



Briefing 16 - 41    October 2016

## **APSE 'S Response to the Department of Communities and Local Government's Inquiry into the Future Funding of Public Parks**

### **Key issues**

- Within this response APSE has highlighted the value both to the public and the wider natural environment of parks and green spaces, together with the level of use and public support.
- A recent public survey showed that 75% of respondents felt public parks should be a statutory duty for local authorities. At a time when many non-statutory services are under threat, APSE suggests ways to address the parks funding issue without putting extra pressure on non-statutory services.
- APSE acknowledges that there is a need to re-consider the future funding of parks and new management models and will look to offer help and advice to those local authorities which look at such options.
- APSE is clear that Government, both national and local, must accept that parks present a significant opportunity to use their existing assets to save considerable sums for the public purse for generations and should not be allowed to decline, be broken up or disposed of on a current budgetary savings whim.

This briefing contains the full APSE response which is the view of APSE and contains comments from local authority members.

### **Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) Response to Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Inquiry into the Future for Public Parks in the UK. (September 2016)**

APSE is a not-for-profit local government association working with over 300 councils throughout the UK. Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority front line services, hosting a network for frontline service providers in areas such as parks and environmental services, waste and refuse collection,

road and highways, renewable energy, housing and building maintenance, leisure, school meals, cleaning and most recently, environmental health and cemeteries and crematoria. APSE recently provided information to the State of UK Public Parks 2016 produced by the Heritage Lottery Fund and is recognised within the report for its contribution.

Public parks have enjoyed considerable capital investment since the HLF introduced its 'Parks for People' grant scheme in 1996. Up to the present day, over £850million has been invested in regenerating and conserving the UK's parks and greenspaces. However, these investments have been targeted at specific parks and at particular facilities within parks, many of which had begun to deteriorate during the 1970's and 1980's which was the result of a lack of investment. Indeed, during this period, many parks and greenspaces became 'no-go' areas where vandalism and anti-social activity prevented people from accessing these places.

We now find ourselves in a period of national austerity where local authorities are seeing their budgets reduced year on year, with no clear end date in sight. Many would argue that in relation to these reductions it is the non-statutory services which local authorities provide which have largely borne the brunt of these cuts, Parks and green space provision is one such service. With reductions of up to 70% in parks budgets, the future sustainability of these public assets is reaching a tipping point, where the continued lack of investment is causing many parks to begin to enter a spiral of decline which may be difficult to reverse.

It is worth remembering that the history of 'public' parks shows that they were not easily gained. Land was owned by the crown and the only reason the public were allowed access to green spaces was to give people an area where they could spend quality time to prevent social unrest, particularly as more of the population moved away from the countryside into densely populated urban areas, where such space was at a premium. Indeed many parks were established by owners of factories who felt exposure to fresh air and greenery would keep their workforces fit enough to work the long hours needed to maintain their profits.

We now recognise many of these early perceived benefits are now being proven in relation to health benefits, social integration, opportunities for recreation and exercise and general well-being all being internationally recognised as just some of the benefits parks and green spaces provide. Added to these, we now know parks help ameliorate the effects of climate change by reducing urban temperatures, alleviate the effects of flooding and help improve air quality, and still further, from an economic viewpoint, they also act as attractants to regeneration and increase residential housing property prices in the area adjacent to a park.

With such a varied and hugely beneficial list of attributes it seems almost inconceivable that we are discussing the potential demise of such national treasures. Therefore it is not a question of whether such assets are important and worth conserving but rather is there a genuine risk of losing them and if so how do we protect and pass them on to future generations, who in reality will need them even more than current generations, as population densities within urban areas and cities is projected to continue to increase.

With regards to the main questions contained within the Inquiry, APSE can provide the following comments:

- **Who uses parks and open spaces**
- **The contribution of parks to the health and well-being of communities**

The answer to this is not likely to come as a surprise, virtually everyone at some time uses a park or a local green space. Birmingham City Council for example estimates that over 100 million individual visits are made every year in its parks and open spaces, both by local citizens and also visitors to the city, and following a recent survey, Glasgow Council estimates that over 65% of its citizens use parks on a regular basis.

Recent figures from the HLF State of UK Public Parks 2016, reported that over 37 million people use their parks every year and of these 57% visit their park at least once a month or more, this figure rose to 61% in urban areas. It is also worth noting that the frequency of visiting parks is increasing, particularly in urban parks

All age groups use parks and although there may be different reasons for this use, from dog walking to undertaking strenuous exercise, the basic reason for being in green space is the same, in that it allows people to escape from the more harder and hectic landscapes and lifestyles of their everyday existence. Other reasons people visit parks include the fact they are easily accessible and free to use, a rare commodity in today's commercially-driven world.

The value of parks and green spaces to well-being has a long-history of academic research which has conclusively shown, the social interaction, opportunities for leisure and recreation and the ability to re-connect with nature has significant health benefits from improving mental health to reducing the levels of obesity which has become a major issue in sedentary urbanised populations. It has been estimated that the value of green spaces to the National Health Service alone, is in excess of £2.1 billion per annum in reduced health treatment costs. Yet despite all these benefits we still seem to be reducing the proactive health values of parks and green spaces whilst concentrating on the reactive and considerably more expensive value of pills and hospital treatments. Even General Practitioners are now prescribing outdoor activity as a medical treatment rather than a handful of pills.

Parks and greenspaces also have an important role in improving local air quality, providing flood alleviation opportunities, carbon capture, reducing urban heat island effect enhancing and improving biodiversity and providing diversionary activities to reduce anti-social behaviour and promote community cohesion through activities and events. In some parks there are even food growing opportunities.

By recognising the cross-cutting value of parks and green spaces and the untold benefits to human health and well-being, environmental sustainability and economic development it seems perverse that local authorities have been reporting ongoing cuts now in excess of 70% or facing the total loss of parks and greenspace budgets.

It is clear therefore that the value of parks and green spaces to the public at large is immense, and this reliance and usage is increasing at a time when budgets and facilities are under growing threat.

- **The impact of reductions in local authority budgets on parks**

APSE has spoken to a number of its member authorities Parks Managers as to the key impacts of budget reductions. They have identified the key areas where most impact has been felt, which is in relation to staff levels, horticultural skills, reduced maintenance and fewer events. It was also identified that due to the non-statutory nature of parks many Parks Managers feel they are taking a disproportionate share of local authority funding cuts with some parks services seeing up to 70% reductions in budget levels.

It has been estimated that nationally these budget reductions amounts to a loss of over £240 million from local authority parks budgets. Perhaps a more worrying aspect is that in 2010 revenue support grant made up 80% of council budget expenditure (2010) but by 2019/20 this will fall to 5%. It is therefore likely that non-statutory services such as parks and greenspace provision could be lost unless other sources of funding can be found.

With this scenario in mind, it is interesting that there has been the comment that one of the lines of this inquiry that government wants to find out is, is the very existence of parks is under threat? The simple answer to this inquiry is yes. In essence the future for many parks could be less than 5 years unless other funding models can be developed, which is extremely challenging if not highly unlikely in the timescale given. Indeed some local authorities are already reporting that their parks budgets will cease to exist in the next few years.

Already we are seeing local authorities green spaces and parks being sold or being transferred to communities to manage, partly due to reduced budgets, but also because many local authorities are expecting to take on more parks and greenspaces as a result of the planning process, at a time when budgets are reducing.

APSE's State of the Market Report for Parks 2016 shows that parks managers feel local authority budget cuts are falling disproportionately on parks and greenspaces with almost 80% of all managers responding to the survey supporting this view. Therefore faced with reducing budgets local authority parks managers are suffering from serious underfunding and even by divesting themselves of some greenspace this is not helping, as new areas are falling under their responsibility. It should also be noted that although a large number of authorities have sold or undertaken community asset transfers, the actual size of area lost or transferred is very small, as community groups tend to take on small parks or local green space areas. This fact has resulted in large areas in the more recognisable municipal parks seeing significant declines in standards.

APSE'S State of the Market Report on Parks (2016) recorded almost 90% of respondents reporting that reductions in funding has led to the withdrawal of maintenance from land and an increase in unmaintained land in general. Other areas of reduced service provision included reductions in bedding and flower displays (52.8%), reduced greenspace educational activities (42.3%), reductions in grass cutting (40.7%) reduced shrub bed maintenance (38.9%) and finally reduction in ranger numbers (34.8%).

These reductions were reported from across the UK, but as the recent State of UK Public Parks Report 2016 identifies the level of cuts is being felt more in certain areas of the country than others. Wales and the North East in particular are reporting 70% and 62.5% cuts respectively with regards to the percentage of their parks which are declining. It is also worrying that some of the worst social deprivation and health inequalities can be found in these areas, two issues which green space has been identified has having an improvement benefit towards.

The loss or decline in standards in these green spaces is having a detrimental effect in other areas also, notably staff morale, the enthusiasm of volunteers to become involved, public perception and the loss of key facilities in parks such as playgrounds. With all the will in the world it is unlikely that parks will continue the renaissance we have seen since the mid 1990's and many will simply be managing the decline in the standards and assets our much-loved public parks provide.

- **How new and existing parks can best be supported**
- **What additional or alternative funding is available and what scope is there for local authorities to generate revenue from park users.**

There have been many studies and pilot studies carried out with regards to future methods of parks funding and management, many of which have shown promise in the long-term. Indeed there are no shortage of ideas as to how to generate income, in APSE's State of the Market Report on Parks (2016) Parks Managers reported over 30 different income generating activities.

The Rethinking Parks Programme identified ways of changing maintenance regimes, developing different uses for parks buildings, engaging business, public donations etc. but all are still ideas and even at best bringing in relatively small income streams. What concerns APSE is that whilst these ideas are being developed, parks and green spaces are haemorrhaging large amounts of money. Worryingly some of the good work achieved through the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) 'Parks for People' funding, is now becoming a liability, as the significant capital improvements funded by the HLF schemes, are now needing revenue maintenance funding which is shrinking year by year.

Therefore the real problem is that many of these alternative sources of funding are still ideas and proposals and even if implemented, are unlikely to redress the loss of previous and projected funding losses, even the summary of the Learning to Rethink Parks (2016) report by Nesta states, '*Rethinking Parks has shown the **potential** of new approaches to raise funding or cut costs in a way that **help** sustain public parks.*'

APSE is not unaware of the reality that changes will have to be made to the way Parks and greenspaces are funded but there is an even greater concern that these new approaches will not come soon enough or provide the necessary capital and revenue streams in time to protect all the good work that has happened over the past 20 years or indeed prevent some parks and green spaces disappearing altogether.

APSE believes that if Government's aim of improving the natural environment is a genuine one, as set out in its White Paper – 'The Natural Choice', which as part of it aims, declared that as a result of the report's recommendations, collectively we will be the "*first generation to leave the natural environment in a better state than it inherited*", then as part of its Natural Capital agenda, it must ensure that current levels of funding for parks and greenspaces are not continually eroded whilst waiting for new sources of funding to appear or new management models to develop. Indeed it could be argued that there should be greater investment in parks and green spaces for as mentioned previously, it has been estimated that the value of green spaces to the National Health Service alone, is in excess of £2.1 billion in reduced health treatment costs alone. With obesity related illness set to cost the UK £50b per annum by 2050, surely investment in Parks at present would be a worthy approach to prevention rather than picking up the cost of cure later.

The work within 'Rethinking Parks' does have potential to manage parks sustainably, but it needs to be supported by government funding which both helps maintain the current level of parks and makes them a viable asset for future generations.

Perhaps we should consider how HLF funding is spent and rather than investing in improving, or regenerating facilities people are finding difficult to maintain, it could be used to help develop the initiatives already highlighted and tested, so as to allow them to become blueprints for others to follow.

However, one area which needs to be carefully considered is the issue of raising income from park users. There is no point installing new café's and visitors centres if the infrastructure and green spaces around them are badly maintained and in a deteriorating state. People are prepared to pay for events and food and drink, but the area they visit must be of a high enough standard to attract them there in the first instance.

As an example, one APSE member authority stated that staffing reductions, an area where budget cuts have had a significant impact, are having a negative effect on their parks,

*'Reduced staffing levels inevitably result in centre opening (times) being reduced or even closed, reduced staff presence to deal with anti- social behaviour, litter and vandalism and increased "distance" between users and the staff managing sites. Many of these changes can appear small-scale at first but have an insidious affect with longer term results.....Unfortunately as sites become less welcoming, due to vandalism or their unkempt appearance, ... confidence is knocked and users can be put off coming, then as the site has fewer visitors, this can itself dissuade further visitors, creating a vicious circle of decline'*

In relation to charging, APSE's State of the Market Report on Parks (2016), shows that over 87% of Parks Managers questioned, stated free access to parks should be maintained, showing a strong belief that public access and enjoyment must not be threatened with the fear of charging for entry. This does not stop charging for the use of wider facilities and attractions within parks. Whilst there is a recognition that income needs to be raised to supplement budgets there is also a concern that an over reliance on income generation and too much exposure of park users to charges, could have a negative effect on both the experience of park users and their willingness to return.

A further point about income generation and its importance to new management models is such opportunities tend to occur in large parks, whereas a great deal of public usage of green space is in local smaller parks, which may not have as much income generating potential. It is generally recognised that small parks and open spaces are nearest to local communities and are regularly used, particularly by young people, the very generation whose lifestyles need to be changed to prevent poor health in later life. The potential loss of such spaces could break the link of usage of such parks by communities which could have significant impact on social and health benefits. Equally many of these spaces are the only green spaces certain socio-economic groups, who may not be as mobile, have access to.

Therefore, APSE acknowledges that changes will need to be made and has no doubt that individual authorities will have many examples of innovative and workable solutions to help fund their parks and green spaces. However, APSE remains concerned about the time it will take to transition to new models and even when implemented these may not address all the areas covered by parks and green spaces under their control.

We are at a tipping-point in relation to local authority controlled parks and greenspaces. Everyone agrees they are key natural capital assets and that they have multiple benefits ranging from climate change mitigation to considerable public health benefits. They also have major societal impacts way beyond their original role. Yet we continue to cut the funding because they are non-statutory services and therefore easy targets.

A decision needs to be made, do we value our parks and green spaces enough to ensure funding is made available to sustain them? Or do we let them fall into an environmental, economic and social downward spiral, wasting the £850 million plus which has been invested over the past 20 years? Perhaps now is the time to seriously consider whether park services should be considered to be classified as a statutory requirement, if the government is serious about protecting the UK's natural assets and promoting the health and wellbeing of its citizens. By making the service statutory it may not prevent further cuts but at least it may buy enough time for local authorities and its partners and stakeholders to develop the new management models and income generation schemes which could help protect the UK Public parks. The point about becoming a statutory service may seem slightly incongruous, when so many other non-statutory services would have similar arguments as to why they should be protected, however parks, because of their cross-cutting benefits, have many stakeholders within local areas who may be willing to contribute towards the upkeep of parks, in particular:

- the health service who benefits from the health and well-being opportunities parks provide
- the Police and Fire Services benefit from the diversionary activities parks can offer in relation to reducing anti-social behaviour,
- developers and planners, for the benefits parks and greenspaces offer in relation to property valuation, flood alleviation (SuDS) and also the growing recognition of the wider ecosystem services parks and green spaces offer.

Even from an economic viewpoint, as the Olympic Park in London has shown, parks and greenspace are now seen as a key elements to the regeneration agenda of many of the UK's towns and cities.

Many stakeholders benefit from parks and greenspaces, they need to be made aware of what they could lose if parks and greenspaces continue to decline or even disappear. Indeed there are many examples of such organisations contributing to parks already, but they need to be developed on a much more formal basis.

APSE is calling for a recognition of the benefits parks bring in reducing upstream costs in other public services and for funding to be allocated on an invest to save approach to prevention rather cure activities. Government often talks of efficiency, removing upstream costs and prevention not cure, parks present a significant opportunity to use existing assets to save huge sums for the public purse for decades to come if they continue to receive funding at present.

APSE is therefore supporting the drive to look at new funding options and management models, but realistically feels they may not come soon enough or provide the funding

required. Parks are public assets funded by public money and there will always be a need to plug the short fall new ideas or management schemes fail to meet. Local authorities and their partners need to continue to fund these facilities whilst these changes are made.

The value of green space has been recognised since the dawn of time: *“Woe unto them that join house to house, lay field to field till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth (Isiah 5:8)*

Yet despite this knowledge we are in danger of losing nationally recognised assets which have value across society and to the natural capital of a country. Imagine a town or city without its parks and green spaces, a landscape of bricks and tarmac, where the only greenery is where a weed breaks through, now that really would be a legacy for our future generations, but would it be one our generation would want to be remembered for?

APSE would welcome the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the inquiry should this be deemed appropriate. Please contact APSE’s Chief Executive, Paul O’Brien on 01617721810 or on [po'brien@apse.org.uk](mailto:po'brien@apse.org.uk)

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