
Environment and Economy Scrutiny Sub-Committee

Scrutiny Review

of Public Green Spaces

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SCRUTINY REVIEW OF PUBLIC GREEN SPACES

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:	Acknowledgments A full list of the people who helped us.
Appendix B:	Bibliography A list of all documents, papers and reports considered in the report. Where specifically quoted, footnotes to a number of items in the bibliography are given in the main text of the report.
Appendix C:	Background papers – available separately The bulk of the evidence on which we based our findings and recommendations.

Section 1

Introduction

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Access to high-quality, public green spaces is something of importance to us all in this country – especially those who live in cities like London. Nationally, after a period of rapid expansion in the nineteenth century of formal, laid-out public parks, followed by consolidation during the inter-war years, there has been a slow but steady decline in maintenance, cleanliness and use. A variety of commentators have suggested a number of reasons for this national decline: it is because of the reduction in the numbers of park staff¹, a result of the disconnection felt between increasingly fragmented communities², or even because local authorities, deep down, have no idea why parks exist any more; effectively, in their current form, they are serving an outmoded Victorian need which no longer exists³.

Recent years, however, appear to have seen a renaissance in thinking about urban parks. The non-departmental public body set up with the aim of championing public green spaces, CABE⁴ Space, will become a statutory body with the advent of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005. CABE Space and other organisations with an interest in public recreation, horticulture, sport, leisure, nature, wildlife and sustainable developments have all pitched in with often lengthy policy statements on how parks and open spaces should be developed to take account of the needs and concerns of local people. Examples of best practice from all over the country glitter on the horizon – Mile End Park in Tower Hamlets, a park transformed through both innovative and forward-thinking working practices (including detailed work with the local community) and liberal application of Millennium Commission funding, is a case which perhaps reflects best the renaissance in parks in recent years⁵. We will, where applicable and relevant, be referring to examples of best practice in green spaces throughout this report.

Harrow has not had to face some of the dramatic difficulties experienced with parks in more urban settings. It seems from the results of the MORI survey⁶, which places parks and open spaces in a middling position regarding their importance to the public, and a middling position regarding people's happiness with them, that there is no immediate cause for worry. In a way, however, these results are more concerning than if people were totally dissatisfied with parks, because it may show an apathy and a disengagement with the natural environment and public space which manifests itself not in a community-led drive for improvement but in a collective amnesia about why parks and open spaces in general are important. Their relevance to people's day-to-day life seems, in many cases, to have receded. For example, how and why should public open space be used when people have their own gardens?

¹ "Parks Need Parkforce", CABE Space (2005)

² "The place for nature in the urban renaissance", Groundwork (2005)

³ *The Greening of the Cities*, J. Nicholson-Lord (Routledge, 1987)

⁴ CABE is the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment – CABE Space is their agency which focuses on quality of the public realm.

⁵ "Decent parks, decent behaviour? The link between the quality of parks and user behaviour", CABE Space, 2005

⁶ Harrow Council Annual Survey (2004)

Harrow is attempting to address these issues at present. Following a report by the Audit Commission in March 2005, and the provision of an extra £4 million in capital funding over the next three years to invest in parks, strategies have been put together to arrest significant decline before it happens and to encourage more people into green spaces – both parks and the green belt. These plans and strategies are something which we shall consider in detail in the next section.

We welcome the opportunity to provide what we hope will be useful and valuable input to this ongoing process of strategic development. Through developing robust, effective and long-term plans, Harrow will be in a position to provide green spaces which combine recreational, environmental and social amenity to all its residents and to fulfil what is becoming a more central function of bringing communities together through their use of public space – an excellent way to build up the council's programme for developing the public realm.

Full acknowledgments are printed at Appendix A, but we would like to take this opportunity to thank the staff of the Urban Living and People First directorates at Harrow Council who have provided a great deal of evidence and assistance to the review group over the course of the last few months. The evidence they have provided demonstrates a clear commitment to the development and improvement of the services they provide to local people.

**Public Green Spaces Review Group
February 2006**

METHODOLOGY

Our review spanned nearly seven months, four months of which was taken up with the gathering of evidence. After a couple of preliminary meetings over the course of the summer, the scope of the review was determined and an approach to gathering evidence agreed. The scope can be found at page 11. Essentially it was adhered to but in a couple of instances circumstances dictated that we diverge from these previously agreed plans, and where this occurred an explanation has been provided.

In brief, then, we gathered evidence from the following sources⁷:

- From the London Boroughs of Brent, Hillingdon and Ealing, in visits made to Roundwood Park, Mapesbury Dell, Fasnidge Park and Southall Park, and from the London Borough of Bexley, in respect of security issues and fear of crime in parks.
- Group visits to a number of parks in Harrow⁸.
- Discussions with a number of officers in the council's Urban Living and People First directorates with responsibility for public green spaces.
- National policy from organisations such as CABE Space, the Civic Trust, Sustrans, Groundwork and English Nature.
- Local policy from organisations such as Harrow in Leaf, London Play, the Metropolitan Police and the Greater London Authority.
- Input into and feedback from public focus groups being undertaken as part of the development of the council's Interim Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy.
- Academic work on the subjects under discussion from the last twenty years.

We also carried out a joint evidence gathering session in December with the recently-constituted Reducing Fear of Crime Review Group (set up by the Strengthening Communities Scrutiny Sub-Committee).

We set aside six meetings to discuss the evidence we received – we considered them in the following order:

- Meeting 1: consideration of evidence received in visits to non-Harrow parks.
- Meeting 2: strategic development (through the Interim Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy and Green Belt Management Strategy)
- Meeting 3: access and facilities, including cycling, play and toilet provision.
- Meeting 4: access and facilities, including allotments and Green Flag Award Scheme.
- Meeting 5: nature, wildlife and biodiversity.
- Meeting 6: security and fear of crime.

Evidence received both at and outside these meetings was all considered in the formulation of the recommendations and the drafting of this report.

⁷ A full list of acknowledgments is provided at Appendix A

⁸ Priestmead Park, Centenary Park, Canons Park, Harrow Weald Recreation Ground, Headstone Manor Recreation Ground, Harrow Recreation Ground, West Harrow Recreation Ground, Roxeth Recreation Ground, Newton Ecology Park

Note on appendices

Readers should note that the bulk of the group's evidence is attached at Appendix C, which is separate from this report. This appendix are available from the Scrutiny Unit.

Membership of group

Cllr Raymond Arnold (chair)

Cllr Anne Whitehead

Cllr Joyce Nickolay

Cllr Thaya Idaikkadar

Cllr Adrian Knowles (to November 2005)

Cllr Mano Dharmarajah (to November 2005)

Co-opted members of the group:

John Palmer (representing Harrow Agenda 21)

Don Goff (representing Harrow Sports Council)

Mic Sayer (representing Harrow Rec Users Association)

SCOPE OF REVIEW**Harrow Council****ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY SUB-COMMITTEE****SEPTEMBER 2005****REVIEW OF PUBLIC GREEN SPACES – SCOPE**

1	SUBJECT	Public Green Spaces
2	COMMITTEE	Environment and Economy Sub-committee
3	REVIEW GROUP	<p>Cllr Ray Arnold (Chair) Cllr Ann Whitehead Cllr Joyce Nickolay Cllr Adrian Knowles (to November 2005) Cllr Mano Dharmarajah (to November 2005) Cllr Thaya Idaikkadar</p> <p>Don Goff (Harrow Sports Council) Mic Sayer (Harrow Rec Users Association) John Palmer (Harrow Agenda 21)</p>
4	AIMS/ OBJECTIVES	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To suggest improvements to access arrangements for Harrow's public green spaces. 2. To increase community involvement in the development of public green spaces. 3. To encourage the principles of biodiversity (the practice of protecting and nurturing the variety of species within a particular area) and conservation.
5	MEASURES OF SUCCESS OF REVIEW	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Incorporation of review group recommendations into Harrow's strategies for public green spaces. 2. Improved awareness amongst residents of the opportunities for recreation provided by public green spaces. 3. Better public perception, leading to Improved participation and consultation by and with residents (especially ethnic minorities) in the development of public green spaces. 4. Development of environmental education aimed at providing the public with ways of learning about nature, wildlife and wilderness. 5. Effective, workable ideas as to how conflicts of use between users of parks and open spaces (and users and the natural environment) can be managed.
6	SCOPE	To examine, with reference to the three themes of access , community involvement and biodiversity (see "Aims and

		<p>Objectives” above), the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Existing strategy and consultations – consideration of the Interim Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy, Green Belt Management Strategy, and consultation work already being carried out by the Urban Living Directorate. 2. Benchmarking – examining examples of best practice in neighbouring boroughs. 3. Facilities – the use of pavilions, provision of other spaces for use, the merits of “themeing” certain parks, concentrating resources for certain activities in particular areas. 4. Security arrangements – the presence of parks staff on sites, the use of CCTV, 5. Cycling (in parks and the green belt). 6. Wildlife and nature – encouraging wildlife and developing conservation through the creative use of wilderness in more urban areas. 7. Bookings – arrangements for booking sports pitches and applying for allotments. <p>The group will concentrate on those parks which the Council has described as “destination parks” (larger parks to which people travel from further area which provide more in the way of facilities and recreational opportunities).</p> <p>The review will not cover allotments generally, indoor sports facilities or “fear of crime” (except when carried out jointly with the relevant review group).</p>
7	CORPORATE PRIORITIES	<p>The review will contribute towards delivering the following of Harrow Council’s 2005/2006 Corporate Priorities:</p> <p>Putting Harrow on the map Valuing Harrow’s customers Impact through Harrow’s partnerships Strengthening Harrow’s communities</p>
8	REVIEW SPONSOR	Lynne McAdam, Service Manager, Scrutiny
9	ACCOUNTABLE MANAGER	Andrew Trehern
10	SUPPORT OFFICER	Ed Hammond
11	ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT	N/a
12	EXTERNAL INPUT	Stakeholders, public, other Local Authorities, experts, assessors, other partners.
13	METHODOLOGY	Desktop research: current strategies, Audit Commission reports, consultants’ reports, best practice nationally. Individual discussions with Urban Living officers.

		<p>Group visits to public green spaces maintained by other authorities.</p> <p>Joint meeting with “fear of crime” review group.</p> <p>Relevant evidence from focus groups and consultation exercises being carried out by Urban Living.</p> <p>Meetings with other stakeholders.</p>
14	EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS	The Group will be recommending ways to ensure open access to public green spaces for all potential users.
15	ASSUMPTIONS/ CONSTRAINTS	<p>Group / officers must be able to effectively engage local residents and get results which can be fed into strategic plans.</p> <p>Resources of Members, Directors, and officers (Urban Living and Scrutiny)</p>
16	TIMESCALE	<p>Evidence collection September – December 2005</p> <p>Draft report – December/January 2006</p> <p>Final report – March 2006</p>
17	RESOURCE COMMITMENTS	To be identified. Will depend upon visits, meetings, consultation events etc.
18	REPORT AUTHOR	Scrutiny Officer with Group.

GLOSSARY

This is a glossary of some key terms and abbreviations used in the report.

ASB:	Anti-Social Behaviour
ASBC:	Anti-Social Behaviour Contract
ASBO:	Anti-Social Behaviour Order
BAP:	Biodiversity Action Plan
BTP:	Business Transformation Partnership (the council's initiative for providing a streamlined service for local residents through a call centre and one stop shop)
BVPI:	Best Value Performance Indicator
GBMS:	Green Belt Management Strategy
(I)SROSS:	(Interim) Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy
PF:	People First (the council directorate responsible for education, amongst other things)
SINC:	Site of Importance for National Conservation
SSSI:	Site of Special Scientific Interest
UL:	Urban Living (the council directorate responsible for the delivery of services related to green spaces)

Section 2

Executive summary and recommendations

This is a brief summary of a few of our key findings, listed with our recommendations to provide them with some context. Full analysis and information on each recommendation, including references to evidence gathered, is provided in the main report.

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT

We found that a significant amount of work had been carried out recently to make plans for strategic development of parks and open spaces following 2005's Audit Commission report. We identified areas where we think that further improvements can be made in respect of communication between different parts of the directorate, thus further limiting the risk of duplication of work, and governance arrangements in terms of monitoring and evaluating the directorate's performance.

It is recommended:

- 1: That the findings of the children's consultation be effectively fed in to the Interim Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy, to ensure that the former piece of work can have an effective outcome.**
- 2: That steps be taken to improve internal communication, especially between senior managers and operational staff, in Urban Living.**
- 3: That the Council apply for Green Flag status for its planned parks for prototyping purposes, and that officers consider making Green Flag applications for spaces other than destination parks.**
- 4: That monitoring and governance arrangements, including timetables and in-house performance indicators, where appropriate, be put in place to ensure that the ISROSS is implemented effectively, championed by an appropriate senior officer.**

ACCESS

We looked at a wide range of different areas; in particular cycling, play, toilets and allotments. Expert witnesses made suggestions that reflect current practice in Urban Living, but we were also informed of additional developments which we consider could both improve the infrastructure in parks and save money, as well as making parks a more welcoming place to visit.

Our findings also touched on security issues, and we have made suggestions for how the council's "capable guardian" scheme might be progressed to achieve maximum possible impact.

It is recommended:

General

- 5: **That delivery of certain facilities in parks be strategically planned.**
- 6: **That facilities such as public toilets be planned to take account of needs outside their immediate vicinity, opportunities provided by existing infrastructure, and the risk of vandalism and anti-social use.**
- 7: **That the council develop the “capable guardians” concept but enhance it through the more formalised support of both police Safer Neighbourhoods teams, volunteers and council staff, when appropriate.**

Play

A significant amount of money has been spent by the council on formal play provision over recent months. Our recommendations do not relate so much to infrastructural improvements – many of these are already being made – but to changes in emphasis to link formal provision to more informal play.

We decided that children must be given the opportunity to play freely, and that it was important that the issue of risk in play (the risk of accident or injury, for example) be dealt with thoughtfully, considering its subjective nature.

We thought that facilities such as multi-use games areas offer excellent opportunities for providing facilities for older children, and suggested that provision for teenagers developed in this respect, separate from provision for younger children. This would limit the potential for conflict between different parks users.

- 8: **That steps be taken to actively encourage more informal play provision.**
- 9: **That play provision be made that includes a more realistic approach to risk, and that risk in general be managed more effectively.**
- 10: **That conflicts of use be eliminated by separating facilities for younger children and those for teenagers and older children.**
- 11: **That sports facilities in parks be examined in light of the ISROSS**

Cycling

We recognised that cycling in parks has always been a delicate subject. We examined the council’s current approach of providing marked paths, segregating pedestrian and cycle traffic, but evidence we received suggested that this approach might not always be appropriate. We also thought that the council could promote cycling by linking it to healthy living strategies and other specific marketing work.

- 12: **That cycling provision in open spaces should be shared use, where appropriate, subject to a favourable risk assessment.**
- 13: **That people should be encouraged to cycle through the planning of appropriate events and training.**

Allotments

Recently there has been a significant amount of work done relating to allotments, the computerisation of existing records systems in particular. We also received evidence indicating that there were a high level of vacancies at some sites, and considered that additional facilities, marketing and more robust administrative processes would encourage use and minimise vacant plots.

- 14: That involvement be encouraged through active promotion (eg healthy eating campaigns) and the provision of additional facilities (eg, play provision) in allotments.**
- 15: That innovative measures to eliminate vacancies and abandoned plots be considered, including shared ownership.**
- 16: That robust administrative processes for the initial application and continued management of plots be maintained.**

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

We considered that community involvement was integral to the success of public green spaces in the long term, and received evidence indicating the power of good quality open spaces to bring communities together. Scope exists for active partnerships between the council and user groups (where they exist, and where they can be developed), and with users more generally to deliver appropriate facilities.

It is recommended:

- 17: That the council engage effectively with young people to deliver age-appropriate and usable facilities, and to limit conflicts of use between different groups of teenagers and potential ASB concerns.**
- 18: That the council use Friends and user groups, backed up by groups of local stakeholders, to build links between different types of user, and different parts of the community, and to encourage community management of some smaller green spaces.**
- 19: That parks management plans, when drafted, contain specific actions on promoting individual parks as appropriate, and that this be reflected in high-level promotional duty in the sports, recreation and open spaces strategy.**

BIODIVERSITY

Harrow does not currently have a Biodiversity Action Plan, although at the time of writing a BAP Officer was about to be appointed. We found that it was important to develop a BAP as soon as possible to better effect the aims of the London BAP, and to protect and sustain Harrow's wildlife, some of which is unique, in the green belt in particular.

We also considered that biodiversity work in parks and private gardens should be developed through building educational and other links with the local community, and that opportunities for

developing biodiversity in parks should be developed strategically by taking into account the most appropriate developments for different sites.

It is recommended:

- 20: That steps be taken to assure swift development and implementation of a Biodiversity Action Plan for Harrow, championed by an appropriate senior manager.**
- 21: That the plan contain a habitat plan for private gardens and private green spaces, and that educational and publicity work with the owners of these spaces be carried out as appropriate.**
- 22: That the Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy should emphasise the importance of biodiversity in Harrow, promoting a cross-cutting approach which can be strategically built by the Biodiversity Action Plan.**
- 23: That conflicts of use between biodiversity and public access should be addressed in parks management plans by adopting an individual approach for each space rather than a prescriptive approach for all parks, and thus encouraging public access where appropriate.**
- 24: That the educational opportunities afforded by the BAP and a BAP partnership in parks and the green belt be investigated and enhanced, with a view to the improvement of the borough's key biodiversity assets.**

Section 3

Strategic development

- 3.1 Before discussing substantive issues, we intend to discuss how the council's strategy in relation to public green spaces has been developed over recent years. This will give useful context to some of the rest of our recommendations, as well as providing an opportunity to examine, and make suggestions on, the process which has given rise to the council's current plans to develop sports, recreation, open spaces and the green belt.
- 3.2 We conducted a mapping exercise, with officers from Urban Living, to determine how the council's two main strategies for the development of public green spaces – the Interim Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy and the Green Belt Management Strategy – came into being.
- 3.3 The Council produced in 2002 a Cultural Strategy, covering many services provided both by the Urban Living and People First directorates. The decision was made in 2004 to develop a Sport and Leisure Strategy, which would sit under the Cultural Strategy. An officer was appointed to undertake this strategy, which was to have covered issues such as leisure centres and other aspects of sports provision (both indoor and outdoor).
- 3.4 However, in March 2005, an Audit Commission inspection of Harrow's cultural services gave rise to new priorities. Two inspectors from Deloitte on behalf of the Audit Commission undertook the inspection of Harrow Cultural Services between 7 and 11 March 2005. This included a consideration of parks. The inspectors' three recommendations as reported to Cabinet were that:
- Partnership working needed improvement
 - Methods of measuring the impact of cultural services require development to assess the impacts and outcomes against local and national priorities
 - A clearly articulated vision for cultural services is needed.
- 3.5 Of course, this applies to cultural services across the board. Their full report goes into more detail on their thoughts regarding parks and open spaces.

Their general view seems positive. They said⁹,

The parks that we visited were generally tidy in appearance with only isolated incidences of litter, vandalism and graffiti. The pathways were clear and well-used and the open spaces provided offer a sense of quiet in what is a densely populated borough.

- 3.6 However, the report stated that "management of this provision and that of the green belt could be improved". Communication with the public was another area identified as requiring improvement. Involvement of the public – in particular, marketing work to identify the differing priorities of the Harrow community in respect of their use of parks – had, the Commission felt, not been adequately considered.

⁹ Report on Cultural Services, Harrow Council (Audit Commission, 2005), para 66

- 3.7 For this reason, the Executive Director, Urban Living considered that it was necessary to widen the scope of the sports and leisure strategy (preliminary work having already been undertaken on this strategy) to include actions pertaining to public green spaces. This decision was communicated to Strategic Leisure Consultants, an external group who had been tasked with carrying out consultative work on the strategy, which was now to include actions of sport, recreation and open space (hence its eventual name; the Interim Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy, or ISROSS).
- 3.8 As this consultation was ongoing, in late spring 2005 (it was one of very wide scope – 3,000 local people were involved, both through surveys, questionnaires and a large range of targeted focus groups)¹⁰, officers came to the conclusion that one aspect of the work – that which related to the green belt – would not be dealt with in the depth necessary if it was added onto the work being carried out by Strategic Leisure. Consequently, a new group, Land Use Consultants, were engaged to prepare a Green Belt Management Strategy (GBMS), which was approved by Cabinet in mid summer 2005. There are significant cross-cutting links between the GBMS and the ISROSS¹¹.
- 3.9 The draft of the ISROSS was produced in late summer 2005 and went through further consultation, this time to assess and prioritise the numerous suggested actions. This prioritisation exercise had two stages – firstly, workshops with council officers who would be involved in delivering the actions in the strategy, and secondly, focus groups with members of the public. Scrutiny contributed to the design of the focus groups, which were carried out on behalf of the Urban Living Strategy Unit by Yew Consulting¹².

- 3.10 Both the ISROSS and GBMS reflect Planning Policy Guidance Note 17, which states,

Open space should be taken to mean all open space of public value [...]

Our consideration of the strategies, and the processes that are leading up to their eventual implementation, has given rise to a number of findings on which we have several recommendations. In reading them we have had regard to the green space strategies of the London Boroughs of Brent, Hillingdon and Ealing, as well as to best practice from CABE Space¹³ and the rationale for producing an open spaces strategy as posited by Strategic Leisure Consultants¹⁴. In this section, we will be discussing the process of development of the strategy rather than its substantive contents.

Internal Communication

- 3.11 We were concerned that, internally, officers did not seem to be communicating at the continued and sustained level that would under the circumstances have been appropriate. We considered – as did some officers – that this was connected with structural problems within Urban Living itself. The opinion seemed widespread that there had been problems of late, with some officers carrying out work without consulting with colleagues working in other groups or services.

- 3.12 An example of where problems such as this have occurred have been in the commissioning of the Harrow Parks Children's Consultation¹⁵, which was commissioned

¹⁰ SLR, 1.32, p6

¹¹ See particularly 14.3, p89, and *post*.

¹² The Strategy Unit having in the meantime been transferred to the People First directorate.

¹³ "Green Space Strategies: A Good Practice Guide" (CABE Space, 2004)

¹⁴ SLR, 1.6-1.15, pp2-3

¹⁵ Two documents were produced as a result of this consultation – a public document and a longer paper with specific actions for internal use. We have examined both.

by the current Executive Director of Urban Living and carried out in partnership with the Children's Society and the council's Children and Neighbourhoods Team. We were told that it was carried out because of a perceived gap in the Strategic Leisure consultation.

- 3.13 We were told that after the gap was identified, these steps were proactively put in place to fill it. We considered the children's consultation to be a useful, robust, timely and valid piece of work which has garnered a wide response – particularly from hard to reach groups - with relevant and timely conclusions. However, it should have been related directly to the Strategic Leisure study, rather than being commissioned afterwards as a “bolt on” component. Carrying out the two parts of what could have been a single consultation exercise separately raises the potential problem of duplication in the work being carried out.
- 3.14 The results of this consultation (that is, the Children's Consultation) also need to be fed into the development of the Interim Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy in order to ensure the successful delivery of the outcomes it promises (some of its actions have already been implemented). We hope that processes will be put in place to ensure this. It is important that all consultations undertaken by the council have a demonstrable outcome. We are pleased that Urban Living have already taken steps to implement some of the recommendations coming out of this consultation but a strategic context to these recommendations can only be provided through ongoing reference to the ISROSS¹⁶.
- 3.15 The duplication of some aspects of the ISROSS and children's consultation emphasised that importance of maintaining effective communication between staff at all levels in Urban Living. Cross-cutting project groups, being implemented as part of the new staff structure in Urban Living, can be part of the answer but additional methods are also needed¹⁷. In particular, strategic co-ordination at senior manager and director level is crucial. Hopefully with the ongoing recruitment to director level posts in Urban Living this will come about, but directors need to demonstrate commitment to a strategic approach to the work of the directorate. This should be brought about by ensuring that a number of key actions - clear and consistent channels of communication, cross-fertilisation of ideas and the sharing of information and evidence on all projects - are in place.
- 3.16 The risks of internal communication breaking down were made more obvious to us on our visit to West Harrow Recreation Ground¹⁸. The nature conservation area on this site had been removed by area-based staff who thought that it was a patch of scrub. This places into sharp relief the importance of communication between both management and operational staff, and demonstrates how the issue of communication in implementing council strategy, which may initially appear to be somewhat remote from the realities of service delivery, can in fact impact upon services on the ground.
- 3.17 Improvements to internal communication need to be mirrored by improvements in communication with other parts of the council – particularly People First. We have found, however, that closer working between these two directorates is an operational fact which

¹⁶ This is particularly important given the outcome and recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Review of Community Engagement.

¹⁷ The steering groups of the ISROSS and children's consultation shared some members – however, the issue of potential duplication was not brought up at the time and did not seem even to have been regarded as a risk.

¹⁸ We visited the recreation ground on 4 October with a manager from the Urban Living directorate.

is being addressed by a number of key plans, and that the policy imperative of area-based working should ensure that links are strengthened along the lines suggested.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 1: That the findings of the children’s consultation be effectively fed in to the Interim Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy, to ensure that the former piece of work can have an effective outcome.**
 - 2: That steps be taken to improve communication, especially between senior managers and operational staff in Urban Living.**
-

Monitoring and Evaluating Performance

- 3.18 The implementation of the strategy and maintaining sustained high levels of performance are important issues. We were told that, as there are no Best Value Performance Indicators for the delivery of services relating to parks and open spaces, it is not only difficult to externally judge performance but also to commit resources for improving services. We were also told that where criteria for assessing performance existed, they are being aligned with street cleaning and other cleansing standards. This reflects the increased amount of work being carried out by area teams as part of the public realm maintenance agenda. The flexibility that this affords does now mean that there has been a significant extension to the core responsibilities which some staff have to fulfil.
- 3.19 Current methods for internally assessing performance seem to be based on the working experience of a few key staff. We were impressed by the dedication that has been demonstrated by staff in ensuring that standards in parks are maintained. We consider, though, that continuous improvement is only possible with significant improvements to performance measurement that goes beyond the more traditional tick-box performance indicators which assess how often grass is cut and how often tennis courts are booked.
- 3.20 Evidence from the Civic Trust¹⁹ indicated that the Green Flag Award scheme (which the Civic Trust administer) may provide an opportunity to effect some of these improvements. We were informed that the Green Flag inspection process could be used as a way to assess performance – and, indeed, that many authorities do this already. Although it is unlikely that one of Harrow’s parks might be successful in an initial application²⁰, data provided by the judges would provide valuable information to feed into service and parks management plans, where they exist. This is also the view taken by CABA Space in their report “A Guide to Producing Green Space and Park Management Plans”²¹.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 3: That the Council apply for Green Flag status for its planned parks for prototyping purposes, and that officers consider making Green Flag applications for spaces other than destination parks.**
-

¹⁹ Provided orally at our meeting on 23 November.

²⁰ See minutes of Group Meeting 5 at Appendix C.

²¹ At page 35

- 3.21 Of course, ongoing internal monitoring is also required – the Green Flag process would only be able to provide a snapshot of whichever parks were judged at any one time. This links with the effective provision of parks management plans and the timely introduction of any actions agreed as part of the ISROSS. In this respect our interviews led us to believe that there were significant risks involved in the successful delivery of the ISROSS (and, therefore, in the creation of robust measures to effectively monitor services, outside of the wider public realm maintenance framework). We were told that no timetables had been set for implementation of many of the actions in the ISROSS for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is currently in draft form and some actions have yet to be prioritised. Secondly, certain issues relating to funding and resources need to be resolved (particularly in respect of capital funding).
- 3.22 It is absolutely critical that the ISROSS sets firm timetables for those actions which are eventually decided on as high priority; moreover, performance indicators need to be formulated which can be used to assess whether the implementation of the strategy has been successful, and whether quality and use are increasing. Effective implementation of the ISROSS will be significantly hampered if there are not concrete measures put in place to implement its actions in a timely fashion. These measures must be supported and championed within the council by an appropriate senior officer – given the scope of the strategy this should probably be the Executive Director.
- 3.23 We consider that this is given credence by work carried out by CABE Space, who have said²² in respect of management plans (but in terms that could equally be applied to the ISROSS, given the principle of the “golden thread”²³),

By setting out a work plan clearly linked to your objectives with measurable targets, it should be relatively straightforward to see where you have and have not succeeded in delivering change on the ground. What is important is to set up a process and timetable for monitoring and to ensure that one person is responsible for leading on this, preferably the author of the plan or the site manager. The management plan needs to identify clearly which components of the plan will be updated and when.

- 3.24 The necessity of assuring smooth addition of relevant updates is particularly important, in order to ensure that the ISROSS and the plans sitting beneath it remain current. This ensures that the responsibilities of operational staff are focussed and aligned with the themes of the strategy as part of their general public realm maintenance duties.
- 3.25 It is important when considering the “golden thread” principle that this be backed up by management plans for each park which give effect to continued interaction between area services staff; we have been told that management plans are currently being drafted and look forward to their implementation in all of Harrow’s open spaces, leading to improvements in performance and staff communication.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 4: That monitoring and governance arrangements, including timetables and in-house performance indicators, where appropriate, be put in place to ensure that both the ISROSS and associated parks management plans are implemented effectively, championed by an appropriate senior officer.**

²² “A Guide to Producing Green Space and Park Management Plans”, p43 (CABE Space, 2005)

²³ That is to say, that high-level and operational plans should be linked by means of fitting into the same framework of targets, timetables and objectives.

Section 4

Access and facilities

- 4.1 Access, as we have looked at it, extends beyond the principle of physical accessibility – that is to say, ensuring that parks meet the standards set out by the Disability Discrimination Act 2000. It is more to do with eliminating barriers to access which are often not physical, but psychological – concerns felt by users and residents which relate to issues like security (both for themselves and their children)²⁴, a perceived lack of facilities²⁵, or simply a lack of knowledge on what local provision exists²⁶.
- 4.2 This can be drawn back into a universal theme – that, effectively, modern parks do not serve a definitive community “need”. If a space does not provide a clearly-articulated community function then it is easy to see why this alone would be a significant barrier to use of that space. We will discuss these broader issues as part of the next section, on community involvement²⁷. For the moment, however, we will consider how improvements to infrastructure can in themselves effect positive change to the borough’s public green spaces, by looking at a number of key areas – facilities in general, security, toilets, cycling, play and allotments.

Facilities generally

- 4.3 There are a number of actions in the ISROSS which make reference to improvements in facilities²⁸ - officers from Urban Living have provided us with additional information for some of the key ones. Existing facilities are, in many cases, to be renovated and brought into use for new purposes. For example, the old park keeper’s cottage at Canons Park is to be used as a base for one of the Metropolitan Police’s Safer Neighbourhood Teams. However, the council’s plans for the use of facilities seem to be ad hoc. The presence of a plan in the strategy does not make the plan itself strategic. It is commendable that officers are taking the opportunity of looking at how individual sites might be developed but there does not seem to be a particular cross-borough overview. In many instances, we recognise that this is because officers are working subject to limitations which they cannot control – for example, the difficulty in leasing empty facilities to community groups and other users can demand a reactive approach. We should, therefore, emphasise that we are not trying to be prescriptive, or to say that parks of a certain kind need certain types of facilities irrespective of local need or use, but some formalised consideration both of what the council is trying to achieve across the whole borough in terms of facilities such as cafes, community spaces such as pavilions and spaces for staff would be worthwhile.

²⁴ See SLR Appendix 6 at 3.1.4.(p12) and 3.1.9 (p23). Data from focus groups in November backed up this view.

²⁵ Ibid, at 3.1.6 (p17) and 3.1.9 (p23), and data from focus groups.

²⁶ Ibid, at 3.1.9 (p23)

²⁷ At page 31

²⁸ See ISROSS 12.3.1 (Table 12) particularly actions 6, 8, 9, 12, 22, 23, 25 and 27)

WE RECOMMEND:

5: That the provision of facilities in parks be strategically planned.

- 4.4 Toilet facilities are particularly important to park users. Evidence received from the British Toilet Association (BTA)²⁹ indicates that facilities provided in green spaces must take account of pressures which occur immediately outside it. Nearby pubs and other late-night venues can increase the potential for vandalism and other forms of ASB, necessitating an appropriate response to the provision of facilities such as lavatories.
- 4.5 We agreed with the BTA's assessment (which accorded largely with evidence provided by officers in Urban Living) that it was not appropriate to continue to provide toilet blocks with communal washroom facilities for these reasons. Maintenance and security concerns were all clear reasons to convert toilet blocks to individual cubicles, opening out onto the exterior of the block, which could be automatically or remotely locked at a certain time of day³⁰.
- 4.6 We do consider that the provision of toilet facilities is particularly important and such provision should certainly be expanded. There are no lavatories even in some of Harrow's large, destination parks, and although it is unreasonable to be prescriptive about facilities in terms of a park's size it is clear that for our more well-used spaces – Canons Park, for example, or Roxeth Rec – toilets are an important service which should continue to be offered. It is true that they require a capital outlay to construct and fund, but the benefits to users would be significant, and could lead to longer stays in parks.
- 4.7 In some circumstances, this cost could be offset. We saw in Roundwood Park in Brent³¹, and it was suggested to us independently by the BTA, that arrangements could be entered into with an on-site cafe to provide toilets to the public as part of a service or licence agreement. This has the added benefit of assuring security and cleanliness, effectively passing the responsibility for provision onto the licensee. A possible expansion of facilities such as cafes in Harrow could make this feasible at a number of sites. However, in the absence of appropriate facilities to which to "tie" toilets, efforts should be made to provide them independently in the manner described above, especially where demand can be shown to be higher – near sports facilities, for example, or play areas.
- 4.8 Accessibility was something about which the BTA expressed strong opinions. We were told that facilities should be accessible to take into account those with continence problems, as well as those who require baby-changing facilities. This should be done in an appropriate and sensitive manner – for example, many public toilets only provide baby-changing facilities in the female toilets, which is obviously not appropriate. We also consider, based on the BTA's evidence, that all cubicle toilets should be accessible to those with physical disabilities. Providing a separate unisex toilet in addition to a male and female (non-accessible) cubicle does not seem to us to be an appropriate use of council resources. This should not necessarily mean, however, that provision of urinals need to be reduced. We think that a contemporary, more sanitary update to the French-

²⁹ Evidence from questions put to Chairman of the BTA, Richard Creswell is attached at Appendix C.

³⁰ This provides an alternative to "superloos", of which we saw some examples in Harrow, which clearly do not provide value for money and also compel the council to enter into inflexible and costly maintenance contracts with toilet suppliers.

³¹ Evidence from Shaun Faulkner (Brent Parks Service); visits to parks in Brent, Hillingdon and Ealing, 21 September 2005

style, open air “pissoir” concept, with urinal facilities available for park users 24 hours a day (or throughout the park’s opening hours), deserves consideration.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 6: That facilities such as accessible public toilets be planned to take account of needs outside their immediate vicinity, opportunities provided by existing infrastructure, and the risk of vandalism and anti-social use.**

-
- 4.9 This leads to a key issue – security and the fear of crime. The latter is a particularly complex problem and in fact a review group has been set up by the Strengthening Communities Scrutiny Sub-Committee to examine it. We held a joint meeting on security and reducing fear of crime in parks, which was also attended by several officers from the Metropolitan Police in both Bexley (who have done a significant amount of work on this) and Harrow.
- 4.10 We have also been appraised of Harrow’s plans for increasing levels of security. Although crime in Harrow, and in Harrow’s parks, is at a low level, and has been for some time³², increased security in parks – ideally through the presence of uniformed wardens – is something which local residents have been very much in favour of³³. Brent, Ealing and Hillingdon all have warden schemes of varying sizes and types (some comprising mainly mobile patrols, but others having dedicated on-site staff)³⁴. Evidence received from those authorities indicated that having a staff presence encouraged more people to use open spaces, and that it also reduced anti-social behaviour and vandalism. This is backed up by evidence based on national policy findings³⁵.
- 4.11 Officers in Harrow have recognised the benefits that having an authoritative presence can afford but have chosen to adopt a different approach to the use of “parkies” or wardens. Instead, a policy of supporting “capable guardians” is being pursued. A capable guardian has been described to us as a park (or open space) stakeholder who can monitor behaviour in parks and challenge those who are behaving inappropriately. This might include area-based staff as well as members of parks’ user and Friends groups. This, in theory, fits in with the council’s public realm maintenance agenda, ensuring maximum flexibility of staff while assuring the public that security concerns are being taken seriously.
- 4.12 In principle we saw promise in this idea but consider that it probably requires a level of formalisation that we have not observed – including a reference in the ISROSS (which currently lists as an action the establishment of a separate warden service). Anecdotal evidence, and experience gleaned directly from one of our group co-optees, indicates that members of the public (including representatives of user groups) might not feel safe or comfortable challenging anti-social behaviour. We consider that the capable guardians idea would probably require specific training and support for those, particularly members of the public, who might be expected to complement the council’s parks presence. This could be accomplished by closer links with Safer Neighbourhoods Teams, where they

³² Data from the British Crime Survey and Met Police statistics.

³³ SLR, 3.1.7 (p22), and data gathered from separate focus groups.

³⁴ Full details at Appendix A

³⁵ See “Parks Need Parkforce: A Force for the Common Good” (CABE Space, 2005)

exist, and access for those people to backup and support both from the police and the council. User groups naturally need to be involved in any planning for the introduction of such a scheme.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 7: That the council develop the “capable guardians” concept but enhance it through the more formalised support of both police Safer Neighbourhoods teams, volunteers and council staff, when appropriate.**
-

Play

- 4.13 Evidence received from Urban Living staff, on our visits to Brent and Hillingdon in particular and our tour of parks in Harrow all informed our recommendations on play provision. We also received valuable oral evidence from Alan Sutton, representing London Play, who advised us of the critical importance of play provision – and especially informal play provision. He reminded us that play areas offer limited amenity, and that children play in other parts of parks as well. He advised that teaching children independence helps to ensure that they stay healthy and active, and teaches children emotional intelligence³⁶, and that informal play, allowing young people to be more creative and to interact with the wider environment, is crucial. We found that this is backed up by other, national policy evidence³⁷.
- 4.14 We saw some examples of this kind of provision on our site visits – in particular when we visited Headstone Manor Recreation Ground, where a group of BMX riders have built their own track from earth banks at one corner of this area of green space. This seems to be a good example of the kind of community involvement that we think the council should be fostering. We are keen, however, that more than merely tolerating the existence of this kind of provision, the council should be actively encouraging it through user and Friends groups, and through contact with the wider community. We have been told that in many respects this might constitute something as simple as leaving the remains of a felled tree in a park rather than removing them, which provides climbing and clambering opportunities for younger children.
- 4.15 Alan Sutton went so far as to say that in many circumstances – especially in smaller areas – it may not be appropriate to provide any formal equipment at all.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 8: That steps be taken to actively encourage more informal play provision.**
-

- 4.16 The promotion of informal play does have safety implications. It is only natural that children will, irrespective of whether they are using informal or formal play infrastructure, will indulge in an element of horseplay and we appreciate that it is important that we consider risk and, perhaps more esoterically, the “risk of risk”. This was another area about which Alan Sutton provided evidence, and we have also considered a CABE Space report into risk, amongst other literature.

³⁶ See particularly “Best Play: What Play Provision Should Do For Children”, (NPFA/Children’s Play Council, 2000), particularly ps 6 & 11.

³⁷ See Ibid, and *More Than Swings and Roundabouts: Planning for Outdoor Play*”, National Children’s Bureau, (London, 2002)

4.17 We agree with Alan Sutton, who considered that dangers are overplayed. He stated it was important that “acceptable risk” needed to be understood, not only by parents who might be unwilling to allow children to use play to make mistakes and develop³⁸, but by parks staff, as well, who should be trained to recognise when real risks are present rather than relying on misapplications of health and safety laws. This reflects the staff training concerns we expressed when considering strategic planning, above.

4.18 Risk is obviously a difficult issue to assess given its obviously subjective nature. In the CABA Space publication “What are we scared of? The value of risk in designing public space”, Dorothy Rowe states in conclusion³⁹,

Everyone wants to be free and everyone wants to be secure. However, the more security we have, the less freedom, and the more freedom we have, the less security. There can be no optimum balance of freedom and security in a public place because each person who uses that space will have a different view of what constitutes the right balance.

Those public spaces which work well are those where the planners have managed to create a design where the discrepancies between the views of the people using that space are not too disparate. There is a balance between order and chaos which both introverts and extraverts find acceptable, a point at which no one feels unduly constrained or unduly exposed to danger.

Such a balance cannot be achieved in all our public spaces if people believe that they are entitled to recompense for every single disaster that befalls them. There needs to be an on-going public debate about how we perceive chance and responsibility. At present the mechanisms for public discussion are unsatisfactory because most people feel that they are excluded from the debate. Public debates seem to be confined to the articulate and the educated, while the need for order and rulefollowing stifles originality and passion. Consequently many people continue to feel helpless, without any say in what happens to them. Yet it is only through debate that we can reach those compromises that we can all regard as satisfactory.

4.19 This is an interesting approach to the increasing problem of attempts to pin legal liability onto local authorities for accidents which occur on their land – in particular in parks and green spaces. The plaintive cry that we should all have an intelligent debate might not be something that we, as a London borough council, can effectively instigate (although it would be encouraging to think that, in consulting with residents, users and Friends groups, some of these issues could be discussed) but we do consider that steps can be taken to, as Rowe puts it, “create a design where the views of the people using that space are not too disparate”.

4.20 Of course, a useful example of this view can be found in recent events at Priestmead Park (a green space we visited) where a series of accidents on a recently-installed piece of equipment had caused it to be taken temporarily out of service. In this instance the equipment had been placed too close to the playground’s railings, so the decision to take it out of service is understandable⁴⁰. However, it is interesting to consider what the council’s response might have been had the arm been broken as part of the normal use of the equipment. Would this indicate that the equipment is intrinsically unsafe and should be removed notwithstanding? Rowe’s (and Alan Sutton’s) more phlegmatic approach suggests that it should not. We agree.

³⁸ See note 22 above.

³⁹ “The assessment of risk is a very personal affair”, Rowe D. in “What are we scared of? The value of risk in designing public space.” (CABA Space, 2005)

⁴⁰ We have been told that steps are about to be taken to move the equipment away from its immediate area to ensure a greater degree of safety.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 9: That play provision be made that includes a more realistic approach to risk, and that risk in general be managed more effectively.**
-

- 4.21 We have seen a large number of play areas, large and small, and of a variety of different styles and vintages, on our site visits. We saw some examples in our visits to other boroughs as well. We saw that Harrow is currently investing a significant amount of money in renewing and upgrading its formal play provision. Some of the sites we visited in Harrow were, in fact, only a few weeks old, and we were informed that (anecdotal) evidence suggested that they were already well-used.
- 4.22 The issue of widespread use suggests the potential for conflicts of use between different kinds of people – in particular, teenagers and younger children. Different authorities have dealt with this in different ways. The facilities at Fassnidge Park in Uxbridge⁴¹, for example, have been provided with older children in mind. We were impressed by this equipment, but it was, we were told, rather expensive (in total the area cost somewhere in the region of £40,000). In Roundwood Park, Brent, we saw another area, which provided mainly facilities for young people. Teenagers were provided for with a “multi-use games area”, or MUGA, a versatile asphalt area with durable fencing which can be used for basketball, football or other games. It is proposed as part of the ISROSS to install a number of these around the borough⁴² (although as we have seen there is no timescale for this). We were impressed by the MUGA, and consider that its high cost (£80,000 for the double unit we saw at Brent) is outweighed by the clear benefits to the park and surrounding area, the high use amongst teenagers and the corresponding fall in instances of conflict of use occurring elsewhere in the space.
- 4.23 We observed how play areas can, in other circumstances, be “zoned” together at West Harrow Recreation Ground. Alan Sutton agreed that there is some sense in having separate playgrounds for children up to twelve inside the same fence (to allow for parental supervision) but that facilities for teenagers should be entirely separate, but in highly visible locations. We again saw examples of zoning at Southall Park in Ealing, where two different play areas for younger people are provided (with one being attached to the on-site playgroup).

WE RECOMMEND:

- 10: That conflicts of use be eliminated by separating facilities for younger children and those for teenagers, but that otherwise shared use and “zoning” for formal play should be pursued.**
-

- 4.24 More generally, we looked briefly at other sports provision in parks – for adults as well as for children. This was not one of the main focuses of the review but, given the evidence we received, we feel it necessary to make a couple of comments. Principally, we were told by Urban Living officers that there is a surplus of tennis courts in the borough⁴³. However, a couple of courts at Harrow Weald Recreation Ground have recently been resurfaced. We commend the fact that the resurfacing was done in a value for money

⁴¹ See notes from external parks visit, 21 September 2005 at Appendix C

⁴² See 12.3.1 (Table 12)

⁴³ Evidence received suggests that an appropriate number of courts, given current use, would be between seventy and eighty – provision stands at 120.

manner and was completed at a fraction of what it would have been, had it been finished to professional standards (not necessary on a public court). However, in the absence of any use figures for tennis courts, it is difficult to say whether this has had any impact, and indeed whether there is demand for this facility in this particular area. We heard, too, about slightly less formal facilities which could be provided. The use of “trim trails”, parts of parks which are marked out to provide people with outdoor “workouts”, with exercise stations providing people with the opportunity to do sit-ups, press ups and other forms of exercise, would be an excellent way to encourage people to use parks to keep fit.

- 4.25 A strategic approach must therefore be taken to the availability of this kind of outdoor sports facility. The ISROSS provides the foundations of this but there seems to be a collective indecision about whether the council is encouraging or discouraging informal use of these facilities. Work needs to be done to map current usage, and to assess how users needs are best served by the provision of sports facilities – both informal areas and formal facilities (both outdoor and indoor). This will provide an operational link with the strategic objectives of the ISROSS, further strengthening this document.
- 4.26 We did not observe any prominent information at any site relating to booking arrangements, availability or conditions of use – if any – of any tennis courts, or football fields. Potential users would be unaware, for example, of whether booking was necessary to use such facilities, and if so with whom bookings would need to be made. We consider that the implementation of the ISROSS provides an opportunity to address this in light of that plan’s high-level objectives, perhaps by developing an action to post information at parks and recreation grounds and adopt a standardised booking system available via the council’s website or by telephone.

WE RECOMMEND:

11: That sports facilities in parks be examined in light of the ISROSS

Cycling

- 4.27 Everybody seems agreed that cycling is an intrinsically Good Thing. Quite apart from the obvious health and environmental benefits, it encourages people to use and take advantage of the public realm in a more considerate way through the use of private transport.
- 4.28 However, the situation becomes rather more ambiguous in relation to parks. Nowhere is the potential for conflict between users more stark than in cycling. Historically, cycles were expressly banned from parks and even more recently there has always been a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards their presence. Inconsiderate cycling – whether it is cycling too fast or in a manner that other users consider “reckless” – has been suggested to in itself constitute anti-social behaviour.
- 4.29 In this context, it might seem appropriate to pursue the council’s existing policy of rigidly segregating cyclists from pedestrians – both in and outside parks. Segregation has obvious benefits. Put simply, cyclists keep to one side of a path and pedestrians to another – the conflict, in theory, disappears. This is carried out through the erection of signs, the painting of road markings, the possible construction of new infrastructure to

“feed” cyclists away from potential areas of conflict and the laying of green tarmac to demarcate different parts of paths.

- 4.30 Carl Pittam provided⁴⁴ some oral evidence on behalf of Sustrans, the sustainable transport charity. He stated that Sustrans did not, in fact, support the provision of segregated cycleways in parks. They tend to promote the theory of “ownership” of areas by particular groups – thus, those groups (pedestrians and cyclists in this case) become polarised, resenting any encroachment onto their space. They also encourage cyclists to ride fast, increasing the chance of accidents.
- 4.31 Sustrans support a multi-use approach, with cyclists and pedestrians sharing the same space. We were told that shared space should in many respects be the opposite to the segregated cycleways described above – they should be minimally waymarked (although the fact that they are “shared use” should be brought to pedestrians’ and cyclists’ attention), have no street markings and need not be surfaced with tarmac (which encourages fast cycling). We were told that, in practice, this works better than segregation. Cyclists ride slower, children can use the space for cycling without feeling threatened by faster cyclists, and both pedestrians and cyclists have different expectations of how they should use this shared space. Self-regulating, shared paths – in parks, at least – are effective.
- 4.32 This should not be interpreted as saying that we consider that the council’s policy throughout should be to eliminate segregated cycleways – the judgments made above are made based on specific evidence received in relation to parks and green spaces only, and even then may only be applicable in certain parks⁴⁵. On the public roadway different rules apply – indeed, we were expressly told that cyclists were not, nor should be, allowed to cycle on pavements.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 12: That cycling provision in open spaces should be shared use, where appropriate, subject to a favourable risk assessment.**
-

- 4.33 A reduction in conflicts will go some way to encourage cycling amongst the population more broadly. Currently, the council does little to encourage cycling (there is a Road Safety Office which is responsible for cycling proficiency tests) and little marketing work is carried out.
- 4.34 Cycle routes do run through two parks but this is provision relating to the London Cycle Network rather than as a result of council policy.
- 4.35 On our visits, we learned that cycle provision seems not to be a particularly high priority in Brent, Ealing or Hillingdon. We were told that Brent has a two mile track in one of their parks.

None of the green spaces strategies in these boroughs seem to make direct reference to cycling. Those who refer to healthy living and recreation tend to concentrate on sports provision – ie, pitches and pavilions, and allotment provision. None of these boroughs

⁴⁴ Third Review Group Meeting, 2 November 2005, at Appendix B

⁴⁵ For example, on Kenton Recreation Ground a segregated cycleway is completely divided from a pathway by an intermittent fence, which eliminates some of the conflict problems raised by Sustrans.

had a “cycling strategy” or anything similar which might provide some strategic steer to provision generally.

4.36 It might be expected that the new Transport Local Implementation Plan might have some recommendations to make on encouraging cycling in green spaces – unfortunately, though, its publication has been significantly delayed owing to late feedback being received from TfL.

4.37 There is a London-wide “London Cycling Strategy” which itself builds on 1996’s National Cycling Strategy. The subsequent TfL “Cycling Action Plan” contains at Objective 4.1:

“Encourage the development of cycling through parks and green corridors”

but naturally these is rather vague and there is no timescale, target or specific action attached.

4.38 It seems important that steps be taken to encourage and market use in parks. Carl Pittam suggested that, if marketing is to be carried out, it should be in respect of family use. Public events should, we were told, be made more cycle friendly so that they encourage use.

WE RECOMMEND:

13: That people should be encouraged to cycle through the planning of appropriate events and training.

Allotments

4.39 We agreed at the outset that we would only consider allotments insofar as bookings and vacancies were concerned. However, as we embarked on our evidence gathering activities, we concluded that it was an important topic deserving of extra consideration. As such, our recommendations and findings have taken a broader scope.

4.40 Some allotments in the borough are provided on a statutory basis⁴⁶ (thus they cannot be converted for other use, or sold off) and the remainder are operated on a discretionary basis. The evidence we received convinced us of the importance of maintaining a full allotments service. Benefits to health, community and biodiversity are all strong reasons for promoting their use amongst residents.

4.41 The council, we were told, has been carrying out some work to promote allotment use – public realm management, a newly computerised record system (replacing the record cards that had been in operation since the 1920s) and new, more prominent signs all appear to be contributing towards a heightened sense of public awareness.

⁴⁶ Section 8 of the Allotments Act 1925 limits the power of local authorities to dispose of allotments provided under s23 of the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908.

- 4.42 We were told by Harrow in Leaf⁴⁷ that they were trying to encourage a wider range of people – single mothers, those from ethnic minority communities (especially from Eastern Europe and the Indian subcontinent) to take up plots. Leafleting has persuaded people to come to allotments and to have the potential of plots demonstrated to them. Other events have also been carried out on sites (principally the site at West Harrow). We are aware of healthy eating events that have taken place in other boroughs – for example, in Luton – where “cook and eat” sessions involving local produce have been developed for plotholders.
- 4.43 We considered the possibility of plotholders selling produce at Pinner Farmers’ Market – however, we were told that produce on the market is subject to strict control and produce from allotments would probably not be able to be sold there.
- 4.44 Promotion more generally has been a concern because of the pressures of funding. Harrow in Leaf would particularly like to see the council employing a general allotments officer and a schools allotments officer, the latter to encourage the growing of produce in school grounds. We think that, in an ideal world, this would be an excellent idea. Schools are subject to pressures on time and resources as a result of the stringent requirements of the National Curriculum but if possible schools and individual teachers should be encouraged to use allotments as an educational tool. Although the support of a separate council officer would obviously be very useful in this respect, unfortunately given the authority’s own budget this is probably something that will not, in the short term, come to pass.
- 4.45 Instead, we consider that continued, closer partnership working would provide the best opportunity for development. The council should work closely with both Harrow in Leaf and Harrow PCT to promote the health, educational and social benefits of allotment holding. We were pleased to note that the council intends to open up plots on Newton Farm allotment for the use of those with learning difficulties⁴⁸.
- 4.46 We think that parents should also encourage their children to get involved outside of the formal educational context. Play provision on allotments might encourage parents to use their plots more, and would be able to occupy younger children⁴⁹.
- 4.47 Harrow in Leaf offers strong support to allotment holders in partnership with the council and we have seen that they have, in recent years, been the driving force behind promotion and marketing. The council needs to capitalise on this by developing new facilities, such as locked sheds, which would be useful to make the use of allotments more attractive to potential users.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 14: That involvement be encouraged through active promotion (eg healthy eating campaigns) and the provision of additional facilities (eg, play provision) in larger allotments.**
-

⁴⁷ The allotment association co-ordinating body for Harrow. It was established in 1998 and has an active membership, an executive committee of whom meet every six weeks. It has representatives on most allotment sites across the borough.

⁴⁸ As a result of the Social Inclusion allotments consultation (Urban Living, 2005)

⁴⁹ But see section on play, above; this could be informal provision requiring minimal capital outlay.

- 4.48 The council has taken steps to encourage biodiversity by using vacant plots as a “green lung”, managing them as a natural resource rather than letting them run wild. This has the added advantage, we were told, of meaning that those vacant plots being used for this purpose are not included on the vacancy details on allotments which have to be submitted to central government.
- 4.49 In some respects this is a novel approach but in others it presents problems. The use of allotments as a biodiversity resource may not, in the first place, be appropriate. Because they are subject to the plots remaining vacant the nature of this resource is, necessarily, transitory. Tending a plot to encourage biodiversity, only to rip it up and turn the soil once it has been let, does not in itself seem (on a large scale) to be an effective use of this resource.
- 4.50 We have considered the other options for dealing with the problem of vacant plots and consider that shared ownership might be an answer. We received evidence from the secretary of Harrow in Leaf that this had not been considered – although attempts had been made to encourage use by halving plot sizes.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 15: That innovative measures to eliminate vacancies and abandoned plots be considered, including shared ownership.**
-

- 4.51 We were told that work was being carried out to computerise data on allotments, to streamline the payments and applications process, but were informed by Harrow in Leaf of some problems that had been reported in respect of the service provided by the council in this respect. Collection of fees has been, we have been told, a particular problem. We expect that these concerns, which mainly deal with unfamiliarity of some administrative staff with the allotments system, will recede as, in the medium term, further records are computerised and the council’s Business Transformation Partnership First Contact project is implemented. However, users of this service would appreciate progress on these issues in the short term.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 16: That robust administrative processes for the initial application and continued management of plots be adopted and maintained.**

Section 5

Community involvement

5.1 As we have seen, many potential improvements to infrastructure in parks, improvements made to enhance access, inevitably involve some aspect of community involvement. It is undeniable, easy - and, moreover, meaningless - to pronounce merely that local people should have a say in how public green spaces look. The crucial factor lies in developing truly effective ways to genuinely do this.

5.2 This is more challenging than merely sending round some questionnaires. It is about considering what parks are actually for. Their relevance to people's day-to-day life seems, in many cases, to have receded. For example, how and why should open space be used when people have their own gardens? Worpole says⁵⁰,

The nature and quality of [...] common land in town and cities will give some indication of the nature and quality of the social systems. At the moment we are at a turning point. A lot of public and lottery money is going to glitzy projects and new buildings, yet 90% of the common land is being neglected [...] We have to give more attention to the minutiae of connecting spaces, the streets, the alleyways, the paths, the parks, the linear parks, the railway cuttings, the canal-side walks [...] the values of the park are often a good indicator of the values of the wider society.

5.3 The use of the word "minutiae" is obviously disingenuous here – the connecting parts (that is to say, what are now regarded as "green corridors" or "blueways") are often as important as parks and open spaces themselves. They have a role in drawing people in to the natural environment and ensuring that parks – or, indeed, the green belt – are not merely barren "open space", culturally dislocated green deserts devoid of context in a sea of concrete.

5.4 Naturally, such drawing people into the country will also have the effect of drawing others into the city. Natural harmony makes the city a more pleasant place to live and work in. Conway says⁵¹,

There is a need to encourage people back to the cities by enhancing them and making them more attractive and parks have a role to play in this process. [...] The most publicised initiatives [...] are those associated with urban regeneration schemes. These relate to regional identity and regional power and the tension between this and central power. They also underline the link between physical and cultural regeneration. The other initiatives are more diffuse, but in the long-term they are of greater significance, for they concern the involvement of local communities in their environment, and this is essential to sustainability. The key to sustainable development involves a holistic approach to the value of conserving locally important features and local distinctiveness.

5.5 Natural engagement is thus one and the same with cultural and community engagement. Through community use of open spaces, and a more outward-looking and inclusive approach in the management of public space, new links are forged and localism blossoms.

⁵⁰ Worpole, K., "The Park and the Town: A sustainable vision for the 21st Century" in *City Parks in the Next Millennium: Papers of the 1999 Conference of the London Historic Parks and Gardens Trust*, (LHPGT, 1999), at 61

⁵¹ Conway H., "Parks for the 21st Century", *ibid* at 53

5.6 Quality is a critical factor in all this. High-quality public space, and a commitment to it, is what kick-starts this community-level development. Often, if we are looking for a highly local impact we should also consider things on a local scale (while remembering that large, “destination” parks are also important – but perhaps for different reasons). This is where quality is particularly crucial. A tree and a bench by the side of the road may be pleasant, and may break up the urban landscape, but it does not in itself constitute anything with the potential to be culturally or ecologically exciting. That said, some amenity areas such as these may be more important to community cohesion than previously recognised. However, localism such as this requires backup and support from the local authority. Although Nicholson-Lord implies that local communities can carry out a great deal with little local authority support this is probably not what individual councils would wish to pursue. They have to support the aspirations of local communities. A critical part of this is maintenance and management. Morphet says⁵²,

For most urban parks and open spaces, the quality of maintenance is critical. In many parks, their original design conception has been scaled down, or reinterpreted with costs in mind [...] Within local authorities, maintenance is specified by standards such as the length of grass and the number of cuts per week. As compulsory competitive tendering is introduced, there is little evidence that the “client” or “user” side is being considered.

5.7 This leads to questions of management. Community involvement may demand that users’ views, and their wishes, be given added importance, with parks undertaking community-led initiatives, but despite this,

Perhaps one of the main changes in the public’s perception of open space management over the last thirty years has been the almost total withdrawal of parks keepers or attendants. It is clear that these staff were seen to be one of the main means of sustaining the quality of the park as a place to be visited and enjoyed.

5.8 She quotes an Audit Commission report of 1988 indicating the adverse effect that the withdrawal of local authority staff has had on usage. Not only this, of course, but it will have had an impact on quality. Now, regeneration, both of parks and communities, seems to be an overriding theme. New thinking has presented the opportunity to use the low standard of many of Britain’s parks and open spaces as a catalyst to bring about more community involvement and, through doing so, giving neighbourhoods more soul. In “The Value of Public Space”, CABE Space argue that⁵³:

When properly designed and cared for, [public spaces] bring communities together, provide meeting places and foster social ties of a kind that have been disappearing in many urban areas. These spaces shape the cultural identity of an area, are part of its unique character and provide a sense of place for local communities.

5.9 This aspect of community involvement, is a critical one. It does not only cover traditional, formal parks and open spaces, such as Harrow Rec or Canons Park here in Harrow, but also smaller, more community focussed spaces, in which local residents can play an active role by contributing not only to landscaping and planning, but ongoing maintenance as well. It is this sense of public spaces as being truly “public” – as belonging to all members and sectors of the community – which is a belief which is vital to foster.

5.10 It goes without saying that local communities should not be involved in parks management as a sop, or a useful public relations exercise. Additionally, although it is a

⁵² Morphet J, “The Future of Urban Parks and Open Spaces”, Working Paper No. 5 in Worpole & Greenhalgh, *Parks, Open Spaces and the Future of Urban Planning* (Demos, 1994) at 5

⁵³ CABE Space, “The Values of Public Space” (2004)

naturally compelling argument in financial terms, the willingness of volunteers to give up their own time to contribute to “their” parks cannot, it is clear, be an excuse for the provision of inadequate council resources. A balance will have to be made as the actions in the ISROSS are taken forward.

- 5.11 Community involvement is seen, in national policy at least, as a method for solving other problems in parks (specifically, anti-social behaviour) rather than necessarily as an end in itself. CABE Space, in their report, “Decent parks? Decent behaviour?” cite the example of Mile End Park, saying⁵⁴,

The Borough’s officers were keen to include the public in the process right from the very start, so that they would develop a sense of ownership and pride. It is important that people feel the park belongs to them, if it is to be looked after.

- 5.12 In this respect working closely with younger people is particularly important. It is an unfortunate fact that younger people are perceived as being the perpetrators of anti-social behaviour, and there is a fear of crime – and a fear of young people, especially in groups – which we have heard from the Metropolitan Police is largely disproportionate to the true threat either generally or from young people in particular⁵⁵.

- 5.13 Much of this fear derives from low-level worries. The presence of graffiti alone can make some parks users feel threatened, yet it has also been argued that graffiti is a social, artistic activity which should be encouraged rather than eliminated⁵⁶. Some authorities have tried to address this by the erection of graffiti walls. This is something which the council is considering at the moment. However, evidence received from Hillingdon, in respect of the success of graffiti walls in Fassnidge Park, indicates that they are not particularly successful. We were told by Hillingdon’s Cabinet Member for Environment that they fill up quickly; because of a principle that artists cannot spray over the work of others it means that the space is of no real use unless it is painted over every couple of weeks (which holds significant resource implications). The subsequent removal of the graffiti wall apparently led to a decrease in the level of both graffiti and tags in the areas.

- 5.14 Brent have addressed the problem slightly differently – one long wall in Roundwood Park is covered by a mural, which was drawn by local young people. This has meant that the wall has not been defaced by tags but there is an obvious risk of merely displacing this activity elsewhere. Solutions like this could be criticised as dealing with the appearance and symptoms of a problem but not the problem itself, which relates to the desires and interests of young people. This is why a sustained level of involvement with younger people is critical.

- 5.15 This is also reflected in the provision of youth shelters. Young people need to feel safe in parks⁵⁷, and providing them with opportunities to gather and socialise is an important part of this. Shelters have been provided in a number of parks in Harrow⁵⁸ and the council is

⁵⁴ CABE Space, “Decent Parks? Decent Behaviour?” (2005), p15

⁵⁵ Evidence provided at Eighth Review Group Meeting, 1 December 2005 (joint meeting with “Reducing Fear of Crime” Scrutiny Review Group, commissioned by the Strengthening Communities Scrutiny Sub-Committee. Further information on general crime statistics at Appendix C (with data on Meeting 6).

⁵⁶ The practice of “tagging”, spraying initials or a sign on a surface, is a different matter and is easier to see as anti-social – it relates more to demarcating territories than artistic expression.

⁵⁷ Indicated clearly in the Children’s Consultation and SLR sIII, 3.155 (p194).

⁵⁸ Particularly at Harrow Recreation Ground.

taking steps to removing those which are in secluded areas and placing them more prominently, to discourage anti-social behaviour.

- 5.16 Hillingdon had experienced some difficulties with youth shelters. Previously, at Fassnidge Park, there had been a number of shelters around the edge of the park. There had also been a significant level of anti-social behaviour in the park. The shelters were removed a couple of years ago, and, at the same time, the level of anti-social behaviour went down. London Borough of Hillingdon took this as a causal relationship.
- 5.17 Harrow's approach has been different, and also demonstrates the entry into a dialogue with younger people. It is important to develop a sense of engagement with young people to reduce levels of ASB and to make sure that the council is providing a good service to what is a significant proportion of the users of our green spaces. Evidence from officers in Urban Living indicates that when equipment and facilities have been planned and installed in consultation with young people, it is less likely that those facilities will be subject to abuse, and also creates a situation where the council can better address the concerns, wishes and needs of this sector of the population.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 17: That the council engage effectively with young people to deliver age-appropriate and usable facilities, and to limit conflicts of use between different groups of teenagers and potential ASB concerns.**
-

- 5.18 While this is always going to be a facilitative measure, community involvement also lets the Council understand its residents and their needs, and focus services more effectively. In a broad sense it democratises access and ensures that the wishes and desires of residents become much more closely aligned with those of the council. In that sense, it's critical – a truism, almost – to see pride in public amenities, and a more human approach to public space, both leading to and leading from high quality public parks and open spaces. It could hardly be more important. Experience from other authorities seems to indicate that detailed protocols and service agreements between friends groups and local authorities, or defining the nature of consultations, has not been an overriding theme. As Gary McManus, Parks Ranger at Handsworth Park in Birmingham says in the CAGE report,

There was no formal structure to our approach to turning the park around. We simply recognised the importance of ensuring that whatever steps we took related to and reflected the local community [...] By combining this with an active approach to engaging the local community and improvised standards of care and security, the rest of the change process fell into place.

- 5.19 Community involvement can, hopefully, lead to community cohesion. The National Guidance for Community (2002) has defined "community cohesion" as having occurred when:

There is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities
The diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued
People from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities
Strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds

- 5.20 Obviously better management of parks and open spaces will not be able to bring all this about. These aspirations are rather more about the way the council relates to Harrow's residents, and indeed the way Harrow's residents relate to one another. Saying that

developing open spaces and making them more accessible to ethnic minorities will enhance community cohesion is probably, then, rather simplistic. Community involvement can, however, hope to place Harrow's diverse communities in a position where community cohesion in a holistic way is more likely. If people from different communities are all using the same space, this encourages interaction. This interaction can be informal, but also more structured, through parks' user groups, sports teams and guided walk groups. Communities can reclaim open spaces for themselves, which encourages cohesion and develops civic pride. Ultimately these kind of aspirations should be (and in many instances are) in the minds of policy makers and strategists when considering what has been called the "urban parks renaissance".

- 5.21 We discussed these broad policy issues with reference to implementing change "on the ground" in relation to Harrow with Paul Todd from the Civic Trust, as well as with officers from the boroughs we visited. Paul Todd told us that using Friends groups can be useful but that the wider community should not be ignored – especially as Friends groups can often be made up of people who are unrepresentative of the rest of the population. He provided some useful evidence in relation to the Civic Trust's Green Pennant Award, which is given to community managed spaces (even when those spaces are council owned). Community involvement in smaller spaces was particularly important, he said, as these are often the areas most important to local people and there is more of a sense of "ownership" than in relation to the larger, destination parks. They therefore provide a valuable opportunity for community involvement in green space management.
- 5.22 The ISROSS contains a number of recommendations relating to community involvement⁵⁹. However, we consider that the council should be bolder in its approach. CABE Space have suggested that green space strategies "create a framework for voluntary and community groups to participate in green space provision and management"⁶⁰. This accords with the Civic Trust's suggestions and also fits in with a number of innovative approaches which have been taken in neighbouring boroughs.
- 5.23 Mapesbury Dell in Brent is often cited as a "best practice" example of such a site. We went to visit it. It is an excellent example of a "pocket park" which has been managed by a community group through an agreement with the local authority. Local people have been involved throughout and have taken on a significant degree of responsibility. This kind of involvement not only helps bring communities together – there are also revenue benefits for the council, since community groups can apply for funding through streams not available to local authorities.
- 5.24 The Dell is impressive but we considered that, in itself, it had been finished to a much higher standard than necessary; it was funded through the Millennium-funded Doorstep Green programme which has now terminated. Having spoken to officers in Harrow, there is a scepticism about drafting formal contracts with community groups to carry out this kind of largely autonomous work.
- 5.25 We do consider, however, that users should play an enhanced role. Community management can take many forms and initially structures built on partnership might be most effective for building up and shared expertise between the authority and the voluntary sector. Hillingdon has established larger stakeholder groups, which augment

⁵⁹ The main ones are listed at Appendix C

⁶⁰ "Green Space Strategies: A Good Practice Guide", (CABE Space, 2004), p7

existing Friends groups, and directly involve key stakeholders in the vicinity of their parks. This seems to have been particularly successful in respect of Fasnidge Park. However, in terms of smaller spaces, maintaining an appropriate level of interest amongst local residents might prove problematic – this is something which we hope to address in our next recommendation.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 18: That the council use Friends and user groups, backed up by groups of local stakeholders, to build links between different types of user, and different parts of the community, and to encourage community management of some smaller green spaces.**
-

5.26 There is a programme of parks promotion being carried out through articles in Harrow People⁶¹ at the moment. There is, however, no general plan for promotion laid out in the ISROSS. Most of the council's promotional activities are based around encouraging people to participate in sports⁶².

5.27 For community involvement to be effective, and for local people to become aware of the opportunities for recreation available on their doorstep, it is important that targeted marketing to be carried out, particularly to raise the profile of some of the borough's smaller parks. Outcomes from the ISROSS focus groups indicate that there is a limited appreciation of the amount of green space in the borough, and the opportunities for local people to become involve with it. It is important that the council works to encourage involvement further, both locally and at a more strategic level.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 19: That parks management plans, when drafted, contain specific actions on promoting individual parks as appropriate, and that this be reflected in high-level promotional duty in the sports, recreation and open spaces strategy.**

⁶¹ The council's resident magazine.

⁶² See particularly section 8 on sports development opportunities.

Section 6

Biodiversity

- 6.1 It is easy to define the council's approach to biodiversity in terms of legal obligations. Indeed, there are many. English Nature have provided us with a significant amount of data on exactly what the council is obliged to do to encourage biodiversity⁶³. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill, which is about to receive Royal Assent, includes a duty on all public bodies (including local authorities) to have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity. Planning Policy Statement 9 now also places a requirement of local authorities to actively consider biodiversity when making planning decisions⁶⁴.
- 6.2 However, it is more prudent to take a step back and consider what biodiversity means in the context of this review – how, essentially, it affects the council's attitudes towards its public green spaces. The use of these green space as a “green lung”, and as an oasis for wildlife in an urban environment cannot be overstated. The concept of providing parks which are essentially “urban wildernesses” without formal features would not necessarily preclude unfettered public access. Tony Hawkhead, Chief Executive of Groundwork, has said,

A landscape which incorporates this idea of a natural urban wilderness also has additional benefits. For a start it is cost-effective as accelerating, harnessing and directing natural growth and development involves much less maintenance than constantly battling against nature. Secondly, a low-maintenance landscape can encourage greater community involvement as volunteers can play a significant part in simple maintenance and management tasks.

- 6.3 Again, the ecological benefits are seen through the prism of regeneration, however, and much of both Groundwork and CABI Space's work on this centres around the idea of an “ecologically informed approach to brownfield land restoration”. Harrow has slightly different challenges – there are few brownfield sites, and green space covers more than 20% of the borough. However, the notion of promoting some parks as “urban wildernesses” is an idea which deserves further consideration.
- 6.4 Green belt land, and the opportunities it provides, is another area within the scope of the review (although we are only considering it in the context of biodiversity). Groundwork have said of such land⁶⁵,

[It] keep[s] the countryside around cities open and available for recreation, agriculture, biodiversity and landscape enhancement.

- 6.5 This is a view which accords well to the situation on the ground in Harrow. It reflects the many uses for the green belt in Harrow, which contains one SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest), eight sites of ancient woodland, ten SINC (Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation) and a number of UK BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) Priority

⁶³ Full details at Appendix C

⁶⁴ ODPM circular 06/2005 and DEFRA circular 01/2005 also refer.

⁶⁵ “The countryside in and around towns”, (Groundwork, 2005)

Habitats as well as London BAP habitats⁶⁶. The review is concentrating on the broad areas of community access and biodiversity, two areas regarding which the green belt can contribute significantly. They are two integral parts to a “vision” which Groundwork has presented in their report “The countryside in and around towns”, which expresses the ideal for nature in green belts and the rural fringe by describing in aspirational terms the ideal rural fringe area⁶⁷:

The countryside in and around towns contains historic and newly established woodlands, wetland, meadows and a broad array of other natural habitats. The importance of this environment to biodiversity is fully recognised and reflected in all management and land use decisions. This has produced a marked increase in biodiversity both around and within urban areas, with wildlife thriving as an integral part, and indicator, of a sustainable landscape.

- 6.6 At a more regional and local level, significant action has taken place recently, especially with the advent of the Greater London Authority. The Mayor has produced a biodiversity strategy⁶⁸ which lays out fourteen ambitious policies for implementation, relating to increases in funding, promotion, education and most importantly partnership, which is a sensibility which pervades the entire plan.
- 6.7 This emphasis on partnership has been picked up on by numerous commentators⁶⁹ and is something which is generally seen as critical for the successful delivery of a BAP. It is, therefore, most appropriate that a BAP be prepared by a council officer rather than an external consultant, to ensure robust links with volunteers and other stakeholders can be built.
- 6.8 The “vision” presented by Groundwork and the aims of the London BAP cannot, we consider, be effected without a local BAP in Harrow. Evidence received from the GLA and English Nature supported this view and listed the evident benefits to education, health, conservation and biodiversity which a BAP could bring about.
- 6.9 At the time of writing a recruitment exercise is underway for the appointment of a Biodiversity Officer at the Council at range H10 (which is two ranges below senior professional grade). We were told that the biodiversity officer would have “clout” within the council as the authority’s expert in the field. We were told, however (and we agree) that success will largely depend on involvement and support from senior managers.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 20: That steps be taken to assure swift development and implementation of a Biodiversity Action Plan for Harrow, championed by an appropriate senior manager.**

-
- 6.10 Partnership and working closely with the local community is given particular credence upon consideration of the biodiversity importance of private gardens. We are aware that consideration of private gardens is beyond the terms of reference of this review – we feel, however, that we should comment if only briefly on it, since in the context of biodiversity, private gardens are particularly important to the borough’s approach – they constitute a

⁶⁶ Green Belt Management Strategy, p104

⁶⁷ See n62 above.

⁶⁸ Connecting with London’s nature (GLA, 2002)

⁶⁹ See in particular Goode, 2005, “Connecting with nature in a capital city: the London Biodiversity Strategy” in Ted Trzyna, ed. *The Urban Imperative*, CIPA, Cal, USA.

significant amount (around a third) of the borough's open space, and provide corridors and habitats for a wide variety of fauna (as well as plant life).

- 6.11 In the London BAP, one of the habitat plans relates to wildlife gardening – we were told that BAPs can actively encourage biodiversity in gardens. It also provides an excellent opportunity to involve and educate the local community in the principles of biodiversity, and encourages direct community involvement. Obviously this is not to say that it is the council's duty – or that it is within the council's powers – to coerce and force people into planting certain types of shrubs in their garden. It relates more to awareness and education providing benefits both for residents and the local environment at the same time – but it is vital that such actions be linked with similar plans for public spaces. Wildlife cannot, after all, distinguish between private and public space and mobility of plants and animals is an important issue.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 21: That the plan contain a habitat plan for private gardens and private green spaces, and that educational and publicity work with the owners of these spaces be carried out as appropriate.**

-
- 6.12 None of the above, however, is intended to indicate that currently there is no work ongoing on biodiversity at the council. We have been made aware that documents stretching back to the late 1980s make reference to it, and 1994-2004's Unitary Development Plan contains a significant amount of material. The ISROSS, as well, makes some reference to biodiversity, but it is generally couched in terms of resolving potential conflicts of use between recreation and biodiversity. The GBMS, however, contains more, notably an aspiration:

To make Harrow's Green Belt more attractive and accessible for people and wildlife and maximise the environmental, educational and health benefits by managing this strategic open space at London's northern fringe.

- 6.13 Access and biodiversity seem to be at the centre of this vision, which is couched in the terms of government guidance⁷⁰. Several other active steps to promote biodiversity are listed in the GBMS (although it can perhaps be expected that some of these will be subsumed within the BAP, when it is drafted).
- 6.14 The drafting of the BAP, and the completion and signing-off of the ISROSS, provides an excellent opportunity to link the strategic aims of biodiversity across the council (on which there is little current or recent documentation) with the operational actions which the BAP will establish. As it stands, we consider that there is too little on biodiversity (in strategic terms) in these kind of high-level plans. English Nature has told us of their view that one of the principle focuses of an open spaces strategy should be to enhance biodiversity. Providing this emphasis in the ISROSS should establish a "golden thread" which can link the council's corporate priorities with its plans and obligations under any future BAP.

⁷⁰ PPG 2 in particular.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 22: That the Sports, Recreation and Open Spaces Strategy should emphasise the importance of biodiversity in Harrow, promoting a cross-cutting approach which can be strategically built by the Biodiversity Action Plan.**
-

- 6.15 Some authorities have adopted an approach which ensures that an area for biodiversity is present in every park. We consider, however (and evidence from Hillingdon supports the contention) that it may not be appropriate to have an area for biodiversity in all parks⁷¹. Smaller, more formal spaces might be used predominantly for sports, or may have another important amenity function that would be incompatible with the establishment of a wildlife area, or indeed the promotion of biodiversity in general. It is, however, vital that biodiversity be encouraged where possible in all public open spaces.
- 6.16 There are two reasons for this. Firstly, provision need not necessarily be formalised. The establishment of specific areas where biodiversity is to be encouraged does not by definition mean that in other areas matters can continue as before. It is more an approach to land management that should pervade action plans. For example, the approach taken to invertebrate conservation is a case in point. Invertebrate habitats are minimal in formal public spaces but provision can be made by encouraging habitats which are conducive to invertebrate life – muddy areas, long grasses, piles of logs and pebbles, and so on. This kind of work can be carried out in inconspicuous places in parks and can be invaluable for pollination, destruction of invasive pests, and providing food for birds and bats⁷².
- 6.17 Secondly, wilderness should (as Groundwork have asserted⁷³) be available to all people, with formal spaces not providing the benchmark for all parks but merely one of a number of different solutions, which may be different depending on the kind of use⁷⁴.
- 6.18 An example of this in action is work undertaken at Paddington Rec in Westminster. Work was planned as part of a park-wide scheme to upgrade facilities, and work to establish wildlife habitats in an environmental area are hoped to begin in 2006. The Rec is well-used by local people, who were consulted on possible improvements to the area. Most of those consulted cited “more space for wildlife” as one such improvement. This reflects the importance of ensuring public support for these kind of initiatives, which can make the building of partnerships much easier.
- 6.19 An example of how we think this potential could be developed in Harrow might be in Roxeth Rec – the far end of the recreation ground (which is bounded by railway lines and is thus inaccessible from any side other than the main entrance) is currently closely mown, but a more appropriate use (especially given the fact that there is a large mown area used for football closer to the centre of the park) might be as a managed wildflower meadow.
- 6.20 This leads us to an important factor - public access in areas of nature conservation. It is easy to think that nature conservation areas should be fenced off, to protect what might be perceived as delicate or fragile flora and fauna. In some cases, it is appropriate that

⁷¹ This is also the approach recommended by English Nature.

⁷² Information provided by Simon Braidman (Warden, Stanmore Common)

⁷³ See above, at xxxx

⁷⁴ These issues will be examined more fully in the upcoming London Parks Biodiversity Plan, being produced by the GLA.

interpretation notices should guide people away from sensitive areas (as in the Royal Parks). However, Mike Waite from the GLA suggested to us that the benefits of additional recreational and community use are that, with more people showing an interest in an area it will tend to be managed better. It is a matter of planning – conflicts can very easily be designed out by planting an area which, while biodiverse, is not fragile and where use is encouraged. Mike further reminded us that there are degrees of vulnerability to wildlife – people should not be too worried about keeping off grasses and wildflower meadows, since it is more likely that the kind of flora and fauna you would want to encourage in parks will not be especially vulnerable.

- 6.21 Another benefit of a bespoke approach is that it allows what Mike Waite described as a degree of opportunism – looking at what is already present on a given site and developing it, rather than doing things by scratch and in isolation.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 23: That conflicts of use between biodiversity and public access should be addressed in parks management plans by adopting an individual approach for each space rather than a prescriptive approach for all parks, and thus encouraging public access where appropriate.**

-
- 6.22 Going hand and hand with a unique approach in different parks is the necessity for education. We have touched on this (above). We have been told that there is a general plan to construct an environmental education centre somewhere in the borough (it is an action in the GBMS). In our view more can be done, however. Public awareness through partnership working is crucial. Currently, wildlife is low on people's list of priorities⁷⁵, but education – which in many cases will be less formal than the existence of a specific building – will help people to understand the benefits which wildlife and nature can afford them.

- 6.23 Opportunities can be pursued, through the engagement of volunteers, to enhance some of the borough's key biodiversity assets (our SSSIs and SINC's, as well as other important habitats which could prove important for eco-tourism).

WE RECOMMEND:

- 24: That the educational opportunities afforded by the BAP and a BAP partnership in parks and the Green Belt be investigated and enhanced, with a view to the improvement of the borough's key biodiversity assets.**

⁷⁵ Reflected by evidence providing in UL focus groups and the (to an extent) the SLR.

Appendices

Appendices A and B are printed below. Appendix C, listing in details the background papers from which the evidence supporting our findings and recommendations were drawn, is available separately because of its length. If you wish to have a copy, please contact the Scrutiny Unit on the number given on the back of this report.

APPENDIX A

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Review Group would like to extend its thanks to the following people:

Ian Ross	Senior Ranger, Southall Ranger Team, Ealing Council
Alec Carpenter	Area Contract Manager, Parks and Countryside Service, Ealing Council
Shaun Faulkner	Head of Parks, Brent Council
Adrian Batten	Head of Parks, Hillingdon Council
Cllr Sandra Jenkins	Cabinet Member for Environmental Services, LB Hillingdon

Carl Pittam	London Area Manager, Sustrans
Alan Sutton	consultant representing London Play
Richard Creswell	Chairman, British Toilet Association
Rachel Cook	Conservation Officer (London), English Nature
Mike Waite	Biodiversity Officer, Greater London Authority
Sue Green	Chair, Harrow in Leaf
Roger Kirkham	Secretary, Harrow in Leaf
Paul Todd	Green Flag Award Applications Manager, the Civic Trust
Bill Munro	Forward and Local Planning Manager, Harrow Council
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Ian Pearce	Crime Reduction Manager, Harrow Council
Insp David Allen	Metropolitan Police (Harrow)
PC John Welsh	Metropolitan Police (Bexley)
PC Michael Waring	Metropolitan Police (Bexley)

Special thanks to:

Andrew Trehern	Executive Director, Urban Living
Dave Corby	Service Manager, Public Realm Maintenance, Urban Living
Trina Taylor	Sports and Leisure Strategist, People First
Carol Yarde	Local Area Champion (West), Urban Living

APPENDIX B**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY****Academic literature**

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Scrutiny

Scrutiny is an independent, councillor-led function
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