Think Global, Act Local
Healthy Nature for a Heathy Barnet

Friends of the Earth Barnet

Introduction

We face a climate and a biodiversity crisis. Nature can help us reduce, adapt and be more resilient to climate change; and improve our fitness, well-being and social cohesion. To benefit from nature, we need to protect and enhance it. As Inger Anderson, the head of the UN Environment programme, recently said "Nature can be our saviour, but only if we save it first".

Barnet has a lot of green space and so has significant opportunities to ensure we work with nature to gain the most benefit - and that means properly valuing nature and biodiversity.

While there are many reports and recommendations about what could and should be done to protect and enhance our natural environment, there needs to be focus on taking action and delivering short and long term outcomes.

Actions need to be taken on public and private land - at large scale such as establishing new parks and at small scale in streets and gardens - and need to be based on expertise, including how to ensure we put the right trees in the right place, the impact on biodiversity, air quality, flooding and climate.

There are many different groups involved in looking after our natural world and it will be important to get the most out of the collective knowledge and passion to overcome concerns about insufficient resources.

The National Picture

UK Biodiversity loss

According to the National History Museum based on analysis of over 58,000 species by museum scientists, the UK has only half of its entire biodiversity left, putting it in the bottom 10% of the world's countries. With an average of just 53% of its native wildlife intact, it falls behind countries including the USA and China following widespread destruction of its habitats from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

Nature Positive

In 2021 in its response to the Dasgupta Review on The Economics of Biodiversity, the Government agreed with the Review's central conclusion that nature, and the biodiversity that underpins it, ultimately sustains economies, livelihoods and well-being saying "The Government is committed to delivering a 'nature positive' future, in which we leave the environment in a better state than we found it, and ensure economic and financial decision-making is geared towards delivering that".

Urban Green Spaces

For town and city dwellers it can be easy to become disconnected from nature even though we have a lot of it within reach in what some call “urban green spaces” - defined in a World Health Organisation (WHO) report as all urban land covered by vegetation of any kind. This covers vegetation on private and public grounds, irrespective of size and function, and can also include small water bodies such as ponds, lakes or streams (“blue spaces”).

We Londoners are lucky to live in what the 2020 London Green Spaces Commission report describes as one of the greenest cities in the world; globally recognised for its parks and green spaces; and the world’s first National Park City (a community-grassroots movement).

The report sets out some of the benefits provided by our green spaces.

- 1 in every 3 of London’s 11-year old children are overweight or obese and just 65% of adults in the city are physically active. Living in greener places is linked to longer life expectancy and better mental and physical health. Covering almost one fifth of the city, green spaces save London £950m per year in avoided health costs.
- It is estimated that Londoners receive £274 in value for every £1 spent on green spaces.
- Projected increases in average monthly temperatures show that London is likely to experience a 5-6°C increase in summer and winter averages by 2050. The natural services parks and green spaces provide help reduce urban temperatures by up to 2°C during heat waves.
- Significant inequalities persist in our society: Londoners are more likely to be socially isolated or lonely than people in the rest of the UK. Parks and green spaces are socially inclusive providing free outdoor public space open to anyone regardless of who they are or where they live.
- London’s wildlife is in decline, in common with nationwide trends. Parks and green spaces provide crucial networks and habitats for wildlife.
- London’s parks have been estimated to store 5.5 million tonnes of carbon annually, valued at £340 million.
- The capital’s parks help reduce Londoners’ exposure to harmful pollutants, providing public space away from the main sources of pollution.

The report also highlights some important issues including:

- The green space sector is facing a crisis with a loss of staff capacity, skills and expertise. This is worsened by a lack of career progression and professional recognition, difficulty gaining transferable skills, poor workforce diversity and the fact that it is currently a relatively self-contained sector.
- Despite recent improvements there remains a lack of diversity in both the sector’s workforce and those who use green spaces.
- There is a lack of investment in green spaces by the Government, which leads to reduced investment by boroughs.
- The GLA, London Councils, a working group of the London Environment Directors Network, and the charity, Parks for London; all have a city-wide remit, role or responsibility for parks and green space. Friends’ groups, businesses and volunteers also play a crucial role. However, resources and expertise are fragmented. Currently no single organisation has the capacity to champion or provide comprehensive city-wide support for London’s 33 borough park services to help them become more integral to a local authority’s response to the climate and ecological crises.

Green Infrastructure

According to the WHO Urban Green Spaces report, urban green space is a component of "green infrastructure", a topic discussed in a 2020 Natural England blog which highlights the following:

- Having different types of green infrastructure close to people's homes, places of work or education, or along transportation routes, is likely to maximise the potential ways in which people benefit.
- Both public green infrastructure, such as street trees, parks, and playgrounds and private ones, such as gardens, are important and support health in different ways.
- Green infrastructure that is well looked after is more likely to be perceived as safe and inviting, and therefore used.
- A good understanding of the needs and desires of local communities will help ensure new or improved provision of green infrastructure is suitable.
- Care must be taken to understand the potential impacts of actions and to ensure that provision of green infrastructure is equitable, fair and does not increase inequalities in health between different social groups.

And the blog draws attention to "the development of the National Framework of Green Infrastructure Standards. This is a commitment in the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan, which aims to green our towns and cities for health and wellbeing, nature, climate resilience and prosperity, in particular for disadvantaged urban populations". It concludes that "we need to create more, bigger, better and joined-up green spaces, especially near to where people live".

However, austerity may have impacted on green spaces as, according to the blog, "in the last ten years £4bn has been cut from core funding for local services in London. Over the same period, spending on public green space has fallen by over 30 per cent to just £159m while London's population has grown by around 900,000 people (11.2 per cent)".

In December 2021 a further blog from Natural England announced the release of the "Green Infrastructure Framework" which provides "an England-wide evidence base to help local authorities and others target Green Infrastructure improvements where they are most needed - a vital step in levelling up access to nature".

England Trees Action Plan

In May 2021, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) published its England Trees Action Plan 2021 to 2024 intended to set England on course to at least treble woodland planting rates and achieve a target of 7,500 hectares a year by 2025.

In March 2022 the National Audit Office published an evaluation of whether Defra's management of the Programme is likely to achieve value for money. Its main finding is that "despite Defra's efforts, new tree-planting in 2021-22 looks set to be well short of what it set out to achieve. This makes its 2025 target and a continued increase beyond 2025 to the levels required for the government's net zero strategy look all the more challenging."

The report also highlights concerns about nursery capacity, the sector workforce, private investment, public engagement and the need to secure the active support of other parts of government to plant trees on their land and incorporate tree-planting in, for example, planning rules and infrastructure projects.

London Urban Forest

The London Urban Forest Partnership comprises 25 organisations with a "strategic interest in the capital's trees and woodlands. In 2020 they published a plan for "working together to protect, grow and enhance London's urban forest" which provides the following information:

London's urban forest – all the trees and woodlands in the capital – is an integral part of the city's green infrastructure and currently covers around 21% of London. With components ranging from trees in parks and streets, ancient and secondary woodlands and copses along railway lines, rivers and canals, London's urban forest consists of over eight million trees.

Woodlands, which are mostly broadleaved, cover 13,300 hectares, (8% of London's land area), with 20% of these defined as ancient woodland.

Although London's urban forest is quite species diverse, there are areas where diversity of both species and age profile is low, increasing vulnerability to the impact of pests and diseases.

Over two fifths (43%) of the urban forest is under public ownership and management – the majority under the control of London's 32 boroughs and the City of London. A fifth of London's urban forest stands within private gardens, making Londoners the custodians of a significant proportion of London's trees.

While almost 60% of London's trees are in private ownership, the trees on public land contribute 60% of the ecosystem service benefits as there is a higher proportion of larger trees.

Trees remove 2,241 tonnes of air pollution a year - the equivalent of 13% of PM10 particulates, and 14% of NO2 emitted annually by road transport.

London's trees and woodlands support a wide range of important wildlife including ten bat species, birds like barn owl, insects such as stag beetle and white admiral butterfly, and fungi like oak polypore.

The plan describes three success factors:

- London's existing urban forest requires protection and management.
- New planting and natural regeneration of trees and woodlands needs to be planned, designed and integrated with the wider network of green and open spaces across London.
- The variety of organisations responsible for London's urban forest need to work more collaboratively on determining priority projects and initiatives.

The Local Level

Barnet Draft Local Plan 2021-36

The new Local Plan which sets the Council's vision for growth and development in Barnet over a 15-year period (2021-2036) and provides the main basis upon which future planning applications will be determined, has been submitted to the Secretary of State for independent examination in public.

During its development representations were made by a range of individuals and organisations, including Natural England who commented on a range of topics including habitats, green infrastructure and biodiversity. Their comments, and the Borough responses, are summarised in a Statement of Common Ground between Natural England and London Borough of Banet.

Supporting the plan are a range of supplementary documents including a Green Infrastructure Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) (published in Oct 2017). The SPD "sets out a strategic approach for the creation, protection and management of networks of green infrastructure. Infrastructure should be provided where it will reduce the impact of climate change, improve local ecosystems and habitats and retain, enhance or create green corridors that enable linkages between rural, urban fringe and urban green spaces".

Protecting Green Spaces

Established in 1925, Fields in Trust is a charity that champions and supports our parks and green spaces by protecting them for people to enjoy in perpetuity. According to their website, Barnet has a few protected green spaces (including Tudor Sports Ground, King George's Fields, King George V playing fields and Byng Road playing fields).

Fields in Trust are helping Liverpool City Council to become the first local authority in the UK to protect all of their parks and green spaces forever, a commitment that will see 100 green spaces, covering over 1,000 hectares, secured in perpetuity.

Barnet Green Spaces

Barnet is one of the greenest boroughs in London. 2,466 hectares of Green Belt and 690 hectares of Metropolitan Open Land cover a third of the Borough and there are 67 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs), all of which help to provide some protection against development.

Barnet Council has a Barnet Open Spaces and Parks Strategy 2016-2026. However, it appears that it is not a strategy and action plan but is a document (with supporting appendices) that "provides the council with a review of the quality of its parks and suggests a range of opportunities". It has a detailed assessment of the council portfolio of public green spaces with focus on parks and natural/semi-natural green spaces and also provides comparison to the previous assessment carried out in 2009.

In 2015, Barnet had total public greenspace provision of 888 hectares, (the 'greenspace' definition includes parks, playgrounds, sports sites, natural and semi-natural greenspaces and other miscellaneous sites). This equates to nearly 10% of the area of the borough and 2.41 hectares per head of population. It appears that this is spread across 208 sites (schools, private land, private sports clubs, churchyards, cemeteries, private gardens and verges are not included in the analysis).

Of the 888 hectares, Barnet has 87 parks covering 465 hectares (approximately 5.4% of the total area of the Borough). Based on the 2015 population of Barnet (367,266), this represents parks provision of 1.26 hectares per 1,000 head of population, which "falls below the standard set for parks in the Local Plan".

The strategy says: "Local parks are evenly spread across the borough and overall most areas are well served, however a section of the borough from New Barnet to Oakleigh Park and parts of North Finchley, East Finchley and an area to the North East of Hendon do not lie within 400m of a local park. North and East Finchley and Brent Cross/Cricklewood have a particular deficiency in District Park provision".

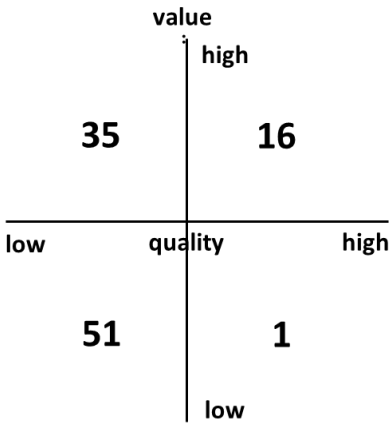
While parks may be evenly spread, Chipping Barnet region has the majority of park space with 244 hectares (Hendon has 141 and Finchley/Golden Green 80).

Of the 49 natural green spaces, 39 were assessed and it is reported that:

- None of the natural greenspaces were identified as being used by schools
- 5% of sites are within areas of future population growth
- 85% of sites are in high flood risk areas

Assessing value and quality

Much of the strategy is informed by a detailed assessment of the (2015) value and quality of parks and natural green spaces which is used to categorise each of 103 sites as high value/high quality, high/low, low/high or low/low. The total in each category is shown below.



According to a press report, during a council committee meeting, the leader of Barnet Council said "the phrase 'low-value, low-quality' – that is a very technical phrase that describes a barren field people may walk a dog on compared to, for instance, a field that is well used for sports, recreation, has landscape gardening and all the rest of it".

As can be seen, of the 103 sites reported on, nearly half (51) were categorised as low value and low quality and there is an uneven distribution of the number of sites in each grouping.

Digging deeper it seems that the assessments provide a more nuanced picture as there are four reporting groups for value (high, medium high, medium, low) and four for quality (excellent, good, fair, poor). Again there is an uneven distribution of scores and the majority of parks and green spaces are rated medium value and fair quality.

Parks Value	Parks Value	Parks Quality	Parks Quality
High	4	Excellent	1
Medium/High	18	Good	9
Medium	48	Fair	49
Low	1	Poor	12
Total	71	Total	71

Natural Green Spaces Value	Natural Green Spaces Value	Natural Green Spaces Quality	Natural Green Spaces Quality
High	0	Excellent	0
Medium/High	13	Good	0
Medium	24	Fair	32
Low	2	Poor	7
Total	39	Total	39

The medium value and fair quality sites seem to have been added to the low and poor rated sites to create the list of low value and low quality sites. High value and quality are the combination of high/medium high and excellent good.

The same approach was applied in 2009 and comparison with 2015 results shows that the number of high value and low value parks fell (from 8 to 4 and 8 to 1 respectively) and the number of medium value parks increased the most from 38 to 48.

In 2015 only 39 of the 49 sites were assessed making comparison difficult but in 2009 and 2015 most sites were medium or high medium value (44/49 in 2009, 37/39 in 2015).

It is unclear whether the methodology, which results in an uneven spread across the categories, is helpful, and whether labelling sites as low value/low quality risks interpretation that potentially leads to unintended consequences as seemed to happen when it was suggested that the council was considering putting solar farms on parks and open spaces.

While the draft local plan continues to use the methodology it includes criteria for development: “The release of low quality, low value open space for development must robustly demonstrate that the criteria set out in Policy ECC04(e) is satisfied and the requirements of Policy ECC06 – Biodiversity are met. Replacement open space should be the same or better quality than that which is proposed to be lost and be provided in the local catchment area to ensure that it does not create further deficiency in public access to open space”.

A different approach to valuation: Corporate Natural Capital Accounts

In March 2017 a Barnet Corporate Natural Capital Account (CNCA) was published. The report says that “Barnet is the first London Borough to produce a borough-wide CNCA for 200 of its parks and open spaces. The account has been developed using the quality and value assessment data of these spaces assembled for the borough’s Parks and Open Spaces Strategy (2016-26).

This account shows the enormous value of these open spaces.

Benefits captured within the CNCA for Barnet include:

- Recreation: Over 10.5 million visits are made to LB Barnet greenspaces each year.
- Physical health benefits: Over 100,000 people (~30% of the population) meet their physical activity guidelines through visits to Barnet’s greenspaces.

- Property premiums: Case studies of five sites suggest they provide property value premiums of 10% – 15% to over 2,000 residential properties and of 3% to over 50 commercial properties in close proximity.
- Climate regulation: Barnet's woodland and grassland sequester over 1,000 tonnes of CO2 equivalent each year.

The total value of benefits from them is estimated at more than £1 billion over the next 25 years. The costs of maintaining these open spaces are estimated at £72 million over the same period – less than a tenth of the benefits they provide".

In Oct 2017 a report Natural capital accounts for public green space in London also highlighted the high value of parks compared to the cost: "In total, publicly accessible parks have an estimated value of £5 billion per year. When compared with the amount spent on maintaining the city's parks, this means that £27 of value exists for each £1 spent on maintaining parks".

Local authorities may not see the full financial benefit as "Most of this value benefits individuals who are residents. Businesses and public services, such as healthcare providers, also benefit from the existence of London's parks. In contrast, costs are incurred by local authorities who pay to maintain public parks".

The report estimates that 3.1 million tonnes of carbon is stored in trees across London and a further 2.3 million tonnes of carbon is stored in soil.

Barnet's trees

According to the Local Plan "Barnet has around 36,000 street trees, the second highest number in London. These trees make an important contribution to the character of the Borough and the quality of life of residents as well as mitigating climate change. The Mayor seeks to utilise Borough Tree Strategies to increase tree cover in London, with 2 million additional trees sought by 2025. Barnet's Tree Policy sets out ambitious targets to plant 900 trees annually focussing primarily on improving air quality, reducing the urban heat island effect and enhancing Barnet's parks."

Looking at the Barnet Tree Policy 2017 the target of 900 trees annually is made up of replacing deadstock (600 street trees and 100 park trees), 100 additional trees in parks and open spaces and 100 additional trees on additional sites. An update on progress was given to the council Environment Committee in 2019 but we have been unable to find any more recent updates. The target covers the period to 2022/23 and it is not clear whether there will be an updated policy, targets and action plan.

Growing the amount and quality of green spaces

Friends of the Earth wants to double UK woodland cover by 2045 - to tackle the climate emergency and make more space for nature. According to take climate action 251 hectares of land may be suitable for new woodlands in Barnet. Of this new woodland opportunity area, 41.9% could be delivered through rewilding (defined by Rewilding Britain as the large-scale restoration of ecosystems to the point where nature is allowed to take care of itself).

But rewilding isn't just about large spaces. Rewild My Street seeks to reverse the trend of city streets going grey. It started in London, where 2.5 Hyde parks of green space are lost each year through changes to private gardens, and provides design-led guidance for people wishing to adapt their homes, gardens and streets to encourage wildlife.

The current parks portfolio in Barnet consists of 10 district parks and 77 local parks. To maintain the 2015 level of provision, 12 district parks and 90 local parks will be required by 2041. However, as the level of provision is lower than required, to meet anticipated population growth and levels of provision, the Barnet strategy analysis says that 240 hectares of additional park space will be required by 2040.

Hedgerows play a big part in carbon capture, habitat provision and regulating air and water quality. The Climate Change Committee has proposed that extending hedges by 40% is one of the key changes needed to reach net zero carbon by 2050. It is not clear what the plan is for improving existing and creating new hedgerows across the borough.

Green shoots – community action

Across Barnet many residents are doing what they can to protect and enhance nature and improve our relationship with the natural world. Groups of residents are working to map rights of way, pick up litter, clean up brooks and streams, plant trees, build bug hotels and provide community food growing opportunities. Individuals grow food on allotments and in their gardens and help provide habitats for wildlife.

Social media is enabling people across the community to connect with like-minded people to share ideas and resources and have a bigger impact. Examples include Barnet Allotment Federation, connecting 37 allotment societies across 44 sites, and Barnet Green Spaces Network (with its Parks and Green Space manifesto for the Local Elections in May 2022), which comprises 40 Friends of Parks and Green Spaces groups.

By working together much more can be achieved as shown by the recent planting of 600 trees in a “tiny forest” near Henlys Corner and volunteer planting.

Conclusions

Actions taken this decade will determine how successful our collective responses to the climate and biodiversity crisis will be.

Barnet is a green borough and so has the opportunity to ensure that development of the sustainability and biodiversity strategies, as well as updating of development policies, puts ensuring our nature is healthy at the heart of decision making.

Doing so can deliver benefits to our communities, our economy, biodiversity and climate, help improve air quality and flood management.

Will the council take the opportunity to go beyond the council portfolio of green spaces and create borough wide green infrastructure strategies and action plans that protect and enhance all of our natural environment, encourage greater use of our green spaces, and enable greater collaboration between community, council and business?