

Report to:

**TOURISM, ECONOMY AND COMMUNITIES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Relevant Officer:

Lisa Arnold, Head of Parks, Leisure and Catering Services.

Date of Meeting:

14 April 2021

PARKS AND GREEN ENVIRONMENT ANNUAL REPORT

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 To consider an update on work undertaken, future plans and performance of the Park Development Service.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 To scrutinise the work of the service and identify any matters for further scrutiny.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1 To ensure effective scrutiny of the Park Development Service

3.2 Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.3 Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

4.0 Other alternative options to be considered:

4.1 None.

5.0 Council priority:

5.1 The relevant Council priority is

- "The economy: Maximising growth and opportunity across Blackpool"
- "Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience"

6.0 Background information

6.1 The report provides an update on the work and performance of the Park Development Service for 2020/21. The Park Development Service is the lead service responsible for the

strategic direction and improvement of Blackpool's parks and open spaces to maximise the benefits that green spaces can offer to social, economic and environmental objectives.

6.2 **Parks and Green Environment Service overview**

6.3 The year 2020 has seen a variety of changes within the Park Service due to a multiple of factors including the COVID pandemic, a separation from the operational element of grounds management and the recruitment of new staff. These changes have provided an opportunity for reflection and revaluation of the Park Development Service's work programme.

6.4 The Park Development Service contributes and plays an active part in supporting some of Blackpool Council's key strategies and plans. Including:

- Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy
- Local Plan
- Active Lives Strategy
- Open Spaces Assessment
- Draft Tree Strategy

6.5 Parks Operations Transfer

6.6 In early 2020 the operational element of the Park Service was transferred to Cleansing and Environmental Services to provide efficiencies in the service delivery. For clarity in this report, the non-transferred Parks Service staff will be referred to as the Park Development Service.

6.7 The Park Operations team within Cleansing & Environmental Services are responsible for the duties highlighted below and are not included in the scope of this report.

- Undertake day to day maintenance of the parks and greenspaces; including grass cutting, weed removal, shrub pruning, litter picking and leaf blowing
- Responsible for the operation of the Tree Team, undertaking tree management as required on the local authority's tree population
- Responsible for playground safety checks and maintenance of play equipment to ensure play areas are safe and useable
- Undertake maintenance of sport pitches; including grass cutting, line marking and end of season renovations

6.8 The Parks Development Service's responsibilities are outlined below and are included in the scope of this report.

- Creating and delivering a programme of Park and Open Space improvements aiming to maximise the benefits of each park to the community and biodiversity where appropriate.
- Steer the management of each park and open space to direct the efficiency of resources whilst ensuring best practices of management are undertaken by the operational team. This is achieved through providing support and working in partnership with the operational team.
- Sourcing external funding for improvement projects and schemes including playgrounds, buildings and park infrastructure.
- Engaging the community with their local open space to encourage responsible usage and involvement in the park.
- Working in collaboration with Friends groups and the community to ensure each park is developed with the needs of the park users.
- Delivery and coordination of the Park Ranger Service to promote parks and open spaces and engage the community with their open space, including the Early Years Park Ranger programme funded through Blackpool Better Start.
- Support and collaborate with Park Friends Groups to promote and develop parks and open spaces, working to establish new groups in areas where required.
- Coordinate partnerships and lead on the application of Green Flag awards across the town.
- Develop a parks volunteering programme which provides volunteers with support and training required to enable positive management of sites.
- Ensure biodiversity is enhanced on open spaces and that specified ecological sites are undergoing positive management to increase wildlife.
- Supporting and promoting events on parks and opens spaces undertaken by external partners and Friends groups.
- Playing a key role in the delivery of the Green & Blue Infrastructure strategy with partners and stakeholders.

6.9 Following the separation from Parks Operations, there are now 11 members of the Parks Development Team which sit under Lisa Arnold, Head of Parks, Leisure and Catering Services.

7.0 **Budget Information**

- 7.1 Due to the COVID pandemic, full budget analysis has not been provided as comparison with previous years is not relevant. In 2020/21 the budget was a shared budget with the operational team and spending was kept below anticipated budgeted figures.
- 7.2 Income however was reduced due to COVID restrictions on events, concessionaires and sports bookings. The team predicted that £50,000 of projected income was not received as a result of the COVID pandemic from predicted events, loss of sport income and concessionaires
- 7.3 The Team were able to secure additional expenditure on parks and open spaces through partnerships with BCH (£46,000), Blackpool Better Start, Ward Councillors, Donated infrastructure schemes (£14,700) and Park Ranger resources and delivery (£10,064).

8.0 **Park Development Service Update**

- 8.1 The capacity and work programme of the Parks Development Team has been influenced by the COVID pressures of 2020 and the following updates should take into consideration the impact that the pandemic has had on staff's ability to undertake engagement and onsite work.

8.2 Projects Updates

- 8.3 In July 2020 Anchorsholme Park was reopened following redevelopment in partnership with United utilities to include new facilities including a café, interactive play area, amphitheatre, multi-use games area, bowling pavilion and species rich meadows. The opening of the park marked the end of a journey of partnership working with United Utilities over the past 5 years which ensured the best possible outcomes for the park. The opening also marked the start of a new chapter in which the park can now reach its potential of being a destination park that caters for the local community.
- 8.4 Fishers Field on Highfield Road also reopened following 3 years of closure due to a United Utilities underground water tank installation programme. The Football pitches were renovated and when play resumed in the summer following COVID restrictions, the site was opened up to allow Foxhall Football Club access. Work is currently ongoing with Leisure Services to develop changing facilities to enable a full return of the club.
- 8.5 In 2020 Layton Recreational Ground reopened following the development of Queens Park housing area. The new look park includes tree planting, hedges, wetland feature, pathways and entrance features which increase public accessibility of the area.
- 8.6 Harold Larkwood park on Chance Street underwent regeneration with new play facilities, removal of the boundary walls to open up sightlines and tree planting. The programme which

was funded by Blackpool Better Start in partnership with Property Services has significantly opened up and improved the site. A forest school circle was installed in the adjacent community garden and when COVID restrictions allowed, the Park Ranger Service were able to run family engagement sessions.

- 8.7 New play features have been installed on Bispham Cliff Tops to replace previous items which had reached the end of their life and had been removed for safety reasons. The works also included a new fence along the tram boundary to reduce the risks of the tram lines. (£7,000)
- 8.8 Additional improvements have been made to play equipment in Stanley Park including the installation of a new dragon swing. (£17,500)
- 8.9 At Boundary Park, in the Grange Park Housing Estate a new pathway network has been developed. Blackpool Coastal Housing and BetterStart funded the installation of new pathways to create a circular route around the park. This is the first step in encouraging users onto the park and create an opportunity for further development to follow.
- 8.10 Park Ranger Service Update
- 8.11 Impacted by COVID, the Park Ranger Service quickly adapted to a change in their delivery model, which was primarily face-to-face prior to restrictions.
- 8.12 In response to the COVID pandemic, the Park Ranger Service introduced printed packs with activities for children to engage with nature and encourage parents to facilitate nature based learning. The packs have primarily being funded through Public Health programmes and over 10,000 have been printed and distributed to 10 schools across the town. Each pack has a theme such as birds or trees and has activities which can be undertaken in Blackpool's parks led by a parent. An example has been provided as Appendix 9(a).
- 8.13 Due to the Stay at Home guidelines, the Park Ranger Team created online videos of activities, introduced online groups for local families to get involved and increased a Facebook presence to over 2,000 followers.
- 8.14 A highlight for the Park Ranger Service each year previously has been the winter fairy trail in which park volunteers turn Revoe Park Community Garden into a fairy wonderland with an evening of singing and activities. This year the Park Rangers adapted this concept by creating an online trail which encouraged residents to place fairy doors across Blackpool and share the locations on an interactive online map. Volunteers were still able to be part of the event and assisted creating and distributing fairy door packs to encourage participation.
- 8.15 Two new placements for Young People have been developed working alongside the Park Ranger Service gaining skills in community engagement, horticulture and ecological management. These roles are currently undergoing recruitment and are funded through the Kickstart programme in partnership with Head Start.

8.16 The work of the Head Start funded Junior Park Ranger scheme has continued in 2020 through the delivery of online engagement and face-to-face when possible. The Junior Park Rangers were actively involved in the Youth Climate Assembly and continue to work with Headstart to influence the climate agenda in Blackpool.

8.17 Volunteering and Friends Groups– Open Spaces Network

8.18 The Parks Service works with 15 Friends groups across various parks and open spaces who together form the Open Spaces Network. Outside COVID restrictions, Friends are able to support and promote their park through volunteering and running events. This activity was heavily impacted by the COVID restrictions and Friends groups have had to adapt or pause their activities.

8.19 Many friends groups have been reaching out to members online and the Friends Of Stanley Park were able to create Friends branded masks and run an online exercise programme with Active Blackpool. The friends of Anchorsholme Park have taken a similar approach, organising knit and natter, gardening and baking groups online to enable the social aspect of friends groups to continue.

8.20 The Park Development Service has been able to support groups in interpreting government guidance and providing risk assessment templates to support activities when they are able to run in the summer.

8.21 The COVID restrictions have enabled a time of reflection for the Park Development Service and work has been going on to improve policies and procedures around volunteering and Friends groups. A new Volunteer handbook is being drafted and all risk assessments have been reviewed and updated.

8.22 The Park Development Service were able to reevaluate the role of the Volunteering Coordinator to create a post which covers the whole town and recruited this post in the autumn. This post will be able to support volunteering activities across Blackpool, identifying training opportunities and work programmes.

8.23 Supporting the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy

8.24 A part of the Green And Blue Infrastructure Strategy, the Park Development Service has drafted a Tree Strategy which is currently undergoing public consultation. The document aims to protect and enhance the Council's tree population and ensure a right tree in the right place approach.

8.25 The Draft Tree Strategy aims to:
“To create a thriving urban forest to benefit our local community, wildlife and visitors to the Blackpool Coast, whilst ensuring a healthy, diverse and well-managed tree population.”

It identifies 4 main objectives:

1. Implement the Tree Strategy in accordance with Blackpool's GBI Strategy, which aligns with Core Strategy Policy CS6.
2. Establish and promote a healthy tree culture and adopt the following practices:
 - Trees viewed as critical infrastructure (ecosystem service).
 - Focus on overall canopy cover and population structure and diversity.
 - Trees have equal priority to other infrastructure such as roads and services.
 - Economic value of trees recognised and valued.
 - Focus on larger longer lived canopy trees.
 - Overall tree population management.
 - Multi-purpose based design.
 - Tree population seen as a continuous resource regardless of ownership boundaries.
3. In accordance with BS 5837:2012, establish a responsible approach to developments and a re-planting specification for removed trees.
4. Manage our tree population with a proactive and informed approach, to maximise ecological, social and economic benefits.

8.26 The Park Development Service has been assisting colleagues in the Planning Service to ensure trees are protected in development applications and Green Infrastructure is promoted. This includes the review of applications and assisting with the creation of Tree Preservation Orders.

8.27 The Park Development Service has been working alongside colleagues in the Parks Operational Team and the Wyres Rivers Trust to ensure the planting of over 4000 trees in Blackpool in 2020. This includes the installation of sustainable living Christmas trees through funding from ward councillors who have been able to redirect funds from previous cut tree installations. The team will continue to lead the tree planting effort across the town in 2021.

8.29 Park Service Management

8.30 During the first lockdown, several members of Parks Service staff were able to assist Public Health and Catering colleagues deliver food parcels as the offices at Stanley Park were transformed into a Community Hub. Whilst this reduced the capacity of the Service to deliver day-to-day duties, it was a worthwhile cause and the team are proud to have been a part of the joint effort in supporting the community.

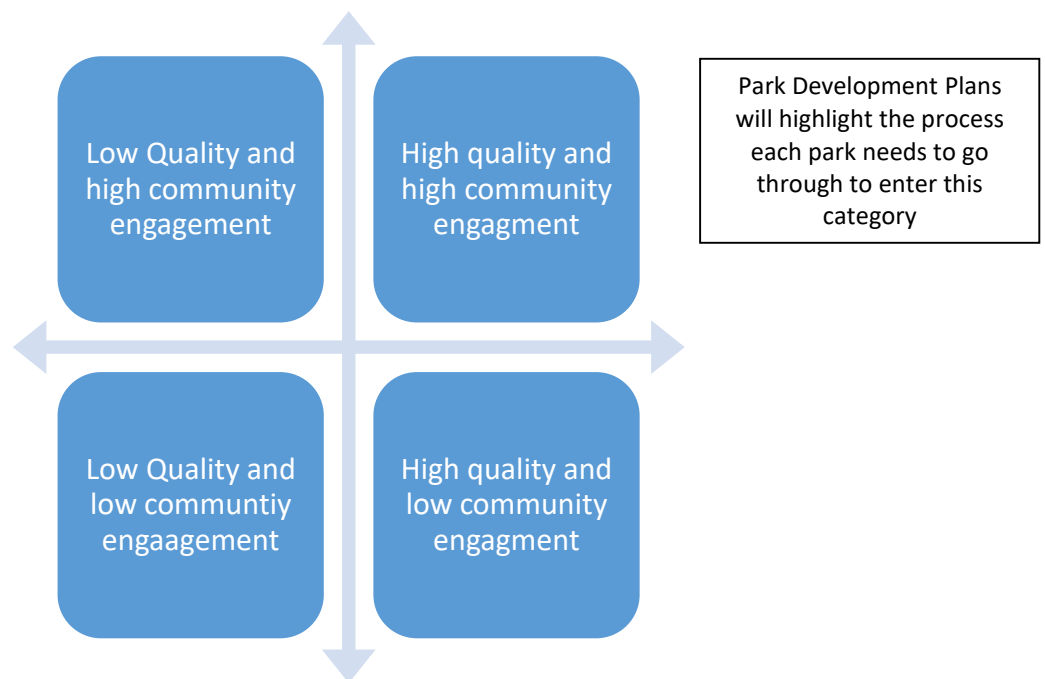
8.31 In November 2020, several swans were reported as dead or unwell on Stanley Park Lake. The Park Development Service immediately contacted DEFRA with suspected Avian Flu and coordinated the response with Public Health England, DEFRA and colleagues across Council services including communications, Environmental Protection and the Parks Operational

team. Sadly over 20 swans lost their lives with each swan being recovered and correctly disposed of to reduce spread by the Parks Operational team.

9.0 Up and coming projects and programmes

9.1 The Park Development Service are in the process of creating park development plans for each park which will shape the future vision of each park. The plans will be made in partnership with the friends groups and through consultation with the local community and park users to ensure each park is unique to the role it provides. The process will enable funds to be directed at the parks with the most need and ensure a consistent approach across the borough. This pro-active approach will also put each green park in a positive position when external funding opportunities arise that support the identified priorities for the space.

9.2 Each Park Development Plan will use the Open Spaces Assessment and Green Flag criteria to highlight potential projects and areas for development. The Park Development Service is taking this proactive approach to help reduce the adhoc requests which lead to disjointed park development and each park not reaching its full potential. Each park is unique and is at a different stage of development so it is hoped that the Park Development Plans are the first step to improving the quality of Blackpool's open spaces.



9.3 The Park Development Service will be working closely with friends groups, ward Councilors and the community to create each Park Development plan as well as a menu of projects along with costings and routes to funding providers.

- 9.4 The Park Development Service has been working in partnership with colleagues at the Enterprise Zone and Leisure Services to ensure new sport facilities there are of a high standard and suitable for the requirements of Blackpool's sport users. This work will continue to be a priority for the Park Service in 2021 as the scheme develops and the new sports plateau is opened in the autumn.
- 9.5 The Park Development Service is a key part of Blackpool Council's successful bid to European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for energy and green improvements to Grange Park. The Parks Service will be working in partnership with Groundwork to implement the £87,000 tree planting element within the programme. They will also be lead in the delivery of the new play area in Grange Park as part of the wider development scheme there.
- 9.6 In order to ensure a positive partnership with ENVECO following the move of the Parks Operational Team to the company anticipated for September 2021, the Parks Service have been developing specifications and working agreements which highlight standards and responsibilities.
- 9.7 Part of this process includes Park Management maps which highlight current management practices for grass cutting, shrub pruning and bed maintenance. These maps will create a clear dialogue between the Parks Service, ENVECO and the community and encourage discussion around efficiencies, biodiversity conservation and standards.
- 9.8 Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

10.0 List of Appendices:

- 10.1 Appendix 9(a): Park Ranger Packs (Sample)

11.0 Financial considerations:

- 11.1 Financial considerations are contained at

12.0 Legal considerations:

- 12.1 None

13.0 Risk management considerations:

- 13.1 The Park Development Service operates within a robust risk assessment framework

14.0 Equalities considerations:

- 14.1 The Park Development Service adhere to the Ethical policy of the Council in ensuring

appropriate use of the town's parks and open spaces.

15.0 Sustainability, climate change and environmental considerations:

15.1 Sustainability and climate change issues are contained within the body of the report.

16.0 Internal/external consultation undertaken:

16.1 None

17.0 Background papers:

17.1 None