

Case Study:

HOW IS TOWER HAMLETS LEVELLING UP THROUGH ITS APPROACH TO PARKS AND GREEN SPACES?

December 2022

ADEPT

The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport

INTRODUCTION

The government committed to delivering a 'nature positive' future, in which we leave the environment in a better state than we found it, and halting species decline by 2030. Key policy developments include the [25 Year Environment Plan](#) and the [Environment Act 2021](#).

Meanwhile, the Environment Agency's [State of the Environment](#) report (2021) found that the pandemic has exposed and amplified green inequality in society. *"Too many towns and cities in England, especially those with a strong industrial heritage, have too little green space, too few trees, culverted rivers, poor air quality and are at risk of flooding"*.

Tower Hamlets is the most [densely populated](#) local authority in England with 15,695 residents per km² – compared to the national average of 424 per km². Between 2011 and 2021, the population increased by more than 22%.

It is among the most deprived council areas, with around 60% of the borough being amongst the 30% most deprived in England. Deprivation is more prevalent among children and older people.

Tower Hamlets also has a diverse population with more than two thirds of residents belonging to minority ethnic groups. It is home to the largest Bangladeshi population in England.

While the borough has more than 200 parks and open spaces, of which more than 170 are publicly accessible, the majority are small and do not support physical activity. Rapid population growth and change also poses a challenge to providing a sufficient quantity and quality of open space to support diverse user needs.

TAKING A PEOPLE AND HEALTH FOCUSED APPROACH TO GREEN SPACES

The [Tower Hamlets Parks and Open Spaces Strategy](#) was put together to assess the quality and quantity of open spaces, and to recommend areas for investment. It was published in 2017 covering the period 2017-2027.

The strategy looked at both the amount of open space per head of population, now and in the future, as well as the catchment areas of each space (drawing on standards in the [London Plan](#)). It used GIS mapping to identify areas of open space deficiency in the borough, using actual walking distances.

It also assessed the quality and value of open spaces and the availability of playing fields and outdoor sports facilities, as required by Sport England.

Measures of quality drew on Green Flag criteria for open spaces including accessibility, sustainability, community involvement, conservation and safety.

The strategy looked at future pressures on open spaces arising from population growth. It predicted that the population was set to grow by 26% in the next 10 years rising to an estimated 374,000 by 2026. The 2021 Census established that the population had risen to 310,300.

It also mapped deprivation across the borough, noting research that people on the lowest incomes tended to be less likely to engage in any physical activity and have worse health outcomes. The most deprived areas were mainly clustered in the east of the borough.

Drawing on this evidence, the strategy established a two-stage set of principles to guide investment in parks and green spaces. This approach reflected both the future pressures on open spaces and the link between access to quality open spaces and physical activity, and improving population health.



The principles in the first stage were designed to focus investment on areas of greatest need in the borough. This would take into account the current level of access to green space, projected population growth, and whether the area was deprived with associated low levels of physical activity and poorer health outcomes.

The principles in the second stage were designed to select specific sites for investment within the areas identified at the first stage. These targeted sites that were well used already and required improvement, or with the potential to offer a wider range of functions to engage different population groups.

WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW?

The strategy has helped to guide investment from development (through S106 contributions and the Community Infrastructure Levy) to the delivery of new parks and open spaces in areas of greatest benefit to local people.

Examples of new spaces now in development include:

- the Poplar Gasworks site at Level Road, a large-scale development of c.2,800 homes and employment space, incorporating a new public river side park
- regeneration of the Tesco site at Bromley by Bow with a new riverside park, 965 homes and a new superstore

Tower Hamlets has also received funding under the Government's Levelling Up Parks Fund. Up to £85,000 is available to a list of places which rate highly on the Index of Multiple Deprivation and have limited access to green space.

The funding will be used to support improvements in Prospect Park including new play equipment, improved surfaces, planting trees and native hedging. The funding will also support community engagement on further work to improve the park.

Tower Hamlets is continuing to apply its understanding of deprivation and the wider social determinants of health to wider local policy making. The borough has been selected as one of 10 local authority areas in the United Kingdom to receive funding as part of the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) [Health Determinant Research Collaboration](#) (HDRC) initiative.

The purpose of each HDRC is to enable local authorities to become more research-active, working with higher education institutions and voluntary and community sector partners.

Tower Hamlets' HDRC will build on its recently established corporate research function in the Chief Executive's Office, with mechanisms for collating and disseminating evidence and evaluating policy interventions.

Local partners in Tower Hamlets have also created a Community Insights Network to strengthen and support community research activity. The network brings together trained local residents and organisations in Tower Hamlets to gather local qualitative insights.

Community Insight researchers gather information about experiences of local services and how they might be improved, made more efficient or more accessible particularly by reaching groups that traditionally do not engage with services. This work is expected to expand under the HDRC.

This network provides a route for gathering qualitative information to understand what residents want from local parks and open spaces.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- **Use of data and evidence to target inequality:** Tower Hamlets developed an evidence-led approach to its parks and open spaces strategy – seeking to target investment to the areas of greatest need, drawing on evidence about deprivation and physical activity levels.
- **Building strong relationships across and between departments:** the strategy and its implementation was a collaboration between parks and open spaces, public health, strategy, and planning services. This approach enabled the council to ensure the strategy met the needs of different professions, facilitated the delivery of new open space, and provided a platform for securing investment from planning contributions dedicated to open space as well as health.
- **Community engagement:** Tower Hamlets has a diverse population with more than two thirds of residents belonging to minority ethnic groups. The Community Insights Network will help the borough to understand local residents' experience of local services, including parks and open spaces and how these can be improved.



CONSTRAINTS

- **Tower Hamlets is a densely populated borough** and there is a limit to the amount of open space available. As the population grows there will be increasing pressure on parks and open spaces.
- **There is ongoing resource pressure on parks teams** with limited budgets for staff time or capital projects to improve the quality of parks and green spaces. Tower Hamlets has sought to maximise the gain from local planning contributions for the delivery of projects.

LEARNING POINTS

- **Prioritised investment:** the Tower Hamlets Parks and Open Spaces Strategy established a two-stage process to guide investment to the areas in most need, taking into account deprivation, physical activity, poor health outcomes, as well as the opportunities in each space for improvement. The main source of investment was through developer contributions.
- **Funding for maintaining and improving green spaces:** there is extensive evidence about the role of parks and natural spaces in addressing social, environmental and health priorities (APSE). However, as a non-statutory service, council parks teams are over stretched. There is a need for secure and long-term funding to enable parks teams to maintain and improve local green space networks.

LINKS

Tower Hamlets Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, via:

https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgn/leisure_and_culture/parks_and_open_spaces/open_space_strategy.aspx

Health Determinant Research Collaboration initiative, via:

<https://www.nih.ac.uk/news/50-million-awarded-to-local-government-to-tackle-interventions-for-health-inequalities-through-research/31654>

State of UK Public Parks 2021, via: <https://www.apse.org.uk>

Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On (2020), via:

<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

Levelling Up Parks Fund: Prospectus, DLUHC, (Aug 22) via:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-parks-fund-prospectus/levelling-up-parks-fund-prospectus>

State of the environment Environment: health, people and the environment (2021) Environment Agency, via:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications>

Environment Act 2021, HM Government, via: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents/enacted>

Levelling Up the United Kingdom (Feb 2022), Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, via:

<http://www.gov.uk/official-documents>

During 2022, the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport led a project to explore how local authorities are levelling up through action to address disparities in multiple domains - public health, local environmental quality, exposure to climate risk and socio-economic deprivation.

This project was in collaboration with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, the Association of Directors of Public Health, the Association of Directors of Children's Services and the Local Government Association, recognising the synergies between our work areas, and the links between wellbeing and place.

This case study is one of a series of examples which look at how local authorities are levelling up, across service areas.

- ADEPT members are the place-making strategists and policy shapers across top tier local authority areas
- ADEPT members are specialists, delivering services and sharing best practice across key sectors including environment, planning, housing, transport and economy
- ADEPT members design strategies for the future, taking communities beyond 2035
- ADEPT members operate in networks, cutting through boundaries to work with partners across the political, public, private and community sectors
- ADEPT members provide opportunities to develop new talent, supporting the place directors of tomorrow

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