



Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Public Parks, HC 45 Monday 24 October 2016

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Watch the session

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Helen Hayes; Kevin Hollinrake; Julian Knight; David Mackintosh; Mr Mark Prisk; Mary Robinson; Alison Thewliss

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Examination of Witnesses

Robert Thompson, Charlotte Woodworth, Imogen Taylor, Ceri Love, and Baxter McLewin-Freund, 38 Degrees.

Chair: Good afternoon, everyone. We start our first session in our inquiry into public parks. I welcome everyone this afternoon, particularly those who have come to give evidence to us. To begin with, Members of the Committee will put on record any interests they have that might be relevant to the inquiry. I am a Vice President of the Local Government Association.

David Mackintosh: I am a Northamptonshire County Councillor.

Helen Hayes: I employ a Councillor in my staff team.

Q1 **Chair:** That is our interests, which are properly on the record now. I have had the opportunity to meet you all briefly when you presented me with the petition, but for the sake of our Committee records, could you go down the table and say who you are and where you are from?

Robert Thompson: Yes; I am Robert Thompson. I live in Lewisham and the main reason I am here is that I am a committee member of a local parks Friends group.

Charlotte Woodworth: I am Charlotte Woodworth; I am a Campaigns Director at 38 Degrees, and I live in London

Imogen Taylor: I am Imogen Taylor. I live in Derby and I use the parks all the time.

Ceri Love: I am Ceri Love. I live in Bristol, and I use the parks all the time too.

Q2 **Chair:** I suppose an obvious, simple opening question, given the nature of the petition that you are presenting to the Committee, is why you think there should be a statutory duty on local authorities to protect and look after parks.

Charlotte Woodworth: First of all, I would like to thank you very much for inviting us to appear today. We are very pleased and delighted to come and speak with you. The people you see before you on the panel represent some 330,000 38 Degrees members from around the country, a diverse set of people who have come together to champion our local parks and green spaces. Our submission consists of a petition signed by more than 250,000 people calling on this Committee to recommend, as you said, that a statutory duty is created. We have also included the results of a survey, filled in by some 156,000 people, mirroring almost exactly the Committee's own questionnaire, seeking to give you the kind of evidence that we know you were looking for.

Our message is clear: parks hold a very special place in the nation's hearts. To give you a flavour of what our members think, and why we believe a statutory duty is what will make the difference, some 150,000 people told us that they use their parks every day or once or twice per week. They felt that their parks and local green spaces had a very positive impact on their health and wellbeing. A similar amount cited the impact that it had on their local communities.

Alongside some of the things that you might expect to see mentioned about why parks are important, be it fresh air, a place to exercise the dogs or somewhere to take the kids, we also heard a lot from people who felt that parks were essential for their mental wellbeing, and one of the things that was raised fairly frequently was the impact of losing parks on other public spending budgets. People felt, "If I did not have access to my park, I would probably end up costing the NHS more."

I am going to hand over to some of my fellow members from 38 Degrees to answer your question around why parks matter to us.

Imogen Taylor: I live on my own, and sometimes I do not know if I will see anyone all day, but I go to the park most days, and I generally get chatting with people. One thing that I particularly like doing is taking my two young dogs there, and in some ways it is quite a community-building thing, because I live in Normanton, Derby, where there are a lot of difficult communities. There are English people like me, there are Asians, and there are East Europeans. Some of the other community groups do not really like dogs, but it is quite positive that I will have my dogs running around, and whenever they are heading for the other people who might be scared, I call them off. That lets them see that we can co-exist:

the people who do like dogs and the people who do not like dogs can quite happily be in the same community.

Last year, one time, I took some balls to throw for my dogs, and I ended up sitting on the grass while some some East European boys threw the balls for my dogs. That was quite a positive thing. We also have an outdoor gym in the park, which lots of people from different communities use. It is the sort of area where we probably would not be going to the gym; it is quite a poor area.

Ceri Love: The reason I am here is to say that I live in a densely populated, multicultural city, a city of sanctuary, and we are known not only for our city of sanctuary status, but because we have very high levels of air pollution. We have major traffic problems in Bristol, so parks become the lungs of the city. They are a corridor for wildlife, and it is great getting people—as Imogen said—from all different cultures looking at nature and getting nearer and closer to it. It makes them feel more responsible and part of that, as well as part of the community.

The other thing for me particularly is that I work with refugee women, and for them and me having good mental and physical health is essential, which we get from going to our parks and communing with nature. For me particularly, because I use a wheelchair, there are safe, smooth paths for my wheelchair, so I can get close to nature and I can go by myself, which is one of the few times that I can go solo with my electric wheelchair. When I lived in the countryside, I could not get close to nature, because the paths that you take you off on are too rugged.

Robert Thompson: I would second everything that has been said already. From my particular perspective as a committee member of a local Friends group, I would add that over the last 10 years we have worked to encourage the widest possible legitimate use of the park. We have done this by encouraging people into it, and thereby discouraging people doing antisocial things because they think nobody will notice. We have been able to make the park look a lot more cared for by gardening the more formal areas, litter picking, collecting dog waste, removing graffiti and so on.

Meanwhile, hard developments supported by the Friends groups, such as playgrounds, outdoor gyms and so on, have also done a great deal to encourage the proper use of the park. It has become a very safe place, we feel, where people are happy for their children to go and play. This would not have been the case 10 years ago. We are concerned that the transformation of the local park into something of a community hub could be reversed if financial pressures lead to arrears of maintenance and the closure of some of the facilities, or to a reduction in the currently very good support we receive from Greenwich Council's parks department.

For that reason, I would urge this Committee to do all it can to ensure the future maintenance of parks as public assets and from public funds, and to recommend that parks be made a statutory responsibility for local authorities.

Q3 **Chair:** I was going to ask somebody else to join us. He was not scheduled, but he presented me with a petition a few moments ago. His name is Baxter, is it not, and he comes from Brixton. Would you mind telling us what you think? The group of people who use parks probably more than anybody are young people like yourself. Tell us what you think about your parks and why they are so important.

Baxter McLewin-Freund: Parks are important to me because every Friday my mother, my little brother, sometimes my dad, and I all go to the park, and we spend three, four, maybe even five hours just playing and talking with our friends. I think I have over 20 friends who I just don't see every day, because we go to different schools. Parks are the main reason we are friends, because we only see each other there.

Another big thing is that, while I am 10 now, I have had nine birthdays in the park, probably in the same place. It has just become practically a part of me. If I didn't have parks I don't know what I would do. I honestly think I would have to go outside of Lambeth to get some fresh air—maybe even outside of London—because I think that parks are the best way that I can be close to nature and to everything that I like in my life—maybe not everything I like in my life, but parks are the best way to connect with everything that is outside and outdoorsy.

Q4 **Chair:** That is smashing; thank you very much for that. You have spoken on behalf of a lot of children there, saying that to the Committee. Thank you very much. Just coming back to focus on the statutory issue, why do you think the statutory duty will make a difference? We know everybody thinks that parks are important, and we hear that message very clearly. Why will a statutory duty make a difference?

Charlotte Woodworth: At present our members are persuaded that this is the best way to ensure that parks are looked after now, and in generations to come. We know that you will be hearing from a number of different other experts today, who will be talking about the many different innovative ways that we can preserve parks now and into the future. There are different funding models that innovative local councils are considering. The bottom line at this point is that when we have talked to our members, they feel the statutory measure is the right way to look after our parks.

Robert Thompson: We are aware of the increasing proportion of council budgets that is being spent on statutory services. Of course, we fully understand the importance of them, and that is why they are statutory. Obviously, the less is left over for any council to deal with something that is not a legal obligation, the less they will be able to spend; it is as simple as that. It is one thing for voluntary groups such as ours to provide time, a certain amount of relatively unskilled effort, and even a certain amount of money in support of local government. Any idea that it could go

further than that, with something of the complexity and responsibility of a public park, we think is just out of the question.

I would also add that we feel that the contribution of parks in, for example, giving young people somewhere safe to play, encouraging people's exercise and mental health and so on, are of such overwhelming importance that they contribute to things that are already statutory responsibilities, and therefore help to reduce the amount that needs to be spent in that way.

Ceri Love: I would second that. I am a retired social worker, and certainly where people are able to get out of their flats to a park, it reduces the amount of input and support that we used to have to provide to those people. It is good for all our mental health, and exercise-wise, as well. We are facing an epidemic of obesity; one easy way is to keep the parks open.

Imogen Taylor: My mother, who lives in Sheffield, goes most weeks with a group of older people. They are meeting each other—probably some of them live on their own—but they are also taking exercise. Once you reach a certain age, sometimes people do not take exercise, but that is what they do, and it is in a public park.

Q5 **Mr Prisk:** If I may, I wanted to tease out this detail. The petition specifically talks about recommendations being as strong as possible to protect parks. Obviously statutory duties for local authorities are one thing that we are going to look at, and a very important element, but there are other models with which, as constituency members, we are all familiar. They are community-owned or community-managed trusts, which is a slightly different model. Is the petition ruling that out, or just saying, "We think statutory duties are important, but we are open-minded to other models as well"?

Charlotte Woodworth: In our petition and our wider campaign, the main message is that we want to see the strongest possible recommendations emerge from this Committee. At this moment in time, our members have very much rallied around a statutory duty being the way to do that. Should this Committee, through your process of research and evidence-gathering, come up with something alternative that you felt did a similar job and would honour the desire of our members, I would be happy to take that to them and see what they had to say, and say to them, "The Committee has recommended a slightly alternative approach." The bottom line is that we want to make sure that parks do not fall through the cracks, and a statutory duty seems to be something that a number of experts have recommended. I know you will be hearing from a number of other people today who are talking about it, and at this juncture it is where our members are at. As I say, however, we would be prepared to consider other options and talk further with them around it.

Chair: Thank you all very much indeed for coming to talk to the very considerable petition that you have presented to the Committee. We will obviously give very careful consideration to that as part of our deliberations during the course of this inquiry. Thank you very much.

Examination of Witnesses

Sue Ireland, Vice Chair, The Parks Alliance, Peter Neal, Author of "State of UK Public Parks 2016", Ellie Robinson, Assistant Director of External Affairs, National Trust, and Drew Bennellick, Head of Landscape and Natural Heritage UK, Heritage Lottery Fund.

Q6 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to our second panel today. Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us. Can I ask you just to begin by going down the table, saying who you are and the organisation you represent?

Peter Neal: I am Peter Neal. I am an independent landscape consultant, but I am also the author of the "State of UK Public Parks" in 2014 and 2016, published by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Sue Ireland: Good afternoon. My name is Sue Ireland. I am here as the Vice Chair of The Parks Alliance. I am also Chair of Parks for London, and I am Director of Open Spaces for the City of London Corporation.

Drew Bennellick: Hello. I am Drew Bennellick, and I am Head of Landscape and Natural Heritage at the Heritage Lottery Fund. I am a landscape architect by background, and have responsibility for our Parks for People investment programme.

Ellie Robinson: Hello, I am Ellie Robinson. I am Assistant Director of External Affairs at the National Trust.

Chair: Thank you for coming, and as I say, we have a range of subjects that we want to go through with you today. There are four of you on the panel, so if you do agree with what someone said, then saying that you agree is absolutely fine, rather than repeating it at length.

Q7 **David Mackintosh:** Why do you think parks are so important to people?

Drew Bennellick: From the Heritage Lottery Fund, we have been investing in parks since 1996. It is one of our longest investment programmes. We have invested over £850 million of public lottery players' money. We were concerned back in 2014 that people needed to understand more about how people value parks, and we ran a report, which we have recently re-run. Hopefully you should have copies, but if

not, we can provide copies of our latest piece of research, which was produced with a team led by Peter.

That report goes into immense detail about the value that people place on parks. 57% of people are using parks at least once per month, if not more often. They are incredibly important, as you have just heard, for children and for black and ethnic minority communities. There is a huge volume of evidence now published about the health and wellbeing benefits, and the impacts of parks on reducing urban temperatures and on absorbing water. They have this vast array of values. It is good to say that since the last inquiry we now have a vast body of evidence, published by some academics and very well-known sources, that show the immense value of parks to people.

Peter Neal: I will just add to that that the "State of UK Public Parks" undertook two public opinion surveys, one in 2014 and one in 2016. Those indicate that the use of parks is increasing. There was a rise in terms of the number of people using parks, but also particular groups, such as children and young people. That trend has been identified in all sorts of other research, such as that undertaken by Natural England and other public space organisations. Not only do they have multiple benefits, but the use of parks across the country is increasing

Sue Ireland: I would agree with that in terms of what Drew described. If you were to sum it up from the Parks Alliance perspective, it is about quality of life, and all that that means for people. The challenge for us as a sector is that we have been trying to resolve these issues ourselves; we as a sector recognise that it is not getting any better, and we need help. We welcome this opportunity.

Ellie Robinson: I agree.

Q8 **David Mackintosh:** Looking at statutory duty, one of the issues there is about economic value. I wonder if you have any ideas about how the economic value of parks can be measured.

Ellie Robinson: We had the same question as you, and just today we have published a piece of research: we found that there is reams and reams of fantastic research, but the question is how you distil that and make sense of it for a single place. Vivid Economics have done some work for us; they have used their natural capital accounting methodology, recommended by the Government's Natural Capital Committee. The research surprised us. It was looking at Sheffield's very large green-space estate, and it demonstrated clearly, looking at the whole economic value, that the asset to the city was worth £1.2 billion, not the liability of £16 million that exists on the current balance sheet. For every pound of public money spent, there is £34 of benefits received to society. We have given you a copy of the summary document, but what was interesting for us is that it clarified that huge amounts of benefit sit off the balance sheet and are not accounted for.

It makes a very clear case not to cut services any more, because the public purse would get hit by a greater sense of costs than the pound saved on parks. This is useful; it is a first prototype account, and we are about to repeat the exercise for London. We will try to fast-track that as much as we can to share any learning with you. We have used cautious estimates in all of that. We have not included all the things that we could have included. One of the striking things is that 60% of the benefits accrued to health. I think that we can share further information if you are interested to see exactly how it was come up with. The methodology is in the public domain.

Peter Neal: It is interesting. We are becoming a lot more sophisticated in how we can measure the value of benefits that parks offer—particularly economic, but also social and environmental. In addition to the useful work that the National Trust has led for Sheffield, it is interesting to see other techniques, such as the Green Infrastructure Valuation Toolkit that was developed about five years ago, through the Natural Economy Northwest. There is the natural capital accounting that has been discussed, but also studies on the social return of investment.

One example is Edinburgh. Edinburgh looked at the social return on investment they received from their parks. On average it was about £12 for every £1 invested, increasing to about £17 for every £1 that was invested for their premier central parks. It is interesting, and part of the challenge of understanding the value is then to be able to capture that value, monetarise it, and then use some of that value for maintaining and supporting our parks.

Sue Ireland: That rather neatly leads me on to talk a little bit about the need for data capture, because there is no useful data that you can use across the sector. There are things like the Green Flag awards, but only 6% of parks achieve Green Flag awards, and there is no measure of quality. When you talk to members in London, as I have done recently, they are saying, "Please describe what a good park. What does it look like?" People have specification, but there is no easy comparator that we can use to demonstrate other than Green Flag, which is clearly not managing to cover sufficiently what is needed.

Drew Bennellick: The only other thing I was going to add was the value of equity in providing quality parks. We did some research a couple of years ago of 135 projects. 50% of the funding for those projects was going to the 20% most deprived communities. The ability of parks to make a difference for people who need those green spaces is absolutely critical going forwards. For the National Lottery, where we are obviously investing money raised through National Lottery players, it is critical to us and 80% of our funding for parks has gone to areas outside the capital, which I think, again, is really important.

Q9 **Chair:** In terms of economic measure, has anyone done an analysis to say what the costs would be if they were not there? Is that another way of measuring the economic value?

Ellie Robinson: It is. We did not cover that, but what we were interested to do in Sheffield was to then follow the pound and try to trace the pound back: for £1 cut, where does the cost go in terms of wider public services? It is begging the question about whole place budgets for public spending, so that we are looking at overall net impact on a place. Clearly that is something that is a live conversation within Government at the minute. The account was helpful, and it makes the case for investing in growing benefits for parks, but I think your question is an important one, and something we would also be keen to have a look at.

Q10 **Mr Prisk:** Can I just turn from value to costs and funding? Clearly we are aware of the general pressure on budgets, and the implications for parks, but I wonder if you could drill down a little bit on more specific things. What does it mean in terms of accessibility, facilities and the way in which parks are being maintained? We can all say that the pressure on the budget means that things are not as good, but it helps us to understand some of the characteristics of those squeezes. Perhaps starting with Sue Ireland, if I may, what impact do you think this has had on parks themselves?

Sue Ireland: You heard me talk about quality. It is about lowering standards. Grass is being cut less frequently. In some cases that can be fine, because you can end up with meadow grassland, which may work, but often it leads to the grass being cut every six or eight weeks. Within that you then get litter collection, dog faeces and other unmentionables, which of course are very difficult to collect when you do cut the grass, because they get all chopped up. You end up with a site that looks very unpleasant and not attractive.

That is just one example: another is litter, generally speaking, not being picked up on a regular basis, or graffiti. Things just are not responded to so quickly. One of the things that I have always been very hot on in managing parks is the importance of clearing graffiti fairly quickly. If you leave it, it grows very rapidly. It is this slow reaction and response.

Another one, which is very obvious to anybody who has any gardening interests, is weeds. Just look at the borders and the growth of weeds in amongst all the borders. I have certainly walked through sites in London where I can show you parks that now have weeds, which are then themselves re-seeding. Of course, then the re-seeding of the weeds means more plants for the future are the wrong sorts of plants. It is things like that; it is a gradual thing, because if you are managing landscapes, they are there for the long term, so you can put those things right. What we are doing at the moment is becoming much more reactive in the way in which we manage.

Drew Bennellick: When the lottery started investing in parks, about 20 years ago, part of the reason for that was the state of many of our public parks. An assessment was done in 2001. From the years of previous

underinvestment, one of the problems was either the loss of quality infrastructure or the loss of features. During the course of our 20 years, a large amount of the capital we have invested has been repairing drainage, paths and fences. We have funded over 100 bandstands, either to repair them or to recreate them where they were a focus in a park.

The danger is that, as budgets get cut, cutting the grass and picking up litter is something that may still happen, but it is those longer term maintenance costs that are just neglected. The Heritage Lottery Fund has an officer who visits the projects that we have funded in relation to public parks, just to track what is happening. He has looked at over 220 so far. Those projects are all holding up well, but what we are noticing is that it is the long-term, costly infrastructure jobs that are not happening.

The other impact is on skills. We are noticing, and our report again shows, the shift that a priority now for local authorities is to find park staff with commercial sponsorship, income generation or volunteer management-type skills. That is probably at the expense of ecology, landscape design and horticulture skills, which is obviously a huge worry given the things that Sue has just been saying.

Q11 Mr Prisk: I think in your written evidence there was a reference to the fact that the money is being focused, where it exists, on to the principal parks. Is that right?

Drew Bennellick: HLF never intended to invest in all 27,000 parks. That was never going to happen, so we have invested in about 800. I think what is happening is as a result of our protecting our public investment, or the lottery players' investment, where we have made sure that we have contracts and management lines in place, and we do inspections. The result is that in some cases maintenance is sucked towards those principal sites, but the local spaces are equally as important. That is why HLF is here, to say that it is all parks that are important: not just the ones that we have invested in, but all the parks that we feature in "State of UK Public Parks".

Sue Ireland: The two-tier approach is not just to do with the lottery. Even if it is sites where there is no lottery, the Green Flag approach also tends to allow certain sites to have their focus on resources. The local green spaces are the ones that are most important in terms of community.

Peter Neal: The issue of inequality across a district, town or city is also being played out with the data from "State of UK Public Parks" across the English regions. You are seeing the Midlands and the northern regions being impacted more, increasingly, with the level of revenue cuts than other parts of the country. Therefore, one would look at the potential of the change and the influence on the fabric of parks becoming greater, possibly, in those parts of the country.

Some of those great northern cities are also our great Victorian industrial cities, with a wealth of great historic parks, and I think the concern in the longer term is that those great cultural assets are at increasing risk.

Q12 Mr Prisk: Can I just turn the question around, in a sense? If that is where we are coming from, then where do we go from here? We have seen a large range of different forms of models for supporting specific areas, whether it is business improvement districts or whatever, elsewhere. The question is how, in future, parks should be funded. Is there a better model? Never mind how much, but is there a different model that could be applied that might provide longer-term security than relying on three or four-year budgets in local authorities?

Drew Bennellick: Shall I lead into this one? I am happy if Ellie picks up. Again, from the Heritage Lottery point of view, we were aware about three years ago that there would be problems with funding parks in the future, so we initiated a project called Rethinking Parks. It was a £1.3 million programme, a challenge fund, if you like, to try to find some new examples, ways, or models of financing public parks. Those 11 projects ran for 18 months. We think five or six of them have some potential, but it became very clear to us in that project that there is no silver bullet. There is no other solution, and the way forward is probably what we call a blended finance model, of parks pulling money together from an array of different solutions.

Solutions will be very site-specific and very city-specific or park-district-specific. Those 11 models tested things like parks improvement districts and foundations, and changing the way sites are managed. We have tried all of those, and we are keen to try to push that work forward over the next year or two. One of the models that we looked at was the project we supported in Sheffield with the National Trust. Although our programme only ran for an 18-month period, it was a very interesting idea, which does have very good potential and has only just recently finished. While our project finished in December, the National Trust one has literally just finished, and that is one that hopefully Ellie can tell you more about.

Ellie Robinson: What we have been doing for the past two years started in Sheffield, as a prototyping approach. We needed a real place, but our search was: where are all the income and investment opportunities for parks and all green spaces, including the incidental green spaces where people are living? That has thrown up a whole wealth of opportunities out there. There are lots of opportunities, but, as Peter said earlier, the challenge is, if you are a beneficiary of parks, how do you capture that benefit and turn it into an investment or an income stream?

That work has evolved and matured, and we are now looking at different blends from the public, private and voluntary sector, trying to find different ways of capturing that investment. I suppose some of the key

things that we have learned from that is that a coherent set of green spaces across a city is more valuable than it being fragmented. It allows you to bring in institutional investors who value that whole infrastructure, if you like, particularly people like health or water companies, universities or people in transport, who can see it functioning to support the economic and social success of this city or place as a whole.

One of the critical issues is to be able to capture that investment and ringfence it for parks. That is the thing we have been struggling with, and we have ended up designing an institutional setup to maximise that opportunity of blended finance. It is a parks trust: a charitable trust with a social enterprise subsidiary. We did not start there, but that is where we have ended up. It is a model that you would recognise in other areas of cultural life: in sport, leisure, museums, libraries, etc. It is not a new model, but applying it to parks across a large place is a challenge, but one we think is possible.

Peter Neal: It is interesting: the 1999 Select Committee asked the very same question, and we are now, 15 or 16 years on, asking the same question. Public parks are a public benefit providing public service, so there must in many ways be a logic of public funding for that. The challenge is to complement and supplement that funding to add value. I agree with the other points, but will just add two particular observations. One is that public investment programmes often look at capital investment and fail to look at the revenue. That is from pocket parks to Olympic parks. We must look at the long-term maintenance and cost of these big infrastructure projects—or small, if they are pocket parks—and how they will be cared for in the future. Looking at the relationship between capital and revenue has to be central.

Also, the relationship with property value is interesting. When you look abroad to the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, the Chicago Park District, or Parks Victoria, they are funded through a property tax. It is a levy on local residents. For Parks Victoria they have a park charge, which is calculated at about £50 per head on average for residents in that area in Australia. The relationship between parks and property and land value is important, because we put a lot of public investment into the value of parks for private gain, almost.

The challenge is to try to tease back out that private gain back into private benefit. While I do not know these in detail, the exploration in the States of tax increment financing, real estate transfer tax, payment in lieu of tax, business, neighbourhood and park improvement districts is a way to look at the relationship between the land and property values that surround parks, to try to capture and return that to the benefit of parks. Property and land value is an incredibly important part of the challenge.

Sue Ireland: To add to that, there are examples of that even in London. Wimbledon and Putney Commons operate in a similar way to that. The challenge is about scale; these things only work at a significant scale. I would also add that the City of London perhaps is exceptional in that

philanthropy has played a very big part. We have more to learn from the States about that, perhaps. The other issue to think about is business rates, because when we went to meet Andrew Jones MP when he was Minister for Parks, as the Parks Alliance, he was suggesting that business rates would be a solution.

Our concern, however, is that there will be so many concerns on business rates that we are not convinced that that may be appropriate. Parks for London have also suggested that perhaps sugar and salt taxes might be worth thinking about from a health perspective. Those are some other ideas for you.

Q13 Julian Knight: Just to follow up, I am very interested in what you were saying, Peter. Talking about funding solutions that could involve potentially sensitive property development around parks, I will give you an example. In Shirley, in my constituency, the park there effectively gave away 4% of its total mass and has been able to invest an awful lot in the infrastructure of the park. It now has great gyms, outdoor gyms, and by all sorts of measurements has a higher footfall as a result of being able to upgrade facilities for locals. I just wondered what your thoughts are in terms of sensitive property development around the margins, if you like, of park spaces.

Peter Neal: I will start by saying that was a historical model: that was at the heart of the Victorian park movement in many ways, as cities grew. The speculation and opportunity to relate development to park-making is well tried and tested, from Regent's Park onwards. The challenge is that the provision of parks and the quantum of open space have to be worked out very carefully in terms of planning. The quality and quantity of public space has to be defined as to whether there is capacity to reduce some of that park stock for development, and that has to be discussed and debated at the local level.

Sue Ireland: I would just like to add a little bit to that, because it is a really interesting initiative, and quite a few authorities are doing it. At the moment it is very short-term. They are doing it just to help themselves carry on for the next three or four years. If one could develop some model whereby there was sufficient arrangement in such a way that you are investing in the long term—rather like some of the trusts that we were talking about had a property portfolio that is ringfenced, and that funding helps to fund and support. This, again, is why I point out the issue of scale.

Ellie Robinson: I agree with what Sue was saying. This needs to be done at a local level, and it must be a conversation including the citizens of that place, so that the benefits of that development are locked in long-term and they can see a net gain in the quality and security of their parks. When we have been looking at this, if the capital from some of that housing goes into an endowment that protects the parks and the

quality, and it improves what local residents and citizens have access to, then it can be worth doing.

Julian Knight: So a park sovereign wealth fund.

Ellie Robinson: Looking at some of the examples of the US again, it is not the only solution. It is about where the other sources of long term capital are. If you have a combination of endowment and enterprise you can weather all sorts of storms—economic, social and political. We need to be looking at another 50 to 100 years for the next suite of solutions coming through, so that we are not coming back to it again in another few years.

Drew Bennellick: From the HLF's point of view, I cannot think of any cases at the moment in which the matched funding we require for our projects has come from housing development or sale of land. We would very much see it as a local issue to be discussed locally. I am not sure if we would express an opinion.

Q14 **Chair:** Ellie Robinson, we have had some evidence from you already. Could you make sure we have as much as possible about the alternative funding model you have been developing? It would be helpful if the Committee could have that.

Ellie Robinson: Absolutely. If we gave you some scenarios about how it might pan out in different sorts of local authorities, that would probably help. We will definitely do that.

Chair: That would be very useful.

Ellie Robinson: I do not want to take up too much time here, but in essence we have been looking at what the other sources of financing are from across the public, voluntary and private sectors. We have been having conversations with those investors in cities about what their grounds would be for investment. We have ended up, as I said earlier, coming up with a parks trust social enterprise model, and we are now talking to several cities about putting this into practice. If you are innovating and doing something for the first time, it is incredibly difficult, especially in the current environment, so that idea of pathfinding—

Chair: If we could have something in writing on that, just to expand it for the Committee, that would be helpful.

Ellie Robinson: Yes, absolutely, and to tell you where the sources of money were.

Q15 **Helen Hayes:** We have a situation where the management of parks is quite often complicated, the funding situation is very challenging, and yet the benefits accrue across many different areas of both the public sector and community life, as well as for individuals. In that context, do you think there is currently sufficient leadership and co-ordination in the parks sector? Locally, have they thought strategically enough? Nationally, is there a

sufficient voice and lobby for parks that pulls together all the evidence and is able to make recommendations?

Sue Ireland: Parks Alliance obviously feels there is not, which is why we only formed three years ago, because of that recognition across the sector. We started with a Minister for Parks, and you will see in our evidence that it took us some time to actually ascertain who the Minister for Parks is. If you look at what is provided nationally, there is very little; it is very silent. If you go to the website for the Department, there is nothing about parks. All you find is a link directly to the local authority. This is because of the problem of not having data and evidence, so there is nobody sitting there thinking about proper strategy. Really, it needs to start from the top and we need some proper planning and strategy. As you meet local authorities, and I am sure you will be meeting some, the challenge is to find out how that is working at their level, and how many of them are managing to develop green space strategies. It is very difficult if you do not have the evidence.

Ellie Robinson: We ran a conference last week for about 80 parks leaders from different local authorities. Part of the reason was to share the learning from a parks trust model for the last two years, but also it was in recognition that there is nothing to bring the sector together at the moment. We know from their asks of us for help that they are all reinventing wheels: spending local taxpayer's money answering the same legal or tax questions, or areas of scope for their green space strategies. There is a desperate need to be able to provide a shared platform where they can share best practice, and you can innovate once and share.

Equally, there is no policy innovation going on at the moment. There is no CABI Space or green space voluntary sector body, so it does make life very hard for local authorities, especially as their staff resources have reduced. How do they do really good green space strategy? What we are finding is that there are some fantastic examples out there, but nobody knows about them. The big call from the conference last week, from all the delegates, was that there is huge ambition for change. They are really up for it. "Bold" and "brave" were the two words being discussed the whole day, but they need some help to transition from where they are to where they could be, and make the most of those opportunities for their place, and, critically, to engage people in that transition.

That was a clear call on us to help them work out what that is, but also to ask central Government to enable and do the stuff that only central Government can do. We are talking about public service reform, and Government are experts at that. We are trying to help, but we are not experts in that space, that is for sure.

Drew Bennellick: Can I just echo everything that Ellie said? I get a phone call about once a week from somebody saying, "We are based in Plymouth and are working on such-and-such a project. We are really keen to find out what you know about X, Y and Z." Also, I spoke to a

journalist last week, and I said that there is a real problem in that the parks community do not communicate well and are not sharing knowledge and experience, and he said, "Oh, I do not know; I have been talking to projects down in Bristol and Burnley and Sheffield, and they all seem to be talking to one another." I said, "They are the 11 Rethinking Parks projects that are working as a cohort together and sharing their ideas." It is really clear.

We would find it very helpful if there was some kind of centre of excellence where everything can be brought together. I think you have quite a lot of evidence from some really creative, new organisations that have, if you like, come to the world of parks. There are some brilliant ideas flying around, but all of that needs to be brought together and shared in a way that CABI Space used to do.

One thing I wanted to add is that CABI Space used to run a thing called a leaders' programme, which happened once per year, which was a three-day event for up to 100 park managers who would come together. During the three days they would learn everything from marketing and branding to horticulture to managing historic structures—the whole gamut of everything a park manager needs to do. We miss the fact that that is not happening; that is something we would love to see happen again.

Peter Neal: There is a hierarchy in the leadership as well. Along with this national centre of excellence—and the Center for City Park Excellence in the United States is a great example as well—there are the regional networks. Some are still managing to go, but have very limited resources. We can take Parks for London, the West Midlands Parks Forum, Green Space Scotland, which provide very useful regional hubs where you can share best practice and do benchmarking and networking. The city regions are also a valuable scale to operate. Take, for example, the Liverpool city region—six local authorities. There is the opportunity for economies of scale to work more collaboratively across small, independent local authority boundaries to share resources and expertise, but also share the risk of innovation so that that is borne across a city region rather than by individual local authorities. The scale is incredibly important in terms of leadership as well.

Q16 **Alison Thewliss:** Just to touch a wee bit further on the issues around planning, we heard earlier on that campaigners feel that parks are an anchor to their local communities, but that does not always seem to be reflected in new housing developments. Can you talk a wee bit about whether you feel that there is perhaps too much focus on housing alone, rather than on parks and the wellbeing of communities that are being created in new developments?

Sue Ireland: I was involved with a GreenArc conference in July, which was trying to pull together people in our sector who were planners for outer London and the South-East. It was very interesting how much the

planning officers there were almost desperate for information, help and support, but their priority was just so housing, they had lost a lot of the understanding about things like the NPPF, assessment of need, and those sorts of things. We were explaining to them and reminding them what SIL could do and how it could help.

There is a willingness, but the priority is so much more focused on housing that what green infrastructure is about is not really understood. It is partly because it is not a very sexy title, "green infrastructure"—that is why we talk about parks much more. When we talk about parks we mean more than parks, but it is the importance of getting them to understand that if they plan road traffic, all those sorts of things, green infrastructure should be in there right at the beginning. If it is, it can do so much more for the whole development.

Peter Neal: I think this issue on infrastructure is important; as you look at parks individually, some of their strength is as systems or networks. You can release these ecosystem services, you can manage water better, you can do green travel much better. Looking at its infrastructure for prosperity, along with energy, transport, waste and water, is incredibly important. However, I think the National Planning Policy Framework has simplified it in its current iteration, compared to Planning Policy Framework and Guidance 17, which was previously in place.

It now just looks at assessments of quality and quantity of green space and parks. It has lost accessibility, which is incredibly important, and it has also lost the encouragement for local authorities to set local standards. The New York planning standard is that all residents should be within 10 minutes' walk of a local park; it is simply put, but it is a complex issue to deliver that, which is really important.

The value of setting local standards for quantity, quality and accessibility is to have that strength and within the planning framework that we have; it is really important. If we can also add opportunities for enhancing functionality and connectivity, which also are teased into the Planning Framework but not really explicit, we could get more out of our planning system.

Ellie Robinson: I was just going to add one thing, in terms of economic value of the work we did in Sheffield. It shows the value of the infrastructure to climate resilience, to the competitiveness of the city, particularly for employee productivity and attracting people with talent, such as students from around the world, whom cities will increasingly be competing for. It is the repositioning of parks from a hugely loved, valuable recreational leisure resource—and they have been sitting in the leisure department for a long, long time now—to, "This is critical infrastructure for the future of our places, whether it is existing green space or new green space."

We need to try to elevate it to where it will be of most value to us, and we can make decisions that both plan and strategise for it, and fund it differently.

Q17 **Alison Thewliss:** This is maybe something the Victorians understood that we have lost a little bit: the parks are everybody's back garden, but we have lost that a little bit. First I should thank Drew for the £1.2 million of Heritage Lottery funding that has come to Glasgow Green over the weekend to fund the West Boathouse, which is very much welcomed. Thanks very much for that.

I wanted to just pick up on some of the things that you said, Drew and Peter, about equality, earlier on, and the importance of investing in more deprived areas. There still seems to me to be a big disparity between the quality of green space in more deprived areas and more affluent areas. I just wondered if you could put a wee bit more on the record about that as well, and talk about what the challenges are of funding that. With some of the new funding models, such as crowdfunding, if you are already in a well-off area, you will still have that disparity; how do you deal with that?

Drew Bennellick: From HLF's point of view, we have development teams and priority areas that we look to fund. For parks, it is just over 15% of local authorities being funded. The challenge for us is trying to target money in those areas where we know that there are issues and, without writing applications for people, seeing how to get those local authorities to apply to us for funding. That is a huge challenge.

We have limited resource in terms of development teams, but I definitely think there is a need there to make sure that everybody has access to quality green space. It is reflected in health and in all sorts of different ways. I fully support it but it is a difficult thing to achieve.

Peter Neal: The Natural Environment White Paper highlights this issue of inequality, with more deprived communities having less access and poorer quality green space. Research by CABI Space, "Community Green", which was looking at health and inequality, published in 2010, also looked at the real challenge: when quality increases, use increases. Quality is an incredibly important influence on use, which then brings all those multiple benefits—health, social cohesion, etc.

The challenge, particularly with austerity, is that we are seeing polarisation, where the metropolitan and unitary authorities and deprived communities around the country appear to be challenged more through austerity. With parks being a discretionary service, and deprived communities at the end of the queue, the quality of those spaces and the access to good quality space that they have will be reduced and at greater risk. One of the concerns is that through austerity we will see greater polarisation between high quality and low quality across individual towns, but also across the country.

Ellie Robinson: I would say that is also our experience of working with some of the northern core cities. One of the important things about keeping the coherence of a portfolio is so that sites that can generate

income, and can attract investment, can subsidise those that do not. Otherwise you see the real disparities. There has been some good work done by Public Health England and the public health sector, looking at how high-quality green space can tackle health inequality, and some of that work has been really informative to us.

BritainThinks did some good work for us looking at citizens, how they feel about their parks. They are coming on later, so I will not go into it, but one of the key things that was useful to us was how important citizens felt that fairness was. That was an important principle for us to do all our work around; that sense of, "If I live in a more disadvantaged part of town, I am seeing my parks at risk already, and that is not fair." People have a clear sense of that, and a coherent set of parks and green spaces across a city, which is looked after for its entirety, with high quality across the piece, is fair and great for everybody. There are some key principles here that people can very well articulate at a community level, but Public Health England's latest work has been good at helping that.

Chair: We are nearly coming to the end of our allotted time, but we still have two subject areas that we need to pursue, so if we could just bear that in mind please.

Q18 Julian Knight: Just briefly, panel, what difference do you think that having a statutory duty on local authorities to provide and maintain parks would have made in recent years?

Drew Bennellick: It is interesting; it is an incredibly complicated issue, and a huge amount to explore. One of the things that is of concern to us at the moment is understanding exactly how it might or might not work if it were to happen. There is some work that was done by APSE, the Association for Public Service Excellence. In a survey they did, I think 78% of their respondents said that the squeeze on the public sector was affecting parks disproportionately to other services, so there is evidence that that is happening.

From HLF's point of view, the issue is around funding, and funding for parks and if you look at some of the other statutory duties, the one that I know a little bit about is libraries. Libraries are still challenged: in the village where I live, we still have a library, but it is only open twice per week and for a minimal amount of time. For parks, if a statutory duty were to be pursued, the question is how you prescribe, measure and enforce it to make sure that it has the purpose of its introduction?

What we would love to see, and maybe it is slightly easier, is a statutory duty around the data and understanding of what parks we have. On the point that Peter was making earlier, there is a massive vacuum in terms of data and knowledge. If local authorities were required to say what green space they had, how much money they spent on it per head of population, and started looking at the quality of that green space and

doing annual reports, that would be a good way to use part of a statutory duty.

Peter Neal: A statutory duty would allow parks services to compete more equally with other statutory services on the annual budget-setting round. The challenge on definition, though, is at what scale we take the statutory duty in terms of parks. Should it be large parks, medium parks or small parks? There is an issue on definition. It does need to have a relationship with funding, and an explicit standard for quality. It also has to be applicable both to local authority provision as well as alternative delivery vehicles that are managing parks, which, as Drew was saying, makes it a very complex issue that needs to be looked at in a lot of detail. There are two other aspects. One is that local authorities publish figures for parks annually in terms of open space; if there were a duty to publish figures that are carefully and comparatively collected on spend per hectare, spend per head of population, one would get an understanding of the provision and the resources of parks across different authorities. These would be easier to compare, because it is very difficult to find data on expenditure on parks at this point in time.

A duty, possibly through planning, on writing parks and open space strategies would supplement the ability for local authorities to encourage them to strategically plan for investment and management of the parks.

Q19 **Julian Knight:** Do you think that should be part of the statutory duty? I am just trying to think now about how long it has taken to bring local plans together.

Peter Neal: In past planning guidance, yes, there was guidance to write open space strategies. That has been lost in the recent Planning Policy Framework.

Q20 **Julian Knight:** Sue, any thoughts?

Sue Ireland: From the Parks Alliance perspective, I generally agree with the comments made. We recognise that there needs to be a full assessment of need, of the advantages and disadvantages. It is not an easy answer, and our view is that if there is a credible plan for viability, then it may not be needed, but if there is not then it may well be a way of strengthening the case.

Ellie Robinson: I do not have much extra to add. We are not experts in local government legal duties. The absolutely critical things, which we all want, are greater priority for parks and secure long-term funding. They are the critical issues we would love to help to solve. Whatever the regulatory statutory basis, will the end goal be more achievable? We would want to ask local government.

Obviously there are metro mayors and combined authorities, and other opportunities to be highlighting the priority of parks and green spaces. There is a broader set of opportunities here with devolution to be thinking through at what level we are trying to set strategy, and get a race to the

top. They are also opportunities to explore, allied to this. However, we do not feel we are the best experts on this issue.

Q21 Mary Robinson: Having the right people in place is clearly really important. Drew, I think you mentioned earlier the different types of skills that local authorities are sourcing, perhaps management a little more than the ecological, if you like. Do you think that local authorities have the right skills and expertise in place to respond to the challenges faced by the parks sector?

Drew Bennellick: At the moment I do not think that they do. Maybe this is a generalisation, but a lot of local authorities have been able to rely on a very steady, secure source of funding for a number of years. You have staff there that are used to having their annual budget and knowing how to spend it. When you take those staff and you put them into this new world, where budgets are going down and they have to find new ways of generating income or working with new partners, working with business, there is a whole range of new skills there that they need to learn.

There are large numbers of park managers who have retired recently, and there are some very exciting new people coming into the sector. Certainly, we have seen some really imaginative ideas in some projects that we have been funding. As I said earlier, there is this skills deficit; new skills are needed, and park managers are, to some degree, rabbits in headlights. They are trying to make cuts very quickly. These things take time to adjust; you need to learn skills and develop.

Part of it is going back to this idea of a centre of excellence, but there is also a need to help people through this transition over the next three to five years. They need help to go from where they are now, where basically they have cut everything that they can cut, and now they have to try to make some big decisions, but with very little resource. We have a funding programme called Resilient Heritage, which aims to help that, but it is only a small amount of money. We are funding right across the entire heritage sector, so if there is more that could be done to support parks departments, particularly, through transition to learn from others, that would be a really important outcome.

Sue Ireland: There are two ways of looking at this. Certainly there are new skills that are needed, but there are also some people within the sector who are very willing and keen to learn new skills. You can see that from some of the CABI Space training you were talking about before. Part of the problem is that there is no structure to getting on in the sector. You can come in as a landscape ecologist or a landscape architect. There are such a range of different diverse backgrounds that can be a part of this sector.

In some senses that diversity is good, because it enables lots of different people from apprenticeships, and a wide range of sources, arboricultural or whatever, to be involved. However, the sector does not have any

proper network of how you become a good quality parks manager. There used to be an institute that would serve that training and development; there is nothing now.

Ellie Robinson: We will write a note of the conference outcomes from last week, because this was very much the topic of the conversation: what is it they need? We asked them, and we said we would feed it in to you. There were two issues that kept coming up. One was a lack of strategic capacity for a lot of the smaller authorities; they might have gone down from a team of 15 to one person, and they are firefighting. It is hard to go out and think of your strategy, meet new investors, talk to people about your other different options, and create new services in parks. It is almost impossible. They are the people who are asking for help.

The other is the skillset you would have. Definitely there are opportunities to increase your enterprise income, but you need a more socially entrepreneurial skillset. In terms of volunteering, there are opportunities to increase all of these things from where a lot of the authorities are now, but to do that, you need to invest in volunteers and create a professional approach. These things are not quick and easy; they require thought and investment in themselves. There are big opportunities, but not necessarily with the skillset and certainly not with the capacity at the moment.

Chair: Mary has the last question. We are really up against the deadline now, so if we can have brief answers, please.

Q22 **Mary Robinson:** This is about Friends groups, because you mentioned volunteers there, and the importance of volunteers. I am very interested in how Friends groups and other voluntary groups can be expected to play their part in relation to parks, and also looking at it in terms of how these changes in staffing levels will affect their ability to do that and to help these groups move forwards.

Peter Neal: I would say that the research on the state of UK public parks identifies an immense amount that community, voluntary and user groups are contributing to their parks. We have had a go at putting that into financial figures, which are considerable, but that is both funding as well as giving time through a variety of activities. That is a means to add value and enhance the quality of parks, not as a substitute for core funding.

In the questions that we have asked to Friends groups, the appetite to take a more formal relationship on management is limited. Some would, but the proportion of Friends groups that have an appetite to take a formal lease or longer-term ownership is very limited. There are real opportunities to make the relationship between local authorities and

volunteers much more sophisticated and constructive for mutual benefit, so that all parties gain.

In other places, when you apply to be a volunteer, you are trained, you have uniforms, you have equipment and it is well structured. This is only a little example: Parks Victoria runs a partnership programme that is tailored to young adults, working with new and emerging communities, such as refugees. They are working with groups that can connect into communities using parks. We have to look broadly at this opportunity for volunteering, and invest properly, so that you achieve maximum return and wide social benefit from that.

Sue Ireland: I would agree.

Drew Bennellick: So do I.

Chair: Thank you all very much for coming to give evidence to us this afternoon.

Examination of Witnesses

Dave Morris, Chair, National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, Ben Shimshon, Founding Partner, BritainThinks, Emma Boggis, Chief Executive, Sport and Recreation Alliance, and Will Smithard, Strategic Projects Director, ukactive.

Q23 **Chair:** Good afternoon. Thank you for coming to give evidence to the Committee this afternoon. Could I just ask you to go along and say who you are and the organisation you represent?

Ben Shimshon: My name is Ben Shimshon. I am a founding partner of BritainThinks. We are a research agency.

Dave Morris: I am Dave Morris, Chair of the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, which is the voice of the 6,000 local Friends groups movement around the country. I am also putting submissions as the Chair of the Friends of Lordship Rec, my local park in Tottenham. I am a representative of the Haringey Friends of Parks Forum and the Chair of the London Green Spaces Friends Groups Network. I am very much part of this large network of Friends groups.

Emma Boggis: I am Emma Boggis. I am the Chief Executive of the Sport and Recreation Alliance, an umbrella organisation representing 320 national governing bodies and other representative sports organisations.

Will Smithard: I am Will Smithard, Strategic Projects Director for a not-for-profit health body, ukactive. We work with around 4,000 members and stakeholders to promote healthy lifestyles by getting more people more active, more often.

Q24 **Chair:** Thank you for coming. From your different perspectives,

why do you think people feel so strongly about their parks? That is coming very clearly from the evidence that we have had so far as a Committee.

Emma Boggis: If I might just kick off from a sport and recreation perspective, but hearing and echoing many of the comments you have already heard this afternoon, we produced a report in 2014, which identified outdoor recreation as the nation's favourite pastime. Three out of four people regularly get active. Last year the Outdoor Industry Association and Sport England produced some research that showed that most people are likely to get active within a mile of their home. For many people, that is their local park. That is the opportunity to be able to get out and do things.

We need to think particularly of some of the challenges about getting more people more active, having environments that people feel welcome in, that are easily accessible and easy to reach. Some people might think, "I am not very sporty. I do not really want to go to my leisure centre; it is not a friendly environment." Being able to do something on your doorstep locally, often with your friends, with your family, in your community, is really important, as we heard Baxter's example earlier about how it is very much a part of his life and his community. Sport and recreation is a very good way of being able to access those parks, and there are great offers that you can do in a local park.

Ben Shimshon: Alongside the exercise thing, there is a broader sense that it adds to quality of life in terms of a place to relax in and an opportunity simply to be outside, especially in more densely urban populated areas. People also see it as a place where they can spend time with family and friends, and also an opportunity for communities to spend time together. All of those things flow out of the qualitative work and deliberative work we have done with the National Trust and HLF.

Will Smithard: If I could just back up Emma's point there, the nation is in an inactivity crisis at the moment. 37,000 people in the UK this year will sadly pass away prematurely because they have not lived an active enough lifestyle. We know from ukactive, through talking to people, that the two biggest barriers around physical activity are around time and cost or money. We know that parks are an absolutely fundamental community asset, which breaks down those barriers. They are in or around people's doorsteps for easy access, and they are totally democratic; they are free to use for everyone. We see them as a fundamental part of breaking that physical inactivity crisis that we are currently facing.

Dave Morris: I agree.

Q25 **Chair:** Excellent; you can come again. If the parks that are currently available to families and children were suddenly removed, or the availability of the facilities within them were substantially reduced in quality or the number of services were taken away, what impact do you think that would have on people and the way

they live their lives?

Emma Boggis: Let me give you a couple of practical examples of some of the activities that take place in parks regularly. British Orienteering, for example, use parks as places that people can go orienteering and have a go. There are 500-odd registered courses in our parks that you can just go and do at any time. It does not have to be an organised event; it is just something that you can fit in around your lifestyle.

There were 90,000 instances of people participating in 2015. If you think of Parkrun, which is something you are probably all very familiar with, it is a regular run, every Saturday morning at 9 o'clock. Just last weekend, in over 550 parks and green spaces in the UK, just under 100,000 people went for a run. It is a very practical, easy way for people to do activity, and if they are just not there then it limits that opportunity for people to do them. It has a very practical impact on people's ability to get out and get active.

Will Smithard: If I could just add to that, we talk a lot about the physical benefits of parks and green spaces, but often what is not as well recognised is the mental benefits of outdoor activity. The mental health charity MIND have done a lot of thinking around that area, and they have published a report around ecotherapy, or the mental benefits of being outdoors. They spoke to a lot of their mental health patients, and 94% of them came back and said that the benefits to their mental health from being physically active outdoors were beneficial in supporting them along that journey. We probably talk a lot about the physical side, but the mental side is equally as important.

Ben Shimshon: There is some evidence that the people who would be most affected might be those who lack other opportunities to either get outdoors, or to find those opportunities to relax locally. You find, for example, that some of the groups that have been most concerned about the implications of budget cuts for local parks in the recent "State of UK Public Parks" survey are, for example, parents. It is about 70% of parents as compared to around 50% of the general population who say they would be concerned about a reduction in the quality of the facilities in their park.

That is similarly reflected amongst, for example, black and minority ethnic groups, and people who live in more urban situations. It is not just the case that some of those benefits would be withdrawn, but the distributional effects of those might be felt more amongst some groups in society.

Dave Morris: I am a parent, I have three children, and when they are young you take them there every day, pretty much. It is important that these are quality, well run environments, and safe; otherwise people do not go there. We found that with our park in Tottenham. We benefited from lottery funding, and one of the reasons that we wanted to save this park, which had been neglected for 20 or 30 years because of previous

public service cuts, was because people with young children, and women in general, were not going there anymore.

What happens with this underfunding crisis, if it is allowed to continue, for UK parks, is that parks will become unsafe places, and people will stop going in there. It will not just be parents with young children, but women or anybody else who is sensitive to the safety quality of that space. They then become problem spaces, which are a drain on the community and a negative asset for a community. It is essential that they are properly funded and looked after.

Q26 David Mackintosh: There are sometimes different, competing needs from different users of parks. How do you think these competing needs can be reconciled?

Will Smithard: The Parkrun example is quite a good one. As Committee Members may be aware, there was a challenge earlier on in the year. It was by Stoke Gifford Parish Council in Little Stoke Park, near Bristol, where they were looking to charge people who took part in Parkrun activities £1 per week. The reasoning around that was because of that exact thing: there were competing priorities. Not everybody who wants to use that park will be at the start line of a Parkrun at 9.00 a.m. on a Saturday, but yet the park has to be a space that is available to all people in the community to use and benefit from.

As ukactive, we can understand both sides of that perspective. Parkruns are a great, fantastic model, which appeal to a very broad audience, with, as Emma was saying, over 18,000 people using them on weekly basis. What we would like to see is support for local authorities to ensure that for other people, dogwalkers and people who do not want to take part but are with their families just going for a walk or a picnic, the space is there and available for them to use and left in a really good state.

One of the areas that we would like to see addressed is how local authorities can be supported in making sure that those parks are a space that can be maintained. It might be using an activity like Green Gym, which is a conservation group that allows people in their community to take ownership of the park for themselves and benefit from some of the mental and physical health benefits of conserving that park and green space. We know that there are competing priorities and we would like to see support for local authorities in terms of addressing those.

Emma Boggis: The key there is exactly that: local conversations. There is no one solution. We have heard some other witnesses talk about this: there is no single model that is going to work everywhere. It is about the importance of having a local solution and having that dialogue. It is why one of the things that we asked, in the run-up to the last general election, was a request that local authorities had to do a local assessment of what they had, particularly around sports and physical activity, based on local need. There will be things that work in some places and not others. The key thing is that local dialogue and that engagement, which means that

the community has what is right for them, and not what somebody else has superimposed and says, "You need three parks." Maybe they do not. It is about working out what fits.

Dave Morris: As someone involved in a Friends group, you realise you need to get everybody communicating and co-operating for the long-term benefit of that green space. These disputes or divisions between user groups are a bit exaggerated. Every so often there might be an issue, but generally all user groups want the space to be well managed and looked after. Our strategy has been to address everyone's needs, and to make sure that all the different, varying user groups had their needs addressed in terms of improvement of that green space, the facilities and activities going on there. That can only be done when there is adequate funding coming in to green spaces and a long-term vision for improvements and so on.

Secondly, I think that it is really important that the community is involved in the decisions about their green space, so that there is a spirit of optimism and co-operation in terms of how we work together to make that space as good as it can be.

Ben Shimshon: The only area in which we address this is in the context of reduced budgets for parks, where there is a quantitative finding that about 60% of the population say that they would be in support of some more commercial use for parks. When we looked at that in the qualitative work, however, particularly with the National Trust in Sheffield, we found that people were very quick to raise concerns about local people not being able to use the park at certain times, or certain parts of it being cordoned off because of those commercial activities. While there is a prima facie acceptance of that idea, I think in practice it might be a little bit harder.

Q27 **David Mackintosh:** In a sense you have answered part of my next question. Do you think local authorities should be free to charge for use to some user groups—for example, people running a business in the park?

Emma Boggis: It seems reasonable that if somebody is making money from the use of something that is heavily publicly funded, then it would be reasonable that they should expect to contribute to some of that. The issue is where individuals are doing things on a voluntary basis, either purely run by volunteers or a free-to-access facility. However, if somebody is making a living out of running something in a park—and you see that model and licensing, whether that is personal trainers or boot camps—that model works.

I think it is this point about how things work together: in that case, making sure that you are not suddenly inundated, so at certain points of the day, all you can do in the park is go to a boot camp and there is nothing else. It is that awareness and that understanding of the difficult needs. However, I think there is a case for that if somebody is making a profit out of it; that is where we need the differentiation in the local

community, because if it is voluntary-led, and free to do, you do not want that to become a barrier. Part of the attractiveness of doing stuff in a park is that it is the most accessible; it is the easiest way for people, so you would end up losing that benefit.

Will Smithard: What we would also like would be for the players in these situations to think more broadly about it. There was a report that came out from the University of Exeter recently, which said that physical activity in parks is benefiting the economy in England by £2.2 billion. That is the health benefit. We need to make sure that when you do think about those funding models, and whether you will charge an individual or not, you make sure that it is thought of as a wider benefit.

Those health benefits to the economy as a whole need to be recognised, in terms of giving people free space to be able to take part in physical activity, because they improve people's health and wellbeing. There is still a role for other parties to come in and support local authorities in terms of being able to bring that green space alive and really appealing to those local communities.

Ben Shimshon: There is much less support for the idea of increasing charges to use the park facilities, especially on an individual basis, but I think that also applies to voluntary group activities, particularly.

Dave Morris: I agree.

Q28 **Chair:** Can I just ask: how do we establish a principle here? How do you explain to a 14-year-old who goes down to play in the junior football match on a Sunday morning that they are charged, but a 40-year-old businessman is not charged for doing a Parkrun? Is there any fairness in there?

Emma Boggis: You need to have some principles about the usage, the impact on the park, and what the funding comes from. If you are paying for something that itself is generating money, so you are a member of a club that you pay into, and then need the facilities in which you do something, that is perhaps different from if you are doing an activity that is completely run by volunteers and has no cost associated with it.

It is about making it sustainable. I am not saying there is an easy model that says, "This should be and this should not be." I think it is easier around commercialism; it is less easy around sports clubs that are making money in order to do more than just put on their activities.

Will Smithard: There is also a role for other third parties, such as the private sector, to be providing support and finance to local authorities in terms of putting in programmes that are free to the general public. Take the ParkLives programme, which is part of Coca-Cola Great Britain's £20 million investment into physical activity in communities. It is providing local authorities funding to put on programmes and activities that they have created and designed themselves, and ultimately put them on for free, for members of the community to take part in. That is a corporate social responsibility for the organisation to do something that,

over the last three years, has led to 180,000 people getting physically active in parks and green spaces around the country.

Q29 Helen Hayes: I will declare an interest before I ask my next question, which is to say that I am a recent convert to Parkrun. I did my third Parkrun this weekend. I did it because a constituent was so kind and encouraging, got me to do it and got me involved, and I love it.

I was going to ask: there is clearly a lot of good practice around physical activity that takes place in parks, but we are still not active as we need to be as a nation. There are still not nearly enough people taking advantage of their parks as a way of becoming involved in physical activity. How do you think that more people can be encouraged to get involved in physical activity on a regular basis in our parks?

Emma Boggis: One thing is simply about better marketing, making more people aware of what is actually there, and the opportunities. You may know that there appear to be some tennis courts, or there is a bowling green, or a running track, or a path, but we need better promotion of the opportunities there. That comes from working with local providers. I do not think we expect whoever is running or owning the park to be responsible for that, but what they can be doing is encouraging people to use that place as a location, and then promote it.

There are some good examples. The Lawn Tennis Association, who are members of ours, are doing some work with a charity called Tennis For Free. The work is all about opening up access to local authority courts, improving the quality of the courts, having things like “walk up and play” sessions where you do not need to book in advance, which makes it accessible. There are good models out there, but as ever, there is some good practice and what we need is good practice becoming common practice across a myriad of different sports and activities.

Will Smithard: The localism piece is key. Parkrun has been incredible in terms of the movement, and it has just gained and gained momentum. It works as a standard model that applies. You know that you turn up on Saturday at 9.00 am and you can take part. You can push yourself as hard as you want to push. That has been fantastic, but going back to some points that were made beforehand, every local community is very different. I am sure you will understand that in terms of your roles.

What we want to ensure is that it is local people who are responsible for supporting that planning in that local environment. There are roles for people like local GPs having the confidence in talking about the power of parks and green spaces as a “green prescription” model. We are not asking a lot; all we are asking for is confidence for general practitioners themselves to be able to talk about the benefits of being able to use your space, which is close to your doorstep.

ukactive has started some conversations with the Royal College of General Practitioners about how we do that over the next 12 months or so. It is about the local community understanding the benefits of that green space, and being able to understand what works for those communities.

Q30 Alison Thewliss: You have done some research, Ben, about the impact of local authority budgets on parks and particularly the decrease. I think your finding was that there is an increasing population of adults who think that the parks are in quite good condition, even though budgets have been cut. Could you maybe explain a wee bit more about the detail on that?

Ben Shimshon: What we found was that most people think that the condition of their park is pretty much stable. The first thing to say is that most people think their park is quite good. About 50% of people say their park is in a good condition, and another 33% say it is in a fair condition. Then we ask people whether they think it is getting better or worse, and about 20% say they think their park is getting better. Just over half say it is stable, and only 10% say the condition has declined in the last three years. However, they also expressed serious concerns about budget cuts. They are not saying that they are seeing the impact of budget cuts yet, necessarily.

How would I explain that in the context of budget cuts? The first thing to say is that the things that people are looking out for, to judge the state of their park, are relatively simple. They look at, for example, the condition of children's play equipment; I think we have not had enough time for the deterioration to set in. They look at whether the grass is being cut, the extent of dog fouling and the extent of litter. I suspect that local councils know enough about what local people care about to deal with dog fouling and litter. It is pretty high up their agenda generally; alongside potholes, they are the first, second and third most important things to local people. I suspect that the impact of budget cuts are a) hidden, and b) slightly longer-term than would show up in these kinds of surveys at this stage.

Q31 Alison Thewliss: If I could ask what the other three people have found in terms of feedback from the groups you are involved in about the impact of cuts so far?

Dave Morris: I would say that we are facing a serious crisis, as we faced 30 or 40 years ago when the UK's parks fell into neglect, became unsafe spaces, and took a colossal amount of effort and money over the last 10 or 15 years, particularly, to rescue. That job has not been completed, and now we are facing the same scenario again. There are a number of things that are different now from before. First of all, we have the rise of the Friends groups movement, so we have the canary in the coalmine that is speaking out, and I am here on their behalf.

Also, we have the knowledge of what happened last time. Nobody in their right mind wants to allow that to happen again. This time, we can act

fast, because we are having this crisis meeting now, as the crisis is beginning to bite. It is an oil tanker that takes a long time to turn around. It has started turning around, so even if now action was taken, we will still see the impacts of the crisis worsening over the next five or 10 years. What we need is immediate action from Government and all those involved with parks, to make it a statutory duty so that everyone is quite clear that this is a recognised part of our communities and our UK infrastructure.

Secondly, it must come with adequate funding levels. At the moment there is a lot of botching and fudging going on, and cuts behind the scenes that people are not seeing. I can tell you that all the pillars of support for the frontline staff are collapsing, and all the pillars of support for Friends groups, community involvement and volunteers are also collapsing. Therefore, we are facing a bleak future that needs to be addressed by this Committee.

Emma Boggis: I will just give one further practical example. I mentioned bowls earlier—crown green bowls. Particularly when you think about keeping people active for longer, it is a great pastime with a more ageing population, given everything that we know about the ageing population. The national governing body, the British Crown Green Bowling Association have noticed an impact on the quality of the surface, keeping the greens, vandalism because of lack of park staff, and access, particularly in the evenings. It is not an encouraging environment so people are not comfortable going there. It is those very practical things that they see will have an impact on their ability to deliver their sport.

Will Smithard: The challenge, we find, was perfectly demonstrated by Baxter, the 10-year-old from Brixton, who summed it up much better than I ever could do. He likes to use his park for three to five hours a week with his friends and his family. That needs to be a safe environment. It needs to be a place where he can feel that he can go with his friends and his family, where he feels safe and able to be physically active. We are in a real crisis with regard to our kids' activity levels in this country, and we need to have those community assets, like parks, which are a safe place for kids to be able to be active with their friends and family.

Q32 **Alison Thewliss:** In terms of what David said about the Friends groups being a new canary on these issues, I would definitely agree. I have lots of very good, active Friends groups in my constituency, who keep a close eye on how parks are maintained, and it is a very useful function. One of the other functions that they take on in my part of the world is around the commercial aspects of parks. We have talked a wee bit about that. I wanted to ask about other funding models with regard to events in parks, maintenance, or investment, and what other things you think could be brought in.

Dave Morris: I knew this might come up, and I was going to refer to the report of Historic England, the Government's statutory advisor on all matters related to the historic environment. They said in their submission: "The history of public park funding models shows local authority management over 170 years has ensured that parks have survived even through late 20th century funding crises. Historically, all other funding models have failed. Since Victorian times, public parks have been dogged by a lack of recognition as an essential infrastructure and service, as local authorities have no statutory duty. It is critical that the status of public parks is resolved."

What has happened is that various other models have been tried on a reasonably small scale, largely because most of them have failed. Local authorities then have to pick up the bill, take on the responsibilities and rescue the situation. To get to the nitty-gritty, as has been heard before, there are various innovative ideas that have been floated and looked at, but now we have an immediate situation where 27,000 urban public green spaces are under threat because of underfunding and lack of statutory recognition.

There is no alternative, and no reason why there should necessarily be an alternative, to local authorities managing most of those and having the tools to do it. Also, I think that more recently, to their credit, they have been open to innovative ideas, to working in partnership with Friends groups and the community. The innovation should be within the context of local authorities having the duty to manage, and where they do not manage, certainly to monitor and ensure standards, which would come with a statutory duty.

Will Smithard: What we would like to see, as mentioned beforehand, is the Government taking a role in supporting and enabling facilitation of discussions between local authorities and third parties. We understand there will be budget pressures across this piece and that they will not be resolved overnight. We see the role of third parties as being able to provide support, either on a pro bono basis or through direct funding, to local authorities, because local authorities own the management of that space, to support them in tackling that.

It would be the Government's role simply to help facilitate those discussions, because there are a lot of innovative ideas and opportunities out there, and some great thinking out there that could help bring those spaces to life and continue to make them community assets.

Emma Boggis: There are some cases. Fields in Trust are an organisation who do a lot to protect green spaces. There have been some good examples; I think they now have over 2,000 sites that are protected through legal contracts and arrangements with local authorities and communities. Again, it is not working everywhere, and they do not have the scale to yet deal with all the sites, but where it has worked, there are models of successful social enterprise that are also linked in with

providing a café, access to facilities, or other benefits that bring in some revenue as well. There are different models that do exist.

Ben Shimshon: From a public perspective, the public are pretty agnostic as to how something is funded. They are much more interested in the outcomes. When we did the work in Sheffield with the National Trust, looking at different funding models there, one of the most interesting things was the idea of taking a city-wide approach. Looking at the distribution of green space and making sure that it was equitable was the foremost principle that that group of the public, who had taken part in that deliberation, landed upon, which was quite interesting, given that it did not focus down on individual parks. They were definitely thinking at a city level, or an area like that, which is quite interesting as a funding model.

Q33 **Mary Robinson:** We have had a discussion about the importance of parks, and obviously I think we are in agreement about that. The question is about the statutory duty of local authorities. In your view, should the local authorities have statutory duties in relation to parks?

Dave Morris: First of all, we support the recommendations of the previous Select Committee on the future of parks, which in 2003 recommended that it be a statutory duty with long-term funding solutions. Secondly, many of the submissions made not just by the petitioners but also by many of the organisations that have submitted evidence—for example, the Landscape Institute, Fields in Trust, the Open Spaces Society, Historic England—all want this statutory duty to be in place, as do many others.

To be frank, in most of the other submissions made by organisations and individuals, it is either implicit or it is the logical conclusion of what they are saying about the importance of green spaces. I do not really see any argument against it other than that the Government might be reluctant to accept it. The purpose of this Committee, I believe, is to make recommendations that need to be made, and we are facing a serious crisis with fairly simple solutions.

First of all, make it a statutory obligation on all local authorities, and secondly, provide adequate funding levels to make sure that they are properly managed to agreed standards. I do not think that is difficult, or should take long to implement, if there is a political will to do so.

Ben Shimshon: I do not have a strong opinion and do not think that the public would. In general, however, it is right that formal lines of accountability should reflect where the public would look to allocate blame if things go wrong, or praise if things go right, which is a bit more rare in the public's perspective. They would immediately look to the local authority if their park were to deteriorate very rapidly; that would be the place that they would immediately assume was responsible. It would be

a real job of work to shift that view to a different place. I think they take it for granted.

Emma Boggis: I do not disagree with what Dave said, other than ensuring that a statutory duty would have the impact that people think it will have. What we would not want is for it to become a kind of tick box, "We do this or we put in a bit of money." For me, particularly from a sports and recreation perspective, it is about getting local authorities to understand the wider benefits that that brings. If you can do that—demonstrating the health and wellbeing benefits, whether physical or mental, and the benefit for community cohesion and the economic benefits—you would not need to make it a statutory duty. It would be obvious why you would invest in it, because of that value.

It is about making the case that short-term or relatively small investment, in terms of actual cost, is hugely outweighed in the long term. The problem is that sometimes that long term is beyond the length of a councillor's term of office or the term in which people are being judged on their own performance. Therefore it is understandable why it may not be the obvious thing that they choose to invest in, but it is making that long-term investment case that, for me, will have more impact than the risk of it becoming a tick box.

Will Smithard: We see the benefit that parks have in supporting areas that do have statutory duty, such as health. Inactivity is costing the economy £20 billion per year, with an estimated direct health cost of around £8 billion per year. What we absolutely need to see is continued funding to parks, because the role they play as an asset in terms of supporting the wider health benefits of the UK is critical. You have heard from organisations and people who can think more in terms of whether statutory duty is the correct answer or not, so I will not put an opinion onto that. Ultimately, however, what we want to see is that there is funding and support for local authorities to make sure that that asset stays alive and is a benefit to the community.

Ben Shimshon: That is true. The general public would endorse keeping their parks in a high state of maintenance and good condition.

Dave Morris: Can I say that I think the general public think that there is a statutory duty? They do not realise that it is possible to just not run a park properly, as is beginning to happen again, as it did 30 years ago. In terms of the detail on the statutory service, we have fleshed something out in our submission, appendix 5, with some of the bullet points: who should have the powers, what should be covered by them, and so on. You can have a look at those very limited bullet points.

I also want to say that the funding for green spaces is so small in comparison to other major infrastructural services that our communities rely on across the UK. It is something like £2 billion or £3 billion per year that is needed to run the UK's public green spaces. Compared to the Health Service, education or other important statutory services, these are small amounts of money. The current Government are committed to

major investment into infrastructure. We are talking about hundreds of billions of pound being put into, for example, HS2, transport, Trident, military commitments, electricity, Hinkley Point—large amounts of infrastructure.

Now it is recognised that parks and green spaces are part of our essential infrastructure; that has been recognised by the Government in planning terms, so the money needs to be put into that. It will generate a lot more jobs and community usage than some of the other, much more expensive infrastructural projects.

Emma Boggis: The key point is really what you do with them. From the perspective of a lot of our members, it is about being able to use that asset, to take part in their activity. From a sports and recreation perspective, we are not interested in just having parks for the sake of it. If we had lots more parks, but they all had signs saying, “No ball games here. Keep off the grass,” that would not interest us. What we want is more parks that say, “Please get on the grass. Ball games welcome here.” That is the key difference; it is about making them accessible and usable.

Will Smithard: “Ball games required.”

Q34 **Mary Robinson:** If you will just indulge me, David, just drill down a little bit. We are becoming mixed up, if you like, with the question of funding, where there is general agreement. It is really why we want that to be a statutory duty that I am trying to get to. For instance, Ben talked about statutory duties that local authorities may have for roads or potholes, but we know that the potholes are still there. What then would be the real reason why local authorities should have a statutory duty for this?

Dave Morris: The potholes should not be there, and anybody who reports a pothole should expect that pothole to be fixed. If it is a statutory duty, it makes it crystal clear that our 27,000 urban public green spaces are expected to be run to a minimum decent standard, and the bar is set, and local authorities have a duty to make sure that is what is happening. The public will be on the case if that is not happening.

It is the foundation stone of a properly run parks service across the UK. What flows from that is then what kind of funding level, enforcement and staffing levels are needed. Without a statutory service, it is seen as an easy service to cut. Councils are trying to lower the public’s expectation. This is very important. When my first son was born, I used to go into the park every day, as I said before. I had very low expectations of what that green space should provide. There was no staffing, there were no flower beds, the buildings were semi-derelict, but I hardly noticed, because our expectations at that time had been lowered from a whole series of cuts.

With the rise of the Friends groups, people’s expectations are now increasing, but what is happening is, because it is not a statutory service, park managers are trying to lower the public’s expectations: “We cannot

do this, and we cannot do that. We have to have these commercial events that we do not really like, but otherwise how will we find the money?" All the problems flow from the fact that we need to have it as a statutory service, and it needs to be properly funded. Really there is nothing else. All the other matters that we are discussing today flow from those fundamental stones.

Q35 Chair: Just to follow up, because I think Mary has asked a very relevant question there, if I play devil's advocate, libraries are a statutory service, but we have seen libraries closing all over the country. Parks are not a statutory service, but there is hardly a park closed. Does that statutory obligation really give the protection, or are we looking at something such as was alluded to by the previous panel? They suggested a statutory requirement to provide a proper strategy and plan for parks and open spaces, and how they link into other things like health.

Emma Boggis: That is why we call for a requirement that local authorities do an assessment based on local needs. There is no prescription on what the solution is, but there is a prescription to have a solution, or at least to have a plan to what the solution is. That is the statutory bit, that they have to review; from a physical activity point of view, they have to have a plan for how they will deliver and meet what they should be doing.

Some of that may be investing in parks, but it is not mandating that parks have to be the answer. In many cases I would hope that lots of the evidence that you have heard today would demonstrate that they would be the answer, but the point is then driven by local need and local communities.

Dave Morris: The same could apply to biodiversity or children's play. What we argue for is that parks should be raised to Green Flag standard; that should be the statutory duty. Green Flag has a range of standards, which the park has to achieve to get that green flag. I agree that it needs to be set in stone what the standards are.

Q36 Julian Knight: Many of my colleagues in their constituencies will have Friends groups. I have Friends of Elmdon Park, who do fantastic work. I wonder what the panel think in terms of what role these groups can play, how we can support them, and what help they get from local authorities. Do you want to start, Will?

Will Smithard: I will give an example of where a voluntary group is doing great stuff in parks. That is Green Gym, whom I alluded to beforehand, who are run by a charity called the Conservation Volunteers. What they do is to bring volunteers into their parks and green spaces to own the conservation—to own the maintenance, the upkeep, and ultimately the legacy that is delivered around the park. That leaves a visible and tangible benefit, but also it has a positive mental and physical wellbeing side for those people who are taking part. What it is doing is

bringing those communities together in terms of old, young, white, black and Asian people, who are all part of the same community but maybe never do stuff together. It brings that community cohesion.

There are examples like that, where you can bring people into their parks and open spaces to own the maintenance, development and ultimately get that physical and mental wellbeing benefit from it, while managing the upkeep of the space so it is available for everyone in the community. We see those examples as beneficial models, and we would urge local authorities to give them the support and potentially even funding requirements to look at delivering those in their local areas.

Emma Boggis: I would just add that I agree, but like a lot of sport and recreation in this country, volunteers are fundamental to it. Without it, it simply does not happen.

Ben Shimshon: I do not have much to add on the voluntary groups. The only thing is that amongst the public, when you raise the idea of park support groups and things like that, often some people say, "That is all very well in certain parts of our city or our country, where there is a vibrant community who can take on that sort of role."

Q37 **Julian Knight:** Is it a fear that people feel that if they do that, the local authority will step away and allow them to do that?

Ben Shimshon: No, that is not so much something. It is more that there might be areas where there might not be the sort of community spirit, the time or social capital, although that is not a phrase the public would use, to form those kinds of groups and take control of their parks. Therefore, what you might end up with is what they would describe as a "postcode lottery" in which some parks are maintained by an active group and another park is left without that sort of support.

Dave Morris: With Friends groups in particular, the amazing diversity of what they do is staggering. Every group is different and every space is different. In all kinds of ways they contribute, although they are reluctant to take on any long-term management responsibilities. I have to say that in our park we co-manage the park with the council. In a very positive way, they are the eyes and ears of the park service. They help to promote the green space and develop a vision of what improvements are needed. They lobby the park managers and work with them; they engage and involve the local community.

To me, however, what is also important is that it is a moral ownership: "This is our green space. We will protect it and use it, and encourage more people to use it." Different groups may get involved in different ways in some aspects of management or maintenance, but it is very patchy. You cannot set a template for a community group. If you tell a community group, "You are formally going to help us maintain this park," people will think, "We are not cheap labour. We are doing this because we want to make our parks great, but that is something we want to do in partnership with the managers, who should be running it properly."

Q38 **Julian Knight:** But can you form a template for how local authorities should interact with groups such as yours?

Dave Morris: I think so. The different local authorities have worked out different relationships, not necessarily with individual Friends groups but with Friends forums. There are a lot of forums, such as Glasgow's recently set up Friends of Parks Forum, which I think has 30 or 40 of the groups involved in that forum. They try to build a relationship with the local authority. That is the way forward.

Emma Boggis: Just to add to that, under the Localism Act of 2011 there are provisions around encouraging communities, engaging and making the best use. One of the areas we would like to see is a bit more from Government around what that looks like in practice, so sharing some of that best practice—not necessarily saying, "This is a model that you have to do," but, "Here are a range of models that have worked elsewhere. Here are a range of ways of engaging and using the provisions of the Act that have been of benefit; they might apply to you." Some of that may apply, as well, to Friends groups. There is no prescribed route, but if there are 10 different models that work, and you work out what works best for you, that could be helpful.

Chair: Thank you all very much for coming to give evidence to us this afternoon on this important inquiry.

