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Subject: Outdoor Spaces Paper

Report to: Environment Committee, Wednesday 27th January 2021

Report by: Kate Watts, Strategic Director

SUMMARY

This paper provides Members with an update regarding outdoor spaces across the Borough under the following themes:

- Management of our outdoor spaces
- Outdoor play inspections
- Section 106 agreements
- Playing pitch strategy

Members are asked to note the content of this report and resolve to use the previously committed funding allocation of £15,790 to appoint a Technical Assistant on a part time basis to survey and log all the Council's outdoor assets, so that a detailed strategic review of these can then be undertaken and presented to this Committee.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Council owns a significant amount of outdoor leisure spaces that offer sport, play and recreational opportunities for our residents and visitors to the Borough. These range in size from the larger Beaconsfield and Wellesley sites to smaller play areas with minimal play equipment.
- 1.2 This paper attempts to identify and present the Council's current position with regards to various themes in relation to these sites.

2. OUTDOOR SPACES AUDIT

- 2.1 Information regarding the Council's outdoor assets is held in part on the Council's asset management database Concerto. Additional information is held in paper format (deeds etc) and some information is held by third parties such as GYBS. This creates significant difficulties in accessing information about these sites, preventing the Council from strategically managing them.

- 2.2 Specifically, the Council's Environment Committee had previously requested a strategic review in relation to the Council's play areas, of which there are 96. The Environment Committee wanted to understand the condition of these sites, the level of usage and consider what the Council may wish to keep and invest in, and what the Council may wish to dispose of, for example to Parish Councils.
- 2.3 A proposal for a play officer was presented to this Committee in September 2019 and funding allocated of £15,790, however this was not progressed and as a result this funding is still available.
- 2.4 Whilst this paper will now explore a number of themes under the outdoor spaces umbrella, it is critical that the Council brings together all the information it can regarding its outdoor spaces to allow the Council to understand the offer provided by each of these sites, the condition of the sites and any equipment provided, the level of usage of the site alongside any cost (repairs and maintenance) or income (rented courts) these sites generate. This work would involve:
- Identifying and bringing together information and uploading it in totality onto the Concerto database
 - Undertaking a visual inspection alongside mapping of each sites detailing as appropriate what equipment it has and its condition, usage details, photographs and proximity to other sites
 - Financial analysis of sites (cost/income)
 - Community engagement – understand usage, need, residents view, appetite to transfer etc (as appropriate)
- 2.5 This would then allow for a strategic review of these sites against the Councils' Asset Management Strategy, enabling each site to be considered in terms of keeping it, investing further in it (or simply understanding the ongoing repairs and maintenance liabilities) or disposing the site. Future income opportunities could also be identified. It is worth noting that this work would help with Open Space Needs Assessment discussed further in section 5 of this report.
- 2.6 However, to do this, additional resource will be required. Property Services have recommended that this resource could take the form of a Technical Assistant (Band 5) appointed on a fixed term basis (PT for 9 months). It is recommended that the funding previously allocated for the play officer post is redirected to support this recruitment.
- 2.7 Whilst the detail of a financial business case has not yet been developed there is clearly an invest to save opportunity through identify clusters of sites and then considering how these could be rationalised. It is proposed that as part of this work the conclusions of the strategic review are presented to Members of the Council's Environment Committee.

3. MANAGEMENT OF OUR OUTDOOR SPACES

- 3.1 Currently our outdoor leisure spaces are maintained and managed by GYBS. From time to time the Council has received complaints from members of the public and elected Members about how these sites are managed. For example, the Members wanted to make improvements to St Georges park and whilst the subsequent management changes were not satisfactory and the works given back to GYBS, there was clearly an initial issue.
- 3.2 As well as maintaining our outdoor spaces, GYBS also manage the hire of these sites, for example the tennis courts on Gorleston seafront. In these instances, there is an additional profit share that means that any income is then split between GYBS and the Council. There is minimal advertising of these sites, and whilst some would benefit from further investment there is clearly an opportunity to also increase income.
- 3.3 With the recent appointment of the Operations Director for GYBS there is scope to work with GYBS to improve both the maintenance of these sites alongside income generation. Work is now ongoing with the Operations Director to progress this.
- 3.4 Budgets for the management of these open spaces currently sit within the Neighbourhood and Community Team. It has been agreed to move these to Environmental Services so these can be managed as part of the contract management role that sits within this department regarding GYBS.

4. OUTDOOR PLAY INSPECTIONS

- 4.1 In addition to understanding the Council's existing assets and considering these against the Councils Asset Management Strategy it would be timely to also consider how these areas are inspected.
- 4.2 Currently our Environmental Rangers carry out routine play inspections which consist of a visual check of sites to identify any vandalism or wear and tear of equipment. This is undertaken on a risk assessment basis and sites can be visited weekly, fortnightly or three weekly. This totals 300 inspections every six weeks. EU guidance and insurance guidance outlines the need for these risk assessment-based inspections.
- 4.3 Additional operational inspections are required on a quarterly basis, these are delivered through a GYN appointed (and qualified) play inspector who also carries out repairs and minor installations of play equipment. These inspections are not just visual as they also involve testing of equipment. Currently this inspector is achieving on average a monthly inspection to each of our sites.
- 4.4 Finally, there is an annual inspection which is undertaken by an outside body. This is a detailed certificated inspection.
- 4.5 Because the operational inspections are being undertaken more frequently than the required quarterly inspections there is some duplication of work. This has

subsequently been reviewed with GYN, and as a result the Rangers have been able to reduce their inspections by half and remove this duplication of work. This has freed up significant Environmental Ranger resource.

5. SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS – SPENDING OF OFF-SITE CONTRIBUTIONS

- 5.1 Section 106 agreements for open space provision are negotiated between a developer and Council to help make new residential development schemes more attractive to communities and meet the additional needs for open space arising from the new occupants. Our current approach is to secure open space investment on major residential developments. This open space will not be routinely adopted by the Council but managed by a management company appointed by the developer. This works well.
- 5.2 However, on occasion a financial contribution towards offsite provision will be made. Spending of off-site contributions has historically been informed by Neighbourhood Managers in consultation with local communities. At present there isn't an up-to-date evidence base or policy on open space needs to inform such decisions. This has resulted in ad hoc decisions for play and open space investments that have not been properly considered in terms of the ongoing costs they create for the Council, such as repairs and maintenance costs.
- 5.3 The emerging Local Plan Part 2 includes a new policy to secure open space contributions which will apply to all new residential developments. Where off-site contributions are considered appropriate these will be £1,800 per dwelling. It is expected that the local Plan will be adopted in summer 2021. The new policy will likely secure more funding towards open space than the existing approach.
- 5.4 An Open Space Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) is also being prepared to provide further guidance on how open space will be secured and how off-site contributions could be used. It is likely that consultation on the SPD will take place by May 2021 with adoption by the end of 2021/early 2022. Alongside this there will need to be an update of open space needs (both qualitative and quantitative), this evidence can inform a strategy to ensure open space contributions from developments are focused to where they will have the most benefit.
- 5.5 Whilst the new policy and evidence base will assist planning officers better in agreeing section 106 spend with developers, there will still be a need for community engagement, especially where the Council is looking to negotiate 3rd party management of a site. Neighbourhood Managers will continue with community engagement, but the installation and ongoing maintenance of any equipment will now be overseen by Property Services.
- 5.6 Finally it is worth noting that central government are moving to an infrastructure levy for this type of spend (instead of section 106 agreements or Community Infrastructure Levy's) and whilst we will not know more until the new year about

how these proposals will work in practice the policy work currently being undertaken as part of the Local Plan Part 2 will still be relevant in terms of evidence base.

6. PLAYING PITCH STRATEGY

6.1 A playing pitch strategy is a key document that covers the sports of football, cricket, rugby league, rugby union, hockey and tennis and provides an assessment of the quantity, quality and capacity of all pitches and courts in an area. It also sets out a series of recommendations and actions for the development of pitch-based sports, both in terms of addressing deficiencies in the quantity and quality of facilities, whilst also seeking to improve participation.

6.2 This is a key strategic document that funders such as Sport England expect to have in place when considering investment opportunities. Interestingly, the Council's Sports and Leisure Strategy (2015) is more like a playing pitch strategy document than an overarching strategy, which is why the Active GY was subsequently developed.

6.3 A Playing Pitch Strategy would feed into planning policy's open space needs assessment and would help inform the following:

- Open Space Supplementary Planning Document and the implementation of our new Local plan Part 2 open space policy
- Inform decisions on the spend of open space s106 funds
- Inform the Local Plan Review

6.4 As such work with planning policy is being undertaken to allocate existing funding to support the development of this strategy. The Council's current Sports and Leisure Strategy contains a lot of the information required for a playing pitch strategy so it is hoped this can be updated, reducing the overall cost of this work.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 This paper provides Members with an update regarding outdoor spaces across the Borough under the following themes:

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7.2 Members are asked to note the content of this report and resolve to use the previously committed funding allocation of £15,790 to appoint a Technical Assistant on a part time basis to survey and log all the Council's outdoor assets so that a detailed strategic review of these can then be undertaken and presented to this committee.