



Briefing 17-10    March 2017

## **The findings and recommendations of the Communities and Local Government Committees report on Public Parks (January 2017)**

### **Key issues**

- Following increasing pressure to establish an inquiry into the impact of funding cuts on Public Parks in England a DCLG Committee has produced a report on Public parks, looking at their role, the challenges facing the sector, and how their future sustainability be secured?
- The report highlights the responses to the public inquiry and provides a series of recommendations for Government and in particular the new Parks Minister to introduce.
- Whilst APSE welcomes the report and the increased profile it has given to parks and green spaces, there are concerns about whether the report and its recommendations really provides any real answers or simply prolongs the conversation whilst parks budgets slowly drain away.

This briefing outlines the main findings and recommendations coming out of the DCLG's Committee looking at the role of public parks and how the impact of funding reductions is impacting on the future sustainability of these valuable public assets.

### **Why Do Parks Matter?**

One of the first findings of the report and perhaps the most needed, is the acknowledgement by Government that parks funding is at a **'tipping point'** and that the ongoing cuts to parks budgets will have 'severe consequences'. Of equal importance is that the report recognises the multiple benefits parks and green spaces have to offer, not only regarding public health and mental well-being but also the many and varied environmental and economic benefits such spaces bring, including climate change mitigation, increasing opportunities for biodiversity, flood alleviation etc. This realisation is now being backed up by the development of economic models based around accounting for the value of such spaces through a process known as **'natural capital'** which takes into consideration the overall economic, social and environmental value of parks and greenspaces. A recent study between Sheffield City Council, The National Trust and Vivid Economics estimated that for every £1 invested in parks and greenspaces up to £36 of natural capital benefits were achieved. This has led the report to recommend that these benefits

and the value parks and open spaces bring to wider local and national agendas should be more fully recognised.

Whilst the report has been extensively researched and its breadth of evidence is well presented, there doesn't appear to be a great deal of information which is new to park managers and stakeholders. The whole first two chapters of the report merely provide information which has been the subject of discussion for many years amongst park professionals and their partners and many have been working collectively developing these areas for many years.

## **What challenges are facing the parks sector?**

Chapter 3 focuses on the challenges facing public parks, in particular the **different needs different users** have, primarily focussing on the issue of ensuring public accessibility, safety issues within parks and conflicting community demands within parks etc. Therefore one of the reports suggestions in Chapter 3 is that local authorities need to better consider applications for exclusive use of parks for major events and greater transparency with residents if charging is to be made as local authorities try to bring in additional funding for their parks.

The need to develop alternative or additional funding sources is recognised by a more in-depth assessment being made of the impact these funding cuts are having, for example, Newcastle City Council has lost 97% from its parks budget over the past 5 years. Local authorities have tried to mask a great deal of these cuts to ensure service quality in their parks is maintained through the use of volunteers, Friends Groups etc. but this has often been counter-productive as even greater cuts have been imposed based on the argument that despite cuts, services have still been delivered. But the report highlights how services are now beginning to noticeably decline, with examples of reduced maintenance and horticultural features, play facilities being closed down and removed, fewer rangers leading to increased anti-social behaviour, prioritising one park over another, loss of skilled staff as people retire, loss of links with the community and an inability to support Friends Groups etc.

Some have stated that the quality of our parks will now begin to decline to the levels experienced in the 1980's and 1990's before Heritage Lottery funding allowed a renaissance in parks.

There is a re-emphasis on the need to promote greater community involvement by developing local groups into a single **parks forum** which can then share ideas, resources and learning about all the parks on their area so as to avoid them having to compete against each other for scarce resources. It is likely that the management and resourcing of a larger group like a parks forum will ultimately rest with the local authority on the basis that parks are their responsibility, and as already acknowledged in the report, these same local authorities are already finding it difficult to support small groups without the creation of a larger group.

**Health and safety** issues are raised, highlighting the need for local authorities to ensure proper inspections and maintenance is carried out in areas such as children's play equipment, tree maintenance, and building safety. In reality, many are now finding the

easiest way to address these issues is to either remove or close down expensive facilities such as public toilets, paddling pools play areas and bandstands.

The problems of gaining access to **revenue and capital funding** is also addressed in Chapter 3, but again many of the examples given are not new to parks professionals with a reducing ability to access either and the difficulties now being experienced by many in finding revenue funds to maintain large capital schemes put in because HLF or similar capital funds being spent. Peter Neal, the author of the two' *State of the UK Public Parks*' reports highlighted this problem when he stated that this situation results in " *costly and demoralising cycles of investment followed by decline*". In response to this difficulty, the report does suggest that local authorities should be allowed to use Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy funds to cover parks revenue requirements, this would help to ensure any future capital schemes would have sufficient funds to maintain them.

The report although focusing on the difficulties and opportunities to fund and manage existing parks and greenspaces also highlights the need to protect them against the growing **pressures of development** unless it can be shown they are surplus to requirement or better provision can be made elsewhere. This is particularly important as much green space is now under threat due to increasing need for new housing land. Often the provision of new green space simply adds to the burden for local authorities but what is being suggested is that green space should be seen by developers as part of the total development not as an after- thought. Birmingham City Council have suggested that the design of towns and cities should adopt a 'whole-place' approach where parks would be '*part of an holistic and interconnected green estate*' whereby they would be '*given equal weight, thought, design and resources, as all other parts of the wider platforms of city infrastructure and totally integrated*'. The report suggests this whole place approach should be built into Local Plans and even be a talking point with other local authorities where there is opportunities for co-operation on developing parks and open spaces, thereby reaping all the benefits they bring to both local communities and wildlife.

Finally in Chapter 3 the report recommends that the new Parks Minister Andrew Percy MP should work with Defra to ensure parks and the green infrastructure are more widely recognised in the Government's new 25-year **Environment Plan**.

## **How can we secure a sustainable future for parks?**

The report although recognising the huge contribution Friends Groups and volunteers bring to the management and sustainability of parks, recognises that they cannot be expected to be the future management choice for parks and greenspaces.

*"volunteers should be seen as an addition to, not a replacement for, local authority responsibility"* – The Parks Agency Ltd.

The report therefore looks to exploring **alternative models** for the management of parks such as parks trusts or formal partnerships with Friends Groups. Other suggestions include asset transfers, long leases to social enterprises or charitable trusts. The view taken is that these options would either replace or add value to the existing local authority role.

The report suggests that many still believe that local authorities are still best placed to manage parks and green spaces in their areas. The reasoning behind this lies with

evidence given in the report which highlights the difficulties in many of the options. Primarily with many of the models it is not the lack of enthusiasm to take this role on but:

*" the level of skill, the level of effort and energy involved really does require some sort of professional expertise that it is perhaps beyond the realms of parks groups necessarily to be able to have."* – Lynda Ragoonanan-Rethinking Parks Programme.

Other authorities who have considered establishing trusts for some of their parks have also rejected the idea because raising a sufficient endowment would be prohibitive.

The report states that a key issue regarding the development of new management models for parks is the 'establishment of transparent governance and accountability structures'. This is because parks are run by local authorities through the provision of Council tax and other rates and as such are held accountable by local communities for their provision and management, therefore they have democratic legitimacy. By changing the way parks are managed, then this link with community decision-making can be weakened. Others argue that by releasing control of parks to trusts does not break this link as long as good relationships with the community are established. But again concerns are raised within the report that charitable trusts can become "self-perpetuating oligarchies", which lack suitable transparent governance and accountability to local people.

The report does not come down on either side over how local parks should be managed but recommends that the Parks Minister '*should issue guidance to local authorities setting out key principles for the appropriate governance and accountability arrangements in non-traditionally managed parks which could be put in place as part of any emerging or alternative models for parks management*'.

The report further recommends that a small amount of funding be made available to assist **pathfinder authorities** who may wish to pilot alternative management models. Furthermore it is recommended that the cross departmental group the Parks Minister intends to establish, should look at the future management and funding of parks and how it can assist pathfinder pilots to nurture such projects.

Many of the respondents who replied to the consultation, asked that the provision and management of parks be a **statutory duty**. Furthermore the DCLG Committee received a petition signed by over 320,000 people that also supported this move. Suggestions were made that local authorities should be required to monitor all publically accessible green spaces and make sure that they are maintained to nationally agreed standards. However one view was that by agreeing these standards which could be set with current levels of budget cuts in mind would mean some parks which exceed the prescribed levels may have their standards lowered in order to make further savings elsewhere in the corporate budget. The example of library services which is a statutory duty was quoted where despite statutory status, there have been reductions in opening hours, staffing levels and even library closures as the statutory requirement has been met by providing a central library.

Therefore the Committee did not feel that granting parks and green spaces statutory status bearing in mind all the other statutory priorities such as social care and education would achieve the intended outcome of protecting and maintaining standards in parks.

Although statutory status is not recommended, the report does highlight the need for a 'greater recognition of the value and benefits of parks and the appropriate prioritisation in local authority planning and funding decisions'. The report suggests that parks should be supported by those areas such as health, transport, planning and education which gain from the benefits parks and greenspaces offer. Parks and greenspaces play a major role in contributing to a wide range of local authority objectives and as such should be seen as a critical support mechanism towards achieving these objectives.

There has been the view that a **Parks Champion** should be appointed in each local authority, for example a senior elected member to ensure parks importance are recognised and taken into account. However, the concern is that this role would be members who already have responsibility for parks and green spaces and therefore would make little difference to the current status quo.

The other option is that a statutory duty be placed on local authorities to develop parks and green space strategies working with their **Health and Wellbeing Boards** to highlight how parks and greenspaces contribute to the wider local authority objectives and how they will be managed to maximise these contributions. Equally a more detailed parks and green space strategy also needs to be developed which will show how these spaces will be managed both now and in the future, as currently less than half of local authorities have such plans or strategies. The view is that currently due to a lack of data it is difficult to show how parks are used, managed or invested in. This lack of information it is believed can lead to parks receiving a low priority in policy and decision making.

In light of these suggestions the report recommends that the Minister for Parks should issue guidance on the need for local authorities to work with Health and Wellbeing Boards and other relevant bodies to prepare and publish **joint parks and green space strategies**. In addition the Ministers cross-departmental working group should monitor the preparation and production of these plans and annually report on progress being made. If this guidance does not achieve the aims of delivering such plans then the Minister should consider legislating to place a statutory duty on the production of such joint parks and green space strategies.

The final consideration in Chapter 4 is the need for **co-ordination and leadership**. Many believe since the loss of CABI Space in 2011, parks managers and community groups have lost the ability to access knowledge, guidance and support to enhance and improve their parks. Therefore there is a need to develop a network which allows parks managers to share best practice, develop skills and undertake benchmarking activities.

The Land Trust stated that,

*" Government must recognise that funding parks is a cost effective means of delivering a range of wider objectives relating to health, well-being, housing, economic development and more, and must be supported for their continued evolution accordingly, as well as having a greater synergy with the evolving public health and well-being agenda."*

The report acknowledges the need for a more central co-ordination and facilitating of the sharing of best practice to help ensure the future sustainability of England's parks and greenspaces. However it sees the importance of parks at a much more nationally strategic level in helping to address climate change mitigation, and public health and as such the

leadership and vision needs to come from national government. The report looks to the Minister for Parks to provide this.

The Committee requests that the Minister for Parks together with the cross-departmental group undertake the role of providing co-ordination and leadership in delivering the Minister for Parks vision via providing:

- a response to the DCLG Committee's Parks Inquiry report
- Details of the cross-departmental group's membership
- Terms of reference
- Initial priorities
- How often it will meet
- How it will work across the parks sector and the LGA to secure a sustainable future for England's parks.

The Committee suggest early priorities should include establishing and maintaining an on-line parks information hub and establishing and supporting national or regional park manager forums.

## **Conclusion**

The report clearly shows the importance public parks have to England's communities. Parks Managers have done a great deal of innovative work to ensure they have continued to survive despite huge cuts to funding levels. However, as Cllr. Trickett of Birmingham City Council states,

*"We have been innovative and we have looked at alternatives, but the cuts are in very great danger of tilting the balance too far."*

If we fail to protect our parks and green spaces they will have severe negative consequences with regards to being able to meet many of England's national priorities regarding social, economic and environmental targets.

The report recognises that the responsibility for parks and green spaces still lies very much with local authorities and it is they who are best placed to make decisions on local need. But the report states that in light of reducing budgets there is a role for central government to provide leadership, co-ordination and vision regarding the future sustainability of England's parks and greenspaces.

The DCLG Committee recommends they be given annual updates on the progress the Parks Minister and his cross-departmental group achieves in the role.

## **APSE Comment**

Undoubtedly APSE welcomes the DCLG Committee's report, in that it has raised the profile of, and threats facing England's parks and greenspaces at Government level and as such should lead to actions to protect these valuable assets. Unfortunately there does seem to be an element of 'Groundhog Day' about large sections of the report. Whilst the depth of consultation and research cannot be faulted, much of the report provides information which has been available for many years and known by parks professionals across the field.

APSE is concerned however that this recognition does not appear to be helping in relation to stopping or slowing down ongoing budget cuts which are continuing to bite into parks funding, and neither does the Committee appear to be offering any solutions to addressing these shortfalls within the report. What is important is that the report shows the level of public concern about the state of England's parks from not only regular parks users but a multitude of organisations which also benefit from these public spaces.

This recognition is clear by the suggestion that joint parks and greenspace strategies should be developed with Health and Well-Being Boards so that the value of parks is entrenched across local authorities and other stakeholder's priorities and objectives. Therefore, APSE welcomes this suggestion but would make the point that many local authorities are, and have already recognised this link and have been working in this way for some time.

The report highlights many of the key issues facing local authorities in managing parks and greenspaces such as meeting differing demands, securing free public access, the need to generate income and the increasingly important role of volunteering and Friends Groups to parks management. Most people who become involved in their local park do so because it means something to them, its where they played as children, or took their own children, walked their dog etc., whether they would have the same commitment for a park several miles away is debatable, and therefore questions the long term reliance upon volunteers to support all an areas parks. These points are likely to increase as public use of parks continues to rise as resources are reducing. APSE feels there is little real help on how to address these issue other than the suggestion that there is a need for greater consultation and transparency in decision making, which in reality, local authorities are already doing for many years.

More worrying is the loss of skills and experience as parks staffing numbers are reduced and the suggestion that '*local authorities should work collaboratively with relevant groups of park users to identify the range of ways in which they can contribute to their parks*' (paragraph 50), is unlikely to fill these key and growing gaps.

A helpful suggestion for helping ease the problems over revenue funding to maintain capital projects, is the suggestion to use Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy to cover these costs but this depends on the ability to negotiate with developers. This would be particularly welcome where large HLF funded capital schemes have been introduced.

APSE is concerned about the reliance upon alternative management models particularly as there are few examples of successful schemes. It does acknowledge that elements of such approaches can help, such as small scale asset transfers, developing income generation schemes etc, but is pleased to see that the Committee has taken the view that parks and greenspaces should remain in the control of the local authority which has democratic accountability for the decisions it makes on behalf of its residents and ultimately its park users. '*We believe that local authorities are best placed to make decisions which are appropriate for their local circumstances*'.

APSE believes that the issue of statutory status for parks is no longer an issue as such status has not helped libraries or allotments, with many being threatened or closed on the

pretext that as long as a few are provided then others can be sacrificed, albeit reluctantly, in order to meet corporate budget cuts.

The suggestion of better data and sharing of best practice and innovation is most welcome, as this is an area where APSE has a long history of supporting parks managers through its Performance Networks benchmarking data, Parks Seminars and Advisory Groups, briefing papers, training courses and network queries etc. Much of what the report recommends through the development of park manager forums and data hubs can be found in APSE's offer. APSE data has been used in the State of the UK Public Parks reports and within the DCLG Committee's report. APSE also promotes Horticultural Apprentice Awards which recognises the skills of new horticulturalists, many of whom have the future of the UK's parks and green spaces in their hands. APSE will watch with interest the work of the Parks Minister and the cross-departmental group with interest to ensure its members are kept abreast of any developments which comes out of the work undertaken.

APSE acknowledges that there will be a need to manage England's parks and greenspaces in different ways in which a number of different approaches are used such as, commercial income, external grants, fundraising and social investors but crucially the responsibility for parks and green spaces must remain with local authorities who have the democratic governance to ensure that public parks remain a public asset. In order to do this there must be a core grant which is guaranteed to which the previous sources of income can be added. Without this core funding the financial viability of parks will be unsustainable and the ability to try new management models and income generation will be irrelevant as parks become the unkempt and un-loved barren wastelands reminiscent of the 1970's and 80's.

One final point that is perhaps worth considering, is that the report mentions that the new Minister for Parks, Andrew Percy MP will be expected to lead and co-ordinate the future vision for parks and greenspace, but with such a large portfolio and only recently being given this new responsibility, will he realistically have the time to address the many and complicated questions which need to be addressed, not least, will there be any extra money to deliver this vision?

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