



Funding for pocket parks

This briefing is provided to all APSE member authorities but will be of particular interest to the environment, parks, grounds maintenance and horticulture sector on a UK wide basis.

Key Issues:

- This APSE briefing outlines the provision of £1.5 million for the creation of 100 pocket parks in England during 2015 – 2016.
- The briefing highlights the criteria for funding application as well as the design ideals and the ability to ensure sustainability of any pocket parks created.
- APSE is always pleased to see increases in the amount of green space and urban parks, and is particularly pleased to see that many of these pocket parks will be developed in areas of high multiple deprivation. However, APSE is concerned that public involvement in parks management albeit on a micro-scale, could lead to larger parks being increasingly managed by communities with limited experience and without the horticultural skills larger urban parks require if they are to thrive as large and well-used community assets.

1. Government funding for Pocket Parks

Pocket Parks first came to public attention in late 1964 when a group called The Park Association of New York City was organised to support the formation of public green spaces from small, unused, overgrown lots in New York City. The aim was to create a number of small green oasis features in a crowded and stressful urban environment which would allow people to escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday city life.

Pocket parks have been a key part of the Mayor of **London's Great Outdoors** – a programme which aims to improve streets, squares, parks, and canal and riverside spaces

across London. These spaces have trees and greenery; they are open to all; they have places to sit and relax and for people to come together; and they aim to contribute to making the city friendlier, greener and more resilient. The Mayor of London has allocated £2million pocket park fund to create 100 parks in 26 London boroughs.

Based on this success, the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), has allocated £1.5 million to create a further 100 pocket parks across England to provide valuable green areas for communities. Again the aim is to transform “scores of unloved spaces” across the country to allow people to socialise, take part in exercise and watch their children play.

The DCLG has adopted the definition of a Pocket Park used by the Mayor of London,

“A Pocket Park is a piece of land of up to 0.4 hectares (although many are around 0.02 hectares, the size of a tennis court) which may already be under grass but which is unused, underdeveloped or derelict.”

The parks can be either formal or natural in character, (possibly a mixture of both), and must be openly accessible for the communities they serve and ideally open to anyone wishing to use them.

The DCLG is targeting action into deprived areas and communities with less access to quality green space with the aim of gaining multiple benefits attributed to parks and greenspace such as health, well-being and community integration. They will therefore give priority weighting to bids for funding from those areas of high deprivation as defined by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (2015).

2. Who can apply?

Funding is being supplied as a grant to community groups with both a capital and revenue element and must be match-funded. In defining a ‘community group’ the following are being identified: a group of people who have come together for a purpose – this might include friends groups, tenants or residents groups, community gardeners associations, town teams, coastal community teams, voluntary and community organisations or even Business Improvement Districts. The group must have a constitution.

Community groups will be expected to have the support of the local authority who will hold the grant on behalf of the community group and distribute money as required. The community group will also be expected to work with a partner such as a local authority or relevant network, body or professional who will provide expertise to help and support the delivery of good quality feature and management of the pocket park.

Community groups will be expected to supply as part of their application for funding, evidence of both local authority and partner support as well as evidence that the land owner is agreeable to the creation of the pocket park and the land can be used as such.

Community groups are expected to contribute towards the cost of creating and managing the pocket park by providing or making a commitment to secure match funding towards the grant awarded. There will be a need to show what match funding has or will be secured, from what sources and by when. DCLG's funding is expected to be used to start delivery and establish the site and its core features and thereafter communities can add further features as they secure funding to do so including covering its long-term maintenance costs. In this way communities can deliver a pocket park that is fit for purpose and of value to the community.

3. What constitutes a Pocket Park?

The site must be no bigger than 0.4 hectares (and can be much smaller) which is unused, undeveloped or derelict, not used to its full potential by the community. Pocket parks will be in urban areas which can include town or city centres.

Communities applying for funding will need to explain how their pocket park project adds to the provision of quality green space within the area.

Particular features that will be looked for in applications include:

- The site must be called a pocket park and be branded as such
- It must be in an urban area of deprivation in England
- It can be a new site or an existing site and all or part of a site.
- It needs to be accessible and available for the community who wish to use it and ideally openly accessible to all

Pocket parks should aim to provide a green open space that offers both habitat opportunities and opportunities for people to connect with nature. As such, schemes that value and make use of existing landscape and natural features will score higher. DCLG are also keen to see the addition of trees to pocket parks, with trees providing many benefits, improving air quality, providing shade for people, and homes, shelter or such as nesting sites for wildlife so they will welcome proposals that provide more trees and/or make the most of those that are already there.

4. Can you deliver and is it value for money?

Within their application, communities will need to describe how their pocket park will be delivered and how they plan to achieve it. This will necessitate:

- Explaining what they will provide in the site with the grant money
- Include a timescale that shows what they will deliver when
- Confirm that they have permission of the owner to develop the site as a pocket park
- Attach a plan of the site now and another that shows what it will look like after the grant is spent

In their application, communities will need to set out their plan and timeline for delivery and confirm that DCLG's money will be spent by the end of March 2016. They will need

show it will deliver value for money by highlighting the benefits they believe can be achieved, including for example detail on how many people are expected to benefit from or have improved access to the space, and show how they have considered the challenges ahead and risk to delivery.

The proposal must be realistic and achievable, logical and well-constructed with the outputs and benefits achievable clearly identified. DCLG will also look for evidence that the challenges and risks to success have been properly considered and are understood.

5. Sustainability

The ability to sustain delivery is important. DCLG funding (£10,000 - £15,000) may simply support the start of work to establish a pocket park, and therefore DCLG will want to hear how communities and their partners plan to continue the work, FROM opening the park and thereafter keeping it open and well managed in the years ahead. In particular, communities will be expected to:

- Achieve the Green Flag Community Award, the free to enter national quality standard for green spaces, within the 2016 or 2017 judging rounds and maintain that for at least 5 years;
- Secure the pocket park for the future by registering it as an Asset of Community Value and under Local Greenspace Designation. They are also encouraged to consider dedicating it for use as a green space for use by the community in the future through schemes such as Field in Trust designation.

In their application, communities will need to clearly outline how they plan to sustain development and delivery of the pocket park beyond the grant period. If their application is successful, they will be expected to provide by 31 March 2016 a detailed sustainability plan that sets out how they plan to sustain the development and ongoing management of the park.

6. Applying for a grant

Communities can find further information on the project and how to apply for a grant at; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pocket-parks-support-for-communities-to-manage-small-green-spaces>.

7. APSE Comment

There are many ways that local people can become involved in the management and maintenance of a pocket park, ranging from practical community activities, health walks, consultation days, community events to attendance at local meetings as well as the planting and maintenance of the green space features themselves, as long as they relate to the types of works they would carry out in their own gardens.

Communities minister Marcus Jones MP has said, *"Parks are the gateway to the great outdoors and can provide a real boost to people's well-being. They are particularly important in town centres, where many don't have their own gardens"*.

Equally many other organisations' are now seeing the benefits of parks and greenspaces, for example in relation to improving human health, addressing the impacts of climate change, reducing flooding and increasing biodiversity levels. Therefore the announcement that funding is being made available for increasing the number of greenspaces should be welcome. However, as mentioned earlier, at a time when local authorities are struggling to maintain existing parks and greenspaces the creation of new ones does seem a little incongruous.

Although the funding is for local communities to apply for, the fact the local authority will hold and distribute the funding, clearly establishes a link or bond of responsibility for the project regardless of mention of communities working with a variety of different partners to develop the parks. By having this role, local authorities will have a further administrative responsibility and clearly looking at examples of community managed pocket parks already established, there does appear to be a significant involvement from local authorities in their management and maintenance.

DCLG mentions their desire to see a natural element to the parks and cites trees and natural play features as well as habitats for wildlife, all of which have ongoing maintenance costs and require a degree of specialist knowledge. Also as these areas will be public spaces, communities will need to consider health and safety and insurance liabilities.

Although not wishing to pour cold water on this initiative, APSE does feel that much of the work relating to this proposal could end up at the door of local authorities, and whilst local authorities would no doubt be supportive of creating new green space facilities for the general public, they are faced with reducing budgets for the green space they maintain themselves, and with continuing cuts forecast, it would be counter-productive and unsustainable if these new facilities were to place additional resource and financial burdens on their already stretched resources. A recent APSE survey showed that nearly all parks managers surveyed, expected to see significant reductions in their financial budgets of up to 50% over the next five years.

Therefore, it is felt before any local authority agrees to support this initiative they need to consider a few basic points:

- Ensure there is a strong and a wide interest base amongst the community group wishing to apply for a grant who will ultimately design, create and manage the pocket park. If there is only one major catalyst amongst the group, then caution should be exercised – what if they leave!
- Think about the site – not any site will do, for example, is it close to housing, as not all the neighbours may appreciate the extra public attention such a site may bring.

- Are the proposals for the site realistic with regards to the space available – remember the site can be no bigger than a tennis court.
- Can the proposed features and infrastructure be managed easily by a community group or their partners – expensive equipment or complicated planting could require considerable levels of maintenance.
- Does the site plan have enough interest to engage the wider community – avoid creating a ‘white elephant’.
- Bear in mind priority is being given to areas of high deprivation and people may not be able to afford ongoing maintenance costs and could further become disenchanted if vandalism becomes an issue. Speak to support agencies about monitoring the site and its use.
- Is there a realistic plan for long term maintenance, are local businesses or sponsors supportive and can that support be guaranteed long-term?
- Does the community group have plans to pursue consistent engagement in order to avoid the pocket park becoming neglected, as it is likely that even if land ownership did not rest with the local authority, there would be an expectation amongst the wider community that ‘the council’ would take over the park.
- Make sure the community has on-going communication with the wider community who will use the park in order to ensure their interest is maintained, and wherever possible they have an opportunity to be involved in the project.

As with any new development, there will be challenges and problems, but if developed correctly and everyone is committed and engaged, then in the long-term such projects will bring benefits to local communities where green space is at a premium. The only proviso is that such projects do not become a further strain on already scarce local authority green space services which themselves are having to make cuts and efficiencies to maintain existing parks and greenspaces.

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