

# Children, Environment and Leisure Policy and Scrutiny Committee

<b>Date:</b>	18 September 2017
<b>Classification:</b>	General Release
<b>Title:</b>	Open Spaces & Biodiversity Strategy: Draft for Public Consultation
<b>Report of:</b>	Barry Smith, Head of City Policy & Strategy
<b>Cabinet Member Portfolio</b>	Environment, Sports and Community
<b>Wards Involved:</b>	All
<b>Policy Context:</b>	City for Choice City of Heritage City of Aspiration
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## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Work has recently been undertaken to develop an updated strategy for Open Spaces and Biodiversity for the council, combining these two topics for the first time in a single strategic approach (historically they have been handled separately).
- 1.2 The draft strategy aims to recognise the range and value of Westminster's impressive network of 'green assets', including parks, gardens and green infrastructure such as living walls and roofs, and looks at the importance of protecting the city's rich and diverse wildlife. The strategy reflects the full range of assets – those that are owned or managed by the council and those that are not, such as the Royal Parks and private spaces. The strategy narrative and the Action Plan which accompanies it aim to capture the role of the council among a wider team of partners in protecting, enhancing and making the most of the city's open spaces and biodiversity. This 'wider team' includes the contribution that Westminster's residents themselves can make and with this in mind the document seeks to present the issues in a way that non-specialists and the general public will find engaging and accessible.

- 1.3 The draft strategy, attached at Appendix A, is very shortly due to undergo public consultation, with responses being welcomed until November 2017. The Children, Environment and Leisure Policy and Scrutiny Committee is invited to provide its comments and feedback on the draft strategy alongside this wider consultation process, so that a final document may subsequently be developed which reflects all of these views and perspectives.
- 1.4 The draft Open Spaces and Biodiversity Strategy is a recently developed piece of work and has not previously been discussed by this Policy & Scrutiny Committee or any other.

## **2. Key Matters for the Committee's Consideration**

2.1 As outlined in this report, the draft Open Spaces and Biodiversity Strategy is currently undergoing public consultation. Through this process we want to encourage interested parties to join us in an open discussion which can take shape based on their own perspectives on what the key issues are. The Committee's views are sought in relation to a similar set of broad lines of enquiry.

1. What are the Committee's views on the overall approach currently being taken to delivery of a combined strategy for Open Spaces and Biodiversity?
2. This is a very broad and cross-cutting area of work with multiple connections to other areas of council service. Synergies with Sports, Leisure and Wellbeing (and especially the refreshed Active Westminster Partnership strategy, 'An Active City for All') have been highlighted in particular, along with a range of other strategic connections noted in the 'Policy and Legislative Context' section (page 5) of the consultation draft. Are there any further key linkages which we may have missed – any connections to additional areas of council service delivery, or current or forthcoming strategic approaches or publications – which the Committee would see as particularly relevant?
3. The Action Plan associated with the draft strategy references the council's own commitments and also some specific contributions by key partners. Does the Committee have any further suggestions it would like to make in respect of:
  - a. Further actions to which the council itself should commit?
  - b. Additional, particularly significant, partner contributions which we would seek to recognise?
4. Is there anything further, in any aspect of the draft document and proposed approach overall, which the Committee feels we may have missed and which should be brought into the post-consultation review process as we finalise and publish the strategy to begin implementation?

2.2 The Committee's responses will form the basis of recommendations that will be incorporated into a short report that will be submitted to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Sports and Community for a response.

## **3. Background**

### **Open Spaces and Biodiversity in Westminster**

3.1 Westminster has an impressive network of 'green assets' with everything from large open spaces such as Paddington Recreation Ground and the Royal Parks, to small

parks and ornamental gardens, waterways, 'pocket parks' and green infrastructure such as living walls and roofs. In fact, over 20% of the land in Westminster is made up of green or open space.

- 3.2 The city also supports a rich and varied range of wildlife. Nearly one quarter (more than 500 hectares) of Westminster's total area is protected because of its value in terms of biodiversity, and part of the city (in St John's Wood) has formal designation as a Local Nature Reserve under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949). It is particularly noted as a rich and important habitat for birds and a wide range of bird species can be found across the rest of the city also. Robins, dunnocks, blackbirds, song thrushes, starlings, blackcaps, chaffinches, coal tits and goldfinches are all regular visitors to Westminster's parks. Within the Royal Parks, there are various waterfowl including herons and pelican. The tawny owl, stock dove and great spotted woodpecker are all known to breed and nest in some Royal Parks locations within Westminster, and even peregrine falcons have been spotted. Westminster also supports a number of invertebrate species, including the stag beetle – a species which is in steep decline across Europe. There are small mammals, including hedgehogs, foxes, grey squirrel as well as five different species of bats. Our waterways are also important sites for supporting wildlife, with a range of fish and other aquatic species to be found in our canals and in the Thames.
- 3.3 143 specific locations in Westminster are formally recognised as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) by the Mayor of London and GLA. This offers them extra protection to acknowledge their particular role in supporting the biodiversity of London as a whole. The spread of SINCs across the city have been mapped and can be found at Appendix B.
- 3.4 The wealth of natural assets within the city, taken collectively, are extremely popular and highly valued. They deliver a wide range of specific benefits for Westminster, both as a place and as a community, including:
  - Benefits to physical health and wellbeing, encouraging and providing opportunities for people to get physically active
  - Mental health and wellbeing, by offering respite from the city in spaces of relative tranquillity and enabling people to have contact with nature
  - Environmental benefits, impacting positively on air quality, noise pollution, flood risk and urban cooling
  - Supporting biodiversity by providing essential habitats for a wide range of animal, bird, insect and aquatic species and giving people a chance to connect with, learn about and experience that wildlife in the very heart of the city
  - Economic benefits, including impact on land values and property prices, while of course attracting tourism and enhancing the visitor experience
  - Supporting strong and resilient communities, providing places where people from all sections of the community can come together for recreation, volunteering or to take part in communal activities
  - Contributing to local identity and heritage, providing a backdrop for events and filming as well as simply adding to the sense of place in specific neighbourhoods and Westminster as a whole.

- 3.5 We want to work to protect, enhance and promote Westminster's open spaces and local wildlife, making the most we can of them to help us realise these benefits. Work has therefore been undertaken to develop an updated strategy for open spaces and biodiversity for the council, combining the two topics for the first time in a single strategic approach (historically they have been handled separately).
- 3.6 The intention has been to produce an accessible and engaging document which will be able to reach a wide audience and generate interest in the issues among local people and non-specialists. The document closely references but does not seek to replace or replicate the existing documents which support it and provide it with its policy context. It focuses not on Planning Policy (discussed in much greater detail later in this report) but rather on why the City Council considers our open spaces and wildlife to be so important and what we and others will do to ensure they are maintained for future generations and that we continue to get the best out of them.

### **The Importance of Partnership**

- 3.7 The draft strategy highlights how vital it is that key partners and the local community work with the council, all playing their own part in protecting Westminster's green assets and biodiversity. Several partner organisations are highlighted as being of particular importance in helping us achieve our shared aims in this area. These include the Greater London Authority, Royal Parks, the Rivers and Canals Trust and ZSL London Zoo, among others. Early, informal engagement has taken place with some of these partners, and they will all naturally be included in the formal consultation process. We hope to benefit from their unique expertise and perspectives, while also giving them an opportunity to highlight additional work their agencies are doing which complements the council's own efforts.
- 3.8 We also recognise that local people themselves can be an essential partner in helping us achieve our aims in relation to Westminster's green assets and wildlife. The strategy points out how, with even the smallest amount of outside space of their own, residents can do their bit by choosing pollinator-friendly plants or installing bird boxes in their gardens.
- 3.9 We have also explored different ways of encouraging residents, especially young people, to take an interest in 'greening' their local area. In June this year the council partnered with the School of Architecture and Built Environment to run a student competition, seeking design ideas for pocket parks and planters within the Marylebone Low Emissions Neighbourhood Area. A number of greening initiatives have also been supported via the council's Ward Budgets programme in recent years. This is another way in which Councillors, council officers and local people have historically worked together to bring extra greenery into Westminster's neighbourhoods, and support local wildlife.
- 3.10 This all serves to underline the central role that working in partnership has in our ability to make the most of Westminster's green assets and support biodiversity. To reflect this the Action Plan that accompanies the draft Open Spaces & Biodiversity strategy has been structured in such a way that the reader can see, alongside the council's own commitments, several examples of the work of various key partners (the general public included), which complements our efforts and contributes to shared outcomes.

## Policy Context

- 3.11 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires that our “planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the needs for open space, sports and recreation facilities and opportunities for new provision” and, in respect of biodiversity we must “have regard to conserving biodiversity as set out in the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006)”. To this end, preservation and enhancement of Westminster’s ‘green assets’ features prominently in the City Plan, with a number of specific policies to protect existing open space and to support the provision of new and improved spaces and green infrastructure.
- 3.12 Westminster’s City Plan is currently undergoing a process of extensive revision and updating. By collaborating directly with the officers working on the redraft it has been possible to ensure that the priorities of the draft Open Spaces and Biodiversity Strategy are underpinned and fully supported by specific and targeted policies within the refreshed City Plan, with all the legal weight that provides. This frees up the Open Spaces and Biodiversity Strategy from needing the status of Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) in itself. This gave us the desired scope to create a more ‘plain English’ document outlining the council’s purpose and commitments in relation to open spaces and biodiversity, without needing to duplicate the policy rigour and more technical tone of the statutory planning documentation.

## Evidence Base and Emerging Priorities

- 3.13 In 2014-15 significant work was commissioned and undertaken by Groundwork to audit all of Westminster’s open spaces. The study noted size, topology, biodiversity data and a range of other details in respect of each open space. Green infrastructure installations were also looked at. To complement this, qualitative and quantitative customer insight and consultation work was done, to understand how our existing green assets are used by the public and what the current perception of them is among within the community.
- 3.14 From this evidence base a few key priorities began to emerge. These are areas where the available information indicates the City Council has scope to deliver particularly beneficial impact, either by building on existing strengths and successes, or by tackling areas of specific challenge. The emerging priority areas are:
- **Green infrastructure** – Through our planning policies and working with developers and other partners, driving the delivery of additional green infrastructure such as living walls and roofs, especially in areas where the opportunities for other green space are limited. Thinking innovatively about how greening can be introduced into the urban environment is critically important with pressure on available land in Westminster so great. A big part of achieving this is working effectively with developers, using our planning policies and our strong working partnerships to drive the delivery of new green initiatives wherever possible.
  - **Space for play** – Boosting the city’s offer in terms of play space by facilitating new sites where possible, but also by exploring alternative solutions such as ‘Active Streets’. This is particularly important as the Groundwork survey data shows that Westminster continues to be deficient in play space. Given aforementioned pressures in land this is not necessarily surprising, but again by approaching the problem creatively it can be possible to deliver real benefits to Westminster’s children and young people by giving them opportunities for play. Encouraging physical activity in this way also has, of course, implications

for a range of our public health and other priorities, such as tackling childhood obesity.

- **Walking in and around open spaces** – Ensuring we closely align with the council's draft Walking Strategy. Consultation with the community shows that a majority of people using Westminster's parks and open spaces tend to travel there on foot, and we know that high quality green spaces encourage people to walk more. With all the benefits in terms of health and wellbeing, traffic congestion and impact on air quality that this can bring, it is more important than ever that we use our open and green spaces to best effect in encouraging people to explore the city on foot.
- **Biodiversity** – This area has received less emphasis in recent years, with the discontinuation of the London-wide Biodiversity Partnership framework. However, as outlined in the strategy preserving a diverse range of wildlife and offering people easy access to experience it first hand can have a wide range of benefits. So, to complement our strong focus on offering 'wildlife education' opportunities, we want to take a strategic approach to protecting Westminster's biodiversity. We aim to work with key partners at a borough level to re-establish some momentum around the topic, developing a realistic set of local priorities and agreeing a targeted two year action plan to address them.

### **Developing our Action Plan**

- 3.15 The evidence-based priorities outlined above have fed directly into the detailed Action Plan which accompanies the draft strategy. The Action Plan sets out the specific actions which we propose to take and, by incorporating responsibilities which fall across a broad range of council service areas, we are able to reflect the truly 'whole council' approach we take to this cross cutting issue. To ensure we accurately capture and reflect our collective efforts the Action Plan has been developed with direct input from a wide range of council teams, including Public Health; Sports, Leisure & Wellbeing; Growth, Planning & Housing; and Adults' Social Care.
- 3.16 As noted above, the Action Plan also seeks to reflect the crucial contributions being made by some of our key partners, such as Royal Parks and the GLA. The result is a cross cutting Action Plan which articulates the multi-faceted approach which will allow us to achieve our shared objectives.
- 3.17 For clarity the draft actions have been structured into three broad themes:
- **Quantity:** Increasing green space and infrastructure wherever possible (driving this through the City Plan, neighbourhood plans and planning decisions, and as part of our own local area regeneration schemes such as Church Street)
  - **Quality:** Delivering high quality open spaces and green infrastructure which deliver our priority outcomes, including all biodiversity objectives but also all those which have resonance across the full range of City for All outcomes
  - **Impact:** Enabling access and engagement across communities to ensure benefits are felt as broadly as possible.

## **Focus on Biodiversity**

- 3.18 During the course of early engagement with some key partners while the draft strategy was being developed, it became clear that a specifically focused approach may need to be taken to the biodiversity agenda. This is an area which has arguably suffered from some loss of emphasis and momentum in recent years, with the discontinuation of the pan-London Biodiversity Partnership framework due to lack of funding in 2013. A meeting with the Central Royal Parks Wildlife Group (CRPWG) earlier this summer demonstrated the strength of interest in protecting and preserving Westminster's wildlife among key partners, but also a sense that greater understanding of, and support for, the priorities of these stakeholders was needed from the council.
- 3.19 The draft Open Spaces and Biodiversity Strategy therefore does not seek to preempt the views and specific priorities of those who specialise in this area and carry out this type of work day to day, on the ground. So instead of setting overly prescriptive, specific actions around biodiversity at this stage, and in the absence of a formal London-wide framework to slot into, the strategy proposes that we establish a local (borough-level) working party which will discuss issues relating to Westminster's biodiversity and develop for itself a targeted plan of actions. It is suggested that this plan would look at realistic actions which would contribute to an agreed set of priority outcomes over the next two years. After this point the nationwide approach to biodiversity will be due to for review, so the matter can be looked at once again in that context. An invitation is to be sent out to key partners identified through the CRPWG, seeking to initiate this process with a first meeting with the Cabinet Member.

## **Next Steps**

- 3.20 As outlined above, the draft strategy will be launched for public consultation very shortly, with responses sought until November. All consultation materials and details for submitting responses will be available on the council website. The consultation is taking place primarily online, through the dedicated web page and via Open Forum.
- 3.21 After the consultation period closes, all responses will be reviewed individually and in detail. Feedback and recommendations from this committee will be brought in as part of that process. The draft strategy will be further discussed and amended as appropriate on the basis of consultation responses, and a final draft will be developed. The aim is to achieve this in December. Following Cabinet Member approval and final sign off, the Open Spaces and Biodiversity Strategy will then be launched and formally adopted.

<p><b>If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers please contact Report Author</b> <b>Rebecca Fuhr (Principal Policy Officer) 0207 641 2342 <a href="mailto:rfuhr@westminster.gov.uk">rfuhr@westminster.gov.uk</a></b></p>
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## **APPENDICES:**

- Appendix A: Consultation draft of the Open Spaces and Biodiversity Strategy (word format)  
Appendix B: Map of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) in Westminster

# WESTMINSTER OPEN SPACES AND BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY

Draft for consultation  
September 2017



## FOREWORD

The open and green spaces sprinkled across Westminster are remarkable. We are fortunate to be custodians of some of the most recognised and valued areas in London and almost one quarter of Westminster's 8.9 square mile area is open and green space. These spaces provide important opportunity for respite in the centre of one of the world's most vibrant cities, as well as helping to improve local air quality across the city.

We know residents, workers and visitors alike value these areas immensely. Our green and open spaces provide opportunity for recreation, sports and contemplation for us all. The green areas of the city also provide an important home to the rich and diverse wildlife that live or visit the city each year.

Our partners across central London are also very important. The Royal Parks provide a large proportion of the green open space in Westminster and provide a unique draw for tourists and visitors in particular. Meanwhile our numerous private squares and gardens provide a great refuge for the near quarter-of-a-million residents of the City of Westminster.

The City Council is determined to protect, enhance and promote our many parks, open spaces and other green infrastructure, as well as acting to conserve the City's rich and diverse wildlife, so that we can all continue to benefit from them. We are committed to encouraging and facilitating new greenery wherever possible across the city – whether in the form of new green spaces, living walls and roofs, or other innovations.

I look forward to working with everyone that values these outstanding assets.

**Councillor David Harvey**  
**Cabinet Member for the Environment, Sports and the Community**

## 1. Introduction: Pressures and priorities

Westminster has an impressive open space and green infrastructure network – in fact it is a much ‘greener’ place than many people tend to expect. Almost one quarter of Westminster’s 8.9 square mile area is open and green space, and the number and range of other ‘green assets’ such as living walls and roofs, is increasing.

Over half of the city’s open spaces have a heritage designation, with over 70 London Squares and 21 Historic England registered parks and gardens, including the five Royal Parks. These unique landscapes are assets that can reinforce a sense of place and identity, improve health and wellbeing, boost environmental resilience and make the city a more attractive and prosperous place. Westminster is also home to a thriving and diverse range of plants, animals and micro-organisms. Over 600 different kinds of flora and fauna have been recorded in Westminster and St John’s Wood has formal designation as a Local Nature Reserve under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949). In fact, nearly one quarter of Westminster’s total area – more than 500 hectares – is protected because of its wildlife value.

Nonetheless, there are challenges associated with providing green and open space in the very heart of central London. Westminster is a truly ‘24 hour city’ and its population of over 233,000 residents is boosted on a daily basis by a further 674,000 workers and 176,000 visitors, which swell the overall population to an estimated around 1.1 million. With the impending opening of Crossrail and other infrastructure improvements, these figures are only set to rise. Population growth adds additional pressure on existing green space, but conversely it also further intensifies the value of green infrastructure and other interventions to help relieve the intensity of the urban built environment.

User surveys and feedback from the public highlight just how highly valued by the local community Westminster’s open spaces are. Access to, and contact with, nature are important for individual and collective wellbeing, and our parks, open spaces and green infrastructure provide opportunities for people to be physically active and do things which benefit all aspects of their health and wellbeing. We want to capitalise on this, helping as many people as possible feel the benefits. Meanwhile, as the local authority we have a statutory responsibility to have regard to Westminster’s biodiversity. We need to make clear plans to prevent the decline of - and improve conditions for – the species and habitats that make up the city’s wildlife. We can achieve this by working together with key partners, to maximise our impact with constrained resources.

Given these pressures there will be challenges in ensuring that we reap all the benefits of having high quality, well maintained open spaces and green infrastructure. The City Council has therefore developed this draft combined strategy for Open Spaces and Biodiversity, to help us meet these challenges head on.

## 2. Policy and Legislative Context

The importance of open and green spaces and the role of Local Authorities in protecting, managing and enhancing them, is recognised in the **National Planning Policy Framework** (NPPF). Noting that “access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation can make an important contribution to the health and well-being of communities” (paragraph 73), it advises that councils conduct up-to-date assessments of the needs for open space, and opportunities for new provision, while also working towards the protection and enhancement of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure (paragraph 114). Open and green spaces are also protected by some specific legislation – for Westminster this includes the **London Squares Preservation Act (1931)** which offers statutory protection to a number of squares and enclosed gardens across the city.

The NPPF is supported by **Planning Practice Guidance**, which advises local authorities to prepare green infrastructure strategies, which should including an assessment of current green infrastructure provision and opportunities for improvement (Natural Environment section, paragraph 29). The assessment can inform the role of green infrastructure in local and neighbourhood plans, infrastructure delivery plans and community infrastructure schedules. Planning Practice Guidance also recognises the need to take account of biodiversity (Biodiversity and Ecosystems section, paragraph 7) as set out in the **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006** (Section 40). This Act places a duty on all public authorities in England and Wales to have regard, in the exercise of their functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity. Assessment of the local ecological network, particularly the distribution of protected and priority habitats and species, is important in planning for biodiversity.

The Mayor of London’s **London Plan** aims to protect and promote London’s open spaces and green infrastructure, with a number of policies giving shape to the contribution local authorities are expected to make to this. Key relevant policies include the requirement for planning authorities to audit, manage and protect existing green spaces and infrastructure and develop priorities for addressing deficiencies. This strategy directly responds to this, and the expectation that councils will “set out positive measures” for achieving those goals. Additional key relevant policies in the London Plan relate to play and recreation space, urban greening, sustainable drainage and biodiversity and access to nature. Meanwhile, the Supplementary Planning Guidance document on the All London Green Grid, published in 2012, added extra emphasis in respect of connecting and integrating London’s green infrastructure network. Any future iterations of this strategy will also have regard to the new Mayor’s Integrated Environmental Strategy, which is due for consultation in autumn 2017.

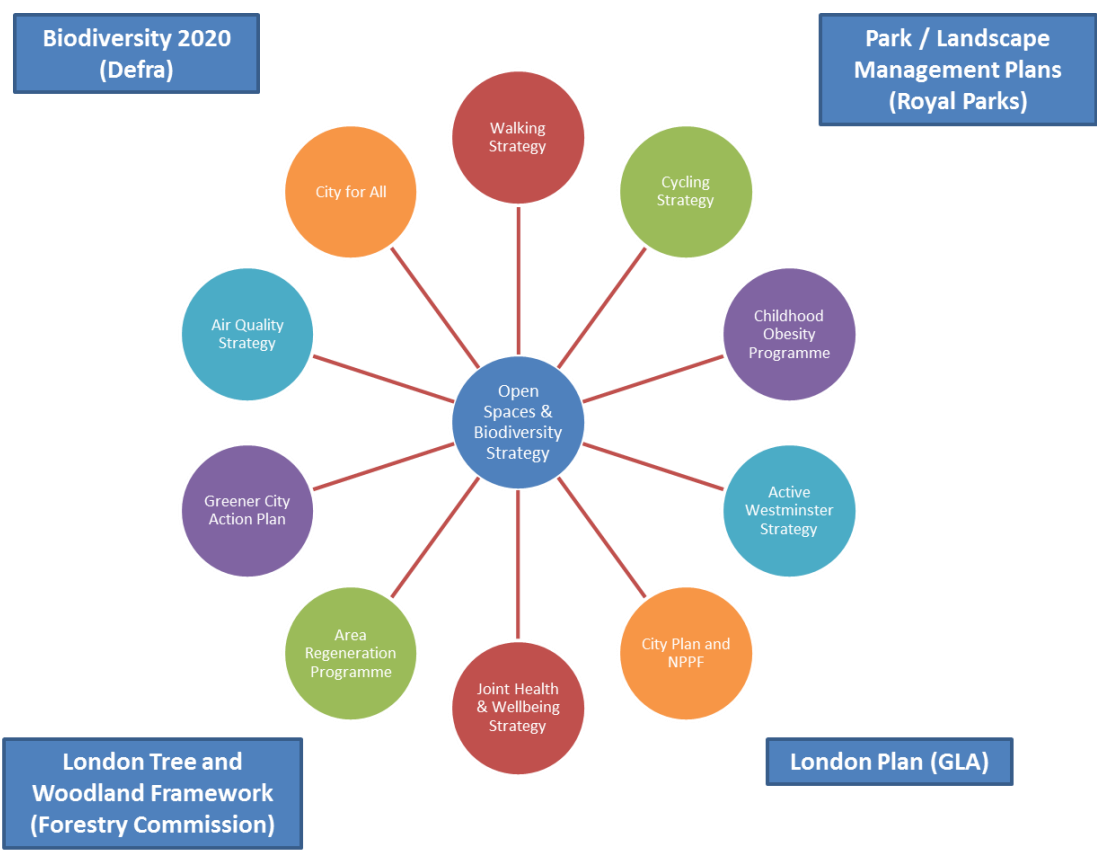
The City Council reflects the aims of the Mayor’s London Plan in its own planning policy, with a clear strategic objective within Westminster’s City Plan to: “protect and enhance Westminster’s open spaces, civic spaces and Blue Ribbon Network, and Westminster’s biodiversity; including protecting the unique character and openness of the Royal Parks and other open spaces; and to manage these spaces to ensure areas of relative tranquillity in a city with a daytime population increased every day to over one million workers and visitors.” Key policies within the City Plan include: S35

Open Space; S36 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation; S37 Westminster's Blue Ribbon Network; S38 Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure; and S32 Noise; although additional policies on flooding, design, heritage and health are also all relevant.

The City Council is currently in the process of refreshing and updating its City Plan and a fresh look is being taken at the aspects which pertain to open spaces and biodiversity as part of this. The careful drafting and application of the relevant planning policies within our City Plan will provide the necessary legal backbone and this strategy aims to capture the practical actions and commitments, which combined together will enable us to protect, develop and enhance Westminster's open spaces and wildlife.

Our priorities around green infrastructure and protection of Westminster's wildlife are further supported and reinforced by the council's Code of Construction Practice, which was published in July 2016. This document helps us to monitor, control and manage construction impacts on sites throughout Westminster. It sets out a range of requirements for developers whose proposals may have implications for the city's green assets or local ecology, to ensure negative impacts are managed and mitigated.

In addition to this statutory planning context, the council's strategic approach to open spaces and biodiversity shares important connections with a wide range of its **other policies and strategies**. By looking at how we can work with partners to maximise the benefit of the city's green assets for the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities, to protect the environment and biodiversity and to support the character and prosperity of Westminster as a whole, this strategy also aligns directly with our City for All vision.



### 3. The Importance of Open Space and Green Infrastructure

The benefits of open space and green infrastructure to individuals and communities are broad ranging and widely recognised. Providing green spaces and spaces for nature improves the health and well-being of individuals, increases resilience to climate change, improves air quality and enhances biodiversity, while also delivering economic benefits and driving local growth and prosperity.

However, our understanding of the precise impacts is growing all the time and there's always more we can learn about the benefits of protecting and investing in 'green assets'. In 2016 a Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) committee recommended that more work was needed to specify the real value of the contribution of green spaces to wider public agendas. So research and exploration of these issues is ongoing and the ever increasing body of evidence has been brought into consideration in the development of this strategy.

#### **Health and Wellbeing benefits**

Our network of green and open space has many benefits for physical and mental health and well-being – the connections between the two are well documented and further work is being done all the time to understand the specific impacts of access to green space and wildlife on people's health. Among the most recent evidence are findings from a research study by Fields in Trust, which indicate that proximity to, and more frequent use of, local green space produces corresponding increases in health and wellbeing scores across all four of the Office of National Statistics wellbeing indicators (life satisfaction, sense of worth, happiness and anxiety) along with general health.

#### *Physical health*

Insufficient physical activity is among the ten most important risk factors for the health burden in England, costing the NHS over £1 billion a year. In Westminster specifically, over 58% of adults aged 16 and over engage in moderate physical activity only once a week or less and the percentage of children who are overweight is higher than the national and London average<sup>1</sup>.

Access to parks can and should promote more active lifestyles by default, by providing space for recreation, physical activity, leisure, sport and play. Public Health England<sup>2</sup> recognise that increased access to green space is directly linked to increased levels of physical activity, which is then directly connected to maintaining mental and physical health and preventing illness. This is supported by a wealth of scientific evidence which demonstrates a positive impact in terms of reductions in long-term conditions including heart disease, cancer, and musculoskeletal problems.

Westminster's Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy recognises the value of our network of open and green spaces, not only in encouraging physical activity but also in providing opportunities for relaxation and interaction, which can impact on other concerns such as loneliness and social isolation. These connections point to a direct

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<sup>1</sup> Tri-borough Joint Strategic Needs Assessment on Physical Activity (2014)

<sup>2</sup> Improving Access to Green Spaces (2014) Public Health England

alignment between making the best use of Westminster's green spaces and infrastructure and those strategic health objectives.

One of the ways in which the City Council encourages people to use our green and open spaces to get physically active is through our Park Makers scheme. Under this initiative local people can volunteer to run free health and fitness activities in Westminster's parks. There are opportunities for them to improve their skills and expertise while opening up access to organised physical activity opportunities to the whole community. This initiative was recently highlighted to the Department of Communities and Local Government as a 'best practice' approach and it marks an important link between promoting open spaces and their positive impact on physical health with our commitment to support volunteering. This is a connection the council would like to explore even further in the future.

### **CASE STUDY: TAI CHI AT PADDINGTON RECREATION GROUND**

Paddington Recreation Ground is somewhat unique in Westminster, as our largest open space area with multiple recreation, physical activity, leisure, sport and other facilities, outside of the portfolio of Royal Parks. The City Council works to make the most of this valuable asset, especially in terms of its potential to provide opportunities for people to get physically active. Over 1.3million people visit the site annually and it offers a wide range of different activities, including non-traditional activities such as the mass Tai Chi session held in July 2017, this can encourage many who might otherwise be less likely to participate in sport or structured physical activity to give something new a try. Over 50 people took part in the session and enjoyed shiatsu massages and other wellbeing activities on the day. The success of events like this, along with the positive feedback from the local community, supports our aims to use Westminster's green and open spaces to help people look after their physical health and wellbeing in ways they really enjoy.

#### *Mental health and wellbeing*

Green spaces also influence people's wider well-being. They can offer tranquil spaces in the heart of the city, helping to reduce stress and improve mental health<sup>3</sup>. Supporting and improving the mental health of Westminster's residents and visitors is a high priority for the council. Our Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy recognises that "poor mental health can affect quality of life, life expectancy and the ability to participate in and contribute to society", while also noting that Westminster has a higher prevalence of self-reported anxiety and depression than neighbouring London boroughs. Studies have shown that people value green spaces as important for their happiness and wellbeing<sup>4</sup> and local data reveals that in Westminster a large proportion of people who use our parks and open spaces do so in order to enjoy the peace and quiet.

#### *Communities*

In addition to the physical and mental benefits which may be felt by individuals, green spaces and infrastructure can contribute to the collective wellbeing, resilience and cohesion of whole communities. Our green assets can help foster a sense of

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<sup>3</sup> Gardens and Health (2016) The Kings Fund.

<sup>4</sup> The Value of our Green Spaces (2016) The Land Trust - a perceptions survey found that 9 out of 10 feel that green spaces play a positive part in their happiness and well-being

community – whether through community growing projects like the one in Church Street or simply by providing a focal point where local people can gather together, offering opportunities to socialise, learn and volunteer.

### **Environmental benefits**

The environmental benefits of open and green space are broad ranging and well documented, and are drawn into particularly sharp focus in intensively developed, highly populated urban areas like the centre of London. They provide a vital role in supporting urban wildlife, can help improve resilience to climate change, improve air and water quality, and are an integral part of the historic townscape.

#### *Wildlife and biodiversity*

Both open spaces and green infrastructure, such as green roofs and walls and trees, can provide habitats for wildlife and support pollinators<sup>5</sup>. There are 32 locations in Westminster that have a designation as Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINC). This total has remained unchanged for almost ten years and underlines the major contribution that green spaces and infrastructure within our borough make to supporting wildlife and biodiversity across London and more widely. The majority of these sites incorporate a number of different habitat types, enabling them each to benefit a range of species. However, most recent audit data shows that of the total land area assessed, only 39% was found to have ‘average to rich’ or ‘rich’ species diversity<sup>6</sup>. This is something we would look for opportunities to improve through this strategy.

The majority of our green spaces also have a good mix in size and species of trees. We hope to build on this by continuing to enhance Westminster’s public places with trees, via our planting programme for street trees on the city’s highways, as well as within parks and open spaces. This is part of how we hope to generate as much opportunity as possible for supporting biodiversity within the urban landscape.

#### *Access to nature*

As well as providing for wildlife, green spaces and infrastructure allow people to experience a closer relationship with nature. There is a significant weight of evidence connecting a lack of contact with nature with a range of negative impacts on people’s wellbeing, including higher incidences of depression, stress and anxiety, and greater susceptibility to allergies. There is a particular significance for children and young people growing up in predominantly urban environments, with studies indicating that spending time in the natural environment can improve children’s cognitive development, mood and self-esteem, and may even reduce the symptoms and need for medication among children with ADHD<sup>7</sup>. This underlines the importance of providing opportunities to interact with nature for those living and growing up in Westminster.

The London Plan encourages boroughs to ensure people can walk to areas with significant wildlife value (no more than 1km from their homes). The city council aims to respond to this by continuing to maintain high quality green spaces all over the

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<sup>5</sup> The National Pollinator Strategy (2014) DEFRA

<sup>6</sup> City of Westminster Open Space audit (March 2016) Groundwork London

<sup>7</sup> Natural Childhood (2012) – Report of the National Trust



city, and in view of the known benefits in terms of health and wellbeing we will be particularly keen to increase opportunities in places where there is less easy access to nature currently. Our priorities will be guided by audit work which has identified specific areas of potential deficiency, as outlined in [Appendix X](#).

Partly due to pressures on land use, Westminster is characterised by a large number of smaller sized parks, open spaces and gardens. We intend to make the most of these smaller green spaces. This can come with challenges as there is a balance to be struck between private and public access, however it is important that we take all available opportunities to enable people to connect with nature within their immediate neighbourhoods. This recognises that the majority (58%) of the people using Westminster's open spaces have been found to have travelled less one mile, usually in foot, in order to get there<sup>8</sup>. We will also continue to support and build upon the success of initiatives such as Forest Schools, which provide vital opportunities for Westminster's residents to interact with and learn about nature<sup>9</sup>.

### **CASE STUDY: FOREST SCHOOLS**

The Forest Schools programme has been operating out of Paddington Recreation Ground for over 2 years. It has become extremely popular with local primary and infant schools, which send their pupils to enjoy the custom-built Environmental Area – an 'outdoor classroom'. Children learn about wildlife as well as, through planting herbs and vegetables, gaining an understanding of where their food comes from, which can have additional benefits in line with the council's commitment to helping tackle childhood obesity. This year we aim to engage more children than ever in the programme – our target for 2017/18 is 5,000 and we are on track to exceed before the spring. Furthermore, we're looking to develop the offer to create more opportunities for other sections of the community to learn about nature. Among the areas being explored are working with Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools and a home school, as well as looking at how we could open opening up more opportunities for adults and whole families to learn together.

#### *Climate change and urban cooling*

Green spaces and planting have a crucial role to play in helping manage the effects of climate change. They help to cool the city, lowering both surface and air temperatures by providing shade and through evapotranspiration. A well-known effect of urbanisation is the warming of the local climate relative to surrounding rural areas, creating a phenomenon known as the 'urban heat island' (UHI)<sup>10</sup>. Planting in urban locations helps to mitigate this. Green roofs and walls can also provide insulation, reducing the need to cool and heat buildings mechanically<sup>11</sup>. This further benefits the environment in terms of energy efficiency, in line with the aims of the City Council's Greener City Action Plan.

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<sup>8</sup> Westminster Open Spaces Community Consultation (2014) Groundwork London

<sup>9</sup> A marvellous opportunity for children to learn – a participatory evaluation of Forest School in England and Wales (2010) Forestry Commission England and Forestry Research

<sup>10</sup> Air temperature regulation by urban trees and green infrastructure (2013) Forestry Commission

<sup>11</sup> Green Capital: Green infrastructure for a future city (2016) CRP/GLA

### *Flooding*

Green spaces also help to reduce flood risk. Intense rainfall can cause localised flooding as rainwater is unable to soak into the ground or drain away, but vegetation can slow down and reduce the flow of rainwater to the drainage system. Westminster has identified areas that are susceptible to surface water flooding so the city council would look to preserve and where possible enhance planting in these regions as a priority. Small areas can also contribute, such as the John Lewis Rain Garden in Victoria which provides permeable surfaces that help to manage rainwater flow. The key role that green infrastructure like this can play in reducing surface water flooding is recognised in the London Sustainable Drainage Action Plan<sup>12</sup>.

### *Air Quality*

Westminster has some of the poorest air quality in the country and has been designated an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) since 1999 for nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) and particulates (PM<sub>10</sub>). Air pollution damages human health causing an increased risk of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, an increased risk of cancer, and exacerbating asthma. The number of additional deaths in Westminster attributable to air pollution was estimated at 9,400 in 2010.

Vegetation can help improve air quality, by absorbing pollutants such as ozone, nitrogen dioxide and particulates. The London i-tree study<sup>13</sup> found that larger trees were of particular benefit, estimating that a 75cm diameter tree can intercept 10 times more air pollution than a 15cm diameter tree. It also found that trees are particularly effective in storing carbon, estimating London's trees store almost 2.5 million tonnes of carbon each year. In recognition of this and other benefits, this strategy supports and will coordinate with the council's Greener City Action Plan commitment to planting 1,000 trees by 2020. Green walls can also play a role, so the City Council will always push for the incorporation of this type of green infrastructure in all school-based developments, especially on heavily trafficked roads where air quality is an additional driving factor.

Green planting and well maintained open spaces have the additional benefit of making the city more attractive to pedestrians and cyclists. This contributes to the council's and others' aims around increasing carbon neutral travel. In 2016 the council successfully established the area around Marylebone as a Low Emission Neighbourhood and as part of this has focused on creating attractive streets for pedestrians, mitigating local air pollution.

### *Water Quality*

Most of Westminster is served by combined sewers designed in the 1860s. These receive both waste water and rainwater, and during rainy periods may overflow into the River Thames. Open space and green infrastructure can reduce the amount and speed of rainwater entering the drainage network, and thereby reduce the polluting overflows from the combined sewers into the river.

### *Heritage and townscape*

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<sup>12</sup> London Sustainable Drainage Action Plan: Draft for public consultation(2015) GLA

<sup>13</sup> Valuing London's Urban Forest (2015) Treeconomics/ Forestry Commission

Open spaces are an integral part of Westminster's historic fabric, they allow for views and provide the setting for buildings and contribute to the character of conservation areas. The Royal Parks and River Thames provide the setting for iconic landmarks, such as the Palace of Westminster and Buckingham Palace. Open spaces can also be heritage assets in their own right, with 21 registered parks and gardens<sup>14</sup> and 85 London Squares<sup>15</sup> in Westminster. Many parks and gardens also contain listed buildings and structures including statuary and railings.

### **Economic benefits**

There is a growing evidence base to support the economic benefits of green infrastructure. As well as the potential savings to health care<sup>16</sup>, social<sup>17</sup> and environmental<sup>18</sup> costs, there are benefits to local businesses and a positive impact on tourism. Investment in our open spaces and green infrastructure can therefore help to drive our City for All ambitions by helping to encourage the right kind of economic growth in Westminster<sup>19</sup>.

#### *Land and property value*

A greener environment can increase land values<sup>20</sup> and can attract investors. In an assessment of London house prices by the GLA Economics in 2010, it was found that property prices were boosted by quality green spaces. The study estimated that property located less than a kilometre from quality urban parks benefitted from an up to 3% boost in total property value. These impacts are reflected in action taken by Westminster's Business Improvement Districts and major landowners, in undertaking green infrastructure audits and prioritising and resourcing greening improvements in Westminster's public realm.

### **CASE STUDY: WILD WEST END**

Wild West End is a partnership initiative by a group of the area's largest property owners which seeks to "encourage birds, bees and bats back into this iconic area of London, and create greater connections with nature for residents, visitors and

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<sup>14</sup> Compiled by Historic England

<sup>15</sup> Defined by the London Squares Preservation Act 1931

<sup>16</sup> The RIBA published a report in 2014 that demonstrated how vital green space in cities is to public health. 'City Health Check – How Design Can Save Lives and Money'. This compared three major health issues: diabetes, obesity in children, and physical activity in nine cities, and reported that England's obesity epidemic could be eased if better public spaces and green infrastructure were prioritised.

<sup>17</sup> The Land Trust's, "The Value of our Green Spaces" (2016) estimates that every £1 it invests in its parks and nature reserves contributes £30 towards health and wellbeing benefits and £23 towards crime reduction and community safety.

<sup>18</sup> Valuing London's Urban Forest (2015) estimated the financial value of London's trees at £132.7 million – estimate reached by assigning value to the benefits they bring such as in providing storm water attenuation, improving air quality and storing carbon.

<sup>19</sup> A City for All (2014) Westminster City Council

<sup>20</sup> The Landscape Institute's, "Profitable Places" (2014) notes that investment in the public realm can potentially double average values of flats in parts of London.

workers to enjoy”<sup>21</sup>. The aim is to achieve this by creating “green stepping stones” between existing green assets, to increase the sense of connection and collective impact between them. This can take various forms – street trees, planters, living walls and roofs, or other infrastructure. This is all done with the support of partners including the London Wildlife Trust and the GLA, and in recognition of the potential for urban greening to improve the health and wellbeing of local people, enhance local environment quality and support biodiversity. An example of the type of work facilitated by Wild West End is the creation of ‘Pocket Meadows’ at 25 Castlereagh Street. This sequence of green roofs has added interest, visual appeal and support for local wildlife within this housing development in Marylebone, which is a geographic area of priority for the council in terms of greening. The project was short-listed for a Civic Trust Award in 2016.

### *Tourism and events*

Westminster’s green spaces are a significant draw in their own right, for visitors from around the world. Research by Visit Britain has found that of the 31 million people who visit Britain each year, around a third (11.1 million) enjoy a park or garden, while data from the Royal Parks shows that typically well over a third (37%) of people visiting Hyde Park, for example, have come from outside the UK. So by focusing effort and resources on providing high quality green spaces, we can help drive the local tourism economy, support local businesses and contribute to Westminster’s continued reputation as top global destination.

A number of our open spaces can also provide unique and attractive venue for a wide range of special events. In recent years Westminster’s Royal Parks and council-managed green spaces have played host to large scale concerts, international sporting events, and even film premieres, as well as many smaller scale commercial and community events. Many of these events are enormously popular with the public but they can also generate litter, noise and wear and tear, as well as potentially restricting access to spaces for a limited amount of time. This means that using our parks and open spaces for these purposes can be a sensitive issue. We need to manage the competing demands, carefully considering what might be appropriate in terms of the nature, duration and frequency of events, and recognising that this may well vary depending on the precise open space or locations. We intend to develop some specific guidelines, which will help event organisers work with the council to achieve this.

This strategy joins a number of other documents and policy materials, most notably the council’s City Plan, in supporting us to balance the conflicting demands for open spaces as ‘venues’. The City Plan creates scope for events in our parks and open spaces that will be beneficial to the local area and to Westminster’s communities and enterprises, provided that they do not unreasonably compromise or damage the quality, amenity and accessibility of our open spaces or green infrastructure for the public. This means protecting planting, habitats and biodiversity and controlling the potential negative impacts of noise, litter and so on. This policy backdrop, in conjunction with this strategy, aims to ensure that the city and its communities benefit from the positive impact of appropriate events while preserving the other key benefits of our green assets.

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<sup>21</sup> [www.wilwestend.london/vision](http://www.wilwestend.london/vision)

### *Corporate Social Responsibility*

Our green spaces and infrastructure can also provide opportunities for the private sector to get involved in improving and looking after the city, for the benefit of local people. The City Council is committed to helping private business to invest in their local community. By supporting them to connect up with Westminster's charities and community sector organisations, as well as linking in with the council's volunteering schemes, we can help all sectors work together on a wide range of activities, from day-to-day parks maintenance, to community growing or educational programmes on wildlife and biodiversity. This type of work helps us to further increase the social and economic benefits of our green and open spaces, while working together across sectors like this help ensure that our green infrastructure network can continue to thrive in these times of constrained resources.

## 4. Our assets

### Parks and open spaces

Westminster has over 200 identified parks and open spaces across the city, ranging from large, multi-functional areas such as Paddington Recreation Ground to small ornamental gardens, squares, 'pocket parks' and other. Westminster's 'blue ribbon' waterways are also included – canals and of course the Thames. These assets are supplemented by the five Royal Parks that fall within Westminster - in fact Royal Parks land accounts for around 80% of our total green space. Both the city council's spaces and the Royal Parks are at times used for special events and a range of organised activities, but their primary purpose is to provide places for local people and visitors to relax, gather, engage in physical activity and connect with nature.

### Green infrastructure

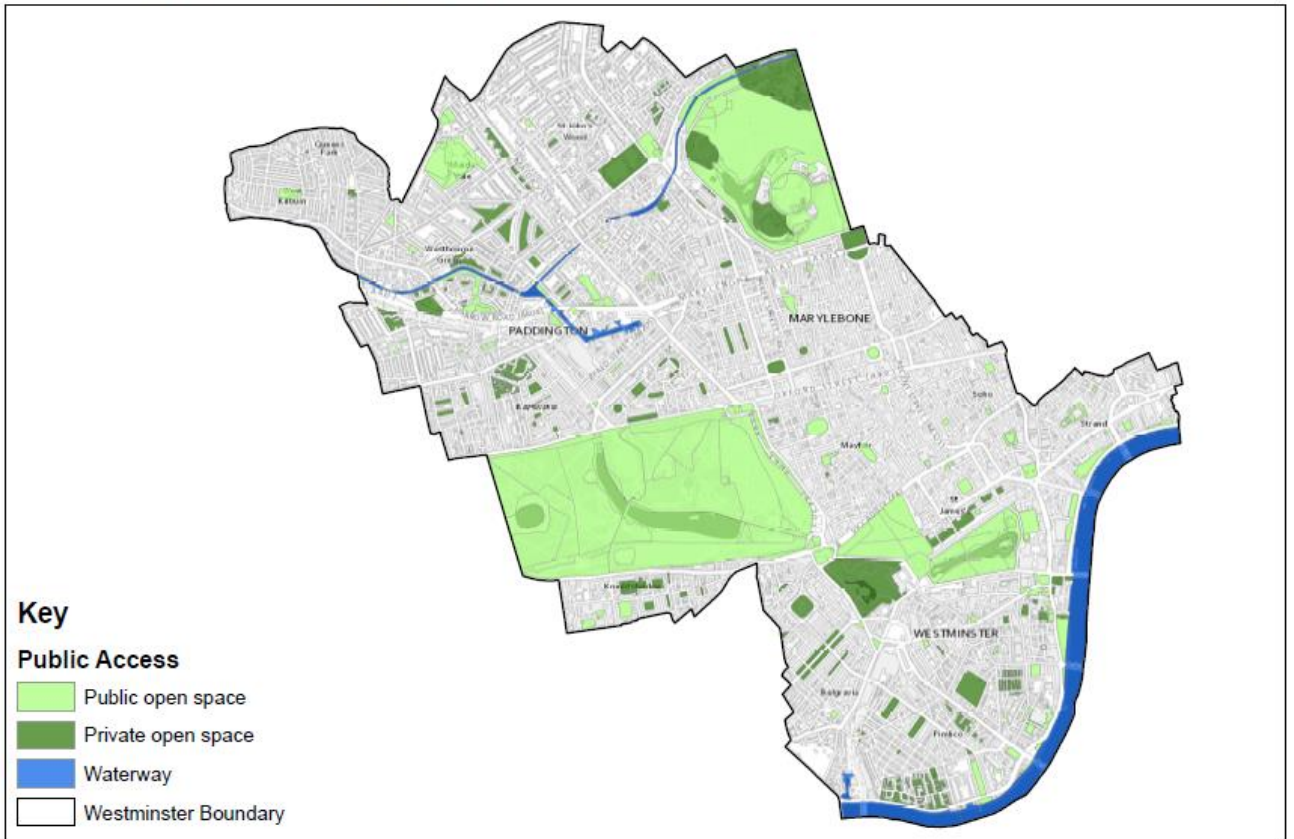
The term 'green infrastructure' refers to a wide range of interventions which bring plants and nature into the urban environment. Westminster has an impressive network of greening in the built environment which includes green walls, landscaped roofs, food growing and wildlife 'installations' such as beekeeping sites. Some of these are owned and managed by the council, although many are privately held assets which the council has helped to encourage, enable and facilitate through in its role as planning authority.

### Further assets

In addition to the open spaces and greening within Westminster, the city council has some further assets which provide opportunities for people to access nature, get active and enjoy the outdoors. The council operates three cemeteries outside of the borough – at East Finchley, Hanwell and Mill Hill. These spaces are valuable open spaces in their own right, reflected by the fact that they have all individually attained Green Flag status. The council also owns and operates the outdoor education and activity centre at Sayers Croft in Surrey. This is an important asset for enabling and encouraging many kinds of physical activity, leisure, sport and has a big role to play in wildlife education and contact with nature, offering activities such as pond dipping, nature walks and wildlife themed creative workshops while actively supporting our Forest Schools programme and wildlife education which takes place at Paddington Recreation Ground and across the city. Westminster is also part of the consortium of Local Authorities which support and help fund the 26 mile long, 10,000 acre, linear Lee Valley Regional Park. In these ways the City Council taps into additional green assets in order to increase access to green spaces and nature and make a positive contribution to the broader greening and biodiversity agenda, both within and beyond the city itself.

The city council's aim, through this strategy, is to enhance and make the best use of the entirety of our 'green network', ensuring we maximise their benefit to those that live in, work in, or visit Westminster.

# GROUNDWORK OPEN SPACE MAPPING



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City of Westminster/LA1001691 City Planning Delivery Unit Peter Hulse / JG\_City Planning Group/300open Space Strategy/GROUNDWORK DATA/APPLS/2016/GROUNDWORK ACCESS MAP/APRIL 2016.rxd

## 5. Working in Partnership

Maintaining and improving Westminster's network of green spaces and infrastructure is something the City Council does not, should not and cannot do alone. Our efforts combine with those of an extended team of partners and it is through this collaboration that we are able to achieve our shared aims in respect of the quantity, quality and positive impact (for both people and local wildlife) of our green assets.

This strategy seeks to recognise the collective efforts of this partnership. With a range of key partners lending their efforts and expertise in various specialist areas, the City Council aims to articulate the specific commitments and contribution it will make to achieve goals that we all have in common. The timing of this strategy, too, reflects the wider partnership context – our two year action plan mirrors the life span of central government's 'Biodiversity 2020' strategy.

In the area of biodiversity in particular there is an opportunity to build upon past good practice to deliver things in partnership. In previous years a collaborative approach has been driven by the former Westminster Biodiversity Partnership, which brought together 33 organisations and groups to ensure a healthy future for wildlife in Westminster. This local arrangement operated within the context (and with the support) of the wider London-wide biodiversity partnership. Unfortunately the London-wide partnership structure folded in 2013. However, many of the partners that were previously involved continue to be instrumental in working to support and protect Westminster's rich and diverse wildlife, and the City Council continues to recognise the benefit of providing opportunities for agencies to come together and work jointly in this area. It is with this in mind that we will propose, through this strategy to work to re-establish some form of structured partnership around biodiversity at a borough level. Through this mechanism we hope to explore how we can make the most of our collective resources and expertise to achieve some key biodiversity priorities locally. This is discussed in greater detail later in this strategy document, and in the Action Plan which accompanies it.

Across the biodiversity and broader open spaces and greening agenda, then, our key local partners can therefore be seen to include:

- Greater London Authority
- Royal Parks
- Major landowners, including Grosvenor and Crown Estates
- BIDs and the wider business community
- Neighbouring boroughs, including Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
- Zoological Society of London (ZSL)
- Canals and Rivers Trust

This is by no means an exhaustive list, and is in addition to partners in central government and elsewhere, that work at a national level (including the Environment Agency, Historic England, RSPB and Defra).

This strategy has been developed with consideration of the roles of all of these partners, and will be delivered in collaboration with them. We can succeed in our



ambitions for open spaces and biodiversity in Westminster only with the help of their contributions.

## 6. Evidence Base and Priorities

The London Plan states that local authorities should periodically audit the green spaces and wildlife in their area and in 2015 the City Council commissioned Groundwork London to carry out such an audit in Westminster. This detailed audit had the purpose of assessing the level of provision of open space and facilities within the city, highlighting any changes to provision since the last audits were carried out and identifying opportunities for improvement. As well as establishing a solid basis of information about the geographic area, typology and physical features of open spaces and green infrastructure, strong emphasis was also placed on understanding our local biodiversity, looking in detail at the specific habitats and species that those spaces are home to.

Alongside this audit a community consultation and engagement exercise was undertaken, to gather views about our green spaces from those that use them. User surveys were carried out at 14 of the city's parks and open spaces, as well as online, to ascertain usage patterns, levels of satisfaction and priorities for improvement. The results can only provide a snapshot of course, but a mix of spaces (some large areas such as Paddington Recreation Ground as well as several smaller gardens) and over 800 respondents in total were included in the study, with the aim of gathering a useful and representative range of insights.

The results of the spaces audit and the community engagement exercise are provided in more detail at [Appendix X](#). Mapping for Areas of Deficiency for access to public open space and access to nature – which will inform future planning decisions to drive greening where it is needed most – is at [Appendix X](#). However the key headline findings can be summarised as follows:

### Green spaces audit - key findings

- A total number of 203 'parcels' of open space in the City of Westminster were audited.
- Westminster offers 2.17 hectares of space per 1,000 resident population. This overall level of provision has not changed significantly since the last full audit, a decade ago.
- However only a little over half (57%) of the audited spaces are openly accessible to the public.
- That said, on account of their smaller average size, the private spaces account for only 24% of total green space.
- Contrary to some perceptions, the central area of Westminster is actually the best off area for green space, thanks in no small part to the Royal Parks. There are geographical variations within this though, with some neighbourhoods being identified as particularly deficient in open space.
- Areas of lower provision include Abbey Road and Warwick wards, as well as some very central areas like the West End.
- Areas with particular deficiencies in terms of access to nature include Warwick ward and Bryanston and Dorset Square.
- Marylebone is an area of comparative deficiency in respect of both open space and wildlife. These findings, alongside the area's Low Emissions Neighbourhood (LEN) status suggest it should perhaps be a priority area for greening.
- Green infrastructure (GI) was also audited - 30 living walls / roofs were included in the study. There is a mix of new build and retro-fitted infrastructure and the majority has a lengthy life span of 25 years or more.
- However only about a quarter of green infrastructure is open to access other than for maintenance. Only one GI location was found to involve the community or volunteers in maintenance.

### Community engagement -key findings

- Satisfaction with Westminster's green spaces is high - 87% of people rate open spaces as "excellent" or "very good".
- The majority reach open spaces on foot and stay for less than an hour. Most visit regularly (at least weekly) and year round.
- The majority of respondents also visit Royal Parks in the borough. Compared to open spaces generally, respondents tend to visit Royal Parks less frequently, but tend to spend longer when they are there.
- Open spaces are highly valued assets, and those engaged particularly appreciate their ease of access and convenience.
- Main reasons for visiting are to get fresh air, to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city and to spend time in a natural environment.
- Planting arrangements, a high standard or maintenance, cleanliness and seating were of great importance to those questioned.
- Quiet, informal recreation was by far the most popular way in which people use open space. Walking was the most popular active pursuit.

## What the Evidence Tells Us: Key Emerging Priorities

From these findings it has been possible to identify some specific emerging priorities. The action plan accompanying this strategy will therefore look to focus the efforts of the council and its partners in the following areas:

1. **Green infrastructure** – There are some excellent examples of living walls, roofs and other green infrastructure across the city, however a number are private and not many are accessible other than for maintenance. We want to drive the delivery of more green infrastructure, with a particular emphasis on

public access and visibility wherever this is achievable. We will support this through our planning policies, set out in the Westminster City Plan. We're particularly keen to encourage green infrastructure in areas at the very heart of the city, such as the West End, where there is little currently and where people have fewer opportunities to have contact with nature. We're looking to learn from and build upon successful work with and by partners to achieve this. Initiatives such as Wild West End demonstrate the instrumental role local land owners can play, while we're keen to also work with Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and community groups.

- 2. Space for play** – Based on the evidence collected to support this strategy we are conscious of an overall lack of play provision in Westminster, with a particular shortage of facilities geared towards older children. Geographically there are some areas of the City which have both deficiencies in play space and higher concentrations of resident children, such as Church Street, Pimlico, Little Venice, East Marylebone and Soho. We will be especially keen to take opportunities to add play space in these areas. Recognising the challenges such as pressures on available land, we will ensure targeted policies are built into the refreshed City Plan, which will create scope for all different types of play opportunities to be pursued, including informal play and play in more natural environments. This will help enable us to take full advantage of any opportunities to offer additional play space, whenever and however they arise.

As we are committed to pursuing all opportunities to enable safe play for children and young people in Westminster, we will also be exploring other options, for example through our Active Streets initiative. Based on legislation passed in 1983, local authorities may restrict or prohibit vehicular access to specific streets at designated times, to create a 'Play Street' which offers a safe opportunity for children to play. Westminster was, in fact, one of the first in London to create permanent Play Streets in the 1950s and with concerns about air quality as well as our commitment to provide more play space in the city, we're keen to focus on the idea once again – as detailed in the Active Westminster strategy, 'An Active City for All'. The City Council is proposing a new pilot scheme of permanently designated Play Streets. The current suggested location is Luton Street and Fisherton Street in Church Street ward, which is an identified priority area for additional play space (see [appendix x](#)). These streets would have restricted traffic and be available for play Monday to Friday, from 3pm until dusk and from 10am until dusk at weekends. The initiative would be further supported by structured local activities delivered through our Active Streets programme, and a team of volunteer 'StreetMakers' who will help people to get involved in those activities to facilitate a sense of community ownership of the Play Streets.

- 3. Walking in and around open spaces** – Most people (63%) using our green spaces get to them on foot and 30% said they were using the space specifically for walking or as a through route. We want to focus on walking routes through and around parks, recognising how things like raising awareness of available green space locally and effective signage can help with this. These aims align directly with the council's developing Walking

Strategy, which outlines a number of specific actions including working in partnership with The Royal Parks to improve the pedestrian experience and access into the Royal Parks, reducing any conflict between pedestrians and cyclists, continuing to drive the greening of Westminster's streets to provide a pleasant walking environment and offer people contact with nature, and introducing pocket parks and plazas where possible to offer additional opportunities and incentives for people to get about and experience open spaces on foot. These two strategies are therefore entirely complementary and mutually supportive, both highlighting the council's overarching commitment to encourage and facilitate the continued enjoyment of our open spaces by people on foot.

- 4. Biodiversity** – The momentum of some biodiversity partnerships and initiatives has perhaps decreased in recent years. Historically there has been a dedicated partnership covering all of London and coordinated by the Greater London Authority, but this ceased to operate in any formal sense in 2013. Nonetheless, the City Council continues to appreciate the importance of protecting and enhancing biodiversity and there are some recent examples of the issue of biodiversity being brought more to the fore at a wider level than just Westminster. Notably, in June 2017 the Greenspace Information for Greater London Partnership (GiGL) wrote to all London Local Authorities, citing a recent GLA research publication and highlighting the finding that “approximately 18% of planning applications have the potential to impact adversely on nature in the capital”<sup>22</sup>. Earlier in the same year the London Assembly drew attention to “a risk that London will see its biodiversity being squeezed or reduced” and highlighting the importance of balancing pressures to deliver housing with impacts on nature in the way that housing developments are delivered<sup>23</sup>.

In the absence of a London-wide framework at the present time, but recognising the continued importance of working to protect and improve Westminster's biodiversity, the City Council is interested in drawing together key partners at a local (borough) level to explore how some work on priority outcomes in this area could be driven forward. With all partners, including the council, operating with limited resources, we're keen to take a pragmatic approach and look at how we can make the greatest impact within current constraints. Drawing a borough-level group together on the back of this strategy, with the specific task of developing a two year action plan (which will take us up to the point when biodiversity will be looked at again London-wide, as the existing Biodiversity 2020 approach comes to a close), is the way that we intend to this.

There are already a number of bee keeping sites in Westminster and continuing to support pollinators is something we are keen to do through this Open Spaces and Biodiversity Strategy. Based on expert advice from partners such as the London Beekeeping Association we are keen to look at

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<sup>22</sup> 'Planning for Biodiversity?', Greater London Authority, September 2016

<sup>23</sup> 'At Home with Nature - Encouraging biodiversity in new housing developments', London Assembly, January 2017

what we could do not necessarily to encourage more bee keeping, but rather to ensure we support the bees that London already has. This is about driving the right kind of planting in both public and private spaces. This is one of many areas we'd like to explore in detail as part of developing our biodiversity plans.

Alongside these proposals for developing a strategic approach for the next two years, the council and its local partners will continue to deliver a number of projects and initiatives which support Westminster's biodiversity. Wildlife education is a big part of this. The City Council is continually building on the success of our Forest Schools scheme, with an ambitious target for the number of children participating this year. With the ongoing support of our Sayers Croft facility, work is being done to offer additional drop-in learning opportunities in the school holidays which allow whole families to get involved, and we're looking at potentially offering sessions for adults and 'Continuing Professional Development' learning opportunities for teachers. With the completion of works to expand the 'bluebell glade' area at Paddington Recreation Ground, too, it will soon be possible for more people than ever to take part in outdoor activities and learning about Westminster's wildlife.

In the meantime the City Council continues to recognise the importance of Westminster's open spaces and green infrastructure as habitats for a number of priority species, as referenced in existing Biodiversity Action Plans.

## ACTION PLAN

Recognising the depth and breadth of impact that our green spaces and infrastructure are able to have on not only the environment but also the health, wellbeing and enjoyment of all those who live, work or visit in Westminster, we have developed this strategy to help us - with our partners - to get the very best we can out of these assets. The following plan outlines the priorities that have been identified on the basis of our audit and consultation work, and the specific actions that the council will undertake to deliver them over the course of the next two years. Many of these specific commitments will be delivered in collaboration with our partners in any case, but as part of this action plan we also recognise some further examples of additional work being done by other agencies and organisations, all of which supports our common aims of protecting, improving and maximising the benefit of Westminster's open spaces and biodiversity.

This action plan structures our priorities and proposed action in a way that reflects our intention to secure and increase the:

1. **QUANTITY** of green assets across the city
2. **QUALITY** of our open spaces and green infrastructure
3. **IMPACT** of our green assets, delivering a range of benefits to individuals, communities and the environment.

## QUANTITY

Our priorities	Our commitments	The council will:	Wider Context – examples of partners' work
<b>Protecting existing green assets</b>	We will robustly protect and preserve existing green space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure planning decisions strictly align with our policies, with particular reference to the City Plan including latest revisions, to protect, preserve and where possible increase open space.</li> <li>• Incorporation of specific policies in the council's City Plan to protect residential private garden space. Specific reference in the refreshed version to preserving green infrastructure and maintaining ecological value.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gardens Trust and Historic England are consulted on all development proposals affecting registered parks and gardens. They maintain the inventory of London's green spaces of local historic interest.</li> <li>• Garden for Living London campaign (London Wildlife Trust)</li> </ul>
<b>Increasing green spaces and infrastructure</b>	We will drive and support developers to deliver new green infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt robust planning policies to encourage the provision of living roofs / green infrastructure as part of Westminster's City Plan. Include specific target that major development should aim to provide an area equivalent to 100% of the building's footprint in living roofs, living walls and ecologically sensitive landscaping.</li> <li>• Continue to support BIDs and major land owners to deliver greening</li> <li>• Provide advice, information and guidance on ways to incorporate greening in development proposals (potentially using council website and/or signposting to additional information or third parties who can help)</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for developers to see good practice examples of greening</li> <li>• Maximise opportunities to fund greening, including using CIL contributions if and where those funds are available for the purpose.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BIDS and land owners' initiatives, e.g. Wild West End</li> <li>• Private developers who introduce innovative green infrastructure within developments and in the public realm</li> <li>• Other major development / infrastructure projects – developers work with the council to ensure impact on open spaces and biodiversity is considered and steps are taken to appropriately manage</li> </ul>
	We will directly contribute to the expansion of Westminster's green network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore 'green spine' proposals as part of the Church Street regeneration project, with a view to maximising the delivery of green assets</li> <li>• Deliver our ongoing programme of tree planting, in green spaces and on streets</li> <li>• Plant 1000 trees by 2020, striving for a mix of species and sizes (GCAP commitment)</li> <li>• Use ringfenced council capital funding to implement open space and green infrastructure projects. Commitment within the capital fund for FY 2017/18 will be £200k.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major landowners and developers will work with us on jointly funded projects to deliver new (or improve existing) green infrastructure.</li> <li>• Work between with the council and CityWest Homes to facilitate greening on housing estates</li> <li>• The Greater London National Park City Initiative - campaign to have London recognised as a National Park City.</li> </ul>



Our priorities	Our commitments	The council will:	Wider Context – examples of partners' work
	<p>We will focus our efforts where they are needed most</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use planning policies (including latest/ongoing revisions to the City Plan) to drive delivery of green infrastructure. Prioritise identified 'deficiency areas'.</li> <li>• Support and facilitate innovative greening solutions including pocket parks and private 'greening' activities by residents and businesses.</li> <li>• We will add much needed play space, with targeted policies in the refreshed City Plan to ensure we can pursue all different types of play opportunities wherever they exist.</li> <li>• Complement existing play space by pursuing our Active Streets initiative, aiming for the establishment of at least one Play Street in a priority area (based on current deficiencies and location of the Marylebone Low Emissions Neighbourhood). Support this with the Street Makers scheme which will involve local people and drive participation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver the objectives of the 'Play Strategy: 2015-2020' (Royal Parks)</li> <li>• Driving greening initiatives with private developers, especially in identified areas of deficiency</li> <li>• Finalise and implement with partners our refreshed Active Westminster Strategy, making the connections through to this strategy in recognition of the large number of common objectives.</li> </ul>

## QUALITY

Our priorities	Our commitments	The council will:	Wider Context – examples of partners' work
<b>Biodiversity and wildlife</b>	We will work to protect important habitats and species	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look to establish a local (borough level) 'task force' for biodiversity, working jointly with key partners to develop specific actions for the next two years to 2020.</li> <li>• Conduct review / updated audit of open spaces and biodiversity in the final year of this strategy (2020)</li> <li>• Build in specific biodiversity requirements and training when procuring key services (incl. new WCC Grounds Maintenance contract)</li> <li>• Raise residents' awareness of the need for friendly planting in gardens, window boxes etc, to support Westminster's existing population of pollinators. Use various communications channels to do this.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement by various partners (particularly via Royal Parks wildlife group) in borough level local biodiversity task force.</li> <li>• Volunteering opportunities orchestrated by various providers, focusing on parks and environment education (e.g. One Westminster, London Wildlife Trust and many others).</li> <li>• Private developers can incorporate wildlife-friendly features in their designs, e.g. planting creepers, creating vertical habitats or introducing 'bird bricks' or spaces for bats within new or converted buildings.</li> </ul>
	We will enable people to access and learn about nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to provide and update information on the council website about how people can get involved in enjoying and supporting Westminster's biodiversity.</li> <li>• Continue to deliver our successful Forest Schools scheme and, using use the newly extended facility at Paddington Recreation Ground, pursue opportunities to extend the scheme e.g. with SEN schools and a home school.</li> <li>• Alongside this, look to offer more learning opportunities for adults and whole families.</li> <li>• Deliver targeted communications which encourage people to support biodiversity (bird boxes, bee friendly planting in gardens, etc)</li> <li>• Extend the range/programme of wildlife learning activities at Paddington Recreation Ground and Sayers Croft</li> <li>• Provide details and links to wide range of activities and opportunities via the council website.</li> <li>• Signpost to the Greenspace information available on the GiGI website to encourage people, especially children, to record the wildlife they see in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Royal Parks continue to offer wildlife talks at the wildlife garden in Regent's park</li> <li>• ZSL continue to deliver range of nature and conservation learning opportunities to schools and individuals at London Zoo</li> <li>• Thames Explorer Trust offer opportunities to bring people closer to nature living in the Thames foreshore</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

		Westminster.	
<b>High standards</b>	We will deliver and maintain clean, safe and award winning green spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective management of the re-commissioned Grounds Maintenance contract, with explicit requirements around biodiversity built in.</li> <li>• Maintain our success in Green Flag awards (currently 23). Explore additional opportunities in relation to Heritage Green Flag Site Accreditation.</li> <li>• Continue and build upon Westminster's success in London in Bloom awards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contracted grounds maintenance provider will work with the council to maintain consistently excellent standards and high levels of customer satisfaction among users of open spaces.</li> <li>• Contractor also committed to helping us achieve awards and maintain Green Flags</li> <li>• All those who use and enjoy Westminster's open spaces play their part in keeping standards high. Disposing of litter properly and taking care not to damage plants and infrastructure all helps enormously.</li> </ul>
<b>Managing and balancing demands</b>	We will work to ensure Westminster's green assets can be used for a range of purposes, without jeopardising people's enjoyment of them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a specific approach to facilitating events in some of our parks/open spaces, ensuring successful events can be hosted for the benefit of the local area, but that other's enjoyment of these spaces is not unduly compromised.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Event organisers and private businesses will collaborate with the council to operate in a way that minimises negative impacts for the spaces and wildlife, and people's enjoyment of them.</li> </ul>

## IMPACT

Our priorities	Our commitments	The council will:	Wider Context – examples of partners' work
<p><b>Health &amp; wellbeing</b></p>	<p>We will make good use of our green spaces to encourage physical activity and support mental wellbeing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver the WCC Walking Strategy. Actions particularly relevant to open and green spaces include improvement of parks and street scene with planting, signage and wayfinding to attract people into open spaces.</li> <li>• Deliver our Park Makers scheme, recruiting and providing training opportunities to local volunteers in order to drive participation and open up access to organised physical activity opportunities.</li> <li>• Ensure physical activity is built in by default at our open spaces, supporting people to be physical active where, when and how they choose.</li> <li>• Look to review 'no ball games' and other prohibitive signage and potentially trial positive signage, to help facilitate physical activity, making our open spaces 'active by default'.</li> <li>• Explore how we can achieve build the benefits of access to open and green spaces into targeted provision for Older People, via WCC's older people's service hubs.</li> <li>• Alongside this, look at potential to strengthen referral links including at looking at connections with physical activity 'by prescription'.</li> <li>• Through robust application of our City Plan policies, protect our open and green spaces as spaces of relative tranquillity, offering opportunities for rest, calm and reflection.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with our Active Westminster partners to deliver the new Active Westminster strategy. Use the connections and momentum it offers to promote open spaces to drive participation in physical activity, leisure and sport.</li> <li>• Targeted plans and strategies to encourage and enable physical activity and sport at Royal Parks.</li> <li>• Various partners including CCGs and local Voluntary and Community Sector partners will continue to offer structured physical activities in Westminster's parks/open spaces, e.g. weekly walking groups</li> </ul>
	<p>We will use our green assets to help support people to eat healthily</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create 7 new horticultural spaces bringing people together in schools and community spaces to grow their own food.</li> <li>• In line with our Greener City Action Plan published in 2015, we will also offer community gardening and education at 11 additional sites, demonstrating the clear link between nature and a healthy life.</li> <li>• Continue to deliver – and expand - food education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Royal Parks with Capital Growth offer open days, food growing training and sessions for schools at Regents Park allotment garden</li> </ul>

		as part of the Forest Schools learning offer.	
<b>Social Value</b>	Our green assets will bring people together and enable them to contribute to their communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Align this strategy and Action Plan with the plan associated with Westminster's Community Cohesion Commission, ensuring actions and projects that positively impact both areas can be driven forward in a coordinated way.</li> <li>• Facilitate appropriate community events in parks, using the rigorous events planning and applications process to manage impact of events</li> <li>• Encourage volunteering in work areas that support and help us make the most of our green assets. This includes our Park Makers and Street Makers to facilitate physical activity.</li> <li>• Explore and take advantage of connections with Time Credits and other ways of rewarding volunteers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteering scheme delivered by and through partners (One Westminster and other VCS)</li> <li>• Intergenerational activities - e.g. Open Age and other VCS providers</li> <li>• Grounds Maintenance contractor to contribute to the council's civic responsibility priorities, e.g. by facilitating apprenticeships, volunteering and community involvement.</li> </ul>
<b>Information and access</b>	We will promote our green spaces and raise awareness of their benefits to increase access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote the Mypark website, encouraging use by residents, workers and visitors, to make information about green assets accessible and appealing</li> <li>• Actively promote Westminster vast array of open and green spaces and all the uses and benefits they can have, through the council's regular communications channels</li> <li>• Connect with relevant public health campaigns (obesity, stress etc) delivering coordinated communications and a coherent messages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing promotion and engagement encouraging the use and enjoyment of Royal Parks.</li> <li>• Ongoing promotion and information provision to general public, by London Parks and Gardens Trust and many other organisations</li> <li>• Research, lobbying and other work by health partners, including Public Health England and academic institutions, to highlight benefits of open spaces and contact with nature for mental and physical wellbeing.</li> <li>• Parklife London interactive online mapping tool, provided by City Bridge Trust/City of London.</li> </ul>
	We will share and use data effectively to raise awareness and increase understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct fresh audits of open spaces and biodiversity in the final year of this strategy (2020) and analyse results in light of partners' data</li> <li>• Carry out a review of Westminster's contribution to the mayor's Green Grid strategy – identify where we can do more</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide data through GiGL to open up / maximise access to information on Westminster's habitats and biodiversity (GLA)</li> <li>• Work with GLA to ensure our data access agreement with GiGL is maintained after the current arrangements formally expire in 2018</li> </ul>

## **APPENDICES:**

### APPENDICES 1-3: Deficiency maps

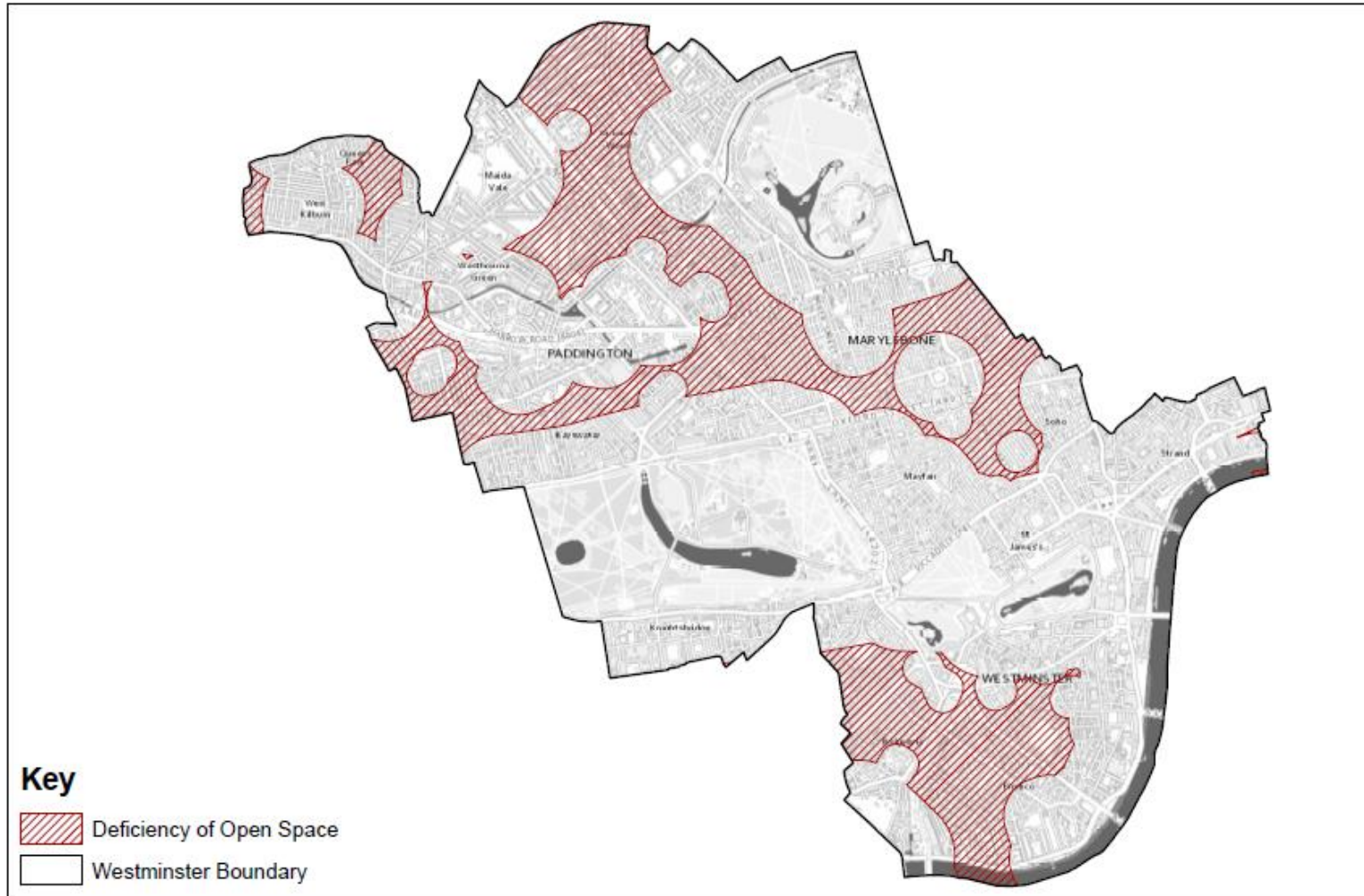
1. Open space
2. Biodiversity / access to nature
3. Play space and demographics

### APPENDIX 4: Further information / reading / document links

- GiGL
- Draft London Environment Strategy (under consultation as of August 2017)
- Westminster City Plan
- Royal Parks plans
- London Biodiversity 2020
- Tri-borough Joint Strategic Needs Assessment on Physical Activity (2014)
- Improving Access to Green Spaces (2014) Public Health England
- Gardens and Health (2016) The Kings Fund.
- The Value of our Green Spaces (2016) The Land Trust
- The National Pollinator Strategy (2014) DEFRA
- Air temperature regulation by urban trees and green infrastructure (2013) Forestry Commission
- Green Capital: Green infrastructure for a future city (2016) CRP/GLA
- London Sustainable Drainage Action Plan: Draft for public consultation(2015) GLA
- Valuing London's Urban Forest (2015) Treeconomics/ Forestry Commission
- Other partner plans (ZSL?)
- [www.wildwestendlondon/vision](http://www.wildwestendlondon/vision)

# APPENDIX 1 – MAP OF OPEN SPACE DEFICIENCY AREAS

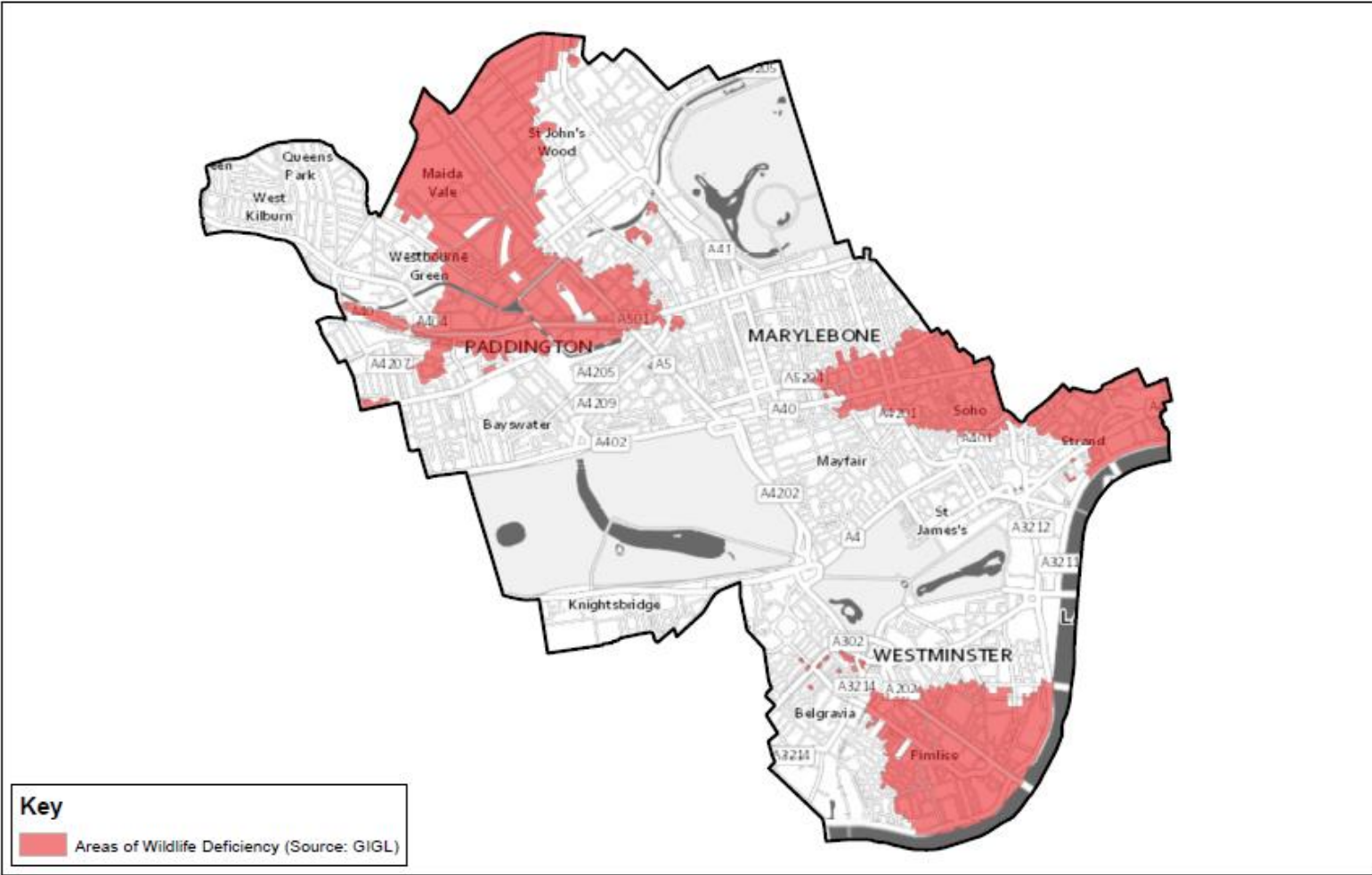
## GROUNDWORK OPEN SPACE MAPPING



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**APPENDIX 2 – MAP OF ACCESS TO WILDLIFE DEFICIENCY AREAS**

**Deficiency in Access to Wildlife Map**

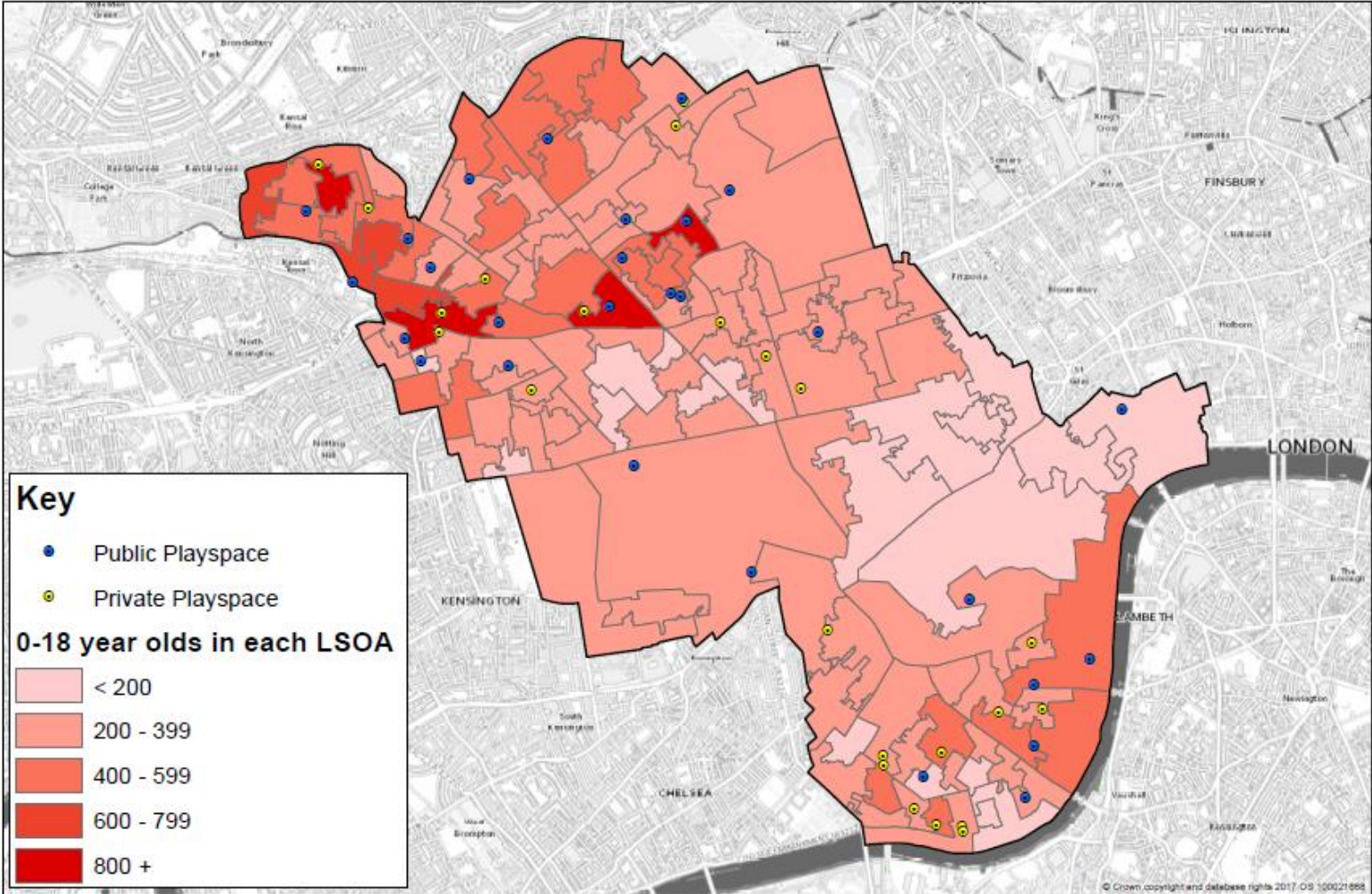


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**APPENDIX 3 – MAP OF CURRENT PLAY SPACE PROVISION AND LOCAL CHILD POPULATION DATA**

**GROUNDWORK OPEN SPACE MAPPING**



**APPENDIX B: Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation in Westminster**

