

Report to:	TOURISM, ECONOMY AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Relevant Officer:	Lisa Arnold, Strategic Head of Community and Wellbeing Services
Date of Meeting	30 March 2022

PARK AND GREEN ENVIRONMENT ANNUAL REPORT

1 Purpose of the report:

- 1.1 To provide an overview of the service, work undertaken over the last twelve months, performance of the Park Development Service and future priorities.

2 Recommendation:

- 2.1 To scrutinise the work of the service during 2021/2022, provide feedback on any relevant areas within the report and identify any areas for additional scrutiny.

3 Reasons for recommendation:

- 3.1 To ensure effective scrutiny of the Park Development Service

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

- 3.2b Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

- 3.3 Other alternative options to be considered:

- 3.4 None.

4 Council Priority:

- 4.1 The Park Development Service contributes to both council priorities;
- Priority One 'The economy: Maximising growth and opportunity across Blackpool';
 - Priority Two 'Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience'

5 Report Information

- 5.1 The report provides an update on the work and performance of the Park Development Service with a financial overview and projected year end position for 2021/22. The Park Development Service is responsible for the strategic direction and improvement of Blackpool's parks and open spaces to maximise the benefits green spaces can offer to social, economic and environmental objectives.

6 Park Development Service Overview

6.1 The Park Development Service is responsible for:

- Collaboratively 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;
- Working collaboratively with ENVECO NW to ensure the maintenance and presentation of parks and green open spaces across the town meets the agreed standards;
- Sourcing external funding for improvement projects and schemes including playgrounds, buildings and park infrastructure;
- Engaging and connecting 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 promoted and developed with the needs of the park users and establish new groups in areas where required;
- 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;
- Coordinating partnerships and lead on the application of Green Flag awards across the town;
- Developing and co-ordinating a parks volunteering programme which provides volunteers with support and training required to enable positive management of green open spaces.;
- Ensuring 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; and
- Playing a key role in the delivery of the Green & Blue Infrastructure strategy with partners and stakeholders;

6.2 The Park Development Service contributes and plays an active part in supporting some of Blackpools' key strategies and plans, including:

- Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy;
- Tree Strategy;
- Local Plan;
- Active Lives Strategy;
- Open Spaces Assessment; and
- Climate change Action Plan;

6.3 The team comprises of 13 members of staff which sit under Lisa Arnold, Strategic Head of Community and Wellbeing.

Park Development Manager;

Community Engagement Officer;

Parks Volunteer Coordinator;

Park Ranger Supervisor;

Junior Park Ranger Coordinator;

Parks Administration Officer;

Parks Rangers x 4; and

Apprentices x3

- 6.4 Five placements for young people were undertaken in 2021 working alongside the Park Ranger Service gaining skills in community engagement, horticulture and ecological management. One role was a traditional apprenticeship funded through Head Start and 4 were funded through the Kickstart programme. These programmes have proven successful with some individuals progressing into employment with the Parks Development Service.

7 Projects

- 7.1 Stanley Park playground has and is seeing improvement works undertaken including upgrading of pathways, repairs to existing equipment and the addition of several new items including an explorer dome, octo net and cliff rider at approx. £80,000. A disused growing space adjacent has been adapted to provide a viewing space across the play area as requested by many park users.
- 7.2 The Stanley Park Skate Park Development group has been successful in securing £225,000 funding for an improved wheel sports facility at Stanley Park from Sport England and Suez. The group, which comprises of local skating participants, Friends for Stanley Park and Blackpool Council have appointed Mind Works Ramps to undertake the ambitious project. The chosen design includes ramps steps, quarter pipes, curbs and rails, finished in concrete and steel to provide a low-maintenance long lasting facility. Work has started on site and is expected to be completed before the end of April. Indicative designs are included in Appendix 6(a).
- 7.3 At Boundary Park, in the Grange Park Housing Estate additional pathways have been installed to create a circular route around the park. Work is now focused on creating an improved multiuse games area, changing rooms and parking facilities.
- 7.4 A new playing pitch plateau of 115,000sq has been developed at Common Edge as part of the wider Enterprise Zone developments which will include a 3G pitch and new changing room facilities. The grass pitches are now open and have been well received by the football community.

8 Playground improvement schemes

- 8.1 Bispham cliffs – A new assault course has been created to replace the equipment in a poor condition with any equipment in a good condition being transferred to Watson Road Park to help replace a broken swing, furthering our sustainability efforts. Most of the funding has been contributed by ward councillors with Parks Development Service contributing the remainder.
- 8.2 Watson Road Park – As discussed above the play equipment due to be removed will be replaced by equipment from Bispham Cliff. The funding has been provided by ward councillors.
- 8.3 Gynn Sunken Gardens – A new piece of equipment is installed to replace the broken bridge. Most of the funding has been contributed by ward councillors with Parks Development Service contributing the remainder.
- 8.4 Boundary play area – The play area requires several improvements and installations; part funding has been secured with the remainder waiting on application forms.
- 8.5 Carr Road – Plans have been created to improved and replace several items, the project has been funded by commuted sums and will be available soon.

9 Park Ranger Service Update

- 9.1 The BetterStart Park ranger scheme has continued to deliver high quality nature-based activities and events to families with young children. Since April 2021 there have been 450 individual 0-4s attending sessions with many repeat visits on top of this. The Park Ranger Service is now OFSTED registered allowing for full day programmes throughout the school holidays to be delivered, which will enhance the overall Park Ranger programme and meet identified demand locally. A photo board of events is shown in Appendix 6(b).
- 9.2 Funding has recently been received from local councillors to help complete improvement works to the Revoe Community Garden with £16,000 to help purchase additional plants, upgrade tools and Personal Protective Equipment PPE for our volunteers and community events and plan further forest school events for the local community.

10 Community Involvement

- 10.1 The Parks Service has recently recruited a Parks Community Engagement Officer to ensure that communities are at the centre of greening projects within Blackpool. They will work closely with the volunteer coordinator and Friends groups to lead community involvement and grow greenspace volunteering. Many Parks Friends Groups are reporting a drop in active members since COVID, with the exception of Anchorholme who have grown a network of engaged community members. Work will now focus on supporting those existing groups and creating new opportunities.

- 10.2 The Parks Service is working alongside members of the community to create new Friends groups for Mossam Fields and Moorpark to improve the management, promotion and engagement of these sites.
- 10.3 Volunteering hours have not been accurately measured in 2021 due to post vacancies however the service has observed that volunteering activity has increased since COVID restrictions were lifted.
- 10.4 Volunteers have continued to managed Marton Mere Local Nature Reserve for the benefit of both people and wildlife. The team meet weekly to undertake activities such as scrub clearance, pathway maintenance and grassland management.

11 Supporting the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy

- 11.1 The team have planted over 80 large trees throughout Blackpool and including Christmas trees, new street trees, trees in parks, memorial trees, community orchard trees in collaboration with schools, construction companies, social enterprises and Trees in Cities. Funding has been provided by the Parks Development Service, ward councilors and commuted Sums. A further 500 whips have been planted at Mereside Park and an additional 1000 whips have been sourced from the Woodland Trust.

12 Events and Promotion

- 12.1 Due to COVID restrictions and guidelines many events on Blackpool's parks were paused for the majority of 2021. Parkrun and several running events were able to go ahead alongside smaller scale community events such as sport activities.
- 12.2 In August 2021, the Adventure Cinema company came to Stanley Park to screen the Greatest Showman and Grease. These events were well attended and received lots of positive feedback. On the back of this success the Adventure Cinema is booked to return 29 April-1 May showing Dirty Dancing, Mama Mia and Jurassic Park.

13.0 Parks Development Service (other)

- 13.1 Sadly, highly pathogenic Avian influenza H5N1 was confirmed again this winter at Stanly Park lake resulting in 25 swans dying. The Parks Service were able to quickly react and work with colleagues in ENVECO and Environmental Protection to close the lake and ensure communication messages were disseminated.
- 13.2 As expected, the transition of the parks operational team to ENVECO in September 2021 has taken some time to bed in and is working well. Regular relationship meetings take place between the Parks Development Team and ENVECO to agree longer term work plans and focuses and opportunities to work together to improve the green spaces across the town. An example of a joint project which is currently underway is the refurbishment and equipment replacement in Stanley Park playground. The parks team have arranged the equipment replacement which ENVECO have committed to refurbishing the pathways and tidying up the existing facilities. In addition, the previous GrowZone, which has been disused for some time will have picnic benches and seating installed to enable dog owners

with children to watch the play park without needing to take their dogs into the playground area.

- 13.3 Over the last 7 months the service has faced significant change, with vacancies across a quarter of its workforce. Key roles remained vacant for several months whilst the recruitment process was carried out which has resulted in several projects, particularly around community engagement and the development of Parks Development Plans not being progressed as far as the service had hoped. Therefore, the development of these plans remains a key focus for 2022/23.
- 13.4 A review of the tree and bench memorial scheme and application process has been completed, with the application process eventually moving online, making it more user friendly and streamlined. The review included assessing tree species which would further benefit the parks and provide biodiversity, with a new species list in place. The benches have been changed to ensure we create sustainable practices with all benches are made from recycled plastic and cast aluminum, reducing maintenance. A condition audit of all existing memorial benches was also carried out and a replacement and removal plan agreed with ENVECO.
- 13.5 A tree survey of all trees on Blackpool Council land was carried out throughout Autumn 2021. A total of 7000 trees and groups of trees have been surveyed and highlighted within a schedule specifying any maintenance requirements and sets of plans which can be integrated into our asset maps. In addition, a robust risk management process and reporting procedure has been developed for the zoning of trees and logging any 'failed' trees. This will ensure we are taking a proactive and responsible approach at managing our trees and ensure any failed trees are inspected to see if the hazards were detectable and any learning shared to reduce the risk to the council of public liability claims.

14 Key Future Priorities

- 14.1 A Stanley Park Masterplan is currently being developed to identify areas requiring significant refurbishment and areas that present opportunities for investment to increase footfall and potentially attract new target markets to the park. The masterplan will be developed with key stakeholders including the Friends of Stanley Park, ENVECO, park concessionaires, local Councilors as well as consultation with the local community including users and non-users of the park. A consultation timeline and approach can be found at Appendix 6(c).
- 14.2 Blackpool's Open Spaces Assessment, which highlights the current condition of all Blackpool Parks and open spaces, has directed future priorities and is contributing to creating Park Development Plans. These will be used to create targeted site improvements with the view to obtaining Green Flag where possible. The Park Development Plans will shape the future management of the spaces by the grounds maintenance team to ensure a consistent approach and quality of open spaces across Blackpool. Three parks (Anchorholme, Highfield Road and Revoe) have initially been targeted to undergo the Park's Development process and community engagement has started to establish a community vision and aims for each park. A document highlighting the Park Development Plan process is included as Appendix 6(d).

- 14.3 The website will be updated and improved to ensure it better meets the needs of the public in providing informative information about local parks and green spaces. The website development team have committed to starting this work in April 2022 and it is anticipated the project will take 4 – 6 months to complete. An overview of the proposed page structure can be found at Appendix 6(e) which shows the extent of the update and proposed changes.
- 14.4 The Parks, Leisure and Catering Services have jointly employed a Marketing Officer to promote the work of the three teams. Their initial focus for the parks team is looking at promoting existing events and services such as the Park Ranger’s programme. The service plan to develop regular a regular stakeholder newsletter to promote the work of the service and ensure case studies and success stories are shouted about as this has previously been recognised as an area for improvement.
- 14.5 Further procedures are to be implemented to establish the Parks Development Service and will include providing clarity and enhancement in our working partnership with Enveco, existing services and stakeholders, and furthering our community engagement through our new officer. The establishment of the parks development plan is key to provide direction, improve practices and plan future projects, whilst been available as a shared resource. This will direct future projects allowing time and resources to be allocated, whilst providing consultations to take place and valuable feedback to be highlighted. Therefore, these will be a priority going forward.
- 14.6 The tree survey has highlighted that we have a limited range of tree species and therefore, to improve our biodiversity, pest and disease resilience and improve amenity, parks and green spaces will be planted with as many diverse species as possible adding further interest to our areas, benefitting wildlife and helping to offset the borough’s carbon footprint.

15 Budget Information

- 15.1 The Parks Development Service has an annual expenditure of £799,623 and annual income target of £338,245 with the net overall cost of the service being £461,378. For 2021/22 the service has exceeded its income target through securing of additional external funds, predominantly for capital expenditure and improvement works. However, the service has continued to see the impact of COVID on income particularly in relation to bowling and events, with very few large events returning for Summer 2021. The projected year end position for the service is to be £20,000 over budget, all of which related to bowling and event income targets not being achieved.

Does the information submitted include any exempt information?

No

16.0 List of Appendices:

- 16.1 Appendix 6(a)– Skate Park designs
 Appendix 6(b)– Rangers images
 Appendix 6(c) – Stanley Park Masterplan process
 Appendix 6(d) – Park Development Plan Process
 Appendix 6(e) – Website considerations

17.0 Legal considerations

17.1 None

18.0 Human Resources considerations

18.1 The Park and Green Environment Service employs 30 staff.

19.0 Equalities considerations

19.1 The aim of the Parks and Green Environment Service is to ensure accessibility for all interests and abilities.

20.0 Financial considerations

20.1 Revenue savings and investment in the Parks and Green Environment are detailed in the body of the report and have been considerable.

21.0 Risk management considerations

21.1 The Parks and Green Environment Service operates within a robust risk assessment framework

22.0 Ethical considerations

22.1 The Parks and Green Environment Service adhere to the Ethical policy of the Council in ensuring appropriate use of the town's parks and open spaces.

23.0 Internal/External Consultation undertaken

23.1 None

24.0 Background papers

24.1 None