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# Overview and Scrutiny

Parks management and maintenance review

Sustainable Development Select Committee

Spring 2020

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**Membership of the Sustainable Development Select Committee in 2019-20:**

**Councillor Liam Curran (Chair)**

**Councillor Patrick Codd (Vice-Chair)**

**Councillor Obajimi Adefiranye**

**Councillor Abdeslam Amrani**

**Councillor Suzannah Clarke**

**Councillor Mark Ingleby**

**Councillor Louise Krupski**

**Councillor Pauline Morrison**

**Councillor Alan Smith**

**Councillor James-J Walsh**

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## 1. Purpose and structure of the review

- 1.1. In April 2019, Members of the Sustainable Development Select Committee discussed their work programme for 2019-20. They considered their priorities for the year ahead and agreed which issues were of primary importance. One of the Committee's key areas of interest was that of parks management and maintenance and it was agreed that this would be the topic of the Committee's in-depth review.
- 1.2. The topic of 'parks management' met the criteria for an in-depth scrutiny review because:
  - it is a strategic and significant issue for the Council and its finances;
  - it has the potential to affect a large number of people living, working or studying in Lewisham (and also smaller groups of people disproportionately);
  - the Council is reviewing and developing this area of work.
- 1.3. The review is of particular significance because the Council has initiated the process of reviewing the management arrangements for its parks service – in anticipation of the end of a long term maintenance and management contract with an external provider.
- 1.4. In June 2019, the Committee received a 'scoping report'<sup>1</sup> for the review – which set out the context for this piece of work and proposed key lines of enquiry – as well as timetable for evidence gathering to answer the questions posed in those key lines of enquiry.
- 1.5. The Committee considered its priorities for the review given the time and resources available and agreed three 'key lines of enquiry' (KLOE). These are set out below and represent broad areas for investigation.

### KLOE1: future options for the parks service

- (Having considered reports by officers) - Which option for the future of the parks service does the Committee believe would be best?
- What good practice should Lewisham seek to retain and which areas could be strengthened further?

### KLOE2: income generation

- How much progress have officers made in delivering proposals to generate income from the borough's parks?
- Are there examples of good practice that Lewisham can learn from? How might Lewisham avoid the potential pitfalls of income generating projects?

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<sup>1</sup> Sustainable Development Select Committee: ['Parks management review scoping report'](#) June 2019

- Are changes required to Lewisham's policy for events in parks to ensure that the Council continues to build on its best practice whilst also creating opportunities for income generation?

KLOE3: maintenance and management of other open spaces

- How well is Lewisham homes doing at maintaining and managing housing amenity space?
- How might Lewisham ensure freedom of access to open spaces in the borough?
- Are there innovative options for the maintenance of these spaces that the Council could consider?
- What progress has been made on delivering the greening fund?

1.6. During the course of the review, the Committee also agreed to seek evidence regarding a number of interrelated issues, including:

- Tree planting and climate change mitigation
- Bio-diversity corridors for insect migration
- Flood alleviation
- Use of equipment in parks and sustainability
- Opening hours for parks and accessibility of cycling routes
- Lighting in parks
- Management and maintenance of play areas for children and young adults

1.7. The timetable for consideration of reports and collection of evidence for the review was as follows:

Committee meeting 4 June 2019

Consideration of the 'key lines of enquiry' for the review and agreement of a timetable for collecting evidence.

Committee meeting: 4 July 2019

Update from officers on the development of the options for the future of the parks service (to help answer questions under KLOE1);

Lewisham's parks visit: summer 2019

Visit with officers from the parks service to examples of good practice in the borough (to help answer the questions posed under KLOE1 and KLOE2);

Committee meeting: 11 September 2019

Report on summer visit by Councillors who attended; final report from officers on 'future options for the parks service' in advance of Mayor and Cabinet;

Committee meeting: 28 October 2019

Update from Lewisham Homes (to help answer the questions posed under KLOE3); invitation to Lewisham's Green Spaces Forum and representatives of 'Good Parks for London'

Lewisham Green Spaces Forum 28 January 2020

Members attended a meeting of the forum and listened to views about the future insourcing of the parks service (to answer the questions posed under KLOE 1)

Committee meeting 10 March 2020

Consideration of the parks and open spaces strategy in advance of Mayor and Cabinet; final report and recommendations for submission to Mayor and Cabinet.

## 2. Context

- 2.1. National planning policy promotes the protection and improvement of green and open spaces. It encourages the strategic protection of the green infrastructure open spaces, river corridors, green roofs and gardens in order to create high quality environments, enhance local landscape character and contribute to the distinctiveness of different places. Policy also recognises the role of green spaces in promoting healthy communities by reducing air pollution and noise as well as mitigating the impacts of extreme heat and extreme rainfall events. Furthermore, parks are recognised for the important role they play in encouraging ecology and biodiversity.
- 2.2. Research<sup>2</sup> by the Heritage Lottery Fund has found that nationally, park use is rising while resources and skills available to manage them are declining. It has also found that the downward trend in condition of parks first highlighted in its 2014 report on the state of parks is set to continue.
- 2.3. The Mayor of London's environment strategy recognises the importance of parks in the broader 'green infrastructure' of the city. It includes the ambition to make London 'Greener':
- 'All Londoners should be able to enjoy the very best parks, trees and wildlife. Creating a greener city is good for everyone – it will improve people's health and quality of life, support the success of businesses and attract more visitors to London'<sup>3</sup>  
London Environment Strategy (2018) p12
- 2.4. The Greater London Authority's 'natural capital account for green space in London' estimates the value of London's parks to be 5 billion pounds a year. It notes that: 'For each £1 spent by local authorities and their partners on public parks, Londoners enjoy at least £27 in value'<sup>4</sup> This benefit is accrued from the value of:
- Recreation
  - Mental health
  - Physical health
  - Property
  - Carbon storage
  - Temperature regulation (based on lives saved due to cooler peak temperatures)
- 2.5. Accordingly, 'Making Lewisham Greener' is a priority in [Lewisham's Corporate Strategy \(2018-2022\)](#). Through the delivery of the strategy, the Council is committed to ensuring that: 'Everyone enjoys our green spaces and benefits from healthy environment as we work to protect and improve our local environment.'

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<sup>2</sup> Heritage Lottery Fund '[Public Parks Face Decline](#)'

<sup>3</sup> Mayor of London '[London Environment Strategy](#)' (2018)

<sup>4</sup> Greater London Authority '[Natural Capital Accounts for London](#)' (2017)

- 2.6. Lewisham's Mayor and Cabinet has agreed to the creation of a 'greening fund'<sup>5</sup> to support the delivery of the plans in the corporate strategy. The amount of £360k is being distributed to parks groups in order to enable local groups to improve local green spaces. Officers in the Council's Green Scene team are overseeing the Council's approach to this work to ensure the best use of the funding.
- 2.7. This is important because, by 2021, projections indicate that Lewisham's population will have increased to 318,000 people and by 2031 it is anticipated the population will reach 344,500 people. To accommodate this growth, the Committee has heard that national assessments as well as those for the draft London Plan indicate the need for between 20 to 30 thousand<sup>6</sup> new homes in Lewisham over the next decade.
- 2.8. Lewisham's Open Spaces strategy (2020-25) provides useful descriptions of the different types of open spaces in the borough:
- Parks and gardens:** includes urban parks, county parks and formal gardens
- Children's play:** includes equipped play areas, multi-use games areas (MUGA), BMX tracks and skateboard parks
- Natural and semi-natural urban greenspace:** includes green corridors, woodlands, scrubland, wetland, and nature conservation sites
- Outdoor sports facilities:** includes pitch sports, athletic tracks, tennis and bowls
- Amenity:** housing open space, village greens, informal recreation space, hard-surfaced areas (civic space) roadside enclosure
- Allotments and community gardens:** site opportunities for those people who wish to grow their own produce
- Green corridors:** includes grids, chains and networks
- Cemeteries and churchyards:** Quiet contemplation and burial of the dead, often linked to the promotion of wildlife conservation, biodiversity and to provide a link to the past.
- 2.9. The review focuses primarily on Lewisham's parks and gardens. However, members of the Committee were also interested in the provision of green spaces by Lewisham Homes as well as children's play - additional information about this is included in the sections below.

### Glendale

- 2.10. Glendale grounds management service has been Lewisham Council's contracted provider of parks management and maintenance services since the year 2000. Its full list of services to the Council includes:<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Mayor and Cabinet '[Greening Fund report](#)' (2018)

<sup>6</sup> Sustainable Development Select Committee '[draft local plan](#)' January 2020, p81

<sup>7</sup> See Glendale, '[your service](#)': and '[the future maintenance of parks and open spaces](#)' Mayor and Cabinet (October 2019)



- Grounds and ecological management
- Environmental maintenance
- Serviced facilities e.g. parks buildings and depots
- Maintenance of park furniture and sports equipment
- Playground inspection repair and maintenance
- Water play and water features
- Infrastructure maintenance
- Keepers/patrols/locking/unlocking
- Events and activities
- Sports and sports development
- Marketing and development
- Customer care

2.11. A limited grounds maintenance only service is provided at other locations such as:

- Closed churchyards
- Car parks
- Homeless persons' accommodation
- The corporate estate, including Laurence House and the Civic Suite in Catford
- Two school playing fields (Elm Lane and Whitefoot Lane)

2.12. It should be noted that in addition to the outsourced services provided by Glendale a number of Lewisham's open spaces, as set out below, are managed in-house by the Council's Environment Division. This 'mixed economy' of service delivery has been in place for the duration of the outsourced contract and has delivered comparable levels of quality across all locations.

- Mature trees within parks
- Street trees
- Infrastructure maintenance within closed churchyards
- Beckenham Place Park
- 18 Nature reserves
- 37 Allotment sites
- Cemeteries and crematorium grounds

2.13. The contract for parks and greenspaces management and maintenance is worth approximately £2.5m a year. This does not include the western section of Beckenham Place Park, which is managed in-house and has its own budget. The annual contract was originally worth approximately £3.5m but at that time it also included Lewisham Homes. The delivery and performance of the contract is overseen by officers in the Council's Environmental Services Division within the Housing, Regeneration and Environment directorate.

2.14. Funding for parks management has, like all other Council services, been subject to budget cuts and efficiencies due to the ongoing reduction in Lewisham's budget.

Nonetheless, the Council has been successful at accessing funding from external sources - and notable examples include the Heritage Lottery Funding for Beckenham Place Park and the funding for the improvements to Ladywell Fields and the Waterlink Way.

### Commercialisation

- 2.15. During 2017-18 around 500 events were held in Lewisham's parks and open spaces. These ranged from small events to the two day OnBlackheath music festival. In October 2018, the Committee considered officer proposals<sup>8</sup> for balancing the Council's budget and heard from officers that demand for events in Lewisham's parks and open spaces is increasing. In particular, officers proposed (see proforma CUS2) that large events in the borough's biggest parks (Blackheath and Beckenham Place Park) might generate significant income. A target of £500k was proposed to be delivered over the two years to 2021.
- 2.16. Responding to the proposals, the Committee recommended to Mayor and Cabinet that the policy for managing commercial events in Lewisham's parks should be reviewed. Members suggested that this should build on best practice and that it might include options for charging for the full range of commercial activities taking place on the borough's green spaces (including but not limited to: commercial dog walking, commercial exercise classes and other profit making activities)<sup>9</sup>.
- 2.17. A number of London authorities are undertaking projects to raise income from parks. Such initiatives might include small scale commercialisation, such as charging users that deliver professional services from parks and rents for park buildings. Some boroughs have begun to use their parks for private ceremonies and celebrations, such as weddings. However, others have begun to host large scale events such as festivals and concerts over a number of days or weeks<sup>10</sup>. It is worth noting that a number of community campaigns against the commercialisation of local parks have been started in boroughs that are using their parks for large scale events, with some community groups concerned about the damage to park infrastructure and the limiting of access to public space<sup>11</sup>.
- 2.18. As outlined below – the provision of income generating events is largely an issue for the Council's parks management contractor. Future changes mean that the Council will have a far greater role to play in determining the programme of events and income generating activities for Lewisham's parks and open spaces.

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<sup>8</sup> Sustainable Development Select Committee '[agenda](#)' (28 October 2018)

<sup>9</sup> Committee [comments](#) to the Public Accounts Select Committee meeting (7 November 2018)

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Guardian '[London's parks accused of creeping privatisation of public space](#)' (2018)

<sup>11</sup> Crowd Justice: [more information about the campaign](#)

### 3. Findings

#### Future options for the parks service

- 3.1. Glendale's long-term contract with Lewisham Council was due come to an end in early 2020. This change presented an option for the Council to review its arrangements for the management and maintenance of Lewisham's parks.
- 3.2. Before the summer of 2019, a report to Committee set out the timeline – and the relevant considerations for the options appraisal being prepared for a decision by Mayor and Cabinet. The options included: retendering of the contract to a green spaces provider; bringing the service back 'in-house'; sharing of services with other authorities or public sector partners or developing an arm's length local authority trading company (LATCo) to provide services on the Council's behalf.
- 3.3. Given the Council's restrained financial position it was recognised that the expenditure on the new service would be a key consideration in the options appraisal. Officers in the Council's financial team supported the modelling for each of the options and an appraisal model developed by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) was also used.
- 3.4. The APSE model set out a number of key areas for assessment, including: risk; advantages and opportunities; value for money; commercial opportunities for the Council; viability of each option to deliver a quality service; responsiveness of management and assuredness of service delivery as well as social value (which was assessed in line with the Council's newly agreed policy).
- 3.5. Assurance was provided by officers that, whichever option was agreed, Glendale had committed that it would provide a quality service until the end of the contract. The Committee was also assured that the relevant consideration would be given to the employment rights and conditions of parks service employees in the event of any change to the service.
- 3.6. The Committee recommended that in developing any future plans for the parks service, consideration should be given to:
  - The future management and viability of spaces for sport in parks;
  - Options for the ring fencing of the parks budget;
  - Safeguarding the employment of professionals with volunteers focused on providing support – rather than allowing volunteers to replace paid employees;
  - Biodiversity, climate change mitigation and environmental protection;
  - Management of rough sleepers;
  - The availability of officer resources to deliver the urban national park project;
  - The maintenance of specialist assets (such as built features as well as ceremonial and memorial gardens) in parks

- 3.7. At its meeting in September 2019 – the Committee carried out pre-decision scrutiny of the options appraisal for the future of the parks service in advance of a decision being taken at Mayor and Cabinet. The appraisal put forward three models for delivering the parks service: a local authority trading company; a contract managed service; an in-house service.
- 3.8. The previously considered option for developing a shared service was discounted during the process due to the practicalities of timing and the potential implications for the control and management of the service. And – whilst it was recognised that a local authority trading company could provide a number of benefits – officers believed that there was insufficient time to carry out the work required to make this option viable before the end of the Glendale contract.
- 3.9. It was also noted that the Council’s Corporate Strategy 2018-2022 priority: ‘Building an inclusive local economy’ states that when considering whether to commission services, ‘we will have an assumption that the Council is our preferred provider and in-source our contracts’.
- 3.10. Assessing the various options, officers considered the following factors:
- Risk
  - Advantages/opportunities
  - Value for money
  - Commercial opportunities to generate income
  - Barriers to market entry
  - Responsiveness/management and surety of service delivery
  - Social Value
- 3.11. The recommendation made by officers - based on the options appraisal - was that the parks service should return in house to direct delivery and management by the Council. The number of wider opportunities and challenges related to the insourcing of the parks service were also reported to the Committee. One compelling factor for insourcing was the increased control that the Council would have over the day to day management of the parks service – which would also allow for increased prioritisation of budgets and spending decisions in parks.
- 3.12. Consideration for the development of a LATCo was not discounted by officers but it was reported that Councils that had most successfully created LATCos that incorporated a broader range of environmental services within the remit of the company – in addition to parks management. Costs, governance, legal and financial implications would also need to be better examined and understood before the Council could embark on the commercialisation of the service. The Committee recommended that this work be expedited during the transition period from the

contract to the in-house service.

Key finding: the planned insourcing of the parks service will bring opportunities and challenges. An opportunity exists in the creation of a local authority trading company.

3.13. The Committee also questioned the Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport – who outlined the ambitions for the parks service, in line with the Council’s corporate strategy. It was felt that increased control of the service would allow for: increased flexibility of services; better training for staff as well as better pay and an anticipated increase in motivation.

3.14. The Committee agreed with the recommendation made by officers – and emphasised its recommendation about the evaluation of options for the future creation of a LATCo. Subsequently, at its meeting in October 2019 Mayor and Cabinet<sup>12</sup> agreed that:

(1) Intention in principle be given to insource all aspects of Lewisham’s parks and open space services on 1 November 2021, subject to further detailed consideration.

(2) Officers undertake a more detailed evaluation of the option to establish a wider divisional LATCo the outcome of which will be to be reviewed following the insourcing of the parks service.

(3) The current contract be extended on the existing terms and conditions with Glendale Grounds Management for 20 months from 29th February 2020 until 31st October 2021 at a maximum cost to the Council of £4,347,000

Key finding: there is further work for scrutiny to do in advance of the insourcing of the parks service. Scrutiny’s role as a ‘critical friend’ will be vital whilst officers negotiate the risks implicit in such a significant service change. Support could also be provided for assessments of best practice and consideration of relevant operating models – both for the service and for any potential future LATCo.

### Good Parks for London

3.15. Parks for London is an independent charity which advocates for the protection and best use of London’s green spaces. Its stated vision for London is that it: ‘...is a healthy and sustainable world city. A place where parks and green spaces make a contribution to the health and wellbeing of Londoners and to the environment they live and work in’<sup>13</sup>. It is responsible for the new ‘Good Parks for London Report’, which assesses the overall quality of parks and parks services in all of the London boroughs.

<sup>12</sup> Mayor and Cabinet ‘[agenda and decisions](#)’ 10 October 2019

<sup>13</sup> See Parks for London ‘[about us](#)’

3.16. Researchers for the 'Good Parks for London' report<sup>14</sup> use the following measures for assessment:

**Public satisfaction** (based on borough surveys)

**Awards for quality** (based on numbers of Green Flags and London in Bloom awards)

**Collaboration** (evidenced by cross boundary management and delivery of parks services through partnerships and alliances)

**Events** (based on quality of events polices as well as numbers and variety of events)

**Health, fitness and well-being** (incorporating promotion of social prescribing; health campaigns and healthy infrastructure, such as free water fountains)

**Supporting nature** (based on biodiversity action planning and the proportion of sites of importance for nature conservation that are being well managed)

**Community involvement** (based on a combination of measures on involvement of community groups)

**Skills development** (number of parks apprentices as a percentage of the total workforce)

**Sustainability** (based on the sustainability of fleet vehicles, use of battery operated equipment and management of waste)

**Strategic planning** (assessed by current open space/green infrastructure strategy action plans and management systems)

3.17. Lewisham's parks (and parks management service) received the highest ranking of the 33 London Boroughs (and City of London) in 2018. Lewisham's strengths were also highlighted in several sections of the report which demonstrate good practice. In particular, Lewisham's planning and programming for events was commended:

'Lewisham's parks currently offer one of the most diverse range of community, sporting, arts and cultural events in London. They provide a mixture of charity and commercial events that increase public use of parks and promote greater social inclusion and cohesion'

Good Parks for London (2018), p20

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<sup>14</sup> [Good Parks for London](#) (2018)



A blank square indicates that a Borough has not submitted data for a particular area or the data is not available or has not achieved a score.

#### Scoring criteria



**Key finding: Taking into account a range of measures – Lewisham’s parks are independently acknowledged as some of the best in London.**

- 3.18. Lewisham’s partnership with Glendale and the combined efforts of both organisations to bolster community involvement is also praised in the report. Nonetheless, the Committee is conscious that the high standard achieved must not drop with insourcing and it is also mindful that there are areas for improvement. Excellent standards need to be reached across all measures for all parks in Lewisham.
- 3.19. To better understand the Good Parks for London assessment the Committee invited Tony Leach, Chief Executive of Parks for London to attend its meeting in October 2019. The Committee heard that Parks for London was not only interested in parks and open spaces but also in the maintenance of green infrastructure from ‘doorstep to destination’ – this built on the acknowledgement that all green spaces mattered. During the question and answer session, a number of issues were discussed, a summary of key points it included below:

#### Insourcing

- 3.19.1. The Committee heard that current trend seems to be for London Boroughs to bring services back in-house for two main reasons: firstly there are very few costs savings still to be made from outsourcing services. There is also the possibility that if contracts continued to be squeezed then providers might go out of business; secondly – the delivery of services in-house allows for greater flexibility, especially during periods of seasonal demand.
- 3.19.2. The number of green spaces contractors in London has reduced from 15 to three in the past five years. This is partly because of acquisitions – but it is largely because there is very little money to be made in delivering green spaces management and maintenance services.

3.19.3. There are ways to ensure that insourced parks services can be encouraged to maintain services. In some boroughs, user groups are enabled to report on the maintenance and management of parks and green spaces. Parks for London has developed a quality manual to assess standards in parks which could be used to support this work.

Key finding: User groups can play an important role in reporting issues and helping to maintain high standards.

3.19.4. The presence of people in parks helps to maintain a sense of safety – there are examples of parks in which dog walkers – and residents in the vicinity of parks are given a special contact phone number to report issues.

3.19.5. The days of having permanent staff at every park are over. However, some boroughs issue uniforms to members of friends groups – so that they stand out and provide a visible presence in a park.

3.19.6. The standard of parks in London is falling over time – as the squeeze of resources pushes boroughs to do the minimum to maintain their parks and green spaces.

#### Commercialisation and collaboration

3.19.7. Traditionally – councils had looked upon parks as assets that maintained themselves. However, this is not the case – parks need management.

Key finding: Lewisham demonstrates a range of good practice – but it may need to draw on external ideas to continue to innovate.

3.19.8. Income generation could be part of the mix of activities in parks. Parks for London has developed an events policy for councils to use – it also benchmarks costs between boroughs.

3.19.9. The quality of cafes in parks across London varies considerably. There are always a number of issues to consider – including: local feeling towards established providers; affordability of the offer and the opportunity to improve provision.

3.19.10. The Council might seek to manage green spaces as a whole rather than maintaining the artificial division between parks and housing green space.

3.19.11. Parks user groups are formed for a variety of different reasons – often in response to a threat to a park. However, once they achieve their objectives – these groups can lose their impetus. Support could be provided for user group



– but care had to be taken about how this was delivered. Efforts by boroughs to set up user groups might be well meaning but they were fraught with problems.

3.19.12. User groups should have a named person at the Council that they could contact for support and sometimes user groups need more coordinated support from fundraisers or other technical support.



## The Open Spaces Assessment

3.20. The Committee has been scrutinising the development of the new Local Plan. As part of this work, it is reviewing the developing evidence base for the new plan. At its meeting in April 2019 – the Committee reviewed the ‘Lewisham open spaces assessment’<sup>15</sup> - which was carried out by Jon Sheaf & associates and overseen by the planning department. It included categorisation and assessment of 349 parks and green spaces in Lewisham.

3.21. The study team considered the quality and accessibility of Lewisham’s green spaces, in order to inform future planning policy. The study also reviewed future requirements for open space, given the projected increase in Lewisham’s population over the next 20 years. Analysis for the study found that:

‘To maintain the current level of greenspace provision, the growth in the borough’s population over the next twenty years implies the need for the provision of approximately 50 hectares of new public open space by 2030. The benefits that could accrue from additional open space could be delivered by improving the quality of existing provision.’

Open Spaces Assessment 2019, p7

<sup>15</sup> LB Lewisham [Open Spaces Assessment](#)

Key finding: to meet the requirements of an increasing population – Lewisham will have to continue to improve the quality of its parks. Moreover, it is recognised that facilities in parks will need to be extended and varied to meet the needs of the growing population. There will also have to be a greater emphasis on parks and all of Lewisham’s green spaces to mitigate the pressures on the environment caused by an increase in population.

3.22. The assessment of Lewisham’s existing open spaces found that the majority of Lewisham’s parks were of good or fair quality. However, the assessment did not find any ‘excellent’ parks in the borough. It also found that Lewisham has a number of poor quality green spaces, including a number of spaces that are categorised as ‘pocket parks’. Though it should be noted that a distinction is drawn between those spaces that are publicly accessible and those that are not. For example, the assessment included some areas adjoining railway corridors and a number of other areas that would not be suitable for public access.

#### Lewisham Homes

3.23. The Committee wanted to better understand how Lewisham Homes manages the communal green spaces in and around Lewisham’s housing stock so it invited representatives to attend the Committee’s meeting in October 2019.

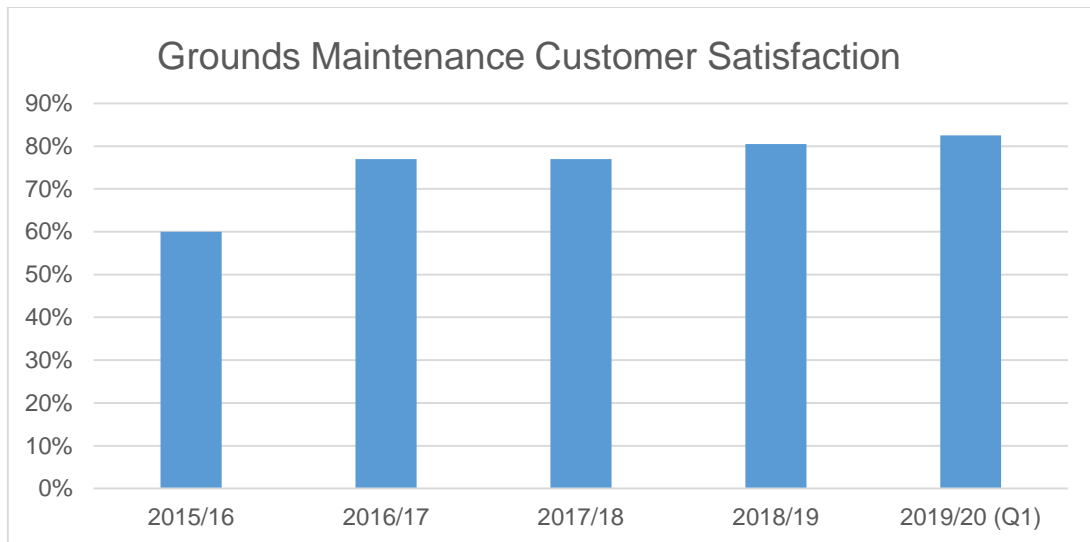
3.24. Lewisham Homes’ annual report<sup>16</sup> (2018) states that resident satisfaction with grounds maintenance increased from 62% in 2015-16 to 77% in 2017-18:

‘We have invested £180k in improving our environmental services, which includes caretaking, grounds maintenance and bulk waste removal... We’ve recruited an extra team of gardeners so that we can spend more time improving the quality of the green spaces on our estates, and we’re planting thousands of new flowers and shrubs that are bee friendly, sustainable and will grow each year.’

Lewisham Home’s annual report (2018) p6

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<sup>16</sup> Lewisham Homes ‘[annual report](#)’ (2018)



3.25. The Committee heard that Lewisham Homes sees communal gardens as ‘estate parks’ – that is: places of rest, recreation and inspiration which have potential to improve mental and physical health and to promote community cohesion. The grounds maintenance team is a key element in realising that potential.

3.26. Grounds maintenance services were previously provided by Glendale (as part of the Council contract) however – in late 2015 Lewisham Homes returned the service in house and consulted with residents about their priorities. As a result Lewisham Homes has moved away from a commercial culture, focussed purely on maintenance, to a dedicated community-orientated approach. From the outset of the insourcing of it engaged residents in helping shape how it maintained and invested in sites.

Key finding: Lewisham Homes has moved from a commercial/contracting approach to grounds maintenance to one that is based on community engagement.

3.27. Residents wanted more certainty about schedules and standards so Lewisham Homes replaced the client/contractor performance based model with an area-based one. It sent out teams, dedicated to specific areas, to work on a clear fortnightly cyclical maintenance programme so residents would know when to expect their gardening team and what to expect on a maintenance visit:

You said	We will
We want a more regular service	The service will be delivered every 2 weeks across 4 areas, using 7 teams of staff.
What standard are the grounds supposed to be kept in?	We are simplifying the standard of the grounds maintenance service to enable residents to help shape and monitor the quality of the service.
We want to be involved in monitoring this standard of service.	
We want to be involved with making decisions about the service	We want residents to engage and assist us with our local Grounds Maintenance improvement plans. Please contact us if you're interested in being part of this.
Different gardeners come on each visit. We want someone who takes ownership and who knows our area to do the work.	We have set up a team structure that makes sure the same gardeners remain responsible for work in your area, supported by one or two supervisors.

Information for residents of Lewisham Homes about the insourcing of the grounds maintenance contract<sup>17</sup>

- 3.28. As well as ensuring all sites receive regular maintenance, the Lewisham Homes approach has helped build relationships with residents and take ownership of the sites they maintain. They built on this relationship to develop an annual investment plan to deliver sustainable improvements – often with direct input from residents and partner organisations. As well as working with people in their neighbourhoods, officers have collaborated on a more strategic basis with the Residents’ Engagement Panel (REP).
- 3.29. From 2019/20 Lewisham Homes has begun adapting its approach to promote more environmentally sustainable improvements. A key part of the programme is to develop a bee corridor around the borough which links sections of green space to enable bees and other insects to easily cross between green spaces. Further work will be carried out in spring 2020.

Key finding: Lewisham Homes’ plans for a ‘bee corridor’ are welcome – however – the details of its development and plans for its management should be reviewed further.

- 3.30. Lewisham Homes has used the insourcing process to progressively harmonise terms and conditions for grounds maintenance staff so they now enjoy the same basic annual leave and sick pay entitlements and their pay scales are commensurate with

<sup>17</sup> Lewisham Homes [Grounds maintenance comes to Lewisham Homes](#) (2015)

caretaking staff. Staff surveys indicate environment staff are more engaged and motivated compared with other field-based employees. Furthermore, like their counterparts in caretaking, grounds maintenance staff benefit from a basic professional skills programme, opportunities for career progression and a quarterly performance conversation with their line managers.

Key finding: Lewisham Homes' approach to insourcing demonstrates the possibilities for improving staff working conditions and encouraging engagement.

3.31. There were added costs associated with bringing the grounds maintenance service in house as Lewisham Homes took on liability for pensions and other staffing related costs. It is recognised that there are likely to be increased costs as a result of the Council bringing its services back in house (the initial estimation is an increase of more than £100k on contract costs).



## Field work

3.32. The Committee carried out a visit in the summer of 2019. Its purpose was to see first-hand how Lewisham's parks are being maintained and managed. Council officers were also present on the visit to answer questions. Members visited the following locations:

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

3.33. Members taking part in the visit had a number of questions that arose from the key lines of enquiry. The specific interest was in further exploring KLOE1: *What good practice should Lewisham seek to retain and which areas could be strengthened further?* The additional questions were as follows:

- What are the differences between management of big/small parks/pocket parks?
- How businesses/cafes are managed in parks?
- Is there a process for creating links/routes/signage between parks?
- How is the upkeep of formal areas/monuments/sports facilities managed?
- Are there examples of projects that have encouraged significant increase in parks use/successful park improvement projects?
- What's the process for staff training/tree management and planting/use of equipment and minimisation of carbon emissions/use of glyphosate?
- What are the processes for improving biodiversity in parks?
- What are the opening times for parks/how is the accessibility of cycle routes and the policy for lighting in parks managed?
- How is the maintenance and management of play areas for children managed?



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



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

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

How businesses/cafes are managed in parks?

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

Key finding: There is potential to deliver social value by supporting well run cafes in parks.



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

3.37. There are good examples of projects which link green spaces in the borough – the most notable of these being the Waterlink Way – which runs the length of the borough.



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

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

Key finding: Creating links between parks and green spaces might broaden their reach and create an experience of small spaces that is greater than the sum of its constituent parts.





3.40. There are some good examples of the ways in which other towns and cities promote walking routes between green spaces. One such example is that from Kirkstall (see the photo) where colourful eye catching signs help to draw people between green spaces. Lewisham has many green spaces – including pocket parks and informal green spaces. It might be that these could be threaded together – at relatively low cost in order to make the most of the spaces outside of – on the way to and in the vicinity of our parks. The community driven ‘Urban National Park’ is another example of a project to link green spaces. The Committee did not consider the proposals during the review but it is a project which is supported by Members.

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

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

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

3.43. Members also heard that there were plans to apply for funding from the FA (football association) community fund for improvements to playing pitches. On the visit, Members were approached by the manager of a youth amateur football club – who had concerns about the provision for football. Officers emphasised the work being carried out to ensure that there was sufficient access to sporting facilities as well as a balance between parks usage. Work between officers was taking place to deliver the ‘playing pitch strategy’ which has been developed by officers in the Council’s community services directorate. Sports equipment (such as outdoor gym equipment) is often paid for using section 106 funds – and maintained by Glendale.



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

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

3.45. There are a number of planting initiatives supported by friends groups. For these projects, Glendale provides training, plants and equipment for community groups. There are multiple benefits – including: the support for community groups; the increase in the sense of ownership and belonging for parks users and the freeing up of parks staff time to carry out other projects.



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

- 3.46. The Council directly maintains and manages mature trees (in green spaces inside and outside of parks) but the tree maintenance budget is under pressure. This is particularly the case when it comes to routine maintenance. The maintenance programme is prioritised based on risks. Regular assessments and prioritisation of works are carried out by the Council's two tree service officers. An independent assessment of all of the borough's mature trees is carried out every four years.
- 3.47. There was an extended discussion about the management of young trees. Members reported that they had received specific complaints in relation to grass cutting and damage to trees in Mountsfield Park. Officers from Glendale acknowledged the concerns and highlighted that there might be multiple causes for damage to trees and that problems should not always be attributed to grass cutting works. They also outlined the work that was taking place to address complaints related to Mountsfield Park.



3.48. Complaints from parks user groups and members of the public are investigated and if a complaint about the work carried out by parks staff is founded then parks staff receive further training as well as instruction on the best use of machinery and tools. Officers in the parks service were confident that – aside from the specific concerns being raised in Mountsfield Park – there was not a trend of complaints about grass cutting and tree maintenance in parks.



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

3.50. Turnover of staff in the parks service is low – so the majority of staff working in parks are experienced. Staff who work on shorter term seasonal contracts during busy periods regularly return to work for the service. Glendale uses very few agency staff – as the majority of seasonal workers are directly employed.

Key finding: A great deal of value exists in the commitment, knowledge and engagement of those who work for the parks service. The Council has an opportunity to build on this further with the insourcing of the service.

What are the processes for improving biodiversity in parks?

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

3.52. Members were in agreement that meadow land was an important new element of parks and green spaces. However, it was felt that more work may need to be carried

out to ensure that residents were aware of the rationale for reducing cutting and the benefits of doing so.

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

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





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

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



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

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

Key finding: Some simple and cost effective measures can be implemented easily to enable safe cycling through parks and green spaces.

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

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



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

Key finding: As part of its preparation of the insourcing of the service, the Council will need to move carefully but quickly and deliberately to ensure that it replicates the system for assessing and maintaining play equipment in parks.



### Parks user groups

3.59. The Committee was keen to hear from members of Lewisham's Green Spaces Forum about their assessment of opportunities and challenges in Lewisham's parks.

Evidence gathering took place on two occasions – including the Committee's meeting in October 2019 and in January 2020 when members attended the meeting of the Green Spaces Forum.

3.60. The forum was created to represent friends groups from all Lewisham parks and green spaces – its aims are:

- To protect & promote green space;
- To improve & enhance the quality and amenity of green space;
- To improve staffing & management of the Borough's green spaces;
- To ensure involvement of Friends / Users groups as partners in the management of our Borough's parks and public green spaces;

- To encourage use and appreciation of our parks and open spaces.

Lewisham Green Spaces Forum (2019)

3.61. Lewisham's parks groups are made up of lots of different people – with varied interests and a range of thoughts and concerns about the management of parks and green spaces. The forum is managed by volunteers – as with parks user groups. This clearly takes a substantial amount of time and effort from those involved. Officers take a collaborative approach to working with the forum – as with individual groups. Nonetheless, the number of officers available to support user groups is limited, as are the financial resources to do this work. There is no indication that additional officers or resources will be available in future so careful consideration will have to be given to the approach the insourced parks service gives to engaging with user groups.

3.62. A number of groups have issues that are specific to their parks or green spaces – but there are several issues that groups have in common, including:

- The decline in support from park rangers – or otherwise trained/named officers responsible for specific parks.
- Concerns relating to conservation and developing the biodiversity of Lewisham's green spaces.
- Consultation about tree planting - which it is felt should be carried out in liaison with friends groups. Some user groups also have concerns about the ongoing upkeep of newly planted trees in parks – specifically related to the mowing of grass and protection of saplings from damage.
- Recycling in parks and the general approach to litter collection and bins.
- Possible proposals for income generation – and the potential impact on parks of pursuing income in contrast to maintaining parks as open spaces for recreation and relaxation.

3.63. User groups have also highlighted a particular concern about the mechanism for maintaining quality in parks and ensuring that issues are dealt with promptly. Under the existing contracting arrangement with Glendale – the contractor is required to meet a set of performance standards. The contractor's failure to meet these standards may result in a financial penalty – so there is a strong incentive to maintain high levels of service.

Key finding: User groups are the Council's eyes and ears in parks on a day to day basis – identifying issues and reporting problems early on.
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3.64. Using this mechanism, park user groups have supported the parks service to hold Glendale to account. The strength of this three way relationship between the Council, user groups and Glendale has developed over the years of the contract.



## 4. Recommendations

4.1. The following recommendations were agreed at the Committee's meeting on 10 March 2020.

### Accessibility

- 4.1.1. Our parks play a role in providing places for our communities to meet. It is important to ensure that these spaces, by their very nature, do not exclude certain demographic groups and encourage intergenerational interaction. All new designs for play areas, recreation, seating etc. should encourage social interconnection. Officers should seek out good examples of this from other Councils where this has been achieved. The Committee believes that Lewisham's parks and green spaces should be accessible to all. It recommends that - by the end of the next municipal year (2020-21) - the Council should publish a play strategy, which develops a coordinated approach to inclusive play for children of all abilities as well as play and recreation spaces for young people of all ages. Moreover, the Council should consider the options for carrying out a full assessment of the accessibility of all its parks and green spaces.
- 4.1.2. The Committee recommends that the Council use good examples from other councils to provide wayfinding signs to help our residents locate our parks and green spaces and understand how they join up to provide positive walking and cycling, clean air routes through our borough. Furthermore, where parks form part of cycling routes every attempt needs to be made to keep these open for as long as possible. They should be closed last by ground staff and the times should be clearly posted on the gates. In addition, during the next round of maintenance of the paths, the insertion of cats-eyes to make cycling safer should be implemented.

### User Groups

- 4.1.3. The Committee wishes to recognise the commitment and enthusiasm of Lewisham's parks user groups and it commends the collaborative approach officers take to working with these groups. However, the Committee is concerned about the absence of groups in some parts of the borough. It is also mindful of the single person dependency in some user groups. The Committee recommends that - in time for the insourcing of the park service (November 2021) the Council should consider how best it can support park user groups. This should include an action plan for establishing user groups in parks and green spaces that are currently underserved as well as a process for volunteer management and succession planning which builds on best practice from other local authorities.

- 4.1.4. The Committee notes that the current contractual arrangement for the management of the parks service provides a strong incentive for the service to fix issues quickly and to maintain high standards. The Committee recommends that – in time for the insourcing of the parks service (November 2021) options are explored for park users to report issues. This might include a formal process for escalation of issues by user groups (or a coordinated ongoing process for monitoring standards) as well as promotion of the ‘Fix my street’ app for reporting issues in parks.

#### Biodiversity

- 4.1.5. The Committee recognises that Lewisham’s parks are well loved because they provide spaces for relaxation as well as recreation. Open spaces are essential for play, community gathering and exercise and these need to be protected. All other areas of our parks for example, edges of fields, pathways, flower beds, underused open spaces need to be considered as land suitable to improve biodiversity, for example, leaving spaces to re-wild, seeded as meadow, space for more tree planting and possibly, in the right situation, introducing water into the parks. Furthermore, in order to maximise biodiversity benefits, reduce costs and waste most formal flower bed planting, both in our parks and other green spaces, should be changed to perennial planting schemes.
- 4.1.6. In order for our parks to reduce their carbon footprint and increase biodiversity, all natural waste materials, such as leaf fall and annual prunings etc. should be kept on site and composted as far as is practically possible. Leaf fall should be left to decompose in situ and cleared only where it becomes a slip hazard or needs to be controlled to encourage other forms of vegetation growth.
- 4.1.7. Training of staff should be of the highest standard for all maintenance of groundwork done around trees to ensure that they are given sufficient protection. All new staff should be properly supervised until there is a good level of confidence that trees will not be damaged. Equally all trees in our parks should be given the highest level of protection at events. No vehicles should be allowed to park or drive close to any trees to avoid soil compaction around their roots. Vehicles arriving and departing from events must be provided with a clearly delineated route and be supervised.
- 4.1.8. The Committee recommends that the Council should develop an integrated pest management policy, which prioritises biodiversity and sustainability. This policy should seek to minimise glyphosate use as far as possible, devising a

plan to phase out its use, except where it needs to be applied to control invasive species that cannot be controlled in any other way.

#### Insourcing

- 4.1.9. The Committee believes that there should be close collaboration between the insourced Lewisham Council parks service and Lewisham Homes' ground maintenance service. The Committee expects that the options appraisal for the local authority trading company being carried out by officers should include an assessment for the potential to incorporate the Lewisham Homes' service. Furthermore, the Committee expects the high standards of our parks to be applied to all green open spaces across the borough including land managed by Lewisham Homes.
- 4.1.10. The Committee believes that the insourcing of the parks service provides an opportunity to accentuate the features that make Lewisham's parks distinctive and special. As such, the Committee recommends that in advance of the insourcing of the parks service (November 2021) there should be an audit of the formal and historic assets in Lewisham's parks. This should include memorials and monuments as well as works of art and special gardens. The parks service should then develop a programme to manage and maintain these special features.

#### Cafes in parks

- 4.1.11. It is recognised that cafes provide an essential hub for park users and extends the time users will stay in parks, making them safer and more valued by our residents (The Committee notes specifically: the spaces that cafes in parks provide for families without outdoor space at home – as well as the provision of informal meeting places for neighbours and communities (including elders and parents with young children)). The Committee supports the provision of cafes in parks. Well run cafes are recognised particularly for their social value. The Committee recommends that the Council's future approach to the management of cafes in parks should strongly emphasise social value.
- 4.1.12. It is very important that there is continued dialogue between café owners, park user/friends groups and the council so that any issues which are perceived to be hindering the success of the cafes are ironed out. Therefore, it is recommended that all cafes are required to make an annual financial report to the Council and/or operate a turnover based rental model so that the Council and the cafe operator both share in success and the Council can work with the cafe operators to discuss corrective action when turnover is falling. Also, there should be at least an annual meeting with senior officers in the parks

service and park user/ park friends' groups to discuss any issues specific to the café and the park where it is situated.

## 5. Monitoring and ongoing scrutiny

- 5.1. This review will and its recommendations will be submitted to Mayor and Cabinet for consideration and response. The Council's constitution provides that scrutiny committees should receive responses to their referrals within two months (not including the summer recess).
- 5.2. The Committee will consider its work programme for 2020-21 at the first meeting of the new municipal year (April 2020). The Committee should consider how it will scrutinise the actions being taken to prepare for the insourcing of the parks service in 2021. Members may also wish to review best practice in a number of areas, such as:
- Other local authority approaches to monitoring the quality of insourced parks management;
  - The set up and structure of local authority environmental services trading companies;
  - Best practice in encouraging bio-diversity;
  - Best practice in supporting and maintaining parks user groups.
- 5.3. Due to a number of pressing priority issues on the Committee's work programme – including scrutiny of the parking policy as well as the development of the local plan and supplementary planning documents for Surrey Canal Triangle – there was insufficient time to consider all of the issues raised in the key lines of enquiry. Specifically, the Committee did not review the Council's programme for generating income from parks nor the process for spending the greening fund. It is recognised by the Committee that for our parks to remain viable and to keep them at the high standard currently enjoyed parks do need to create income. However, the Committee recognises that this needs to be done with sensitivity and with the protection of the biodiversity of the parks as a priority. Accordingly, the Committee may wish to give these issues further consideration when deciding on its annual work programme for 2020-21.
- 5.4. As part of the work programme for 2020-21 an item will be added to the agenda of the Committee's autumn meeting to include a six-month update on the implementation of the recommendations in this report.

## Sources and background documents

Communities and Local Government Committee (2017) Public Parks Inquiry: [link to the Public Parks Inquiry report](#)

Glendale Lewisham (accessed 2019): [link to the Glendale website](#)

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