routes;
- **Enhancing Biodiversity and Ecological Resilience:** There is widespread acceptance of the benefits of enhancing natural processes for the benefit of people and wildlife, conserving the most special landscapes habitats and species;
- **Improving Health and Wellbeing:** There is significant and growing evidence of the public health benefits of green infrastructure, particularly quality parks and green spaces. [The Natural Solutions to Tackling Health Inequalities \(2014\)](#) report indicated that better health is related to access to green space regardless of socio-economic status;
- **Improving Access to Nature:** There is an established and growing body of evidence that 'access to nature' is an important aspect of the widely accepted health benefits of green infrastructure – especially in relation to mental health. In a densely populated borough like Hackney it is incredibly important to provide access to nature for residents;
- **Improving Community Cohesion:** As London's and Hackney's populations grow and experience demographic changes, parks and green spaces will play a more

vital role in promoting community and cultural cohesion. Parks and green spaces have always been places where people and cultures mix and build communities. Cultural festivals, events and public art bring different communities together in shared spaces, building a sense of place, and of shared values;

- **Managing Flood Risk:** Green infrastructure interventions are widely recognised as playing an important role in reducing flood risk by absorbing, storing or dispersing flood water; and
- **Population and Changing Demographics:** London’s and Hackney’s increasing population means that the amount of green space per person is essentially decreasing year on year. It is vital that new areas of green space are identified to meet this growing demand, and that green space is factored into new developments.

1.3 For the evidence base for the Hackney Local Plan 33, the Council commissioned a series of studies, documents and background evidence which provided information to support the production of the Hackney local development framework. This evidence base included an [Open Spaces Assessment](#) - which includes assessments of open space and play space provision in the borough.

1.4 To maximise the benefits that green infrastructure can deliver for the borough, the Council is currently preparing three interlinked documents:



- **Green Infrastructure Strategy** that will provide an overarching framework for protecting, improving, expanding and connecting the borough’s green infrastructure and the mechanisms for delivery;
- **Parks and Green Spaces Strategy** that will guide the management and development of the borough’s parks and green spaces for the next ten years and beyond; and

- **Nature Recovery Plan** that will be the key mechanism for helping prioritise, deliver and monitor nature recovery in the borough.

1.5 This briefing provides background on two of these documents: the **Green Infrastructure Strategy** and the **Parks and Green Spaces Strategy** that will be the focus for the Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission meeting on 18 January.

2. Green Infrastructure Strategy

2.1 Policy G1 Green Infrastructure of the London Plan recommends that boroughs should prepare green infrastructure strategies to complement the update of the All London Green Grid Supplementary Planning Guidance prepared by the Mayor of London.

2.2 The term green infrastructure describes the network of parks and green spaces, trees and woodlands, rivers and wetlands, and new green features in the urban environment such as green roofs and walls. This network can be planned, designed and managed to provide a wide range of environmental, social and economic benefits that support more sustainable, liveable and resilient neighbourhoods. A Green Infrastructure Strategy identifies:

- what green infrastructure is present;
- the functions it performs;
- the benefits this provides to address local needs, as well as more strategic objectives; and
- how these benefits can be maintained and optimised through a more integrated approach to protecting, enhancing and creating green infrastructure.

2.3 Maintaining and improving green infrastructure is a cross-cutting issue. The green infrastructure network is multi-functional and provides multiple benefits that can contribute to the delivery of the statutory duties and objectives of all parts of the local authority. Therefore, borough services that are responsible for highways, housing, health, planning and resilience, are important stakeholders and delivery partners, in addition to the service and officers responsible for the management of parks, green spaces and trees.

2.4 Previous national and regional policy has required or encouraged local authorities to produce a range of plans and strategies - including open space strategies, playing field strategies, biodiversity action plans, and tree and woodland plans – that focus on one component of the green infrastructure network (e.g. parks) or a particular objective (e.g. biodiversity conservation). Often these plans and strategies are commissioned and prepared by different parts of the local authority; consequently, the inter-relationships, including both the synergies and trade-offs, between respective plans and strategies are not always recognised or acknowledged. This can lead to mismatched objectives and sub-optimal investments.

2.5 In addition, a green infrastructure network almost always spans administrative boundaries; so it is necessary to understand the spatial distribution and function of a borough's strategic green infrastructure assets in relation to the strategic green infrastructure in neighbouring boroughs. Where features such as river corridors need to

be considered at a catchment scale to fully understand flood risk for example, green infrastructure may need to be considered at a sub-regional scale.

- 2.6 Many green infrastructure assets will not be owned or managed by the borough. Some, such as railway lines-sides, or grounds of schools or hospitals, will be owned and managed by other public bodies, or non-profit, charitable, or non-governmental organisations such as housing associations and environmental organisations. Other assets might be in private ownership including, for example, private gardens, reservoirs, and most green roofs. Although the borough may not have any direct responsibility for these assets their existing and potential value and function in supporting the objectives of the Green Infrastructure Strategy should be recognised, as appropriate, in order to influence the plans and decisions of other owners and managers of green infrastructure. In particular, many of these assets might be especially important for establishing better connections that will improve the function of the overall network.
- 2.7 A presentation will be made at the Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission meeting of the draft Hackney Green Infrastructure Strategy providing a short overview of the vision, baseline and needs, vision, objectives, opportunities, projects and initiatives.

3. Parks and Green Spaces Strategy

Background

- 3.1 Hackney is fortunate to have one of the largest expanses of green space in inner-London. The majority of the green infrastructure sites in the borough are owned by the Council:
- 58 parks and green spaces totalling some 283 hectares, ranging from major parks and green spaces such as Hackney Marshes, London Fields and Clissold Park to small gardens such as Hoxton Square and Church Street Gardens - twenty seven of the sites were recognised with Green Flag Awards (the quality standard for parks) in 2020 (one of the highest totals in London); and
 - 237 amenity green space sites totalling approximately 73.5 hectares.
- 3.2 In these sites the Council provides a range of assets - the table below outlines a selection of these:

Asset Type	Housing Sites	Parks & Green Spaces
Artificial Turf Pitch	1	3
BMX Track	0	1
Multi Use Games Areas	58	8
Outdoor Gyms / Trim Trails	6	8
Play Areas	172	29

Public Toilets	0	8 (Clissold Park x2; Hackney Downs; Haggerston Park; London Fields x2; Millfields; and Springfield Park)
Skate Parks	0	2
Tennis Courts	0	31 (8 sites)

3.3 The Council has invested significantly in Hackney's parks and green spaces in recent years, with over £25m of investment since 2010.

3.4 The Council is committed to continuing to deliver improvements to its parks and green spaces and is currently working on the following:

- **Abney Park Cemetery Restoration:** A Stage 2 National Lottery Heritage Fund application has just been successful to fund the restoration of Abney Park's chapel, improve accessibility and build a new cafe. Planning permission has been secured for the works which will commence on site in 2021.
- **Catering in Parks:** Opportunities for new catering and ice cream concessions will be tendered in 2021/22.
- **Clissold Park Paddling Pool:** Replacing the old paddling pool in the Park that has come to the end of its useful life with a new splash pad facility in 2021.
- **Daubney Fields:** Project to improve accessibility of park entrances and the skatepark in partnership with the Kings Park Moving Together programme, and the [Connecting Green Spaces](#) initiative.
- **Fairchild's Garden Refurbishment:** The £500,000 refurbishment of the green space in Shoreditch will take place in 2021, subject to a Faculty from the Church who own the land.
- **Haggerston Park Play Area:** Refurbishment of the play area in the Park in 2021.
- **Housing Grounds Maintenance Integration with Parks & Green Spaces:** In 2021 the Housing Grounds Maintenance Service will be integrated into the Parks and Green Spaces Service (subject to approval).
- **Millfields Play Area:** Working with Clapton Park TMO and the Housing Service to deliver a new play area that is accessible to both estate residents and park users on the site of a disused play area on the Millfields estate.
- **Refurbish Play Areas in Parks and Green Spaces:** A number of play areas will be refurbished or introduced as part of other projects. However, there is also a commitment to refurbish other play areas (4 will be undertaken in 2021 - Butterfield Green, Clapton Pond, Clapton Square and Stoke Newington Common).

- **Refurbish Public Toilets in Parks and Green Spaces:** The refurbishment of the public toilets in parks and green spaces has been identified as a priority - the toilets in Hackney Downs and Millfields have recently been refurbished and the ones in Clissold Park, Haggerston Park, London Fields (Martello Street) and Springfield Park will be completed this year.
- **Shoreditch Park Improvement Project:** A project has commenced to deliver a £2m project to improve Shoreditch Park in 2021/22 in partnership with the local community. It will also include a new cafe and public toilet provision as part of the new Leisure Centre development.
- **Springfield Park Restoration:** The National Heritage Lottery Fund funded restoration of the Park commenced in September 2019 and will be completed in early 2021.
- **Tree Planting:** Plant 1,000 new trees in parks and green spaces by 2022.
- **Tree Planting at Hackney Marshes:** Plant 20-30,000 new trees at the Marshes by 2022.
- **Water Fountains:** Deliver 16 new water fountains in parks, libraries and leisure centres by 2022.
- **West Reservoir:** Work is underway to assess the feasibility of opening the site up to wider public access, enhance its ecology and introduce new leisure activities.

3.5 However, within this context the Council has not had a published Parks and Green Spaces Strategy since 2013. This briefing has been prepared to introduce the new [draft Parks and Green Spaces Strategy](#) that will guide the Council in its management and development of the borough's parks and green spaces (including housing amenity green space) for the next ten years and beyond.

The Process

3.6 In early 2020 the Council gathered together a steering group of key stakeholders to identify the key challenges that the parks and green spaces in Hackney are facing, the key people that it should be talking to to develop the Strategy, and the key areas that a new Parks and Green Spaces Strategy should focus on.

3.7 Following this initial meeting the Council held 23 further meetings and sessions with people working in environment, conservation sustainability, planning, housing, sports, NHS and community organisations. We held 7 meetings and sessions to gather insight from public health, residents, older people and young people. We had 3 team meetings with parks staff, park managers and heads of service and 8 focus groups with young people, people with SEND, and staff working in the Parks, Culture and Heritage, Events and Sports and Fitness teams. We also undertook 12 weeks of research using planning and insight from consultations with Hackney residents and communities and other strategies relating to green spaces and play areas.

3.8 The draft Strategy is now being publicly [consulted on](#) until 18 January 2021 and Hackney people and stakeholders are being asked to give feedback on our commitments and identify gaps in the Strategy.

The Issues

3.9 Hackney has changed significantly since the last strategy was published in 2008:

- The recent pandemic has highlighted the significant importance of open spaces for people to socialise and exercise;
- Austerity has led to significant budget challenges for local authorities, and a need to explore how services can be delivered in a more financially sustainable way;
- New technology has seen parks used in different ways - be it for electric scooters or flying drones;
- There is much higher awareness of environmental issues, and the need for services to adapt accordingly. In parks, this means responding to the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis, reviewing the use of pesticides, reducing the use of plastics and recognising the role of parks in helping to mitigate poor air quality;
- There is an increasing demand for parks to be managed in a more 'natural' way, to move away from unsustainable annual bedding and towards the creation of more wildlife habitats;
- Communication technology has made it much easier for people to contact the service on a regular basis, and people often expect quicker action as a result;
- People want to use our parks in different ways. There is much higher demand for calisthenics gym equipment, for example, and an increase in the number of professional dog walkers in parks;
- Not everyone feels involved, prioritised or catered for in our parks and green spaces. Hackney's house prices have increased rapidly, new people have moved into the borough and the demographics have changed at a rapid rate. Diversity is what makes Hackney an incredible place to live, but it also produces a huge range of views on how parks and green spaces should be managed and used;
- The Parks and Green Spaces Service will take on responsibility for the maintenance of Housing Estates Green Space in 2021, and needs a strategy that will include these expanded responsibilities and direct how a joint service will go forward; and
- Hackney's parks are notably safer than they were ten years ago, but in turn this has helped increase their popularity, leading to increased wear and tear, litter and compaction. The intense use of parks early in the morning and late at night can be disturbing for those who live next door to them.

The Draft Strategy

- 3.10 The priorities for stakeholders engaged in the production of the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy were analysed, and found to be linked to three main overall themes:
- The need for the Parks and Green Spaces Service to engage more with local communities;
 - The desire for our parks to be better activated; and
 - The urgent need for us to respond to the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis.
- 3.11 The draft Strategy is deliberately short and readable. It has been designed to appeal to members of the public (including young people) and parks staff, as well as managers and policy makers. The key role of any strategy should be to effect change, and the focus on this Strategy is therefore to focus on the commitments we will make as a Council over the next ten years.
- 3.12 Under “**Work with Communities**”, the Council commits to engaging more with people on how our service is run, making a special effort to engage with young people. We will explore the concept of a ‘Hackney Parks Foundation’ to develop the feasibility of a partnership funding model for the Service, and commit to expanding and developing our volunteering programme. We also commit to developing Hackney Parks Forum, investing in our staff and developing a new apprenticeship programme.
- 3.13 Under “**Activate our Parks and Green Spaces**” the Council commits to working in partnership with community organisations to prescribe activities across parks and green spaces to improve people’s health and wellbeing, make it easier for people to run their own community events and use the knowledge of our Parks and Green Spaces Service staff to share skills and knowledge in the community. We also commit to expanding the provision of food and drink in parks, food growing opportunities on estates, and physically improving them, so that they have the right balance of natural, social and active space for the communities that live around them and the wildlife that lives within them.
- 3.14 Under “**Respond to the Climate Emergency and Biodiversity Crisis**” the Council commits to working towards being a zero carbon service by 2031 and increasing the amount of sustainable drainage in our parks. We commit to eliminating all annual bedding and delivering an extensive training programme for our staff around biodiversity and sustainability.

Delivery

- 3.15 Following the public consultation the draft Strategy will be updated to reflect the results and feedback and address any gaps identified, before going to Cabinet for final approval in 2021.
- 3.16 Alongside the main document, a poster will be produced summarising the commitments. This will be displayed in park notice boards and in the park depots.

3.17 Once the Strategy is adopted the Parks and Green Spaces Service will produce annual action plans outlining how the commitments will be delivered, and annual reports that will provide updates on each commitment.

Conclusion

3.18 The new Parks and Green Spaces Strategy will be an important document to guide the management and development of the borough's parks and green spaces for the next ten years and beyond.

3.19 The views of Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission are therefore being sought as part of the wider public consultation.