

Friends of Parks – Proposal to Greenwich Council

(Draft 2.2)

1. INTRODUCTION

Greenwich Parks Forum is committed to ensuring that our parks and open spaces are pleasant, safe, accessible and serve as wide a section of the community for as wide a variety of purposes as possible. We are confident those aspirations fit in with current Greenwich Strategies.

2. BACKGROUND

There have been diligent efforts and successes for the Parks Department which it is important to acknowledge – a lot of hard work over the last year has gained the borough three Green Flag Awards. Various factors, however, have led to a situation where the Department for Parks and Open Spaces has been struggling for some years to cope with an enormous workload.

Among those factors have been:

- Insufficient focus on strategic approach
- The failure of the Parks Constabulary
- Decay of infrastructure
- Budget cuts
- Increased costs
- Dwindling resources and decreasing manpower
- Increase in environmental crime

The department, and the council as a whole, have been trying to keep pace with the scale and style of what is called low-level crime – the sort of crime that degrades the environment and reduces the quality of life for residents and users, and which appears in many user surveys as a high priority for action.

Graffiti and tagging – one signal indicator of social decay – while it has been consistently acknowledged and tackled as a major menace, has yet to be effectively addressed. Continual lobbying by Friends groups and the best efforts of the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, for instance, have not produced a determination at every level within the Parks department to deal with tags as soon as they appear.

The lack of an effective system of reporting and monitoring has led to a damaged and unrepaired infrastructure. Park keepers receive no training for public interface with the consequence that vital opportunities for informal contact and dialogue are not exploited. There is a legacy of lack of empowerment that has led to a sense that the job is low-grade and thankless task. The park keeper's public image is little more than a litter picker. In any discussion about park keepers, people will nostalgically recall the brown-suited park keepers that used to be a continual presence – people want and need more staff on the ground whose role is manifestly protective and custodial.

3. THE CHALLENGE

The challenge before the council is now to evolve a model for parks management that makes effective and efficient use of the resources available.

The *only* solution is to develop and implement a style of management that will close the gap between what *can* be done and what *should* be done.

This is a chance for Greenwich to implement highly visible changes that will make a significant contribution to realising its ambitions as an Olympic borough for 2012.

The council would be a beacon for the changes that its park users have been demanding for years: the restoration of our parks and the empowerment of more visible staff on the ground where people want them.

4. A SOLUTION

Our proposition is that the council could produce a sea change in parks management and sustainability, at an attractive cost/benefit ratio, by introducing radical changes in the style and remit of its personnel.

We propose a single designation for *all* Parks department personnel of “Ranger”.

Within that single designation there would be:

- a scale of grades
- a range of specialities.

Structure

The Rangers would perform management, professional and technical duties in the borough’s open green spaces. Those duties, in different grades and specialities, might involve:

- Operations management
- Interpretation
- Outreach
- Resource protection and management
- Implementation and maintenance of infrastructure
- Patrolling
- Safety
- First Aid
- Enforcement
- Assistance with program management activities

The Ranger designation would include *all* personnel. Clear lines and styles of management will have to be clearly defined and we have suggestions to make in setting out in detail the role and remit for each grade and speciality.

Special qualifications should be available to all grades after appropriate study and assessment:

- Outreach
- Wildlife Interpreter
- Enforcement
- Dog Warden
- First Aider
- etc.

Movement up the grades and across specialties would be facilitated and encouraged.

The lowest scale of Ranger – equivalent to today's park keeper – would be invested with a new dignity together with an opportunity to increase pay scales with new qualifications and skills.

Given the Council's aspiration, as expressed in the Greenwich Strategy 'The Place to Work', that "*by 2012 we will have increased the number of young people accessing apprenticeship schemes*", the council could lead the way by establishing 'Ranger' apprenticeships.

Uniform

All Rangers would wear a smart and empowering uniform designed to give authority, respect and dignity: a safari shirt appropriately badged, with smart trousers.

Each grade of Ranger would have an appropriate emblem prominent on the uniform. The roles, spheres of operation and responsibilities would be clearly evident to the parks user.

Any Ranger's specific roles and specialities would have a significant badge indicating special qualifications and responsibilities.

The current Parks Ranger designation would be distinguished by a badge or badges indicating specialities in interpretation and outreach, with perhaps a uniform of standard style but in a different colour.

A branded partnership with an outdoor clothing supplier such as Rohan or Craghoppers could reduce the cost of implementation and supply.

Equipment

Patrolling Rangers would be properly equipped, possibly with an appropriately designed bag, to deal with a range of situations. Such equipment might include:

- Radio (with direct link to local SNT)
- Small pack of graffiti wipes
- Multi tool
- Phone/Camera PDA (see below)
- Dog poo bags for handing out

- Simple first aid kit
- Refuse bags

Notebook

Reporting and actioning

One of the most significant elements of the development we recommend would be the implantation of a clear protocol for reporting and actioning summarized as:

- 1 See it**
- 2 Record it**
- 3 Report it**
- 4 Sort it**

This would be a systematic approach, supported by an available IT solution, whereby every Ranger is responsible for recording problems, reporting them to the appropriate department, and then personally seeing through the action within a designated time-frame.

Every Ranger would be equipped with a PDA/mobile device which will:

- Take a photograph
- Record the GPS location
- Allow a brief description
- Relay a report to a designated destination
- Create a log for further entries and action monitoring

The Ranger would be responsible for seeing action through. In many cases, the action could be completed immediately and on the spot.

This system would produce manifold savings in time and resources. Problems would be logged and actioned as soon as they are spotted. Effective and timely remedial response will mitigate against decay and reduce costs. There will be significant reductions in the need for management intervention.

Productivity

The “Ranger” model, combined with clear job descriptions, would radically simplify performance measurement.

It should be possible to introduce regular performance reviews and a performance based bonus system across the whole department.

The benefits of improved productivity will offset the costs.

Synergies with The Greenwich Strategy

The “Ranger” model and the improved productivity resulting from it will enable achievement of the aspiration:

- That “by 2012 we will have a quality living environment with three additional key parks awarded Green Flag status.”
- And “by 2015 we will have more attractive, accessible and safe green spaces for all residents and visitors to enjoy.”

The maintenance of safe spaces, which would have a positive impact on the environment and improve the quality of life for all, has been a major objective for us in commending this model. This accords with The Greenwich Strategy objectives that:

- By 2015 we will have created an environment where crime and anti-social behaviour in our parks and open spaces is significantly reduced, making these areas safe for residents and visitors alike;
- By 2012 we will have achieved a 1% increase in the number of people participating in regular physical activity.

Informal activities in parks and open spaces, initiated and supported by trained Rangers, will form a large part of this.

Time is short, but implementation of the Ranger model would be a great public relations exercise in the run up to the Olympics. What better than a highly visible, smartly attired and knowledgeable 'Ranger' force when the world's focus will be on us?

5. CONCLUSION

The solution we propose would have an enormous impact on the productivity and public image of the Parks Department. It will significantly increase job satisfaction by empowering and involving personnel at all levels. There is a strong argument that investment in personnel will produce mid to long term savings. That has been the experience of other local authorities that have made investment in more personnel on the ground.

We believe strongly that, by keeping the management and maintenance of parks and open spaces 'in-house' and ruling out an 'outsourcing' solution, there is a real chance of developing a style of management and accountability that could be a paradigm of excellence and value.

With strategic implementation of the Ranger model, and the involvement of staff of all grades in the projected benefits, we are convinced that the changes we propose would have a dramatic effect, not only on the parks themselves, but also on public perception of value.