Section 6: CONNECTING PEOPLE AND NATURE

This section contains analysis and recommendations relating to connecting people with their neighbourhoods and with nature.

Goal 3: CONNECTING PEOPLE AND NATURE

We will strengthen residents’ connections with their neighbourhoods and nature. This will be achieved through public awareness, neighbourhood-driven activities and decision-making, and opportunities to animate and enjoy London’s outdoor spaces and places.

Strategic Directions:

a. Enhance awareness of community initiatives and promote the personal and community benefits of parks, recreation, and sport.
b. Support volunteerism and community engagement in the planning and delivery of services.
c. Continue to emphasize initiatives focused on strengthening neighbourhoods, animation of public spaces, and unstructured activities.
d. Collaborate with providers to exchange information and promote services and programs.
e. Use recreation to help people connect with nature and be stewards of the natural environment.
f. Apply effective designs and management strategies that support healthy and sustainable environments and sustain significant ecological features and functions.
g. Support efforts to expand active transportation networks, including trails and pathways within and connecting to, parks and natural park areas.

6.1 Connecting People and Neighbourhoods

The London Strengthening Neighbourhoods Strategy (LSNS)

Through strong resident engagement, the City of London has taken a proactive role in strengthening communications and access to services where people live. LSNS has shown leadership in better understanding the needs and make-up of neighbourhoods and building capacity to deliver meaningful programs and services. This approach assists in better understanding and addressing the unique nature of residents’ needs within each neighbourhood. LSNS provides for greater engagement and inclusion of all residents, local decision-making, increased neighbourhood activities and participation, and enhanced communications.

Some promising deliverables from LSNS include:

- The Neighbourhood Decision-Making program provides funding for infrastructure, local supports, and events. Residents propose ideas and vote for the various proposals. Approximately $250,000 per year was provided in 2017 and 2018 to neighbourhoods through this program.
- The City provides access to free assets such as tents, tables, chairs, and games to support neighbourhood events to residents and neighbourhood groups. A Neighbourhood Small Events Fund (up to $500) is available to residents and neighbourhood groups to support community events to engage and strengthen the community.
- Toolkits and “How to” resources are provided to neighbourhoods to assist with planning of local events and activities.
- Communications are enhanced through various online tools (like NeighbourGood London) and promotional materials.

With the anticipated increase in the population, staff will need to continue to encourage the delivery of recreational opportunities and neighbourhood activities to include more residents and through a
Online Communities

Effective communication and engagement with the community are paramount in not only promoting local opportunities, but educating the public on the benefits of participating in parks, recreation, and sport pursuits. The City of London utilizes an extensive communications program to promote its various special events, registration dates, trails, gardens, specialized facilities, and more. The City is committed to making it convenient for residents to learn about municipal services and make it even easier to access them. One way of supporting increased communications and engagement while reaching a broad audience is through the development and support of online communities. Building an online community for parks, recreation, and sport can serve to educate, inform, promote, engage, and seek opinions. Moving beyond the current “Play Your Way” online newsletter where residents are required to provide contact information to receive updates about upcoming events, program registrations, volunteer opportunities. The opportunity could be geared to one’s particular interests, with participants receiving relevant material on activities, volunteer opportunities, educational items, etc. The system could also offer the ability to respond to City-initiated polling questions to gather a quick response to specific items of interest or allow for cross-posting of events.

Engaging the community in self-governing parks, recreation, and sport activities also requires extending support to volunteers and service providers. For example, neighbourhood hubs such as senior satellites and community centres rely on local organizations and volunteers to promote their programs and opportunities. Staff regularly engage residents, businesses, like-minded organizations, and community groups to maximize investments that enhance local capacity and support accessible, responsive programming – particularly in neighbourhoods with higher numbers of vulnerable children, youth, and families. Meaningful programs and services cannot be provided without open dialogue with the people that the City serves.

The City of London is known for its approach to addressing social issues in the community through an integrated approach with other stakeholders with specific expertise. This approach has set an example for communities in that local issues are studied with a rounded view and a view toward providing coordinated and thoughtful solutions. Some examples of integrated decision-making processes include the London Strengthening Neighbourhoods Strategy, London’s Child and Youth Network, Age Friendly London Network, Homeless Prevention and Housing Plan. These are excellent illustrations of creating a vision as a collective to improve community outcomes, while allowing all stakeholders to play their individual part in achieving them. This is leading practice and should continue as community issues require attention.
Connecting People and Neighbourhoods

16. Continue to **support community development and local decision making initiatives**, the London Strengthening Neighbourhoods Strategy, Child and Youth Agenda, partnerships, and other means of achieving equity in park, facility, and service delivery.

17. Continue to embed **public engagement as a required element** when making key decisions relating to parks, recreation, and sport services. Consider a variety of tactics (including community led and community designed engagement opportunities) that make it easy for people to participate, such as at non traditional locations and times.

18. Continue to support **Neighbourhood Hubs** by:
   a) Ensuring community centres are safe places where people can gather and connect, and promote this fact;
   b) Providing welcoming and inviting spaces;
   c) Using community centres as access points for information about other City of London services; and,
   d) Using appropriate facilities as warming/cooling centres when needed.

19. Continue to maximize program delivery in **existing places and spaces** by:
   a) Identifying location gaps for different program areas and develop strategies to fill these gaps; and,
   b) Sourcing out new program locations through formalizing usage of school facilities (all school boards), coordinating with Family Centres, planning ahead for when new school space becomes available, and identifying under-utilized public library spaces.

20. As part of a broader community engagement strategy that utilizes a blend of broad and targeted tactics, investigate the feasibility of developing an **online community portal and application** centred on parks, recreation, and sport in London.

21. Increase resident **awareness and marketing** of parks, recreation, and sport opportunities and information through:
   a) Leveraging new and emerging technologies that enhance the customer service experience (e.g., program registration and rentals);
   b) Including more information about features available at each location, including those accessible to persons with disabilities;
   c) Educating the public about service level standards, such as parks maintenance and naturalization initiatives;
   d) Establishing strategies for communicating with specific audiences, including under-represented groups;
   e) Expanding current initiatives such as the Play Your Way newsletter, NeighborhoodGood London, surveys, information centres, etc.;
   f) Developing generic neighbourhood based information by working with Family Centres, libraries, and schools; and,
   g) Increasing cross promotion on social media, utilizing relationships with neighbourhood groups, etc.

22. Continue to explore opportunities to publish key promotional material and provide language supports for participants in **multiple and predominant languages** with the goal of expanding the City’s reach and increasing participation amongst newcomer groups.
6.2 Connecting People and Nature

London’s parks and open space system – with many assets connected to the Thames River – has consistently been rated by the public as one of the city’s best features. Parks and open spaces enhance the vibrancy of our communities and keep individuals connected and engaged. Their impact on personal wellness is significant, including the many mental health and healing benefits associated with connections to nature.

Aligning with Provincial Policy

Connecting people and nature supports policy 1.5.1 of the Provincial Policy Statement (2014) that promotes:

- “planning and providing for a full range of publicly accessible, built and natural settings for recreation, including facilities, parklands, public spaces, open spaces areas, trails and linkages, and, where practical, water-based resources”; and,
- “providing opportunities for public access to shorelines”.

The National and Provincial direction to connect people and nature aligns with International standards for managing natural areas in urban centres. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is the world’s authoritative resource for protected areas. In the IUCN’s Urban Protected Areas Profiles and Best Practice Guidelines (7) the number one best practice recommendation is to “provide access for all”.

Note: Additional recommendations on parks planning and design are contained in Section 7.4.

Recreational Trails and Pathways

In recent years, there has been more research into the benefits of nature for children and major efforts to provide opportunities in urban areas for all residents to interact with nature. These benefits are well documented and are recognized by Londoners, as they rank “hiking on nature trails” as their second most popular recreational activity, after walking on pathways. It is, therefore, a high priority to continue to provide residents with these valuable experiences. As more Londoners value and appreciate nature, they are more likely to support and advocate for the protection and management of natural areas.

London residents consistently identify walking, hiking, and cycling as favoured activities for all ages. These activities are often satisfied in local neighbourhoods through sidewalks and walking loops in parks. The multi-use Thames Valley Pathway (TVP) and London’s network of community trails and cycling routes also support these activities and help to connect neighbourhoods across the city. The City places a high priority on enhancing the recreational trail and pathway system.

Continued improvement and expansion of the recreational pathway and active transportation networks are key goals for the City. For example, the Age Friendly London Action Plan (2017-2020) recommends a guide for age friendly outdoor recreational trails and pathways in London. All trail and pathway development projects require site-specific analysis, including application of applicable policies and guidelines.

Making Recreational Trails and Pathways Accessible for All

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act requires that all new recreational trails and pathways be accessible, unless there is a strict technical reason why they cannot be – such as very steep slopes or significant negative impacts on natural features. For the last fifteen years, London has been a leader in Ontario and across Canada in making its parks and facilities more accessible and the City continues to strive to make its parks open to all Londoners.

Many of London’s parks and open spaces are part of a larger Natural Heritage System that includes Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs). Currently, there are twelve large ESAs that the City contracts the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority to manage separately from the parks and open space system. While ESAs provide Londoners with great opportunities for recreational hiking, these areas have their own planning and management goals, guidelines, and processes that fall outside of the mandate of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan. The planning and management of ESAs resides with the City Planning service area.

Thames River

This Natural Heritage System also overlaps with the parks system in many places, the largest being the Thames Valley corridor. Two branches of the Thames River run through the city and form the backdrop to many of its largest parks – Springbank, Gibbons, Harris, Greenway, North London Athletic Fields, St. Julien, and Thames Parks. Through the development of the Thames Valley Corridor Plan, Londoners established a guiding vision for the corridor that is now part of the new London Plan:

- The Thames Corridor is London’s most important natural, cultural recreational, and aesthetic resource. The City and community partners will preserve and enhance the natural environment, Thames River health, vistas, beauty and cultural heritage while accommodating compatible infrastructure, accessibility and recreation.

- Vision Statement from Thames Valley Corridor Plan, 2011

The vision for the corridor through London is in keeping with the goals of the Canadian Heritage River designation – bestowed on the Thames River “for its outstanding natural and cultural contributions, quality recreational opportunities, and demonstration of a healthy river environment”. The important role of the river as a cultural and environmental feature for Indigenous populations is also recognized.

The Corridor Plan has several key objectives that implement this vision, which have been incorporated into the City’s ongoing management of the corridor. Specific sites along the river have been identified for improvement and the recent One River Environmental Assessment has studied how this may be accomplished in the area from the Forks, westward to Boler Road.

Access to the Thames River is important to Londoners and visitors, as is protecting and promoting its Heritage River status. Fishery health and ecosystem biodiversity in local waters are improving and interest in fishing and paddling are trending upward. Residents and stakeholders have requested enhanced access for water-based recreational pursuits and cultural ceremonies. Maintaining and increasing shoreline access promotes good health, water-based recreation, environmental awareness, and connections to nature for multiple user groups.

Consistent with the London Plan and Thames Valley Corridor Plan, the City will continue to seek opportunities to invest in and enhance access to London’s riverfront.

Environmental Health and Stewardship

Aside from the key recreational and social benefits to residents, London’s parks and open spaces also help the City achieve its goals and requirements relating to environmental health. It is increasingly evident that parks and open spaces fulfill a role in helping the City meet many of its environmental goals. Over the last twenty years, the City has purposefully naturalized approximately 15% of the river corridor parklands with meadows, shrubs, and trees. For years, this work has included specific projects that support pollinators like butterflies and bees. This work across the City has also resulted in the parks and open space system having over 40% tree canopy coverage – well above the average in the city of 24%.

The Master Plan recognizes the contributions of natural areas, the urban forest, and the Thames River to individual and community health and wellness. This includes consideration of the City’s role in environmental stewardship (e.g., programming, climate change mitigation, green technologies, etc.) and expanding support for community-driven initiatives that encourage environmentally-friendly behaviours. Many relevant directions and policies relating to these topics are contained in guiding documents such as the London Plan, Urban Forestry Strategy, and the City’s new Invasive Plant Species Management Strategy. The City will continue to support the protection and enhancement of the natural environment through appropriate means, including stewardship initiatives and community partnerships.

The City has both an obligation and an opportunity to be a leader in environmental sustainability. There are many things London can do to become a greener city. While this Master Plan is not intended to provide detailed direction on environmental management, many ideas were raised through the consultation program, such as the use of interpretive signage and community education, pollinator habitat and community gardens, solar and wind energy, shade, and naturalization guidelines, green technologies, low impact development approaches, materials purchasing, urban wildlife, and invasive species management.
Outdoor Play

Outdoor play is critical to children’s development; they need outdoor and unstructured play to master new skills, be active, learn, and find wonder in their natural environment. However, children are given fewer opportunities to engage in outdoor and “challenging” play compared to previous generations. Children spend less time outdoors due to a fear of accidents and more time spent indoors engaged in sedentary behaviours (such as increased screen time). As a result, Nature Deficit Disorder is a term coined to encourage parents to keep their children and families outside longer and more often to gain the benefits of being active. Guidelines to assist communities and individuals address this issue are beginning to emerge, offering practical ways to improve the physical, mental, and social health of children and residents of all ages.

The Value of Outdoor Play

“Access to active play in nature and outdoors – with its risks – is essential for healthy child development. We recommend increasing children’s opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings—at home, at school, in child care, in the community, and in nature.”

- ParticipACTION 2015 position statement on active outdoor play

Several municipalities are engaged in researching and experimenting with the merits of challenging play and testing new approaches. Many communities are also placing larger toys (e.g., kitchens, trucks, workshops, tricycles, castles, etc.) in playgrounds, which has proven to keep children in playgrounds longer and immersed in imaginative play. To address concerns over risk mitigation, the Canadian Public Health Association is developing a policy toolkit to guide the development of challenging play opportunities and adventure play areas. The development of an Outdoor Activity Strategy is recommended to encourage Londoners of all ages to stay outdoors longer, enjoy natural settings, and enhance connections with nature. This strategy should consider programs and pilot projects that animate and energize London’s excellent parks system, unlocking their potential as “outdoor community centres”. For example, London’s Urban Agriculture Strategy includes several initiatives that promote the benefits of staying outdoors longer and leading more active lifestyles.
Recommendations

Connecting People with Nature / Thames River

23. Place a greater emphasis on helping people connect with nature through recreation by:
   
a) Incorporating appreciation and exposure to nature through new program design;
   
b) Improving the connection between community and seniors’ centres and their outdoor spaces; and,
   
c) Enhancing shoreline access and gathering spaces by providing more amenities for trails/pathways and water-based recreational pursuits (e.g., fishing, paddling, etc.) adjacent to the Thames River, in keeping with best environmental practices.

24. To support education and nature appreciation, provide interpretive signage that highlights the significance of London’s Natural Heritage System.

Recreational Trails and Pathways

25. Continue to provide Londoners with trails that offer opportunities to be immersed in, experience, repect, and value nature.

26. Where ecologically appropriate, ensure that new trails are AODA compliant, so that all Londoners can experience nature.

27. Continue efforts to address gaps in the recreational trail and pathway system and extending the system into new growth areas. All trail and pathway development projects require site specific analysis, including application of applicable policies and guidelines.

28. Identify and consider opportunities to enhance the safety and convenience of the recreational pathway system through urban design, active transportation, and park renewal initiatives. Examples include (but are not limited to) installation of bike racks and amenities, signage clearly identifying access points, community education and awareness, separation of users in high traffic areas, and a winter maintenance program in select locations where significant features and functions are not put at risk.

29. Work with applicable approval agencies to develop a coordinated policy approach for recreational trail and pathway development within Woodland Parks and floodplains.

30. Align implementation of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan with the City’s Cycling Master Plan and promote and link with Provincial Cycling Routes (CycleON). Update technical standards to reflect Provincial planning guidelines, as revised from time to time.

Environmental Health and Stewardship

31. Identify resources to support the enhanced management of municipal woodlands (including Woodland Parks) and work collaboratively with internal and external stakeholders to achieve the desired service level standards.

32. Encourage stakeholder and resident roles in providing stewardship of parks, gardens, and other community resources. This may include encouraging the establishment of park foundations, conservancies, and other stewardship partnerships that enhance park sustainability.
Recommendations

33. Seek opportunities to improve **awareness and understanding** about the importance of the City’s Natural Heritage System and urban forest and their broader role within **Carolinian Canada**. Additional research should be conducted into best practices that build upon existing community partnerships and community education opportunities (e.g., programming and events, social media, educational signs, etc.).

34. Continue to promote **naturalization of appropriate municipal lands and beautification and greening efforts** led or sponsored by the City (e.g., planting programs, “adopt-a-” initiatives, community events, public art, and more) to meet multiple goals for habitats, pollinators, and tree coverage.

35. Continue to seek and implement strategies for the effective management of **urban wildlife and invasive species**.

Outdoor Play

36. Develop an **Outdoor Activity Strategy** to encourage residents of all ages to stay outdoors longer, enjoy outdoor settings, and enhance connections with nature. This strategy may also include policy direction on accommodating physical activity and community-based **commercial activities** in parks (e.g., group fitness classes, farmers’ markets, etc.).

37. Investigate new **challenging play opportunities** to keep children and families outdoors and active for longer periods of time.