

**Manchester City Council
Report for Information**

Report to: Environment and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee – 24 June 2021

Subject: Manchester’s Park Strategy – Progress through the Pandemic

Report of: Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods)

Summary

This report provides an overview of Manchester’s Park Strategy and the considerations for the Parks Service following the ongoing impacts of the global pandemic. The report sets out the focus for the service over the next 6 months and outlines how momentum is being maintained on the delivery of the strategic themes despite the significant financial challenges caused by a reduction in permitted activity and trading.

Recommendations

The Scrutiny Committee is recommended to consider and make comments on the content of the report.

Wards Affected: All

Environmental Impact Assessment - the impact of the issues addressed in this report on achieving the zero-carbon target for the city
Parks by their nature contribute to the mitigation of carbon across the City, the service prioritises the protection of those green and blue assets which make this happen. Furthermore the service has ensured that carbon reduction is a key driver in the programme of investment for parks.

Manchester Strategy outcomes	Summary of how this report aligns to the OMS
A thriving and sustainable city: supporting a diverse and distinctive economy that creates jobs and opportunities	Parks are partnering in new and fruitful ways with organisations and communities to increase opportunities for personal development through volunteering, work experience, employment and training.
A highly skilled city: world class and home grown talent sustaining the city’s economic success	Parks offer a unique opportunity to engage in formal educational activity in the natural environment. Opportunities to build life skills such as communication and teamwork are offered through a wide range of volunteering activities.

A progressive and equitable city: making a positive contribution by unlocking the potential of our communities	Parks are at the heart of our communities, offering opportunities for community cohesion through volunteering, events and activities in a setting that is open and accessible to all.
A liveable and low carbon city: a destination of choice to live, visit, work	Parks are an essential part of our neighbourhoods and enhance positive outcomes for residents and businesses. The delivery of a vibrant programme of events and activities is increasing the number of visitors from outside of the City. Whilst parks naturally contribute to the low carbon city agenda, new ways of using and activating the estate in a way that can actively contribute to lowering or offsetting carbon emissions are being explored.
A connected city: world class infrastructure and connectivity to drive growth	Parks connect our City in many different ways, physically they are expanding to offer enhanced green corridors for people and wildlife and socially by sustaining opportunities for shared experiences and common interests.

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Background documents (available for public inspection):

The following documents disclose important facts on which the report is based and have been relied upon in preparing the report. Copies of the background documents are available up to 4 years after the date of the meeting. If you would like a copy please contact one of the contact officers above.

- Take a Brief Walk Through Manchester's Park Strategy 2017 – 2026
- Manchester's Park Strategy
 - Executive Summary
 - Research and Findings
 - Ten Year Action Plan

- Report to Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee - 24 May 2018, Manchester's Park Strategy 2017 – 2026
- Report to Community and Equalities Scrutiny Committee – 5 December 2019, Manchester's Park Strategy 2017-2026
- Report to Community and Equalities Scrutiny Committee – 14 January 2021, Manchester's Park Development Programme 2021 – 2025

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Previous updates on the delivery of the Park Strategy and the development of the programme of capital investment (Parks Development Programme) to support the delivery of the Strategy have been shared with the Community and Equalities Scrutiny Committee in May 2018, December 2019 and January 2021 respectively. This report provides an outline of the strategy, an updated perspective on priorities to be delivered in the context of the ongoing pandemic and the plan for the next 6 months.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 In spring 2016, the Council asked people what their parks in Manchester meant to them and what they could look like in the future. The response was fantastic. Manchester's Park Strategy was the culmination of the ideas, passion and hope people had for Manchester's parks.
- 2.2 In December 2017 the ten-year strategy for Manchester's Parks was launched to guide their investment, upkeep and activation. The strategy set out the vision, key themes and actions that were needed to ensure parks and green spaces continued to serve the needs of communities across the city, providing popular and attractive open spaces for play, sport and informal recreation. There was a focus on 4 key themes:
1. **Parks at the Heart of Neighbourhoods** looks at the physical role of parks in neighbourhoods across the city, as well as their size, accessibility and character.
 2. **Vibrant Parks, Vibrant Communities** considers the use and activities that take place in parks to ensure they are a focus of community life, providing opportunities for exercise and sport, and a wide variety of events that can generate additional income for the benefit of parks.
 3. **A Manchester Quality Standard** sets out a good-quality standard for managing and maintaining parks.
 4. **Productive Parks in Partnership** describes ways to deliver park services in a more collaborative and fruitful manner with communities and local organisations, not just the Council.
- 2.3 Progress updates on the delivery of the Park Strategy have previously been tabled at the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee, set out against the actions below:
1. Co-ordinate stronger **Management Plans** for individual parks.
 2. Seek to leverage further **investment** from housing growth opportunities and planning gain.
 3. Continue the **conversations** and improve **communication** of programmes, activities and plans.
 4. Improve access to **information** about Parks.
 5. Develop new **quality standards**, communicate them and seek out investment to maintain them.
 6. Update and expand the use of **digital** / information technology in parks

7. Identify sustainable **income** generating opportunities and bring forward investment cases.
 8. Strengthen partnerships with **Friends, communities and volunteers** and introduce a volunteer strategy so that residents who want to do more can.
- 2.4 The Council's capacity to deliver the actions set out in the Parks Strategy has been heavily restricted since the global pandemic was declared in early 2020. During the last 15 months the priority for the service has been to maintain safe access to green space for the City's residents. Despite the restrictions, the service has balanced competing demands and overall good progress has continued to be made against the delivery of the actions set out above. A snapshot of the challenges and highlights are set out in section 3. A more detailed update is reported annually to Scrutiny Committee as part of the annual report on the delivery of the Parks Strategy. This is usually presented in December/ January. The updates for the last three year can be found at [Browse meetings - Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee \(manchester.gov.uk\)](https://www.manchester.gov.uk/scrutiny/communities-and-equalities)

3.0 The Impact of the Pandemic on Service Delivery

- 3.1 In March 2020, life changed significantly for our residents. In the face of a global pandemic, the value of the Council's Parks Strategy became more clearly evident than ever before and the Government regularly called for people across the nation to make use of parks, to boost their physical and mental wellbeing. Manchester's Park Team and more than 100 voluntary groups that they support have worked tirelessly to provide safe access to the green lungs of the city. The number of people visiting parks has risen by more than 30 per cent and the pressure to keep them clean and safe has risen accordingly, with 147k bags of litter collected from parks last year.
- 3.2 The Government's advice that parks could be used for exercise was certainly taken to heart by the people of Manchester, the service observed increasing numbers of visitors to the City's parks which culminated in record numbers of young people and families participating in school holiday activities in parks.
- 3.3 New partnerships were formed as the service worked with others to find new ways of delivering in an outdoor setting. In the summer of 2020 close to 200 children with special educational needs and their families accessed a varied programme of activity in Manchester's Parks including Tree Top Trek and boating. Overall, parks provided safe spaces for 60% of the citywide activity for young people to take place, with over 11,600 young people engaged in parks activity throughout the summer.
- 3.4 The success of the summer was clear to see with all of the young people interviewed by City in the Community as part of their programme reporting that parks improved their physical wellbeing after lockdown, with a further 71% saying that engaging in parks activity had helped them recover socially.
- 3.5 Significant increases in cycling, walking, roller skating, jogging and tennis have also been observed, with court bookings up by over 10,000 from 5,906 in

May to September 2019, versus 15,241 for the same period in 2020. The Love Exploring App also grew to include two more parks, Fog Lane and Hulme Park. The eight parks that now feature the digital experience have attracted a massive 9,500 users walking in excess of 12,350km, whilst hunting for dinosaurs and dancing skeletons during Halloween.

- 3.6 Whilst the digital offer has been a huge success, the service also supported families to make use of self-led trails and activities. Despite 8 out of 9 days of rain in the October half term 4,500 visitors completed the Halloween trail in Wythenshawe Park. The new Xplorer Trail in collaboration with My Wild City saw 116 families on its first day at Boggart Hole Clough too. Lightopia returned to Heaton Park for the second year and saw in excess of 115,000 people visiting the park over 32 evenings.
- 3.7 The strength, enthusiasm and kindness of the partners who support the delivery of Manchester's Parks has been exemplary. Partners have stepped in to deliver beyond our parks and into the heart of communities by providing free school meals and donations of plants and equipment to provide activity for the children of key workers.
- 3.8 There has been an incredible appetite to return safely to active volunteering in Manchester's Parks and despite the challenges in meeting face to face, the service has supported the development of two new Friends Groups in the City as well as an army of litter picking volunteers who together have logged a massive 17,500 hours of volunteering.

4.0 The Financial Impact of the Pandemic

- 4.1 The costs of delivering services during the pandemic have risen, whilst a number of income streams have been curtailed or ceased. During the financial year 2020/21 trading income was heavily reduced due to restrictions and the Council released £500k in additional revenue to balance the Parks budget, ensuring that activity could continue safely.
- 4.2 The longer-term financial challenge as a result of the Pandemic is anticipated to be as challenging as the last 15 months. This will require the Council to find different ways of reaching a balanced budget and accelerating some of the actions set out in the Parks Strategy.
- 4.3 Despite the challenges, the Council has responded positively building on the strong track record for investment in parks and the progress that has been made in closing of the gap between income and expenditure. Since 2016 there has been a strong focus for investment on workstreams that deliver to the park strategy and support a more sustainable future for the service, this approach has brought about a year on year income increase of 20% resulting in an additional gross income of circa £700k.
- 4.4 To meet the financial challenges ahead the Council agreed in January 2021 to accelerate capital investment and place a sharper focus on the Parks Development Programme in order to invest in opportunities that will further

close the gap between income and expenditure within the Parks revenue budget. This is set out in section 5.

5.0 Parks Development Programme

- 5.1 Building on the successful outcomes from investment over the last 4 years, a proposal was approved to invest capital funding into an extensive Parks Development Programme (PDP), with the aim of reducing future revenue pressures and insulating the Parks Strategy from the impact of any future savings requirements.
- 5.2 The PDP will see £12.5M of Manchester City Council funding utilised to attract new partnerships and support key stakeholder groups to continue to close the gap between operating costs and income raised through enhanced trading activity in parks.
- 5.3 The investment approach for the PDP is set out across four workstreams, open to all parks across the City. Workstream 1, the Parks in Partnership Fund is being administered as an open fund with £960k made available this year for capital projects in parks. £30k has been allocated to each ward of the City enabling elected members to champion projects that raise standards and help to close the gap between income and expenditure.
- 5.4 Workstreams 2, 3 and 4 of the PDP are more intensely focused on closing the gap between income and expenditure, requiring projects to provide a more substantial return on investment and for partnering arrangements to deliver the strongest outcomes, with match funding and with minimal risks. Further detail on the Parks Development Fund can be found in the report to the Community and Equalities Scrutiny Committee on 14 January 2021 titled Manchester's Park Development Programme 2021 – 2025. Follow this link: [Governance Report \(manchester.gov.uk\)](#)
- 5.5 Based on the previous track record, there is confidence that the service will continue maximising income generating opportunities such as park cafes, by continuing to raise visitor numbers. Offering a more vibrant programme of events and activities and through the addition of new or improved attractions, such as children's play, that would increase dwell time on site and increase visitors' secondary spend. Underpinning this strategy is the ability to compete with other visitor destinations and work flexibly with partners.
- 5.6 Despite the financial challenge ahead, the alignment to the strategic themes laid out within Manchester's Park Strategy will remain, the pace at which progress is made in terms of closing the gap between income and expenditure has been accelerated.
- 5.7 The drive to continue investment into parks is being sustained throughout the summer with projects funded by the Parks in Partnership Fund starting on site alongside a range of other partnership projects which include:

- Refurbishment of indoor facilities and a renovation of the bowling green at Debdale Park. Debdale Park and Greenbank Park will also benefit from improvement of the tennis courts.
- Whitworth Park will see new water and electricity feeds installed on site to support the community growing project.
- New play zones at Scotland Hall Road and Ladybarn Park, funded in partnership with Manchester City Football Club and the Football foundation.
- Crowcroft Park will see the 16 synthetic cricket wicket installed in Manchester's Parks following an 18 month partnership with the English Cricket Board as part of the legacy from the Cricket World Cup.
- First phase works to support the use of Wythenshawe Hall as a multifunctional space offering an outlet for activity driven by the Friends as well as education and income generating activity.
- Subject to funding confirmation from British Cycling the City's first cycling hub will be delivered in Wythenshawe Park, offering opportunities for all to participate in recreational cycling.

6.0 Plans over the next six months

- 6.1 The primary focus whilst the vaccine programme for the Pandemic continues to be rolled out this summer, is to maintain safe access to Manchester's Parks as an essential resource for the physical and mental wellbeing of the community. The Parks Service will continue to have colleagues based in parks with safe operating systems in place to ensure that they remain safe whilst in the workplace. As and when restrictions are eased it is equally important that the Council supports traders, partners and event and activity providers to fully resume their activities. This needs to be facilitated in a timely manner in order to support the economic and community recovery.
- 6.2 Whilst there is an extensive work programme planned over the next 6 months, there is also an element of reactive activity which has and will continue to intensify, this includes unauthorised mass gatherings, high footfall during warm weather, high demand for play & sports facilities and heightened anti-social behaviour. The response and resolution to these activities has been streamlined through the development of good practise since March 2020, however it is anticipated that the adhoc nature of this activity may mean that resources need to continue to be diverted.
- 6.3 A high level overview of the planned activity is detailed below aligned to the four themes of the Park Strategy.

6.4 Parks at the Heart of Neighbourhoods

- 6.4.1 Support to maintain compliance with government guidance and in particular social distancing for visitors, volunteers and partners whilst on site will continue. Key messages will be shared on site, through the web, in social media campaigns and during peak periods through personnel based on site. In the main there will be a shift away from what has been perceived as enforcement activity to an approach which supports visitors to feel good about

their experience. It is accepted that enforcement activity will still be required to manage a small number of scenarios.

- 6.4.2 Development of an Age Friendly standard will continue for Parks with 6 parks included in a pilot. The impact of the pandemic has been different for individuals and communities alike. The use of parks has risen; however the service has listened to partners and stakeholders who have shared that some residents, especially those that are older or have been shielding are feeling less confident about venturing out. The Age Friendly standard will support physical changes in Parks such as the provisions of suitable resting spots as well as activities that encourage residents to safely join in activities with others. This will become a key consideration in the development of park plans.
- 6.4.3 The development of park plans will also be re-energized. Engaging with stakeholders in a face to face setting is essential for the development of a park plan, virtual mechanisms such as online meetings and on site meetings in small numbers have become the new way to undertake much of the work that the service does with partners, however it does not replicate what can be achieved by bringing different stakeholders together to develop and debate what will become a common ambition. The Park Rangers have been participating in a development programme that will give a refreshed approach to park plans, supporting their growth in key areas such as inclusivity and diversity to ensure that all members of the community can and are encouraged to participate.

6.5 Vibrant Parks, Vibrant Communities

- 6.5.1 Alongside remobilising the weekly programme of 100+ activities that take place across the estate, the focus on education and physical & mental wellbeing will continue, with a special emphasis on children and young people. Working in partnership with Manchester's NHS Health and Wellbeing service parks will be hosting a series of Picnic in the Park events throughout the summer months, encouraging people to talk and bring food and discover opportunities available in their local area. There will be 12 events in total, with Birchfields, Chapel Street, Fog Lane, Hulme and Manley Parks already confirmed. Activities will be age friendly, aimed at improving mental well being and reducing social isolation.
- 6.5.2 The partnership with Manchester Libraries will continue to strengthen as children and families with special educational needs are invited to participate in interactive story telling sessions in Alexandra, Heaton, Platt Fields and Wythenshawe Parks. A unique project with the National Literacy Trust will see Wythenshawe Park host the "Look for a Book" trail to discover clues to exchange for free books and a literacy trail will be launched in Platt Fields Park on 5th July, based on a new story written especially for the park with participants receiving a free book.
- 6.5.3 As part of the Summer Holiday Activities and Food Programme the service is working collaboratively with colleagues in youth to provide a programme of

activity in parks that will maximum reach and coverage across the City. The offer will include Active Parks sessions which work with children, young people and families to support physical and emotional wellbeing. A programme of arts and storytelling will also take place in partnership with Read & Feed Manchester. Based on the previous success of play packs we are also exploring the provision of explorer and sport packs for children, young people and families to access from our parks for independent play and discovery.

6.5.4 An outdoor exhibition created by Manchester Histories about the River Irk and people's memories of the area between Angel Meadows and Queens Park in Harphurhey will conclude on 20 June. The project which closely partnered with the mental health charity Project23 and local residents' groups will leave a legacy in the form of an audio trail that will support visitors to explore Angel Meadows, Queens Park and the River Irk.

6.5.5 The restrictions in place over the last 15 months have significantly limited the programme of large events that would normally take place across the parks estate. Working within the guidance and with support from the Safety Advisory Group we have been able to support those that could, to return to site safely. With the details of the next phase and accompanying guidance yet to be confirmed we are continuing to work with event organisers to develop flexible plans to remobilise in our parks safely.

6.5.6 Working on the basis that there will be the potential to host events towards the back end of the summer, with alternative arrangements for capacity and reviewed charging arrangements, the following provisional bookings are in place:

- Eid in the Park, Platt Fields Park, 20 July, 8,000 capacity.
- Festival of Thailand, Platt Fields Park, 24 & 25 July, 3,000 capacity per day.
- Dino Kingdom, Wythenshawe Park, 23 July – 8 August, 8,000 capacity per day.
- Manchester Mega Mela, Platt Fields Park, 4 & 5 September, 10,000 capacity per day.
- Caribbean Carnival of Manchester, Alexandra Park, 5 September, 10,000 capacity.
- New Order, Heaton Park, 10 September, 35,000 capacity.
- Parklife, Heaton Park, 11 & 12 September, 80,000 capacity per day.

6.5.7 Supporting the event programme to take place safely will create an intensive period for the workforce in the late summer and early autumn.

6.6 A Manchester Quality Standard

6.6.1 Covid has impacted both the overall resource available to undertake Grounds Maintenance services and the ways in which these resources can safely be deployed. Whilst no task will be neglected within Parks during 2021 it is proposed to prioritise the following to ensure safety and cleanliness in the coming months.

- 6.6.2 Litter collection: over the last six years the quantity of litter deposited in Manchester parks has continued to grow. In 2020 excluding Heaton Park and not counting skipped waste, a record one hundred and forty-seven thousand bags of litter were removed from Manchester Parks. Contracted support for litter continues to be deployed in several of the City's busiest parks, including Heaton Park, Alexandra Park, Platt Fields Park and Wythenshawe Park. Additional contract support will be introduced in the summer months at other locations.
- 6.6.3 Sports pitches: will continue to be line marked weekly and cut fortnightly during what is usually the closed season, to enable sports teams to complete outstanding fixtures impacted by Covid and resume match and training activity.
- 6.6.4 Volume grass cutting; is traditionally undertaken on a three-week cycle throughout the mowing season, following challenges at the beginning of the season in relation to excessively wet ground and machinery, cutting is returning to the expected cycle and it is proposed that this standard will be maintained. Trials to test the impact of differentiating the mowing regime will be carried out in a cross section of sites to inform the effect on biodiversity improvement, protection of pollinators, improving carbon sequestration and water run off control, balanced against the recreational use of those spaces. The mowing trials will begin help to inform what works best where and what is suitable for adoption into the emerging park plans.
- 6.6.5 The passion for litter picking was highlighted during the recent Great British Spring Clean with over 19 opportunities to participate in organised events in parks from 28 May to 13 June. Love Parks week starting on 23 July will see children, young people and families encouraged to participate in organised activity across the City and the support for independent groups who have made such a huge contribution so far will also continue.
- 6.6.6 An alternative model of delivering grounds maintenance in Angel Meadow and St Michaels's Flags will start this summer. Funded through a service charge associated with the newly built properties, options for the future maintenance of the site are currently being finalised and will be mobilised imminently.
- 6.6.7 The redesign of the Parks Service concluded in February 2020, with team members moving into their new roles in very unique circumstances. During this time the service has supported the team of Estate Assistants to undertake training on play and park inspections and over the coming months will be transitioning to a digital system (PSS) to collect and analyse the information that is collected during inspections. This will be a significant change for the service as colleagues embrace a different way of working, we will work closely with the team to ensure that they are supported to embrace the new technology.

6.7 Productive Parks in Partnership

- 6.7.1 The Parks in Partnership (PIP) fund totalling £960k launched the first round of applications in April 2021, a second opportunity to apply will be launched in September. Feedback from residents has been extremely positive and Round 1 received over 40 grant applications totalling £660k. There are however some wards across the city where groups have yet to make applications and the service is working with Park Friends' groups, Ward Members, and colleagues from across Neighbourhood Services to ensure that assistance is focused on supporting these wards so that funds can be allocated within the financial year.
- 6.7.2 Our Rivers Our City, is an EU funded project, that grew out of the Grow Green project and began in April 2020. It aimed to increase our understanding of the role of Manchester's rivers - the Irk, Medlock and Mersey and their tributaries, in terms of flood resilience, recreation, biodiversity and accessibility. The project is led by the Council, TEP and Groundwork, working with a wide range of stakeholders, including United Utilities, the Environment Agency, Natural England and development partners from Victoria North. The project seeks to achieve agreement around collaborative key actions that will improve the multi functionality of the river valleys. The project will be completed in September 2021 with the production of three action plans, recognising the individual character of each of the rivers.
- 6.7.3 The I-trees assessment of our tree stock undertaken by City of Trees demonstrated the value of our existing 1.2 million trees to carbon storage, sequestration, climate resilience air quality and many other benefits. In August of 2020 and despite the difficulties with Covid, the Council commissioned City of Trees and TEP to deliver this strategically important work with the following four aims:
- A retrospective look back at the composition, change and evolution of the City's treescape over the last 100 years.
 - A sustainable and innovative plan for managing the City's existing tree resource.
 - Ward specific opportunity maps indicating priorities for new tree planting, including species suitability options.
 - The means to identify ward specific location for new Beacon Trees (mature) tree planting.
- 6.7.4 This work will provide the context within which opportunities for tree planting can be assessed going forward, and the Tree Action MCR programme to be delivered.
- 6.7.5 There has been a significant impact on the hospitality trade as a result of the pandemic, on balance the higher footfall that has been observed in Manchester's Parks has positively impacted trade for the 20 small businesses that operate from our sites. As a result, the service identified an opportunity to support pop-up, short term, mobile catering across the estate. Initial opportunities are being trialled at Chorlton Park, with a further 4 sites including

Cringle and Parkway Playing Fields preparing to start ahead of the school holidays.

7.0 Conclusion and Next Steps

7.1 Recently described as a lifeline, Manchester's Parks have been essential for the health and well being of our residents. The last 15 months have required creative thinking, resilience and empathy to ensure that the service could deliver safely. Whilst the service continues to work in a dynamic setting the outcomes that are delivered to residents will remain at the forefront of our actions.

7.2 It is recognised that the opportunity of capital funding to quicken the pace for delivering the strategic themes and meeting the financial challenge ahead is unique to Manchester and the following will be prioritised:

- Delivery of the £960k Parks in Partnership Fund.
- Continued progress of investment in to our Parks through the Park Development Programme including partnerships and adhoc funds such as S106.
- Continued work to bring projects through the pipeline of capital investment to delivery stage.
- Growing existing partnerships and seeking out new ones to ensure that those that want to can do more.
- Ensuring that people are at the heart of the programme of events and activities, with a specific focus on children, education and health & well being.
- A review of progress made against the strategy in December 2021.