

**Tower Hamlets Housing and
Regeneration Scrutiny
Sub-Committee**

**Scrutiny Review - Improving health,
environmental quality, economic and
social outcomes through Housing
Open Spaces**

Draft Scrutiny Report



September 2019

Chair's Foreword

In early 2019, the Tower Hamlets Homes Residents' Panel and the former Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee carried out a joint scrutiny review of housing open spaces, managed by social landlords.

As Chair of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee, I am pleased to present this report which explores opportunities for Tower Hamlets to improve health, environmental quality, economic and social outcomes through Housing Open Spaces.

Tower Hamlets is a thriving borough faced with numerous challenges. It is the fastest growing and second most densely populated local authority in the UK. It is faced with huge inequalities, deprivation and poverty. It has the 4th highest proportion social housing stock in London and over 30,000 homes, 72 per cent of the borough's social housing stock, are managed by registered providers operating in the borough. In 2018, 79% of Tower Hamlets residents were happy with their area as a place to, this is 10 percentage points lower than the England average for less deprived areas.

A report by Public Health England suggests that good quality green space for all social groups is likely to improve health outcomes, reduce health inequalities, foster greater community cohesion and reduce social isolation. It stresses the vital role Local Authority's play in enhancing and improving access to green spaces working with external partners. The monetary value of green space benefits is estimated at:

- Economic value per individual – £30.24 per annum
 - Wellbeing value UK adult population - £34.2 billion
 - Savings to NHS - £111 million (GP visits (excluding prescription or referrals)
- However, participation in natural environments is lowest amongst the BME communities and those with poor socio economic status.

Publicly accessible open space in Tower Hamlets remains low (0.89 hectares per 1,000 residents - less than the borough standard of 1.2 hectares per 1,000 residents) compared to other London boroughs; this is far below the national standard. Working with social landlords to improve open space is one of the best opportunities to improve healthy environments for residents who would most benefit.

There is wide ranging support from National and Regional Governments concerning the objective of the review. This includes a commitment to be a cleaner, greener country, with access to good quality open spaces. National Government has also committed through its social housing green paper to tackle the stigma of social housing and celebrate thriving communities. The Mayor of Tower Hamlets has committed to turn Tower Hamlets into a cleaner, greener and healthier borough where inequalities are reduced. This includes tackling poor air quality, enhancing bio diversity, delivering new homes (including 2,000 Council homes), well-designed neighbourhoods and a balance between competing priorities - where people feel healthier, more independent and part of a fair, inclusive, cohesive and vibrant community.

The review explored a range of programmes and projects that the borough is engaged in to transform open spaces. It was evident that there was a strong ethos to ensure resident engagement and community led change. The review looked at open space strategies and policies, management and horticulture practices, community greening and growing priorities and the benefits they bring to communities. It was evident that good practices were available in the management and maintenance of

open spaces, and there was an increasing demand for community greening and growing.

However, the review highlighted issues concerning missing repository of housing open space information, issues of accessibility, ensuring a consistency of approach in implementing policy, and community greening, growing, project sustainability and training.

This report therefore makes a number of practical recommendations for the council and its partners to implement which comprises of a GIS map of open spaces, sampling accessibility of spaces, implementation of policy and delivery of competing priorities, development of a good practice guide to quality open spaces, a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of projects and a community greening and growing development programme for staff and residents.

I would like to thank members of the joint scrutiny panel, council officers, witnesses and participants who participated in the review.

Councillor Dipa Das
Chair of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee

Contents

	Page
1. Recommendations	5
2. Introduction	6
Review Approach	7
3. Defining Housing Open Spaces in Scope	10
4. National & Regional Context	10
5. Local Context	12
6. Findings	16
Place Shaping – Priorities to Achieve a Quality Environment through Policy	15
Health and Housing	16
Local Policy - Planning	16
Local Policy – Improving Air Quality	17
Bio Diversity	17
Welcoming and Accessible Spaces	18
Community Led Change	19
Greening Our Housing Estates – Management and Service Improvements	21
Managing Housing Open Spaces	21
Horticulture Maintenance and Biodiversity	22
Horticulture Maintenance and Service Standards	23
Healthier and Greener Communities - Communications, Engagement and Partnership working	25
Community Greening and Growing	25
Friends Group	28

1. Recommendations

Place Shaping – Priorities to Achieve a Quality Environment through Policy	
R1	Drawing on intelligence, the Council produces an up to date GIS map of housing open spaces, and encourage the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum to <u>sample</u> and assess the accessibility of sites in wards with open space deficiencies identifying any improvement options.
R2	<p>The Council to report back to the committee on new developments and their compliance with planning policies (below); and the Council to prioritise and encourage underutilised spaces to be co-designed and transformed to deliver a balance between competing priorities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy D.SG3: Health impact assessments • Policy D.DH8: Amenity • Policy S.SH1: Delivering high quality design • Policy D.DH2: Attractive streets, spaces and public realm • Policy S.CF1: Supporting community facilities • Policy D.ES3: Urban greening and biodiversity • Policy D.OWS3: Open space and green grid networks • Policy D.DH6: Tall buildings • Policy D.ES2: Air quality
Greening Our Housing Estates – Management and Service Improvements	
R3	<p>The Council to encourage and support the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum to develop a good practice guide to achieve quality open spaces – to deliver health, environmental quality, economic and social outcomes. Comprising of priorities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green communities, roofs and balconies and support (incl. grants, tools and revenue funding (where possible)) community growing • Improving access, encouraging usage and multiuse facilities on open spaces • Eco friendly and environmentally grounds maintenance and intelligence based planting • An online platform (webpage) for community greening, (either via THHF or by each social landlord) – including information, advice and guidance, policies, procedures, duties, health and safety, licenses and map of community growing projects established and new sites identified
Healthier and Greener Communities - Communications, Engagement and Partnership working	
R4	The Tower Hamlets Housing Forum’s Community Involvement Network supported by the Council to facilitate the delivery of projects that encourage community greening, growing and quality open spaces that deliver wide benefits.
R5	<p>The THHF Community Involvement Network to widen the scope of its ‘food growing and managing a food garden training session’ to a broader development programme to cover community greening and growing (available to both residents and staff) comprising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Green flag awards for housing • Intelligence based planting, enhancing biodiversity and green recycling • Benefits of friends groups • Community greening and growing - policies, procedures, duties, health and safety, and licenses • THHF good practice guide and sharing of good practices • Supporting a cottage industry and resident led social enterprises • Local employment initiatives in horticulture

2. Introduction

- 2.1 In March 2019, the former Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee and the Tower Hamlets Homes Residents' Panel delivered a joint scrutiny review of Housing Open Spaces - those managed by Private and Local Authority Registered Providers (social landlords). The objective of the scrutiny review was to explore ways to 'Improve health, environmental quality, economic and social outcomes through Housing Open Spaces'. The review was delivered in the context of an increasing population, growing needs and challenges including housing. Tower Hamlets is a densely populated borough, blighted by deprivation, inequalities and poor air quality.
- 2.2 Research carried by Public Health England suggests that those living in wealthier areas have greater access to green space and its benefits than those living in deprived areas. The report suggests that good quality green space for all social groups is likely to improve health outcomes, reduce health inequalities foster greater community cohesion and reduced social isolation. It stresses the vital role Local authority's play in enhancing and improving access to green spaces working with external partners.
- 2.3 Faculty of Public Health, 2010 has also concluded that:
- Contact with safe, green spaces reduce health inequalities
 - increases community activity and residents' satisfaction
 - Responds to climate change - heatwaves, flooding and CO2 emissions, improves air and noise quality, enhances biodiversity and
 - Encourages active transport
- 2.4 Research carried out by the City of London estimates that green spaces support a more sustainable environment, improves wellbeing, provides economic value (including £111million saving to the National Health Service (NHS)) and supports a stronger society. However, participation in natural environments is lowest amongst the BME communities and those with poor socio economic status.
- 2.5 There is commitment from Government, the Mayor of London and the Mayor of Tower Hamlets to achieve a greener outcome. This includes greening towns and cities (with the very best parks, trees and wildlife), improving health, wellbeing and the quality of life and supporting business growth and tourism through green / open spaces. The Mayor of Tower Hamlets has committed to turn Tower Hamlets into a cleaner, greener and healthier borough where inequalities are reduced. This includes tackling poor air quality, enhancing bio diversity, delivering new homes (including 2,000 Council homes) and well-designed neighbourhoods - where people feel healthier, more independent and part of a fair, inclusive, cohesive and vibrant community.
- 2.6 In delivering the joint scrutiny review, members of the committee agreed to review good practices and policies in housing open space management. This included identifying opportunities for partnership working, sharing of good practices, promoting an increase in community benefits, accreditations and awards, and increasing access to resources to improve the quality of housing open spaces.

Outcomes

- 2.7 The aspirations underpinning the joint scrutiny review included a desire to:
- Establish good practice in the management of open spaces
 - Encourage all social housing providers to adopt good practices in order to maximise the contribution these spaces can make to improving health and wellbeing, social, economic and environmental benefits and improvements to air quality in the borough
 - Promote collaboration between the Council and the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum (THHF) to establish a Borough wide Housing Estate Best (use of) Open Space competition.
 - Achieve an increase in the number of housing open Spaces accredited by the Green Flag Awards
 - Investigate the appetite for outdoor gyms on housing open spaces
 - Identify funding opportunities that residents, Tenants and Residents Associations and social housing providers can bid for

Core Questions

- 2.8 To achieve the outcomes, the joint scrutiny review was underpinned by 4 key questions:
- (1) How much open space in Tower Hamlets do social housing providers' manage? (GIS Map as outcome)
 - (2) What informs social housing providers' approach to managing open spaces?
 - (3) How do open space strategies / polices:
 - Improve accessibility and overcome challenges including ASB?
 - Improve resident's health and wellbeing?
 - Provide economic and environmental benefits (incl. air quality)?
 - Provide community cohesion, ownership and development opportunities?
 - (4) What funding and partnership opportunities are accessed / available for the use of open spaces to deliver the above benefits?

Review Approach

2.9 The joint scrutiny review took place between February 2019 and May 2019. The review comprised of three evidence collection sessions, a site visit and fourth session to agree recommendations. The joint scrutiny review was chaired by Councillor Dipa Das, Chair of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee and supported by Anne Ambrose, Scrutiny Member – Resident Co-optee. The review was supported by Abidah Kamali, Strategy and Policy Manager, Tower Hamlets Council.

2.10 Table 1 summarises the objectives of each session:

Session (S)	Agenda / Objectives
S1: 19 February 2019 - Introduction to the review & external presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Setting the scene</u> - Background, open space priorities and benefits • <u>Good practices in urban open space management</u> • How localised empowerment around open spaces can achieve better public spaces and improved health, environmental quality, economic and social outcomes?
S2: 12 March 2019 – Open space priorities and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Open space strategies / plans / policies</u>, bio-diversity and air quality action plans and <u>their work with social housing</u>

	<p><u>providers</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public Health – tackling health inequalities and promoting wellbeing through open spaces Landlord <u>approaches to managing open spaces</u> on estates and its relationship with delivering health and wellbeing, cohesion, environmental quality and economic benefits Funding opportunities and improved partnership/collaborative working
S3: 23 March 2019 - Open space and community greening projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presentations from <u>growing projects, organisations and friends group(s)</u> - Work done around fruit/veg growing projects, community ownership / community led green space/horticultural projects Ensuring project sustainability
S4: 7 May 2019 - Recommendations and action plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft recommendations and action plan agreed

2.11 Members of the Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee that participated in the scrutiny review:

Councillor Dipa Das	Chair of Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee
Councillor Dan Tomlinson	Vice Chair, Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee Member
Councillor Shah Shuhel Ameen	Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee Member
Councillor Shad Uddin Choudhury	Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee Member
Councillor Gabriela Salva - Macallan	Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee Member (appointed to committee in April 2019 , attended session 4 only)
Anne Ambrose	Housing Scrutiny, Tenant Co-optee
Moshin Hamim	Housing Scrutiny, Leaseholder Co-optee

2.12 Members of the Tower Hamlets Residents Panel that participated in the joint scrutiny review:

Simon Hart	THH Residents' Panel Member
Daniele Larmarche	THH Residents' Panel Member
Samira Johnson	THH Residents' Panel Member

2.13 Other Councillors that participated in the scrutiny review:

Councillor Sirajul Islam	Statutory Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Housing
--------------------------	---

2.14 Officers that participated in the scrutiny review:

Tower Hamlets Council

Mark Baigent	Interim Divisional Director, Housing and Regeneration
Abidah Kamali	Strategy and Policy Manager
Jane Abraham	Interim Head of Capital Delivery
Yasmin Ali	Project Director – Town Hall
John Archer	Biodiversity Officer
Nicholas Marks	Air Quality Officer
Alice Bigelow	Interim Parks Manager
Matthew Twohig	Green Team Coordinator
Abigail Knight	Associate Director of Public Health

Philip Wadsworth	Strategic Planning – Local Plan Place Team Leader (Leaver)
------------------	--

Tower Hamlets Housing Forum

Gulam Hussain	Scrutiny and Resident Feedback Manager, THH
Mas Momin	Resident Feedback Officer, THH
Nicholas Spenceley	Head of Environmental Services, THH
Matus Holecko	Area Manager, Environmental Service, THH
Leona Menville	Chair of Public Realm Sub Group
Ana Mae Contreras-Ramirez	CaN Area Coordinator, Poplar HARCA
Paul Wilson	Community Engagement Manager, East End Homes

2.15 Other Residents / Organisations that participated in the review:

Gregory Cohn	Director, Seeds for Growth
Klaudija Alasauskaite	Development Manager, Trees for Cities
Jess Massucco	Community Education and Volunteer Manager, Trees for Cities
Fiona Brenner	Area Manager, Groundwork
Kenneth Greenway	Park Manager, Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park
Terry Lyle	Trustee, Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park
Richard Desmond	Chair, Victoria Park Friends
Joanna Milewska	Friends of Meath Gardens
Julia Miller	Friends of Meath Gardens
Tunde Morakinyo	Friends of Meath Gardens
Nathan Oley	Secretary, Approach Gardens
Margaret Wilson	Approach Gardens
Maddy Evans	Women's Environmental Network
Margaret Cox	Chair of Teesdale & Hollybush Tenants and Residents Association

3. Defining Housing Open Spaces

- 3.1 Open space is defined as any open piece of **land that is undeveloped** (has no buildings or other built structures) and can include **Green space** (land that is partly or completely covered with grass, trees, shrubs, or other vegetation) set apart for recreational or aesthetic purposes.¹
- 3.2 The New Tower Hamlets Local Plan defines Open Space as “...all land that offers opportunity for play, recreation and sport or is of amenity value, whether in public or private ownership, and where public access is unrestricted, partially-restricted or restricted”.²
- 3.3 For the purposes of the scrutiny review, only Open Spaces that are managed by Private Registered Providers and Tower Hamlets Homes, the Council’s Arm’s Length Management Organisation were included. This includes ‘amenity green space – including informal recreation spaces, and communal green spaces in and around housing’³. Private gardens were not included in the scope of this review.

4. National and Regional Context

- 4.1 According to the English Housing Survey 2017/18, in England:
- 17% (4 million) of households live in the social rented sector
 - 1.6 million households rent from Local Authorities and 2.4million rent from housing associations
 - 4% of those in the most deprived areas live in high rise flats, compared with less than 1% of those in the least deprived areas
 - Households with a black, Asian or minority ethnic household reference person were more likely to live in a high rise flat
 - 54% had a disability or long-term illness, 8% were living in overcrowded accommodation, the highest level recorded since 1995-96 and 72% were in the lowest two income quintiles.
 - The average life satisfaction score was higher for owner occupiers (8.0), than the average for private (7.4) and social (7.2) renters.
 - People in the most deprived areas were less likely to say that they were satisfied with their area as a place to live (72% compared with 89% of those in less deprived areas).⁴ In 2018, 79% of Tower Hamlets residents were happy with their area as a place to, this is 10 percentage points lower than the England average for less deprived areas.
- 4.2 There is wide ranging support from National and Regional Government concerning the objective of the review to ‘Improve health, environmental quality, economic and social outcomes through Housing Open Spaces’. This is evidenced through commitments and guidance in plans and policies, some of which have been outlined below. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has also committed through its social housing green paper to tackle the stigma of social housing and celebrate thriving

¹ EPA New England, What is Open Space / Green Space

² New Local Plan, 2031, Tower Hamlets

³

⁴ English Housing Survey 2017/18

communities. This therefore places further emphasis on the need to support local improvements, through scrutiny.

- 4.3 The Government in its 25 year Environmental Plan commits the UK to being a cleaner, greener country. The intended outcome of the plan is to build a stronger economy and improve health and wellbeing. It explains that by connecting more people with the environment, using land more sustainably, and by planting trees and creating new habitats for wildlife, we can improve and enhance biodiversity and promote greater well-being.
- 4.4 The plan commits to creating or restoring 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat, and supporting high quality, accessible, natural spaces close to where people live and work, particularly in urban areas. This forms part of its broader objective to halt biodiversity loss by 2020. The plan also aims to encourage more people to spend time in them to benefit their health and wellbeing, and focuses on increased action from all sectors of society to improve the environment.⁵ In London, the Biodiversity Action Plan is reinforced through the London Environment Strategy which sets targets for creation of new species-rich woodland, flower-rich grassland and reed beds by 2025 and 2050.
- 4.5 In achieving sustainable development, the National Planning Policy Framework.⁶ (NPPF) comprises of 3 objectives, economic, social and environmental.

Economic	To help build a strong, responsive and competitive economy, land suitability to support growth, innovation and improved productivity; and by identifying and coordinating the provision of infrastructure
Social	Homes to meet the needs of present and future generations; well-designed and safe built environment, with accessible services and open spaces that support new and existing communities' health, social and cultural well-being
Environmental	Making effective use of land, helping to improve biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution. These objectives are legislated through the Town and Planning Act 1990

- 4.6 In Policy 7.18 of the London Plan, the Mayor of London (MoL) supports the creation of new open space to ensure satisfactory levels of local provision to address areas of deficiency. The policy guides restrictions on the loss of protected open spaces unless equivalent or better quality provision is made within the local catchment area.⁷
- 4.7 In his Environment Strategy 2018, the MoL acknowledges that 'access to good quality green space and living in greener neighbourhoods can have a big impact on people's health and quality of life, and on how attractive a place

⁵ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP 'A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment', sets out what we will do to improve the environment, within a generation. May 2019

⁶ The revised National Planning Policy Framework, 2019

⁷ London Plan Chapter Seven: London's Living Spaces and Places Policy 7.18 Protecting open space and addressing deficiency

London is to live, visit and do business'. He further acknowledges the benefits of:

- Green roofs and walls – to improve air quality, biodiversity and insulation, reduce energy usage and flood risk
 - Green spaces - support biodiversity, improve health and well-being, by providing tranquil places to relax in, and places to play, exercise, and socialise in
- 4.8 According to Greenspace information for Greater London (GiGL), roughly 47% of Greater London is 'green'; 33% of London is natural habitats within open space and an additional 14% is estimated to be vegetated private, domestic garden land.⁸
- 4.9 The MoL aspires to making the London the world's first National Park City, where more than half of the city's area is green in 2050. In supporting this he has created a £12 million Greener City Fund. The fund comprises of community greening grants, green infrastructure projects, new woodland and community engagement projects.
- 4.10 The City of London identifies that green spaces support a more sustainable environment, which improves physical health, mental health and well-being, provides economic value and supports a stronger society. Monetary value of green space benefits is estimated at:
- Economic value per individual – £30.24 per annum
 - Wellbeing value UK adult population - £34.2 billion
 - Savings to NHS - £111 million (GP visits (excluding prescription or referrals)
- However, participation in natural environments is lowest amongst the BME communities and those with poor socio economic status.
- 4.11 Green Gyms run by conservation volunteers, this programme combines physical activity with reclaiming green space. Cost effective at £4K per QALY, returning £2.55 for every £1 spent by preventing physical inactivity related illness.
- 4.12 Under the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008, Private Registered Providers and Local Authority Landlords are regulated by the Regulator for Social Housing. The focus of the regulatory activity is on governance, financial viability and value for money, rent standards together with the setting of consumer standards. Whilst Private Registered providers are not accountable to the Council, Tower Hamlets has established effective partnership working arrangements through the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum (THHF). This forum is a partnership between housing associations (private registered providers) and Tower Hamlets Council. The objective of which is to deliver the borough's housing vision, continuously improving services including through effective inter-agency working and sharing good practice.

5. Local Context

- 5.1 Tower Hamlets is a thriving borough faced with numerous challenges:
- It is the fastest growing and second most densely populated local authority in the UK.

⁸ Greenspace information for Greater London CIC

- It is the 10th most deprived in England, and has the highest levels of child poverty in UK.
- It has the 4th highest youngest population in the UK, and around 66% of residents are from BAME communities.
- Average life expectancy for men and women are lower than national averages.
- The rate of early death is 97.6 per 100,000 compared to an England average of 73.5.
- 1 in 6 residents describe their health as 'fair', 'bad' or 'very bad' (higher than London). Older residents are amongst the loneliest in England.
- Overall education attainment levels are below London and 25% of residents are economically inactive.
- Tower Hamlets has the 4th highest proportion social housing stock in London and over 30,000 homes, 72 per cent of the borough's social housing stock, are managed by registered providers operating in the borough.⁹

5.2 The 2018 Annual Public Health reported:

- Every 10% increase in exposure to green space translates to a reduction of 5 years of expected health problems
- Adults with a wide range of green spaces around their home report 37% lower hospitalisation rates and 16% lower self-reported rates of heart disease and stroke
- Greater proportions of green space close to home are related to higher reported levels of health and mental health for all ages and socio-economic groups
- The risk of diabetes is consistently lower in greener areas; the risk is significantly lower in areas with 40% or more green land use
- There are lower rates of disease among people living within 1 kilometre of more green space; there is an even stronger relationship among people with anxiety and depression, children and more deprived communities
- There is strong evidence that increased access to green spaces, and leisure facilities, is linked to physical activity¹⁰

5.3 In a Borough of 7.633 square miles, in June 2017, the Borough's population was 308,000. By 2014 the Borough's population is expected to reach 365,200. Tower Hamlets has a housing target to deliver over 54,000 homes by 2031. The Council has c.19,000 households on its housing register, a large proportion of which live in overcrowded accommodation.

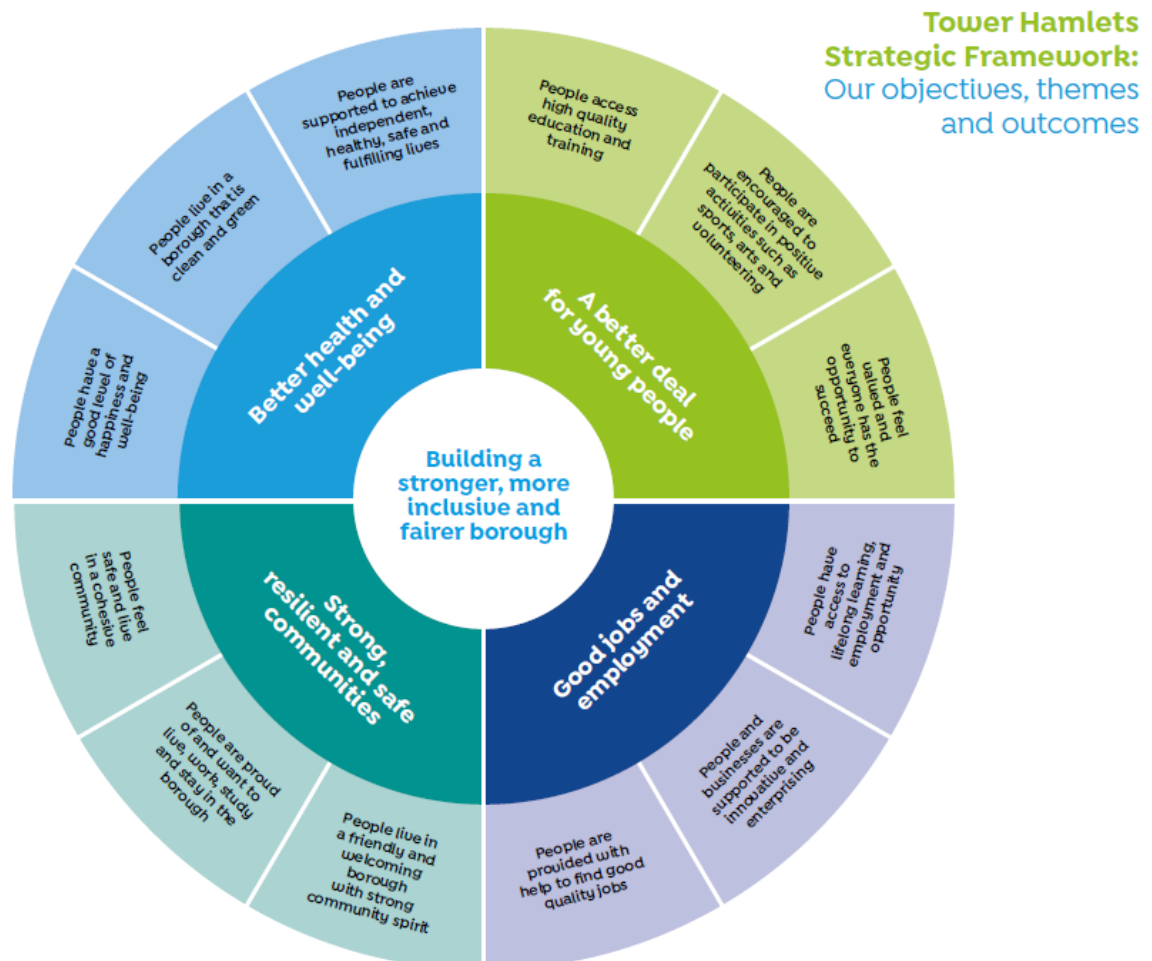
5.4 Around 78% of Open Spaces are publically accessible to residents. 13 wards are expected to experience open space deficiencies by 2031. The borough is unfortunately the 3rd highest emitter of CO2 emissions and has amongst the poorest air quality environments in London. Children in Tower Hamlets have up to 10% less lung capacity than the national average because of air pollution.

5.5 Since 2010, the Council has had its core funding from Government reduced by £148million. The Council has saved an additional £38million through efficiency savings. With pressures on much needed services rising, over the next three years, the Council will have to save a further £44m.

⁹ Tower Hamlets Borough Profile 2018 wards

¹⁰ Tower Hamlets Public Health Presentation, 12 March 2019

- 5.6 The New Local Plan 2031 Strategic Policy DH1: Good Design, Local Character and Historic Environment, places a requirement to ensure all development is designed to the highest quality standards....ensuring that developments are supported by a range and mix of high-quality, publically accessible green spaces that promote bio diversity, health and well-being. Policies seek to:
- Ensure that development does not result in net loss of open space and opportunities for the creation of new and enhancement of existing publicly accessible open spaces are maximised
 - Promote innovative approaches to delivering new open spaces as well as locating parks in areas of the borough where accessibility to public open spaces is poor
- 5.7 There is huge commitment through local and partnership strategies and plans to support the objective of the review. Bringing this together is the Tower Hamlets Plan 2018-2023. Led by the Tower Hamlets Partnership, the key objective of the plan is to build a stronger, more inclusive and fairer borough. Through a golden thread of strategic, plans and commitments, the Council and its partners further support the objective of the review.



- 5.8 The Council's vision delivered through its Strategic Plan 2019-2022 is to 'work together with the community for a fairer, cleaner and safer borough', to tackle inequalities, provide a safe, clean and green borough for people live in, with affordable homes and well-designed neighbourhoods.

- 5.9 With a growing population the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2017-2022 highlights the importance of managing the impact of growth on open spaces whilst addressing competing demand. Through protecting, enhancing, creating new publically accessible open spaces and connecting through new green corridors in supporting Green Grid priorities.
- 5.10 The Council's Local Bio Diversity Action plan sets out what the Council, registered housing providers, developers, community groups and residents can do to help conserve and enhance the important habitats and species in Tower Hamlets. The Air Quality action plan proposes encouraging new technologies and planting systems which can tackle air quality.
- 5.11 The strategies and plans not only contribute to delivering the objectives of the review but also the vision of the Health and Well-Being Strategy 2017- 2020 which is to make a difference to the mental health and wellbeing of everyone who lives and works in Tower Hamlets.
- 5.12 In his 2018 manifesto, the Mayor of Tower Hamlets committed to improving residents' health and air quality in Tower Hamlets, to tackle poverty, inequality and the Borough's housing crisis. Delivering commitments through:
- £332m to start delivery of 2,000 new council homes by 2022, including larger family sized properties and new homes for residents with disabilities and temporary accommodation
 - Promoting well-being, mental health awareness and tackling the growing problem of loneliness
 - Breathe Clean campaign and infrastructure facilities, to support walking, cycling, play streets away from traffic
 - Greening Tower Hamlets, investing in parks and open spaces and delivering public realm improvements

6. Findings

Place Shaping: Priorities to achieve environmental quality through policy

Health and Housing

- 6.1 The Tower Hamlets Health and Housing JSNA found access to good quality green space to be one of the top three priorities for environmental conditions. Additional research recognises that working with social landlords to improve open space is one of the best opportunities to improve healthy environments for residents who would most benefit:
- Living in areas with green spaces is associated with significantly less income-related health inequality
 - Green space has been linked with reduced levels of childhood obesity. However, children in deprived areas are nine times less likely to have access to green space and places to play
 - The closer someone lives to urban green space, the more likely they are to use it and the less likely they are to be obese or overweight
 - The optimal distance to green space is less than 0.5km from home or under 5 minutes walking distance. Ease of accessibility is also a factor¹¹

Local Policy - Planning

- 6.2 The benefits of open / green spaces are widely recognised both nationally and internationally and housing open spaces play a vital role in the delivery of these benefits. Green spaces should be accessible to as many people as possible and people are more likely to visit green space if they do not have to travel far to each it¹².
- 6.3 In order to meet future growth needs, 220 hectares of additional publicly accessible open space will be required by 2031. Publicly accessible open space remains low (0.89 hectares per 1,000 residents - less than the borough standard of 1.2 hectares per 1,000 residents). Compared to other London boroughs; this is far below the national standard. Housing developments (i.e. over 100 units) will need to provide publicly accessible open space on site (based on the standard of 1.2 hectares per 1000 residents). Where this is not possible, a contribution will be sought towards the delivery of the projects set out in our open space and green grid strategies.
- 6.4 The panel was presented with a number of policy requirements relating to the provision and delivery of open space within the Local Plan. Publicly accessible open space should include soft landscaping and sustainable drainage systems; be of high quality design; be well-connected to other spaces; enhance biodiversity; meet the demands arising from the development; and be visible and accessible from the surrounding public realm. Communal amenity areas (as distinct from public open space and child play space) must also be provided as part of the mix of open space typologies within residential schemes.

¹¹ Presentation by Public Health, 23 March 2019

¹² University of Leeds, A brief guide to the benefits of urban green space <https://leaf.leeds.ac.uk/a-brief-guide-to-the-benefits-of-urban-green-spaces/>

- 6.5 In achieving high quality design, greening the urban environment and in maintaining housing standards and quality, planning policies place a requirement for open spaces to function as places for social gatherings and recreation, enhance bio diversity e.g. green roofs, planters etc), protect and increase the provision of trees (e.g. native species and street trees) and replace any lost.
- 6.6 The panel received case study examples of two developments where bad practices were evident in scheme delivery. Public open space had been converted into hardstanding car park with no greenery, plant beds tarmacked due to inadequate maintenance arrangements, no communal amenity space, lack of connectivity to existing areas, and a tall building over shadowing children's play space. The panel agreed that the Council should report back to the committee on new developments and their compliance with planning policies (below), ensuring the development of measures to do so.

Local Policy – Improving Air Quality

- 6.7 Poor air quality is a particular issue in Tower Hamlets. It is forecast that 15% of the population in the Borough (just over 10,000 people) will be exposed to pollution levels over National Objective levels as defined in the UK Air Quality Strategy. This places Tower Hamlets as the second highest London borough with high levels of exposure to pollution. Green spaces can play an important part in reducing air pollution, however there needs to be a significant amount of green space to make an appreciable difference to air quality. The Office for National Statistics has undertaken a study showing the impact of vegetation in removing air pollution. Vegetation saved £11.29 per person in Healthcare costs in Tower Hamlets and removed up to 779kg of pollution per sq km. However, the average health saving due to vegetation in the UK is £15.53 per person. This is a reflection of the low level of green spaces in the borough.
- 6.8 The Council's Air Quality Action Plan, adopted in 2017, has specific actions which are related to green spaces. These are:
- Action 27 Ensuring adequate, appropriate, and well located green space and infrastructure, including for walking and cycling
 - Action 54 Green Infrastructure, such as green walls, green screens or living roofs at schools/residential developments in polluted areas.
- 6.9 The panel raised concerns about accessibility to Mayor's Air quality fund, requesting a strengthening of publicity to ensure to information is available and accessible to all.

Bio Diversity

- 6.10 The Council has a duty under Section 40 of the Natural Environment & Rural, Communities Act 2006 to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity in the undertaking of its functions. There is clear evidence that contact with nature is beneficial to physical and mental wellbeing. Biodiversity also provides economic and functional benefits, such as pollination, flood risk reduction, air pollution reduction and local climate amelioration. These functional benefits will become increasingly important as climate change leads to more frequent extreme weather events.

- 6.11 Housing open space forms a high proportion of green space in Tower Hamlets. Much of it is currently underused and visually dull, consisting of close-mown grass with a few trees. A more biodiverse open space, with an arrangement of different vegetation including trees, shrubs and colourful flowers, is generally going to be a more visually attractive and interesting open space for the people who use or overlook it. The Local Biodiversity Action Plan is a partnership document, overseen by a steering group involving a range of stakeholders including social housing providers. Social housing providers in the borough have undertaken a wide range of biodiversity enhancement projects on their open spaces over the last few years. Many of these projects are instigated and/or led by residents, through Tenants & Residents Associations and/or community garden groups.
- 6.12 Enhancing biodiversity complements other uses of housing open space, particularly food-growing. For example, providing nectar-rich flowers to encourage bees and other pollinating insects ensures that food crops are pollinated, and providing habitat for birds and a diverse community of invertebrates reduces pests through increasing predation of plant-eating insects.

Welcoming and accessible spaces

- 6.13 The Joint Scrutiny Panel received evidence from the Council, local and pan-London organisations in setting out good practice in working with housing open spaces to green communities, and provide quality open spaces, including through new development. This included the identification of benefits to both existing and new communities and habitats and the delivery of a number of improvement projects through community engagement and participation.
- 6.14 In a borough with a growing population, c.19,000 people on the housing register, existing open space deficiencies and underutilised open spaces, delivering a balance between competing priorities to achieve quality open spaces is crucial. In tackling Borough's housing crisis, the Mayor of Tower Hamlets has pledged to start delivery of 2,000 new council homes by 2022, and deliver well-designed neighbourhoods.
- 6.15 The Council presented evidence of its Watts Grove development amongst others where through stakeholder engagement sites identified were being transformed to provide new homes and quality open spaces. Watts Grove (former Veolia waste site) was recently recognised by the New London Architecture (NLA) as a leading example of public housing in London. It provides 148 affordable homes, a large central courtyard space. The site enhances movement routes, offers amenity space to residents and encourages interaction and cohesion.¹³ Sites identified by the Council for housing are often inaccessible, riddled with Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB), with formal / informal car parking, where green / play space needs enhancement. Through resident engagement the Council housebuilding programme empowers residents to be active in the design of schemes. This includes enhancing open space / green space sites through intelligent design and planting, and working with the ASB preventions officer to design out ASB.

¹³ <https://www.bptw.co.uk/projects/watts-grove/>

- 6.16 A housing open space survey of social landlords, with a response rate of 71% found that open space records were often not centrally located, and maps sometimes pre-dated housing stock transfers. Open spaces managed by landlords included fencing for child safety (incl. play areas), restricted opening hours or restricted access to certain groups (community / growing) and closures either temporary or permanent due to health and safety or ASB. 40% reported potential areas that could be transformed into green spaces. Some were under consideration, whilst others were hindered by limited resources. Neighbourhood satisfaction data ranged from 67% - 78% (data provided by 40% of landlords) with higher results visible for horticulture services that were delivered in-house. The landlord with the lowest neighbourhood satisfaction result (67%) reported that it would bring horticulture services in-house. This landlord would also commence work with the Natural Science Research Council to develop a toolkit to enable positive ecological site management and resident well-being.
- 6.17 Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park (FoTHCP) provided evidence on challenges faced with housing open spaces. FoTHCP provided advice on effective management to provide long lasting benefits to the environment. It highlighted a number of challenges relating to social housing green spaces, concerning access in particular. Where some green spaces have limited times of access due to concerns around ASB, others provide visual access only with opportunity to enhance, or are technically available but uninviting, are restricted to residents or a subset of residents.

Community led change

- 6.18 Evidence was heard from Groundwork London on how the organisation, through green spaces, improves the employability skills of those furthest away from the labour market. This includes working with communities to make their surroundings greener, healthier and safer, educating communities on environmental impact and saving natural resources. The organisation provided examples of community led design and change to climate proof social housing landscapes, delivering a social return of £4.29 for every £1 spent. This includes housing estate improvement projects, which through community engagement and design, and Council and housing association support and funding, helped to deliver change. The organisation has committed £429,000 into current projects in Tower Hamlets, £101,000 of which is in housing estates.
- 6.19 Trees for Cities were called to provide evidence on the benefits of trees in an urban environment. It provided evidence of estate tree planting projects and greening benefits. Whilst the benefits were similar to those already mentioned, the organisation highlighted that urban trees helped create a sense of place and local identity, tackle crime and increase pride in the area. Urban trees can play an important role in reducing the urban heat island effect, remove dust and particulates from the air, provide food and shelter for wildlife and reduce traffic noise. One tree can remove 26 pounds of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere annually, equalling 11,000 miles of car emissions.¹⁴ The importance of ensuring a planned programme of planting was emphasised, particularly as the tree planting seasons are short (October – April).

¹⁴ Environmental factsheet, Project Evergreen <https://projectevergreen.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/EnvironmentalBenefitsofGreenSpace.pdf>

- 6.20 The panel raised concerns about the national approach to funding short term greening projects. Whilst they agreed that such projects provided community and environmental benefits, these projects were often not supported by an exit strategy and sustainability plan. The importance of short term capital projects being supported by ongoing revenue funds and effective maintenance by landlords was highlighted. Poor maintenance of green spaces can quickly disengage residents from using them. The panel was informed that sustainability of projects was rising on the national agenda through longer term projects. Where previous funding was mainly short term capital funds, the MoL through his Greener City Fund, committed to 3 years funding. The panel was informed that due to the range of benefits provided including health, employment etc, access to different pots of funding could also be accessed. Engagement of friends groups and educating residents was also recognised as good practice.
- 6.21 The panel agreed with the approach of community engagement and participation over consulting. It raised the importance of ensuring resident engagement in the development of Landscaping Strategies. This would combine local input with professional advice and support the survival of open spaces.
- 6.22 Garden projects can provide opportunities for growing fruit and vegetables and contribute to people eating healthier food¹⁵. The joint scrutiny panel heard evidence from Seeds from Growth on the benefits of community gardens. In recent times, habits and behaviours have increasingly encouraged sedentary lifestyles leading to higher levels of stress and poor physical and mental health.¹⁶ Food growing provides opportunities for social interaction, exercise, education in good nutrition and healthy eating, leading to improvements in residents' physical and mental wellbeing and personal resilience. It provides opportunities for the development of new skills and can be used as a pathway to support people into more active lives and potentially into employment.¹⁷ Food growing in the borough has a long history. The panel raised concern raised about encouraging food growing given levels of pollution in the borough. However, it received evidence to suggest that the majority of growing was food growing takes place in raised beds. Public health also advised that CO2 is important to the food growing process and with proper washing; no negative effects were anticipated if consumed.
- 6.23 Tower Hamlets Public Health delivered a presentation on its Communities Driving Change programme. The objective of the programme is to improve resident health and well-being by working with social landlords and residents to delivery an asset-based community development programme working across 12 neighbourhoods over at least 5 years, predominantly based in THH estates, but working also with other housing associations. The programme works with residents to co-produce open space design. The current themes include improving social connections, reducing ASB and encouraging food

¹⁵ Greener Neighbourhoods: A good practice guide to managing green space, National Housing Federation

¹⁶ Visits to nature are associated with decreases in self-reported stress.

Annerstedt, M. (2011) Nature and Public Health. Aspects of Promotion, Prevention and Intervention. PhD Thesis, Swedish University of Agricultural Science, Alnarp, Sweden

¹⁷

growing. The programme works with communities by securing interest, mobilisation and participation. Projects include play area design, lighting improvements, planting and greening and food growing, street furniture, security/access and addressing anti-social behaviour. There was opportunity to expand project delivery across the borough and also connect with existing projects such as social prescribing and walking.

- 6.24 Outdoor gyms were recognised as a good method to encourage physical activity amongst residents. Currently health centres refer residents through social prescribing. Where Public Health has funded outdoor gyms, this includes exercise classes for up to a year to help people form habits, with good uptake by residents. Public Health works closely with social prescribing and is rolling out wellbeing hubs in the community (i.e. Idea Stores) in 2019, which also includes signposting to services.
- 6.25 The panel highlighted that need to ensure organisations are working closer together to achieve attractive and interactive open spaces. This includes engaging Council / Landlords and working with the Greater London Authority green space improvement framework.

RECOMMENDATION 1

R1 – Drawing on intelligence, the Council produces an up to date GIS map of housing open spaces, and encourage THHF to sample and assess the accessibility of sites in wards with open space deficiencies identifying any improvement options.

RECOMMENDATION 2

R2 – The Council to report back to the committee on new developments and their compliance with planning policies (below); and the Council to prioritise and encourage underutilised spaces to be co-designed and transformed to deliver a balance between competing priorities.

Policy D.SG3: Health impact assessments
Policy D.DH8: Amenity
Policy S.SH1: Delivering high quality design
Policy D.DH2: Attractive streets, spaces and public realm
Policy S.CF1: Supporting community facilities
Policy D.ES3: Urban greening and biodiversity
Policy D.OWS3: Open space and green grid networks
Policy D.DH6: Tall buildings
Policy D.ES2: Air quality

Greening our Housing Estates – Management and Service Improvements

Managing Housing Open Spaces

- 6.26 The National Housing Federation advises social landlords to make a commitment to good quality green and open spaces at the highest level possible within the organisation. Well designed, managed and maintained green space can reduce anti-social behaviour and save money on repairs. It sets out 10 principles for housing green space comprising of:
1. A commitment to quality

2. Resident involvement
3. Knowing the bigger picture – taking a strategic approach
4. Making best use of funding – secure, co-ordinate and use of partnerships
5. Design for local people – better design, procurement and project delivery
6. Develop training and skills – open space training opportunities for residents and staff
7. Maintaining high standards – long-term care for green and open spaces are treated as essential
8. Making places feel safe – through character and design to change use behaviour and improve personal safety
9. Promote healthy living – encourage activeness by promoting attractive and well maintained open spaces
10. Prepare for climate change – protection for flooding, heat waves and rising energy prices through urban greening¹⁸

6.27 In responding to the Housing Open Spaces survey of social landlords, social landlords highlighted a number of existing good practices in community greening. This includes:

- Enhancing bio-diversity, including working with friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park
- Eco therapy project engaging those with substance misuse issues
- Residents maintaining communal areas, and numerous gardening & growing projects (incl. award winning), also helping to tackle ASB through joint responsibility
- Volunteer days engaging employees (from organisations/ corporate)
- Development of a toolkit to enable positive ecological site management and resident well-being working with the Natural Science Research Council.
- Outdoor gyms - 40% of landlords had outdoor gyms on estates. 10% were interested in exploring. 10% reported having multi-use games areas across various locations.

6.28 The Tower Hamlets Housing Forum delivered evidence of its collective approach to housing open spaces including through new development and regeneration. It highlighted that open spaces were designed at the planning process, which ensured landscaping proposals meet the needs of end users, with a mix of accessible space to relax and play and as visual amenity. This includes key design considerations, planting and ecology, safety, connectivity, play and the long term maintenance and viability of materials and planting. There was a mix of in-house and outsourced specialist maintenance provisions with published service standards. Residents are engaged to manage ASB, maximise open space usage and its provision of social value. However, there are conflicting demands on spaces – play vs quiet space. It highlighted that joint working with communities was paramount. It supported projects such as food growing, outdoor gyms and wellbeing including through grants.

Horticulture Maintenance & Biodiversity

6.29 The panel received a range of evidence from the Council and social landlords in horticulture maintenance being economically and environmentally friendly and enhancing bio diversity. The panel agreed that the sharing of advice,

¹⁸ Greener Neighbourhoods: A good practice guide 2011, National Housing Federation

guidance, knowledge and training was crucial to improving the quality and benefits provided by housing open spaces.

- 6.30 The Local Biodiversity officer provided evidence on the importance of biodiversity, legislation and policy. In the action plan for gardens and grounds, under which housing open space falls, the following guidance is provided to social landlords and groups of residents managing community gardens:
- Record, protect and appropriately manage the priority habitats and features of value to priority species which already exist on their estates;
 - Create wildlife habitats such as meadows, small areas of woodland, orchards, and hedges within the landscaping around estates, and enhance any existing habitats;
 - Install bat boxes, nest boxes for birds, bee boxes and hedgehog homes in suitable places on estates;
 - Create loggeries and insect hotels;
 - Plant common or alder buckthorns and other food plants for butterfly caterpillars;
 - Plant nectar-rich flowers to provide food for wild bees and other insects;
 - Plant black poplars in suitable sites away from buildings and paths.”
- 6.31 FoTHCP provided further advice for both residents and housing management organisations on plantation to enhance the longevity of environmental and biodiversity impacts. This included:
- Planting of trees that are appropriate for their location and will not eventually require frequent reduction
 - Inclusion of slow growing trees – irreplaceable assets for the future
 - Planting bulbs and wildflower in grassland – low cost and flexible
 - Following good practice in creating highly successful nature friendly gardens such – i.e. East End Homes (EEH), winners of London in Bloom awards
 - Rolling training programme for staff and residents on sympathetic management practices for estate green space, including tackling negative perceptions – EEH a client
 - Community engagement, buy in, cohesion, planting days and reduces ASB
- Recommendations for social landlords:
- A move away from amenity mowing to bulb/wildflower grass
 - Tackling barriers to informed management
 - Sufficient training for grounds care staff and good c-ordination
 - Evaluating the purpose of derelict shrubberies
 - A joint training programme for grounds staff and residents
 - Delivery of simple and cheap interventions
- 6.32 The panel supported FoTHCP’s advice in working with residents and social landlords to improve biodiversity. The panel raised concerns about a possible knowledge gap in maintenance staff being able to evidence how new and existing planting improved environmental benefits and air quality. They called on a strengthened approach to ensure intelligence based planting and review. The panel was informed that currently no baseline of bio diversity exists, however the objective of the Local Bio Diversity Action Plan was to enhance biodiversity, and this includes the monitoring of habitats on specific projects. The panel requested that the Local Biodiversity officer work with Tenants and Resident Associations to identify and monitor habitats on housing estates.

Horticulture Maintenance & Service Standards

- 6.33 In response to declining standards of parks maintenance a decision was made in late 2012 to in source the Councils grounds maintenance horticultural function. The Green Team encompasses all Parks Maintenance functions including Arboriculture works, Play area maintenance, cleansing, contract management and Horticultural maintenance.
- 6.34 The Green Team has assisted in maintaining parks to a high standard using the green flag awards as a guide. The Council has achieved a record number of Green Flag awards (11 parks and 3 community sites). Across a total of 27 categories, the purpose & aims of the award are to ensure: access to quality green and open spaces; appropriate management of spaces, established standards of good management, promoting and sharing of good practice, recognition and reward of employees and volunteers.
- 6.35 The Green Team has introduced a number of good practice techniques into its maintenance processes, comprising:
- Trees – Cyclical inspections by a qualified arboriculture, in line British Standards 3998 Trees Works
 - Play inspections - delivered according to the RoSPA, three tiered hierarchy of inspections of playgrounds. Routine inspections (weekly as a minimum) to assess condition and faults, recording and reporting. Operational inspection according to the RoSPA guide to routine inspections of playgrounds. Annual inspections are delivered by an independent organisation. Organisations should be checked to ensure their inspections are acceptable to insurance companies and suitable professional indemnity (at least £5 million) is carried.
 - Meadow management - twice yearly cut with arising's removed seasonally. Improves bio diversity and supports a reduction in amenity grass cutting.
 - Mulching Operations - sustainable methods of weed suppression. Mulching utilizing leaf mulch recycled from the previous season's leaf fall. Shredded and returned to shrub beds as a form of weed suppression.
 - Sustainable Planting - nectar rich planting over seasonal planting schemes. More sustainable, better for biodiversity and less labour intensive.
 - Operational mobility and technology- A dedicated fitter responsible for breakdowns repairs and servicing. RFID scanners on gate to provide data on the locking / unlocking of gates and record patterns of ASB. QR code used with smart phones requiring a visit.
 - Increasing demands and skills - Maximising the effectiveness of resources, skills audits and upskilling staff. PA1/PA6 accreditations for using pesticides safely, First Aid, LANTRA on use of machinery and NVQ level 2 in horticulture management and RoSPA RPII routine or operational standards as required.
 - Apprenticeships - work with administrative apprentices, 4 50+ apprentices, and exploring the feasibility of establishing horticultural apprenticeships.
- 6.36 Tower Hamlets Homes provided evidence of its gardening service. In 2013 this service was brought in house, terminating a 5 year contract after just 2 years. This was due to poor performance and complaints. The service explained its approach to quality management through the grading of sites by London in Bloom Judges and has seen improved performance and a reduction in complaints. The service made the following changes of good practice:
- Tree stock of over 5000 trees, 3-4 year cyclical tree works programme and regular pruning. Planting of 50-100 trees per annum to replace those lost
 - Creation of orchards on 3 housing estates
 - Moved from grass cut and collect service

- Created over 50 wildflower areas
- Wood chipping of beds
- Installation of bird and bat boxes and insect hotels
- Supporting community food growing and bulb planting
- Improving employment prospects by providing paid work experience to long term unemployed clients of the Tower Project

6.37 Those green space services which separated their day-to-day maintenance functions from the overall management found it harder to deliver good quality and efficient services than those that unified them. Separation can lead to competing priorities; communication failure and lack of familiarity with day-to-day operations, and can reinforce silo mentality. When services are integrated, priorities are more likely to be shared and there is better.¹⁹ There was an appetite amongst panel members for horticulture services by social landlords to be delivered in house. However, the panel advised that this may be deliverable for smaller housing associations with the majority of their stock in Tower Hamlets, however for larger organisations this may not be achievable. The panel re-enforced the need to share good practice, training for horticulture staff and supported horticulture apprenticeships. Not only would this support local employment but would also build a new generation of local horticulture experts.

6.38 The panel raised concerns over an existing knowledge gap of trees and shrubs, their air quality impact, and future strategies to improve air quality. Tower Hamlets Homes informed the panel they would clarify with the surveyor to what extent air quality considerations are taken on board.

RECOMMENDATION 3

R3 - The Council to encourage and support THHF to develop a good practice guide to achieve quality open spaces – to deliver health, environmental quality, economic and social outcomes. Comprising of priorities to:

- Green communities, roofs and balconies and support (incl. grants, tools and revenue funding (where possible)) community growing
- Improving access, encouraging usage and multiuse facilities on open spaces
- Eco friendly and environmentally grounds maintenance and intelligence based planting
- An online platform (webpage) for community greening, (either via THHF or by each social landlord) – including information, advice and guidance, policies, procedures, duties, health and safety, licenses and map of community growing projects established and new sites identified

Healthier and Greener Communities - Communications, Engagement and Partnership working

Healthier and greener communities

6.39 Community gardening and food growing is a thriving sector in Tower Hamlets with over 100 growing spaces.²⁰

¹⁹ Managing green spaces, seven ingredients for success 2010, CABE SPACE

²⁰ Women taking action for a healthier environment, Women's Environment Network, presentation 23rd March 2019

- 6.40 Seeds for Growth have established food co-operatives throughout Tower Hamlets. These sell healthy fresh fruit and vegetables in areas where there is a high rate of poor diet related ill health. The volunteer led food co-operatives now provide healthy fresh food for 35,000 Tower Hamlets residents. The organisation has identified c.7 underutilised green spaces in Tower Hamlets (E14) that could be transformed into community gardens. It presented case studies of successful projects and their achievements. This included inter-generational social impacts, tackling the stigma of and contributing to a reduction in mental health conditions, anxiety and depression and supporting move on for clients into education, employment or volunteering.
- 6.41 Seeds for growth provided a guide to developing community gardens. This included engaging landlords and volunteers, establishing a steering committee, design choices, seeking supportive funds from landowners for installation and running costs (water and electricity), roles and responsibilities. The organisation advised how it supports the committee established to raise funds and donations for on-going running costs to ensure sustainability. It presented a range of recommendations for the panel to consider comprising of a Tower Hamlets community gardens policy, grant funding through potential sources, negotiation of supplier discounts, community garden website and app – for all to access for advice, guidance and news bulletins.
- 6.42 Evidence was received from the Women’s Environment Network (WEN) who working with local organisations (including social landlords) has supported local healthy and sustainable food, through the Tower Hamlets Food Growing Network. WEN aims to inspire residents (including those vulnerable) to get involved with gardening, food growing, nature and the environment. It supports growing communities in underused spaces and social prescribing. Examples of different models of successful gardens (meanwhile sites, housing sites, organisations), how to encourage growing gardens, and the challenges often faced was provided. This included the growth of gardens groups (and its development), funding and sponsorship, volunteers and friends groups. Challenges included financial sustainability of projects, building a group that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient. Currently funded by City Bridge and community grants, WEN explained that it has funds to work strategically across the borough²¹.
- 6.43 The committee received evidence from Tower Hamlets Homes, Poplar HARCA, East End Homes, and volunteers in their priorities to promote community greening and growing in Tower Hamlets.
- 6.44 Tower Hamlets Homes provided evidence of its demand led and fast growing community food gardens, across 24 sites 46% of which were located in Bethnal Green. These projects were making positive use of public space including reducing youth ASB. These food gardens had licenses, were community owned and managed, comprised of c.527 growing beds and had 1,500 regular users. Food gardens provided intergeneration activities, and were provided with information and clear protocols.
- 6.45 The food gardens provided residents who lived in flats and had no private gardens the opportunity to enjoy greening, growing and the benefits this brought. This included increased cohesion, neighbourhood satisfactions, engagement in formal structures etc. It reported that 79% of residents

²¹ Women taking action for a healthier environment, Women’s Environment Network, presentation 23rd March 2019

engaged had reported an improvement in their Health and Well-being, and an 84% improvement in cohesion. However there was still more to be done. This included increasing partnership working and learning amongst community food gardens, providing further economic and environmental value and sharing of resources, the establishment of a health and community impact survey to a the development of new community food garden network.

- 6.46 The panel went on a Site Visit to an award winning THH site on the Teesdale and Hollybush Estate in Bethnal Green. It comprises of a number of raised beds which promote growing and encourages communities to communicate, work together and enjoy each other's company. The gated but unlocked site has instilled a sense of community ownership, pride and togetherness. Margaret Cox (Chair of Teesdale & Hollybush Tenants and Residents Association) and colleagues have renovated more than 13 disused sites with the help of corporate and local volunteers, creating a 'mini Eden' where local nature can thrive. The eye-catching sites include a children's playground, a number of allotments and Tower Hamlet's first orchard, Strawberry Fields. Creative in their use of resources, they keep sustainability at the heart of what they do – even some of the plants have been recycled from local park rangers or house clearances. One of the year-on-year awards winning sites, Rocky Park, provides free plots to residents to encourage them to grow their own healthy produce. The original allotments were so popular they quickly had to expand to allow for more grow beds²².
- 6.47 Approach Community Food Garden, which was established in 2010 is also an award winning garden which provides gardening access for residents, schools, nurseries and wheelchair users. It has achieved tremendous success in making gardening more welcoming and accessible for all members of the community by tackling communication barriers, promoting healthy eating and the sharing of produce, enhancing bio diversity, communal composting, delivering parties and gatherings to bring communities together.²³
- 6.48 Poplar HARCA provided evidence of its 15 resident led community garden projects, which engaged over 1,000 residents per year and helped enhance partnerships with over 23 organisations. It worked with partners to maximise resources for newly formed food growing clubs/associations and provided continued assistance including facilitation of volunteers and funding sources. It supported transformation of unused /idle spaces often littered with dog poo and fly tipping into community gardens, a green hub and community green house, orchard and play space. This extended to a roof top garden home to 2 beehives producing over 410lbs of honey in 5 years, sold in community hubs, and helps treat hay fever. The gardening projects have engaged schools, young people, volunteers (including corporate volunteers and funds), and has supported community leaders through training, growing competitions (including national entries) cook-offs and the establishment of resident led social enterprises. Quotes were provided to evidence the impact that these gardens have had on communities:

“Did not have to buy vegetables throughout the summer”

²² <http://www.lovebethnalgreen.com/bethnal-greener/>

²³ Growing together, Approach Community Food Garden, presentation 23 March 2019

“I believe this has saved the NHS from spending thousands in supporting me to overcome my panic attacks. Social Services would have saved loads looking after my children. This community garden has restored my sanity and has given me strength”

“I feel closer to my neighbours now having had the chance to work and chat with them in the garden. The sense of community is back”

“It’s a delight to care for plants with support from young people. I thought that they do nothing but play computers these days (if not cause trouble!)”

“It has raised people’s awareness of wildflowers and their benefits to bees and other insects. Raised the profile of beekeeping in Poplar”

“Raised awareness of children about where food comes from and how good food impacts on their health.”

- 6.49 A case study was provided of the gardening journey of an isolated and homebound woman with limited English and poor health. Since being granted a patch in a local community garden, the woman has been able to interact socially with other gardeners, build friendships, overcome language barriers, and improve her health and well-being. She is now more active, can stretch, walk, and bend more. She grows herbs at home during the winter months and thanks the “garden community for making [her] feel alive again”. The panel agreed that this was not an isolated case and that many residents in Tower Hamlets were in similar positions.
- 6.50 East End Homes provided evidence of its approach to community greening and growing and play areas. It explained that following stock transfer a revisiting of sites led to change, including through regeneration to achieve sustainable development, enhance bio diversity that benefit the environment and communities. Through an in-house gardening team and a green design in contract arrangements, community engagement and events and with the assistance of corporate volunteers (Morgan Stanley) it has been able to transform spaces, green balconies and work with residents to achieve compliments and awards.

Friends Group

- 6.51 Friends of Victoria Park provided evidence to the panel of its work in the award winning Victoria Park (Green Flag Awards) and the benefits friends groups and volunteering can bring to improving spaces. The friends group through dialogue with the Council delivers improvements, secures funds, encourages participation of users, delivers a programme of community events, and ensures robust upkeep and maintenance of the park. The friends group is exploring an outdoor classroom and outdoor gym equipment. Whilst resources were available to support the establishment of other friends groups, it also informed the panel that a transformed training centre was available on the site which can be utilised by organisations.
- 6.52 It was evident that there was a history of community greening and growing in Tower Hamlets, and this was in increasing demand. However, the panel agreed that there needed to be a clear, consistent and collective approach across the borough where good practices in management, horticulture

maintenance, community greening and growing are shared by social landlords through the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum.

- 6.52 Whilst a number of greening and growing projects were being delivered, a collective and robust approach to supporting the sustainability of these is needed, exploring supportive grants, access to funds available, and sharing of resources etc. The panel agreed that in supporting the objectives of the review, landlords should utilise resources available and reduce costs through taking an economies of scale approach. This includes widening the scope of the THHF Community Involvement Network's 'food growing and managing a food garden training session' to a broader development programme for staff and residents to cover community greening and growing, policy, protocols and good practice.

RECOMMENDATION 4

R4 – The Tower Hamlets Housing Forum's Community Involvement Network supported by the Council to facilitate the delivery of projects that encourage community greening, growing and quality open spaces that deliver wide benefits.

RECOMMENDATION 5

R5 – The THHF Community Involvement Network to widen the scope of its 'food growing and managing a food garden training session' to a broader development programme to cover community greening and growing (available to both residents and staff) comprising:

- The Green flag awards for housing
- Intelligence based planting, enhancing biodiversity and green recycling
- Benefits of friends groups
- Community greening and growing - policies, procedures, duties, health and safety, and licenses
- THHF good practice guide and sharing of good practices
- Supporting a cottage industry and resident led social enterprises
- Local employment initiatives in horticulture

Appendix A – Housing Open Spaces Scrutiny Review Action Plan