

House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee: Public Parks Inquiry

The need to recognise the benefits of parks and green spaces and to develop a strategy to maximize their value

1. A Merseyside perspective within the national context

The Heritage Lottery Fund's initial report in 2014 on the state of the country's parks painted a worrying and bleak picture. The decline in local authority funding by 2020 was likely to be greater and more damaging than the reduction inflicted on public parks in the 1970s and 1980s, when many urban parks and green spaces were allowed to fall into a dangerous state of disrepair with significantly negative social and health consequences.¹ In 2014, management staff had already been cut by 81 per cent and 87 per cent of park managers expected further cuts to revenue budgets. The most recent report reveals the continuation of a downward spiral: parks in the North West have suffered from a 20.5 per cent in revenue; 95 per cent of park managers expect further cuts in funding; and the quality of parks is expected to decline further.²

Local authorities on Merseyside, in particular Liverpool City Council and Wirral MBC, have been severely affected by the imposition of austerity programmes since 2010, having lost, to date, almost 60 per cent of their baseline funding from Central Government. But there are important differences in their response to the current crisis, specifically in relation to the future of public parks. Liverpool City Council has publicly confirmed that there will be no meaningful funding for its public parks from the start of the next financial year and its Strategic Green and Open Spaces Review Board is likely to recommend the creation of a complex trust framework (with a central management trust, supported by a network of separate trusts responsible for one or two individual parks), while Wirral MBC will try and ensure that the management of its parks and countryside will be cost neutral by 2020 by prioritizing new income generation and by promoting a greater degree of local community participation, particularly by Friends Groups, in their maintenance and management.³

Important lessons can be learned from the way which Liverpool and Wirral have responded to the current funding crisis facing the UK's parks. Not only are they relevant to the on-going debate about the future of parks and green spaces, but they address directly many of the key issues that the Select Committee is now exploring. In particular, three points need to be emphasized:

¹ Heritage Lottery Fund, *State of UK Public Parks* (June, 2014).

² Heritage Lottery Fund, *State of UK Public Parks* (September, 2016).

³ Liverpool City Council, *Strategic Green and Open Spaces Review Board, Interim Report* (Liverpool, 2015)

- 1. The failure of Local Authorities to understand the economic value of public parks and their environmental, health and social benefits;**
- 2. The need to strengthen the contribution of community groups in maintaining and managing public parks;**
- 3. The strategic role of Local Authorities in managing public parks within a partnership framework reinforced by statutory requirements.**

1. The failure of Local Authorities to understand the economic value of public parks and their environmental, health and social benefits.

Too often local authorities, particularly in the context of the short-term impact of continuing austerity programmes, only focus on the operational costs associated with the maintenance of their public parks. Their wider benefits to local communities are simply ignored.

(i). The Economic Value of Public Parks

Previous research on individual urban parks and city squares have highlighted the economic value of public green space as an important factor that influences inward investment: they are, in general, 'a vital business and marketing tool' and a stimulus to the local housing market. A more detailed report by Cabe Space showed a positive relationship in value associated with residential properties overlooking or close to high quality parks, in line with the 'proximate principle', while a study at Sheffield Hallam University has estimated the value of the local green infrastructure to the city's outdoor economy. Natural Economy Northwest has also produced a valuation toolkit user guide to calculate the overall value of the green infrastructure, whether in terms of investment, land and property values, tourism, recreation and leisure, or biodiversity. Although not enough research has been carried out on the economic value of Liverpool's parks and green spaces, it is very significant. In 2010 the Liverpool Green Infrastructure Strategy, while noting that the green infrastructure was not distributed equally across the city, estimated that it represented 'an £8bn asset' (**£9.1 billion in 2015 prices**) that contributed significantly to the delivery of Liverpool's plans for sustainable growth.⁴ The situation in many other local

⁴ Helen Woolley and Sian Rose (for Cabe Space), *The Value of Public Space How high quality parks and public spaces create economic, social and environmental value* (London, 2004); Cabe Space, *Does Money Grow in Trees* (London, 2005), p.84; John L. Crompton, *The Proximate Principle The Impact of Parks, Open Spaces and Water Features on Residential Property Values and the Property Tax Base* (Ashburn, Virginia, 2004); Sport Industry Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University, *Everything grows outside – including jobs and the economy* (Summer 2014); Natural Economy Northwest, 2

authorities is no different and policies designed primarily to generate budgetary savings will only serve to downgrade the value of civic assets over time.

(ii). The Health Benefits of Public Parks

The supporters of the Public Parks Movement in the early Victorian period were fully aware of the potential health benefits of creating public parks, as a response to rapid urbanization and a noticeable deterioration in working-class living standards. In a contemporary context, there is an extensive literature that highlights the positive impact of public parks on people's health. A robust methodological framework has been developed, based on using health impact assessments, to assess the contribution of parks and green spaces and a number of studies have already been carried out within a Merseyside/North West context.⁵ Whether in relation to the direct benefits resulting from the provision of outdoor gym equipment, the reduction in obesity levels, or the wider significance of parks and green spaces in fostering biodiversity, combating climate change, or reducing urban air pollution, the existing evidence is extremely compelling.⁶ According to the Landscape Trust, greenspaces (including public parks) play a major role in delivering positive health outcomes, while other studies have confirmed their key role in reducing heat and air pollution.⁷

On Merseyside there is considerable research expertise in the field of public health issues, both at Liverpool John Moores University and Liverpool University, and a number of informative studies have already been published on the positive impact of public park provision. The Centre for Public Health (LJMU) produced an authoritative study on the contribution that urban parks could make to public health, with the poorest most likely to benefit in health terms from access to parks, while a detailed analysis of outdoor gym provision in Sefton revealed significant benefits in mental wellbeing and in raising overall levels of physical activity.⁸

Building natural value for sustainable economic development The green infrastructure valuation toolkit user guide (2011); Liverpool City Council, *Liverpool Green Infrastructure Strategy Executive Summary* (Liverpool, 2010), p.5; 'Liverpool City Council calculates green infrastructure worth £8bn', *Horticulture Week*, 10 December 2010.

⁵ Greenspace Scotland, *Health impact assessment of greenspaces – a guide* (June, 2008).

⁶ Woodland Trust, *Urban air quality – how trees can improve air quality* (2012); K. Lachowycz and A. P. Jones, 'Greenspace and obesity: a systematic review of the evidence', *Obesity Reviews*, 2011 (12), e183-e189.

⁷ Landscape Institute, *Public Health and Landscape Creating Healthy Places* (November, 2013); David Suzuki Foundation, *The impact of green space on heat and air pollution in urban communities* (March 2015).

⁸ C. Philip Weaver, Elizabeth Potts, Emma M. Shaw, Clare Perkins, Hannah Smith, Helen Castles, Penny A. Cook and Mark A. Bellis, *Urban Parks and public health: exploiting a resource for health minds and bodies*, Centre for Public Health, Liverpool John Moores University (2007); G. Bate, E. McCoy, R. Murphy, N. Kornyk and D. Sackley, *Evaluating the provision of outdoor gym equipment Uptake and impact in Sefton, Merseyside: Summary Report*, Centre for Public Health, Liverpool John Moores University (October, 2013).

(iii). The Overall Benefits of Public Parks

The range of benefits that parks and green spaces continue to deliver is extensive. For example, an earlier study by Cabe Space highlighted their impact on physical and mental health, the benefits for children and young people, their role in reducing crime and the fear of crime, as well as their contribution to biodiversity and nature. A report by Scottish Natural Heritage also attempted to assess the different types of impact generated by green spaces, whether on people, the economy, health or the environment.⁹ Climate change represents an unprecedented challenge to reduce our carbon footprint and waste, and public parks can play an important role in addressing this issue, in terms of environmental education, increasing biodiversity, new planting, flood reduction and bio-fuel.

It is clear from case studies that parks and green spaces already deliver very substantial benefits. The application by Greenspace Scotland of a social return on investment model for Edinburgh's parks calculated that every £1 spent by the local authority generated at least £12 in tangible benefits. The analysis demonstrated that the city's parks deliver 'multiple benefits and make a significant contribution to making people in Edinburgh feel healthier, wealthier, smarter, safer and greener'. The Land Trust recently reported that every £1 spent on green spaces contributed £30 of benefits towards the health sector alone, with nine out of ten people reporting that green spaces played a positive role in their happiness and wellbeing.

There is every reason to expect that Merseyside's parks and green spaces generate an even greater return, given the underlying socio-economic problems that continue to characterize a significant part of its urban area. On a conservative estimate (using the Edinburgh study as a basis) the minimum value of Liverpool's green infrastructure, based on the provisional funding allocation for 2016-17 (£8,130,640) is at least **£100 million**, well in excess of the annual value of the 'Beatles legacy' estimated at £81.9 million.¹⁰ The annual return on investment by Liverpool City Council is already very substantial and only a few private sector companies would be able to demonstrate such a high degree of profitability.

2. The need to strengthen the contribution of community groups in maintaining and managing public parks.

Partly as a response to the significant and continuing reduction in local authority for public parks, there has been a marked growth in the number of Friends

⁹ Woolley and Rose, *The Value of Public Space*; Scottish Natural Heritage, Commissioned Report 60, *Making the Links: greenspace and quality of life* (2004).

¹⁰ The City of Edinburgh Council, *The Value of City of Edinburgh Council's Parks* (Edinburgh, 2013); Greenspace Scotland, *Greenspace is Good...And We've Proved It: SROI Programme Summary Report* (2011); Liverpool City Council, *Strategic Green and Open Spaces Review Board* (Liverpool 2016), p.35; Institute of Cultural Capital, *The Beatles heritage in Liverpool and its economic and cultural sector impact* (University of Liverpool/Liverpool John Moores University)(February, 2016).

Groups and other community groups which support their local parks. According to the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces and the Heritage Lottery Fund, there are around 5,000 Friends Groups in the UK, but they are distributed unequally across the country and many parks still do not have a Friends Group. In the North West, there are over 2,000 public parks (including gardens and woodlands), but only around 40 per cent are supported by an active Friends Group.

On Merseyside, at least 19 Liverpool parks have their own Friends Groups (with a further 12 having been established to support other urban green spaces), but there are 46 Friends Groups on the Wirral. In both cases, a Friends Forum helps to coordinate and support the work of individual Friends Groups, while seeking to disseminate best practice and to act as a representative body in discussions with the Council. The significant contribution of Friends Groups on the Wirral has been confirmed by recent data. Members of the Friends of Birkenhead Park and Park Roots CiC (its trading arm) have raised over £1m since 2008; in 2015 volunteers contributed 5,185 hours of work in support of the park; within the framework of a project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund over 20,000 pupil visits were undertaken by primary and secondary school; and in 2012 the Edward Kemp Community Gardens & Growing Area was opened on the periphery of the park to promote the benefits of locally-grown food, following a Local Food Grant of £96,000. The Friends of Ashton Park, West Kirby, hold an annual May Fair and run 'The Teashop in the Park' and together with Wirral Council raised £24,000 to renew and update the children's playground, while the Friends of Hoylake and Meols in Bloom have been responsible for all the floral displays since 2006 and have raised funds to restore the Parade Gardens.¹¹

Such examples at a national level could be multiplied many times: they confirm the important role that Friends Groups already play in sustaining public parks and provide an indication as to how local communities can contribute more effectively to their maintenance and development. But the role of the Wirral Friends Groups has been strengthened by their involvement in management and strategic planning through the establishment of the Wirral Parks Steering Group (senior staff from Parks & Countryside and the elected officers and committee members of the Friends Forum) and the Wirral Parks & Countryside Partnership and Performance Board, essentially the equivalent to a client review board that is chaired by a representative of the Friends Forum. As a result, Wirral MBC, despite the impact of budgetary cuts, has adopted key strategies to improve the overall standard of its parks because they are seen as an important element in the Wirral offer for tourism and regeneration. A Parks and Open Space Strategy Action Plan has been adopted; the Wirral Standard is intended to raise quality levels across all public parks; and an Allotment Strategy and a Playing Pitch Strategy have recently been agreed. The emphasis in terms of future policy is on income generation, partnership working (particularly with the private sector and local schools and colleges), and supporting an enhanced role for Friends Groups and other community-based organisations.

In terms of future strategy, the following action points should be prioritized:

¹¹ Linda Foo Guest, 'New park gardens to be opened by mayor', *The Wirral News*, 25 April 2012, p.18.

- **Support community groups to play a more active role in maintaining and managing public parks.**
- **Encourage local authorities and community groups to provide better training facilities for volunteers of all ages in public parks, including corporate volunteers.**
- **Promote the development of regional groups (such as the North West Parks Friends Forum) in order to activate local involvement in public parks and to disseminate best practice.**
- **Sustain the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces in its efforts to coordinate the role of Friends Groups and Friends Forums in supporting local public parks.**
- **Provide guidance to local authorities in order to encourage a better working relationship with all community groups that will help to inform future strategy for public parks.**

3. The Strategic Role of Local Authorities in managing public parks within a partnership framework reinforced by statutory requirements.

The responsibility of local authorities for public parks should not be diluted as a result of their current funding crisis, but consideration must be given to how they can develop more effective partnership working with the private sector and community groups in general. In some cases, it may well be sensible to transfer individual parks to newly created trusts, but widespread privatisation should not be seen as an acceptable response to the impact of austerity programmes. Indeed, there is no guarantee that private trusts established to maintain local parks will ever succeed in the medium or long term. The Parks Agency has already highlighted the inherent risk involved in transferring public parks and open spaces to newly created trusts, without making adequate provision for future income. In most cases, it will simply mean that key elements of a city's green infrastructure will be handed over from one underfunded organisation to another.¹² A more recent report for Historic England has explicitly questioned the feasibility of such a strategy: parks are 'complex and multi-functional landscapes often combining heritage assets with fragile ecosystems'; existing trusts (such as the Milton Keynes Trust) have always been funded from the public purse either through the transfer of revenue streams or commercial property endowment; and more radical funding models are more easily applied to new green space sites, rather than to historic public parks. Within such a context, the role of Local Authorities in managing and developing public parks needs to be strengthened, rather than undermined.¹³

¹² David Lambert, 'Public parks and the Big Society', *The London Gardener* (2010), pp.41-4.

¹³ Katy Layton-Jones (for Historic England), *History of Public Parks Funding and Management* (London, 2016), pp. 62-64.

In terms of future policy, the emphasis should be on the following points:

- **Create a National Public Parks Strategy Group in the Department for Communities and Local Government with the remit to develop and provide cutting edge advice to local authorities on how best to manage their public parks in the future and develop effective partnership working with Clinical Commissioning Groups, Local Nature Partnerships, Natural England etc.**
- **Obtain assent in Parliament for the introduction of legislation that would make the maintenance of public parks by local authorities one of their statutory responsibilities.**
- **Provide financial support for existing organisations, such as Keep Britain Tidy, to strengthen their role in maintaining the quality standards of Britain's parks, including an extension of the highly effective 'Love Parks Week' programme.**
- **Establish a 'national champion' for UK public parks with the involvement of key agencies, including the Heritage Lottery Fund and Historic England. Since the demise of CabeSpace and GreenSpace, there has been no national body that been able to fulfil this important role.**
- **Discuss with HM Treasury the possibility of creating tax concessions that would provide a framework to encourage private sector support for and investment in public parks.**

Conclusion:

With appropriate action, the risk that the state of the country's public parks will once again deteriorate to the same level that was evident in the late-twentieth century can be avoided.

- **Local authorities must continue to play a leadership role which reflects a full understanding of the wide range of benefits that public parks deliver. Indeed, they should have a new statutory duty to manage and develop public parks. As a response to the continuing impact of budgetary cuts, local authorities should be encouraged to develop forward-looking strategies that prioritize partnership working with key stakeholders, local communities and Friends Groups.**
- **In some areas, Friends Groups, other community-based groups, and volunteers already make a significant contribution to the maintenance of public parks, but steps need to be taken to increase the level of civic engagement and improve both operational capacity and skill training.**

- **Structural improvements need to be made to the national framework for securing the future of public parks, particularly through the creation of a National Public Parks Task Force, the creation of a 'national champion', and better resourcing for agencies that already play an important role in raising the quality of public parks.**
- **A proper recognition of the need to safeguard the quality of the UK's urban parks, reinforced by appropriate action by Central Government, as well as at the regional and local level, will help local authorities to increase further the overall value of their parks and open spaces; enable them to deliver key elements of their statutory responsibilities at lower cost; and deliver significant improvements to the overall health and wellbeing of local residents in a cost-effective and sustainable manner. Public parks since their initial creation in the 1840s have been essential to the health and wellbeing of this country. At this juncture, we need to enhance their value, protect their heritage and infrastructure, extend partnership working, and encourage greater community engagement in order to make sure that public parks will continue to deliver their original objectives and provide a means of responding to the challenges of the twenty-first century.**

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