



Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Public Parks, HC 45 Monday 14 November 2016

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair), Rushanara Ali, Bob Blackman, Helen Hayes, Kevin Hollinrake, Julian Knight, Melanie Onn, Mr Mark Prisk, and Mary Robinson.

Questions 39 - 105

Witnesses

I. Councillor Lisa Trickett, Cabinet Member for Clean Streets, Recycling and Environment, Birmingham City Council, Andrew Hinchley, Green Space Development Officer, London Borough of Camden, Ian Walmsley, Greenspace Manager, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, Councillor Matthew Balfour, Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport, Kent County Council.

II. Dr Katy Layton-Jones, The Gardens Trust, Merrick Denton-Thompson OBE, President, The Landscape Institute, Julia Thrift, Projects and Operations Director, Town and Country Planning Association, James Harris, Policy and Networks Manager, Royal Town Planning Institute.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor Lisa Trickett, Andrew Hinchley, Ian Walmsley and Councillor Matthew Balfour.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome. Thank you all for being here on time. That means we can start a few minutes early, which is always helpful to everyone. Thank you for coming to give evidence this afternoon to our inquiry into public parks. To begin with, I will ask members of the Committee to put on record any particular

interests they may have that are relevant to this inquiry. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. Are there any other particular interests?

Bob Blackman: I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

Q39 **Chair:** That is it from us this afternoon. Could I just ask that you say who you are and the organisation you represent, going down the table, please?

Ian Walmsley: I am Ian Walmsley, Greenspace Manager from Stockport Council.

Councillor Trickett: Councillor Lisa Trickett, Birmingham City Council, Cabinet Member with responsibility for parks.

Andrew Hinchley: Andrew Hinchley, Green Space Development Officer at Camden Council.

Councillor Balfour: Matthew Balfour. I am the Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport at Kent County Council, which includes our country parks.

Q40 **Chair:** Once again, thank you all for spending time with us this afternoon. There are four of you, and you obviously come from different backgrounds and different areas of the country, and may have different things to say to us. However, if you agree with one of your colleagues who has just said something, just saying, "I agree" is probably sufficient, rather than explaining that at great length to us. That helps us to get through more questions of importance to us. So, parks—nice flowers to look at, a few football pitches to play on, a place to walk the dogs. Is that a fair description of what parks are all about?

Councillor Trickett: No.

Q41 **Chair:** Tell us what they are all about.

Councillor Trickett: That is quite a bad start, is it not, disagreeing straight away with your Chair? First of all, you have to know where you have come from to know where you are going to. The original purpose of many of the parks in our cities came about from Victorian times and industrialisation, and it was about public health and economic wellbeing. We have to remember that that is still a key purpose of our parks. Where we have cities—and cities are going to be the engines of growth over the next decade—what we have to look at is our green space, our park space. It is a fundamental part of the growth of our cities, and unless we see green space alongside grey space, such as roads, and blue space, such as rivers and canals, we will not have inclusive sustainable growth in our cities. For me, yes, those are key components of parks. I walk my dog, I take my kids to the park, I like the flowers; I have an "in bloom" in my ward, which is absolutely fantastic. Equally, however, those green spaces

are what connects my key areas of growth for employment with key residential areas. If we can use our green space to connect our communities to growth opportunities, then the inclusive growth can be better maintained within my city.

Andrew Hinchley: I absolutely agree with that. I also think they are crucial in terms of addressing inequality. One of the key things about parks and other green spaces is that they are freely accessible to all, and that provides them with a unique opportunity to address health inequalities and other inequalities in some of our communities. That is a key value.

Councillor Balfour: I would agree with all of that. Coming from a county councillor, it is slightly different in that we have 1,000 acres of country parks under our control, and the one thing that I would mention that has not been mentioned is the effect on health, and in particular mental health. People being able to get out into the countryside works wonders, and is better than a bottle of pills.

Ian Walmsley: All the benefits for people have already been mentioned, and I agree with all of those, but now as we are looking to develop more housing, they also serve a purpose for sustainable urban drainage systems, and there are the benefits they bring to the natural environment and animals as well. I know they are for people, but there is a big point about protecting them for the benefit of nature as well.

Q42 **Chair:** Reading through the various elements we have, I came across the term “natural capital”. I am sure everyone who goes into the park and plays football and sees the flowers, and does all the other things we talked about, immediately thinks, “What a great benefit I am getting from all this natural capital I am enjoying”. This term is a bit meaningless, is it not? Is it something that is describing something for the experts? Does it relate to anything at all?

Councillor Trickett: It is an actual tool, and there is a natural capital tool. I think you have people giving evidence in the next session on this. Certainly Birmingham City Council has been part of developing this tool, where we can prove the value of the parks and green spaces—do not forget that parks are only a part of that broader green space—that we need in our areas. They contribute to things like flooding defence, health, wellbeing and the natural environment. The natural capital includes fresh air; air pollution is a current issue for a number of us, and parks have a massive contribution to make in terms of air pollution, and the health issue was referred to earlier. In Birmingham alone we estimate a £21.6 million saving to the NHS in asthma costs alone if we have—

Q43 **Chair:** So you have just put a figure on it there, and perhaps other people might like to comment. It is a nice idea, and you have just described it, but is it not impossible to measure?

Councillor Balfour: One must not muddle natural capital in one sense with another sense. I think it is Dorset that have done calculations on natural capital, and come up with a figure of something like £4 billion to their economy. There is then natural capital in terms of the benefit it brings individuals who might use those parks, and those are two slightly different things. The first is in terms of tourism and spend, and the second is in terms of the benefit to our communities of being able to use that green space.

Andrew Hinchley: It will always be difficult to put a figure on the value of parks. They provide so many different beneficiaries. We have already listed the various different benefits that they provide, and they are all measured in different ways and in different forms. It is easier to put a figure on some of those than on others, but I think what is really important is that we start to demonstrate the value of parks. Ultimately, what we are looking to do, I imagine, is monetise some of those benefits that are currently invisible, and that are often being gained by others, to help us to be able to manage parks sustainably into the future. Being able to see and evidence that benefit in various different ways is crucial, and natural capital is a good step towards that.

Councillor Trickett: Quite often what you will find is that a developer, in terms of an uplift on a residential development, benefits from the proximity to a park. It is a local authority that maintains it, and there is no recognition in terms of the model of that overall contribution. The idea of natural capital is to take that total value in terms of the environment to that locality and be able to both monetise and measure in terms of core indicators that overall contribution.

No, I do not expect my 12-year-old to go into the park and think, "Coo, what a lovely bit of natural capital I have today." I would expect, however, when we look at devolution and economic growth, that the natural capital and investment in natural capital should sit alongside such thoughts as what you invest in transport and housing.

Ian Walmsley: The value of parks to mental and physical wellbeing has been known for years, but they always seem somewhat abstract arguments, and are certainly not taken into account when we review the budgets. It is the parks budget that gets cut, and an argument has never been successfully made that if you spend x on a park, there will be a saving in the health budget, and therefore you should take the money out of the health budget and put it into parks. It just does not work.

Q44 **Mr Prisk:** Do the Government require you to provide any measure? I suspect many of our constituents would say, "There is an evident social value. Why bother spending fees on consultants to measure it?" Is there any requirement from Whitehall for you to measure this in a financial sense?

Councillor Balfour: Chairman, in answer to that, I do not believe that there is. I understand that Sport England are carrying out some work to

try to establish the connection between exercise, green space and health. We in Kent are trying to carry out some work to try to make that measurement, which is, I think, what you are asking about, as to what benefits people do gain when they come to a country park. Urban parks may be quite different, but unless we can have some sort of proper measurement, it will be very difficult to persuade our public health colleagues, and the National Health Service, that they should be putting money into and supporting country parks, and indeed urban parks.

Q45 **Mr Prisk:** Is that view shared?

Councillor Trickett: We have to measure it, because of where we are going in terms of the sustainable transition plan for health and social care. We have already piloted Active Parks, and we have seen a huge uptake. It is very much a way that we have tried to shift some of our public health money into preventative activities, getting the inactive people aged 55 to 60 active in those parks, and encouraging cycling. Unless we can start to measure those benefits, then we have no argument to put for the resources.

I am from a city, and we have more parks than any city in Europe. That is a typical Birmingham thing, but I thought it was worth mentioning. If we do not then also see our economic capture in terms of the impact on the environment, cities will grow and grow and consume resources. I am not sure where we are on climate change after last week, but it is absolutely vital that we combat the impact on the environment of unregulated growth.

What we absolutely need to do in local government is to maintain a quality of life for our citizens. That is the primary reason for local councils: day in, day out, to improve the lives of our citizens, and our parks are a core component of that. As colleagues have said, however, in the past that contribution has not been valued. Indeed, I am in a cuts round. We have already cut 40% from our parks maintenance budget. I am already having to look again at our grounds maintenance cuts, but that is partly because it is not placed within that overall engagement with Government and partners in terms of infrastructure. It is a key part of our infrastructure.

Q46 **Mr Prisk:** Presumably, though, you would rather spend the money you have to spend on consultants on improving the parks. It sounds as though at the moment you are having to spend the money in order to prove to particular bureaucracy that there is a value—

Councillor Trickett: No.

Mr Prisk: Most of the people you serve would say, "Of course there is a value here."

Councillor Trickett: I am absolutely delighted to say that the work we have undertaken in terms of natural capital as a local authority has not

gone into the pocket of consultants. We have done it in partnership with the University of Birmingham and the RCIS, who have ensured that we have developed—

Q47 **Mr Prisk:** But that still does not improve facilities on the ground that people can use in the local area.

Councillor Trickett: You mean the local toilets—

Mr Prisk: No, I am just saying that you are having to do an economic analysis of why the money should be spent in this area, in order to satisfy bureaucrats in the NHS, when I think most people would look at it and think, “That is money well spent.”

Councillor Trickett: Yes and no. My professional background is in regeneration. Historically, we used to demand—and I think we still do in Birmingham—a new play area or some green space slotted on to the side of a development under section 106, instead of looking at the totality of the green space, its natural capital, and how a development enhances or protects what is around it. It is not about justifying it to some bureaucrat in the NHS. I am not averse to developing on parkland if it improves the natural capital, because you can, through the right forms of development, improve the natural capital of parkland. It is about having an investment tool. You do not invest in transport without a coherent model that helps you to monetise the outcome from your investment.

Q48 **Julian Knight:** Lisa, I just wanted to follow up on something that you said a moment ago to do with natural capital and devolution, and how you think natural capital will come into the equation. I was wondering: do you anticipate, therefore, that the costs of parks could be passed on to these new combined authorities?

Councillor Trickett: My colleagues will probably be as well placed to answer this as I am. “Passed on” is a very historic way of thinking, in some ways, about the role between the local authority and the combined authority. Certainly in the West Midlands, the role of the combined authority is very much to pursue growth, to ensure that there are jobs and skills coming into our region. My role in local government is to ensure that that growth is sustainable and inclusive, as my colleague has said. It is about a dialogue between the private sector and other agencies who are pursuing growth, and us; we are there, in part, to secure help in rooting growth in our cities, but equally to ensure benefits to our citizens. How do we share the costs, and how do the beneficiaries, who are quite often the investors, help share in these costs? Again, we have local growth funds in terms of transport development, but I do not have a local growth pot to apply to, to ensure that the green space network that leads from HS2 and takes you down to Longbridge and out of Worcester could mean that you could cycle from the centre of Worcester into HS2 Curzon Street station, without crossing a road. We do not have those kinds of things. We have Cycle Revolution and different pots of money, but

nothing that basically understands how natural capital interfaces with our grey infrastructure investment.

Q49 **Julian Knight:** You are ultimately talking about, here, a pooling of resource and costs across a combined authority. For example, the council taxpayers in another part of the combined authority can expect to, perhaps, subsidise the cost of parks within Birmingham. Is that correct?

Councillor Trickett: Again, it is very different, is it not? In some ways we are looking at different models from when we have business rates. One of the issues will be that the quality of your parks and environment supports some of your inward investment, which should lead to an uplift in business rates. The issue would be that it is quite often the people living in the shires, who drive their cars into my city for employment, who create some of the air pollution. I suppose it could be asked: is that part of an overall contribution to the economic social wellbeing of the region? Those are questions we have to put, but I think that a number of local authorities are arguing that this is about rethinking parks. It is about taking them from their historic context of flower beds and ice cream vans to their wider, proper role in the infrastructure of a place.

Julian Knight: That is broadly a yes, then.

Councillor Trickett: It is broadly—

Q50 **Chair:** Matthew Balfour is itching to get in.

Councillor Balfour: I apologise if any of my shire people drive into your parks. There are two different things here. One is the maintenance of what we already have, which is under pressure, because local government budgets are under extreme pressure. Secondly, there is the business of how you prove to developers that you need those open spaces. In Kent, because we are not allowed to have a structure plan anymore, we have something called the growth infrastructure framework, which you do not say too late at night. That monetises everything from the utilities, allotments, green spaces, roads, rail—you name it—to try to establish a persuasive argument to Government as to why local authorities should be better funded.

Q51 **Mary Robinson:** Before we end with this question, I want to pick up on the devolution aspects of this. This is to Ian in particular, because Stockport is part of the Greater Manchester area, where devolution is racing ahead, with the integration of health and social care. Looking at this from the point of view of recognising the wellbeing and health benefits of having a park, will Stockport Council and other councils be arguing the case for part of this integration, and the cross-support of the value going into these parks? In other words, will you be saying, "In terms of monetising, we have something that is worth while for the health of our residents"?

Ian Walmsley: If we were to make the argument without some form of statutory enforcement, it is easily forgotten and will be put to one side. The benefits of parks are not new, but the budgets keep being cut, and there is the existing maintenance of sites, which need protecting now. Yes, there would be an argument put forward that they should be widely considered, particularly through the planning policy, but what difference that makes for protection of parks, I do not know. I am cynical on that, which I apologise for.

Q52 **Mary Robinson:** I am thinking of Stockport Together, which is the GPs, the consortia and local authorities all working together for the benefit of the health of our residents. This seems to be a key issue.

Ian Walmsley: Just recently, in terms of making the argument to support things like parkrun, specific arguments on a small scale are certainly happening. However, I would not know whether on a grander scale there are options for moving budgets or protecting green spaces across Greater Manchester.

Andrew Hinchley: I think there is a belief that traditional parks departments need to move themselves into a slightly different arena. For a long time we have been concerned with the old traditional leisure model of parks, for many, many years. Now people are familiar with the concept of green infrastructure. We are starting to understand much better the variety of roles that our parks play. Those parks departments, in a way, need to evolve into more of a green space management function, and learn new ways of valuing, sharing and advocating, if you like, the benefits of those spaces.

However, we do need support to do that. We need the tools and some of the networks or the national bodies that no longer exist to help us, in a busy day-to-day life, where there are a lot of immediate pressures coming from green space management, to be able to step back and do some of that important strategic thinking.

Q53 **Mary Robinson:** You spoke about the various roles parks can play. How can those competing needs of different groups of park users be reconciled? We can see people using the park: mums and dads, children, and parkruns have been mentioned. I set off a parkrun a few weeks ago, so I know how important they are now. There is a wide range, from BMX parks to people playing football. How do we reconcile that?

Andrew Hinchley: It is very difficult. Camden is characterised by having very small spaces. Most of our spaces are less than a hectare, and they are meeting the needs of a very broad range of community members, businesses, plus all environmental needs on them. Ultimately, it is down to very careful and well thought-through design and management, and we need the skills to be able to manage a space for

nature at the same time as offering a space for play and for the two to interact.

There are no easy solutions to that. At times, we have tried to make sites be all things to all people, but when a site is less than a hectare, it just cannot be that. We have tried to step back and look more strategically at what our sites are providing in different areas. I go back to those toolkits or examples of best practice. They are the things I find important, as someone working in the park profession, that I can learn from and use to change the delivery or the way that we are providing parks, to help reconcile some of those conflicts.

The pressure to generate income has had a big impact, because there is a lot of conflict between, for example, the need to have more events in our parks and potentially the heritage value of a lot of parks in Camden, for example. There is a big resistance to using them for more events, due to damage or the effect people feel it might have on how those places feel.

Councillor Trickett: There are a couple of things. One of the issues is about free, accessible space. A lot of my parks, and those in other cities and areas, will often connect some of the most deprived communities with some of the most affluent. In my ward, there is definitely one of the poorest communities in Birmingham, which is connected through a park and the shared space in which they congregate to some of the most affluent communities.

We are already living in segregated cities, because of the built environment; 65% of the buildings that are up now will be here in 100 years' time. Our parks offer an opportunity to break through some of that segregation and bring communities together. We have polarised communities, so using park land as a space where people congregate and try to look at inclusive measures has been amazingly successful, certainly for us. Sport England has been a fantastic partner for us, as has This Girl Can, an absolutely superb initiative.

We have seen more women whose culture and faith sometimes mean they do not find it easy to interact in some of our leisure centres and activities be able to come out into the parks. We have seen people that have never been outside their neighbourhood take part in park runs, and they are now doing the 10km around the city. It is about capturing people in their locality, and then offering opportunities. The other issue is looking at reconciliation. Place shaping is an act of reconciliation anyway; it is about conflicting and competing priorities. I have to deliver a Cycle Revolution programme, but I equally have to keep the dog walkers happy. Sometimes those two do not go hand in hand. We need to bring it out, because it is about mutual respect. If the cyclist cannot respect the dog walker, then we have a problem in our society. We should not be shy about bringing those things out.

The other thing I think about parks, and something Mark used to be very keen to drive, is that we have made a number of our parks digitally enabled. I can remember hours of my life when I have been trying to do

work whilst trying to watch my children in a play area. What we looked at is play areas in our deprived areas where mums were doing access courses and things like that. We put wifi in those areas, and we have a number now who are able to do their college courses and everything else while being there with their children in the parks.

That is what we want to start looking at parks for: taking learning and opportunity to people in the places they are at. If capturing them in a play area is the best way of gaining somebody an opportunity to a pathway back to work, let us do it.

Q54 Mary Robinson: Does that work quite well? Let us say you have a local football team that wants to set up in the park, because the problem is that it takes it out of action for an hour and a half on a Saturday morning. How do you incorporate those sort of activities into your local parks?

Councillor Trickett: We held a Park Summit last week, and it was quite interesting, in that we had a group in the morning that was engaging with people who had either come through our books through free bicycle loans or Passport to Leisure, and all those kinds of things. We then had Friends of the Parks and key stakeholders. It was a very different understanding. A lot of people do just want to go to the park and kick a ball around.

Some models say, "Give the park to that sports club. If you want the football pitches to survive, you need to give the ownership over to the football club." The problem is that it becomes the exclusive use or the power base of that one particular sport or group, and the beauty of the parks and the green space is their openness and connectivity. Once they start being given over to just one group or usage, you lose the underlying benefit. You manage it through, again, sharing; it is about mutual respect and sharing.

Andrew Hinchley: There are ways around that. For example, we set up agreements quite carefully that constrain the amount of hours that a sports facility, for example, can be put out of us, making sure it is free to use from 4.00 until 6.00 in the evening when the kids come out of school. Little things like that can mean you are maximising the income, but not impacting the free-to-use value of that space.

The other thing I think is worth saying on conflicts is that removing barriers to use of space is one of the key things. The things that prevent people from going to use a space are particularly damaging—as much so as conflicts within space—and can often affect the more deprived communities much worse. They are particularly susceptible to changes in maintenance regimes, so if the quality of the space declines, people feel less secure, women and children are less likely to use it, and ethnic minorities are less likely to go and use that space. That is what I think is just as damaging as some of the conflicts that you might hear about.

Q55 Mary Robinson: There have been discussions recently around parkrun and the impact it has in terms of competing use, if you

like. The question is whether or not they should be charged for using the parks. A local football team may be charged, whereas other park users will not be. How would you decide who to charge and who not to?

Ian Walmsley: Largely it is back to those people who pay to use the park at a local level. British Military Fitness run classes, and if they are making a penny from the park, they can contribute to keeping the park in the condition it is, which brought them there in the first place. Parkrun, however, do not charge. I met with parkrun in Stockport last week. They are not universally popular, because at 9.00 on a Saturday morning they dominate the site. The car park will be full and there will be 300 people ruining a path. Without charging them, we are going to make a more formalised approach to the way they apply to use our parks, and have some form of agreement up front.

The agreement is about, on an annual basis, coming to talk to us to agree routes and agree B routes. We are putting them in direct contact with the people who tend not to like them, the Friends. I am aware this is webcast, but the Friends can be very protective of their own site and not perhaps so welcoming of people from the outside. It is about managing those agreements and a method by which they feed back into the park. They are all there for free, to run, so we try to introduce that if they have a damaged path, we will drop some stone off, and they will go and put the stone up for themselves. It is a little bit of payback, so that other people who do pay can see that park runners who go for free are contributing in some other way, but not necessarily through a set fee.

Q56 **Mary Robinson:** Is that universal—that you make a decision based on whether or not they are making any money out of it?

Councillor Trickett: We have a policy and protocol for the use of our parks across the board, and various risk assessment systems. Again, we are in a period where the budget situation is so awful that whether you make it statutory or not does not make a lot of difference, because we cannot afford the statutory as it is. What we have looked at is that if you take a revenue stream from something, you put something back in. If it is free to the user, then we should not charge, but if you make a profit from it, you put it back in, or if you charge a rent for something, you put it back in. Again, it should be proportional and fair. If I am honest, we probably have a whole set of charging regimes that have historically built up, and it is something we need to look at afresh in terms of understanding what the core purpose of our parks is.

Q57 **Mary Robinson:** One thing I would perhaps want you to consider as well, in the other answers, is this: if people are going to be charged for using the park, because they make money out of it and it is a business, if they go out of business, those people who are benefiting from the use of the parks, maybe through the fitness regimes, etc, or the parkruns, will not have the health benefit. Is

that something to be considered as well?

Councillor Balfour: I come at it from a slightly different viewpoint, in that there are few people who would be able to walk from their homes to one of our country parks, for obvious reasons. I think it was in 2013 that we took the brave decision to charge for the parking of cars, and that now brings in about 30% of the income that is needed. The cafés produce a considerable amount of income—about half—and then there are small amounts from children’s parties and that sort of thing.

However, we are still only three-quarters funded, which is where the public health comes in. If we could get public health to recognise the benefits of open space, then we would be very happy.

Q58 **Mr Prisk:** Councillor, you have already touched on this issue, so if I can therefore start with Councillor Balfour. In the sense of where parks sit in the priorities for local authorities, we have heard and had a number of representations both orally and in writing that without making parks a statutory duty, they are at risk of falling way behind in terms of the priorities, and therefore the strategic funding from local authorities. Putting the question simply, would a statutory duty be a good thing or a bad thing? Would it help? Would it tie your hands? What would your views be? Perhaps I could start with you, Councillor?

Councillor Balfour: Again, because they are country parks, it would be extraordinarily difficult to decide how you would say how many acres or hectares were required in Kent. The same would apply in urban areas. When you are carrying out a development, as has already been said, we should, with good planning, make sure there is sufficient green space within. However, I think to make country parks a statutory requirement would be extremely difficult.

As to the effect on the budget, it is a rounding error when you compare it to social care. £1.2 million, I think, is our total income; you can change that in a day with social care or transport policies. To my mind it is good management and good local government to provide these things, but I do not think it would be possible, practically, to dictate what local authorities should provide. It could be very dangerous, because you could have one Government that said everybody had to have pink swings in their park, and the next Government says they must be blue. It would cost a fortune to change the colour.

Q59 **Mr Prisk:** Mr Hinchley, what is your view, from a very different authority?

Andrew Hinchley: As an officer, it is difficult to say more broadly what the role of parks is. However, the role of green space in delivering Camden’s core strategic objectives is widely understood and appreciated in Camden. I think they are well protected through planning anyway, and through other designations that many of our parks in a central London

location have, such as through the London Squares Act, or through being listed or containing listed buildings. That means they enjoy an additional layer of protection, if you like, which perhaps means that we are not necessarily representative of other areas of the country.

The pressing need for them being statutory is not felt in that sense, perhaps. Personally, I think that the implications of a statutory function for parks is still very unclear, in terms of how it would function, what it would mean and how you would decide where to draw the line in terms of what priority it should provide, or what its character should be. How do you put a standard on the quality for all green spaces in an authority? I currently find it quite hard to see how that would transpire, and I think it would take a lot more work to explore the implications of it.

I am also not clear what some of the implications are for some of the income generation methods that we use at the moment. I believe there are differences with a statutory function, in terms of whether you can charge for it or not. That might have implications for some of the models we are talking about in other conversations here. There is a lot to explore in terms of that particular issue.

Councillor Trickett: We already have a range of duties upon us in terms of the Climate Change Act, which requires us to look at the natural environment and how that can be used to support and adapt our adaption to climate change. In BDP, we have set out where our green spaces are and what their requirements are. We have a range of duties; I am not sure what a statutory responsibility would offer, in terms of clarity on where resources were needed.

What is far better, in my mind, is a framework that understands who the core beneficiaries are, be it health, inward investment, or the broader regional economy. To me, that is the starting point. Let us understand where the key outcomes and opportunities arise from parks, and ensure that the resources, duties and plans fit around that.

Q60 **Mr Prisk:** It sounds as though you are saying that a recognition in the health service, for example, of the role of parks would be far more helpful in delivering resources, priorities or whatever, than necessarily placing an additional statutory—

Councillor Balfour: Absolutely.

Councillor Trickett: With the public health money that came to local authorities, we pioneered taking that forward in terms of our active parks, and leisure centres without walls. Again, though, when you are then having to balance the needs of people with mental health issues against a park facility that is seen to be added value when the budgets are depleting, I know where the resources will end up in public health terms by the end of this round of budget cuts. It is a Catch-22, and it is again about the fundamental, whole-system, whole-place accounting for what the needs and requirements of local government are.

Q61 **Mr Prisk:** And Stockport?

Ian Walmsley: As a park keeper of 30 years, my gut reaction is, "Yes, it should be statutory; we should make sure the funding is there." However, without having any idea of what that would mean, there is a risk that if there were a minimum level set, then more green space would be at greater risk. The provision of green space in itself is not enough. As Andrew said, it is about setting a quality level for that. Without any clear idea of what it would mean, I tend to think the risks would be greater to parks in having something statutory.

Q62 **Mr Prisk:** Presumably if the duty was broad—"A council shall provide green space"—it becomes meaningless. If it becomes too narrow, the issue that Mr Hinchley has raised, which is whether it would restrict your practical ability to generate funds, whether from cafés or whatever, would be a concern.

Andrew Hinchley: How do you set a local standard? I have just said that most of the spaces we have in Camden are less than one hectare. If you set that standard in some of the shires, that would seem ridiculous. I do not know how you would manage that nationally.

Councillor Trickett: It is a bit like the library issue, is it not? There is a responsibility for us to provide access to libraries, but what that means in practice is yet to be fully determined, and will be determined by the libraries that are cut, and what the outcome of challenges will be. Again, looking at passing up responsibility or demands or statutory duties, it was a different era of local government from the one we are in now; we have to be more flexible and understanding of the functionality of what we are responsible for.

Councillor Balfour: Most particularly in urban areas, there is a danger that, if you set a certain standard, there will be a race to the bottom. There is the Green Flag system; the standards of seven out of our nine parks are much higher than the standard that is set by the Green Flag. However, if you set a level, statutorily, then the inclination, given budgets and all the rest of it, is to do that minimum.

Mr Prisk: It becomes a ceiling?

Councillor Balfour: It becomes a floor.

Mr Prisk: It depends where you start from, I suppose.

Councillor Balfour: Half empty, half full.

Q63 **Julian Knight:** Following on from that point, do you know how many parks and green spaces you are responsible for, and how much each costs? Do any of your parks make a profit?

Councillor Balfour: Shall I reel off a few statistics? We have about 1,000 acres of parks, with about 1.6 million annual visits. That is based on car numbers coming through the car parks, on which we now have number-plate recognition, and then a multiplier as to the average number of people, so it is not an exact figure. There is a small team that run it.

We also have over 2,000 volunteer days, equivalent to about 14,000 hours of volunteers. 5,800 children engage through school trips, which is really important, and there are 300 parkrunners every weekend. I suspect you probably have that in each and every one of your parks.

Total expenditure is in the order of £1.7 million, total income £1.26 million, so it is costing Kent County Council £440,000. We are therefore 74% funded. What is interesting is that, when asked, 46% of people say they have come to walk their dog or just go for a walk. 21% want to visit the café. 22% want to relax in nature, and believe it or not, 20% say they want to get the kids active. Those last two statistics must be the important ones, and if we could build on those—

Q64 Julian Knight: I will follow up on that in a second, but if we could just go through, very briefly, your parks and green spaces, do you have that to hand, in terms of how many you are responsible for, how much each costs and whether any of them turn a profit?

Andrew Hinchley: I do have them. We have 76; in terms of the amount that each costs, I do not have that at my fingertips. It is something that I could happily provide.

Q65 Julian Knight: But do you know what each one costs?

Andrew Hinchley: We have that information; I do not have it in front of me. In terms of whether individual ones make a profit, again, I do not know that offhand, to be honest. I would have to go back and check, and provide you with an answer separately, if that would be possible.

Councillor Trickett: We have 591 parks, 251 play areas, and some 3,700 hectares of green space. We get from our parks, if we look purely at traditional return, an income of about £4.84 million. If I am to use the natural capital tool and the modelling that has recently been done in Birmingham, then the net natural capital value that the parks bring in is £12 million. That is what the natural capital tool partly does: show the actual value, aside from what you assume. However, stick with the £5 million.

Q66 Julian Knight: £5 million. How much does it cost?

Councillor Trickett: I have only had parks since June, so I am on a steep learning curve, having just done bins. Within our parks we have allotments. The other thing you find, which goes back to my section 106 argument, is that we have an extraordinary amount of pocket parks and little bits of hard-to-maintain land that come under parks. The overall grounds maintenance budget is £8 million, and on top of that we have the cost of allotments and various other things, which comes to about £12.2 million.

Julian Knight: On top of that?

Councillor Trickett: No, in total.

Q67 Julian Knight: In total. So you are funded to either about 55%,

or if you take into account the allotments, you are funded to around 35% to 40%.

Councillor Trickett: The allotments and the green space; central reservations also come under my parks maintenance, so again one of the things that we are looking at there is trying to turn that into meadow. I hate to say this, but one of the difficulties with local government is that so often, what you are measuring does not actually relate to what you think. My finance colleagues will give me a sum, but that does not actually measure what people see as park and green space. It is how historically we have accounted for it.

Q68 **Julian Knight:** No, I understand. I am going to move on to benchmarking in a second. Mr Walmsley?

Ian Walmsley: 1,200 hectares of green space, with a revenue budget of around about £3 million. Per site, I have no idea; many sites do not receive any maintenance. There is an income target, and we receive about £400,000 in income. However, that is not the cost of maintaining the parks, because there are 60 "Friends of" groups, thousands of volunteer hours spent on the sites, £800,000 worth of transition moneys to improve play this year, and £400,000 of money from health to improve paths.

We can identify the revenue budget that is currently available, but not truly what the costs of maintaining the parks are, or what the true liabilities of a park are. There is no money for replacing benches or bins. I know I have 600 bins at £300 each.

Q69 **Julian Knight:** So you have £3.4 million in costs.

Ian Walmsley: Yes.

Q70 **Julian Knight:** Do you have any idea of revenue?

Ian Walmsley: That is the revenue budget.

Q71 **Julian Knight:** So you get £3.4 million from the parks? They bring in £3.4 million; is that correct?

Ian Walmsley: Sorry. The total budget is £3.4 million requirement, but I get £3 million, because I bring £400,000 in. I get £3 million in my budget because I am expected to bring in £400,000. The total of £3.4 million is required to—

Q72 **Julian Knight:** You spend £3 million to get £400,000; is that correct?

Ian Walmsley: Yes.

Julian Knight: That is about 15% or 12.5%. Percentages were never my strong suit.

Councillor Balfour: If I could just point out that coming from a two-tier area, I have 12 districts and boroughs, all of whom have their own parks.

I hate to think how many little bits of land they have to look after. Some have wonderful areas, and some not so wonderful areas.

Q73 **Julian Knight:** And presumably some, as Ian just mentioned, have no recourse at all to the public exchequer, and they just do it through the Friends groups and that sort of thing in small areas.

Councillor Balfour: No.

Councillor Trickett: This is one of the concerns at the moment. The Friends groups are absolutely fantastic and do wonderful, wonderful work. We probably have more active Friends groups in areas where there is less need, but you have a health and safety requirement. If you want to do a parkrun, you have to make sure your pathways are safe. If you want to encourage children's groups to come to the parks, the ground has to be safe. That is where some of our costs come in: the annual inspections of your play areas, or that your lakes and your ponds are properly fenced off. You cannot leave all of that to volunteers.

Q74 **Julian Knight:** Very finally, if I could briefly ask individual members of the panel, how do you actually benchmark your parks? We have had a blizzard of statistics, and thank you for that, but how do you benchmark against each other, and against other local authorities?

Councillor Balfour: We run user surveys; that is the main way of doing it, to find out what people want and what they think, what they are getting, and what they would like to change. We benchmark by comparing ourselves with other similar authorities, not necessarily on a pound per pound basis but because our officers communicate with other officers in different areas.

Andrew Hinchley: We use a combination of factors. We look at satisfaction levels from resident surveys across the board. We have conditions surveys that tell us the physical condition of our parks and what might need investment. We also do a quality assessment. We do not enter Green Flag anymore; I think it was found quite an onerous application procedure, and as officer resource declined, unfortunately that was not something we were able to continue. One of our focuses at the moment is on some of the smaller green spaces that would not necessarily naturally be put forward for Green Flag, those that are serving more deprived communities rather than traditional public parks.

Councillor Trickett: We certainly benchmark on volunteer hours. Footfall and the condition of our parks is taken account of by an individual assessment, the name of which I forget but I know it was in the Birmingham submission. We are an active member of the Natural Capital Tool Research Group, so we are benchmarking and comparing costs and things with Sheffield.

Ian Walmsley: Previously, across the Greater Manchester authorities, there was a park subgroup, so we had a range of local performance indications that we compared with one another. As parks teams reduced,

that died off. We used the Green Flag criteria, and measured the percentage of provision of Green Flag parks per head of population, but since 2012 and impacts of cuts there has been no form of benchmarking, and very little by way of surveys. There is something with a different regime in Stockport now that we are looking to reinvent a little bit, but none for the past four years, in terms of site surveys and benchmarking.

Q75 Rushanara Ali: I just wanted to pick up on Councillor Trickett's point about safety and maintenance of parks. You may be aware that last year, one of my constituents, Alexia Walenkaki, went to play in Mile End park and, very tragically, the equipment was not maintained, so it collapsed on her and she died. One of our concerns is that we need a better sense of whether there are risks elsewhere in the country. Perhaps others could also reflect on this: are you concerned that, given increasing pressures on resources, those who are in charge might inadvertently neglect, as we found, the need to ensure there is proper inspection and maintenance on a regular basis?

Councillor Trickett: It is a major concern to us, in that the quality of the play areas, for example, are assessed when they go in, and then it is how they are used. We will have play areas that went in when they were for a housing development for young children. We seemed to forget in the 1980s that young children become teenagers; they become older, and play equipment is used by teenagers in a different way. We have gone through an evaluation of all our play areas.

I have three days of meetings with members next week where we are looking at the phased withdrawal from some of those play areas, because we do not have the money to reinvest in that play equipment, nor do we have the money to maintain them. We are having to withdraw from them. In my ward, there is one of the first play areas where we withdrew the equipment and barked it over, both because it was a community safety issue in terms of evening usage of that play area, and because of the quality of some of the equipment. What we are going to look at within that is how, with diminishing budgets, we can still ensure there is good, safe play. We are working with the Go Wild network to look at how we can ensure there is play space, and play within our parks that is safe but flexible.

Andrew Hinchley: I do not think necessarily there is an increased risk. Health and safety inspections, and addressing high-risk items, will always be top of the agenda. Perhaps the difference now is our ability, once we have shut a space down and made it safe, to do something about that quickly—how fast it could perhaps be replaced, or where we can find capital investment to do something about that.

Q76 Bob Blackman: This question builds on from Rushanara Ali's question. What has been the impact of the budgetary pressures on the service that is provided for parks and park users?

Andrew Hinchley: In Camden, there have been changes to the maintenance regimes; we have had to look at our maintenance regimes. There are things you will have heard before about removing annual bedding and reduced mowing regimes; officer-wise, we have fewer officers in our team, so certain functions, such as landscape design officers or community engagement officers are no longer there. We are no longer providing certain services that we used to, such as educational facilities, in our parks. They are now provided by others. At the moment, that is broadly the extent of the impact to date.

Ian Walmsley: We have also lost asset types, such as flower beds and the like. The biggest loss in Stockport has been the loss of site-based staff. They are not there in the weekends and evenings, which has seen a bit of a rise in antisocial behaviour. It was some of the things that were less easy to evaluate. With grounds maintenance, you can see a guy working for eight-hour days and you can see what he does. However, with somebody who has a slightly different role in engaging the community, it was less easy to evidence their value, and so now they have gone.

Q77 **Bob Blackman:** Earlier, in reply to another question, you said that some open spaces that were under your control do not get any maintenance at all. What happens to those sites?

Ian Walmsley: Not formal urban parks, but a woodland, for instance, does not require regular maintenance input, and nor does a meadow. We have tried to change and ended up losing play equipment. Some things were changed in urban parks to a more naturalised management regime, which is able to keep good quality parks, but looking and feeling a little bit different, and that is how we have accommodated some of the budget losses.

Councillor Trickett: There has been a 40% cut to the management and maintenance of our parks, and reductions in and changes to the way we maintain it. We are no longer half-mooning. Some of the edging is changing. There is not the changeover in terms of managed maintenance. We have closed our horticultural centre, which is a great regret, because it could have been a great training and employment facility. We are very much focused on trying to bring in volunteers, so we have about 60,000 volunteer hours coming into our parks per year. We have gone to huge lengths in terms of events—

Q78 **Bob Blackman:** How do you control what the volunteers do? 60,000 volunteers is—

Councillor Trickett: 60,000 hours.

Bob Blackman: Hours? Right. Even so, however, that is a lot of people coming in, which, unsupervised, could be disastrous.

Councillor Trickett: This is one of the dilemmas: the most successful way of working with the Friends of the Parks groups is partly through

protocols, so we agree on the use of machinery and what you can and cannot do, in terms of cutting things down, but equally our park rangers have been absolutely critical in terms of supporting the volunteers. If we are not careful, the next round of cuts will mean we have to reduce down our park ranger service to a series of hubs, which will potentially reduce the amount of volunteer hours we can attract, because there will not be enough resources to support and facilitate that access to the parks.

Ian Walmsley: Can I just add to that? We have also lost rangers. We have been through that process already, and that was what we thought might happen: that without the direct support we would lose the volunteers. What we have had to do instead is invent new ways to provide that direction, vision and control. We do this by tasked application, and we provide training for risk assessment and training for machinery. I have had to become a lot less risk-averse and allow volunteers to go into sites and maintain them.

We agree what works they will do; they tell us when and where and what they will do, but we let them get on with it. Our visitor centres would all be closed in Stockport if we had not allowed volunteers to take them over. It is coming off and allowing that lack of control a little bit, to allow the volunteers to do what they need to do.

Councillor Balfour: As in every part of local government, the cuts have been awful, and I am sure my colleagues would agree that things like maintaining the public rights of way to a safe standard have suffered. Do not forget there are bridges and things on public rights of way, and if you do not maintain them and they fall down, somebody might well get hurt. The same applies in country parks; they need to be ensured to be safe.

As I said before, in the great scheme of things, when you are looking at the totality of the budgets, country parks, as far as Kent is concerned, is a small sum, but we have got it up from being about 40% self-funding to, as I say, about three quarters self-funding. That is, I am afraid, the way it will have to go. It will have to be much more “user pays”, but we do not want to lose the people. We have fantastic teams of rangers and educationalists, and we do not want to lose them, because they are the lifeblood of that service. Volunteers will come and work because they will be supervised well, and they will be enthused. School parties will come because they will be well educated when they come to a country park. To lose that part of the natural capital—I would include that as natural capital—would be a terrible shame.

Q79 **Bob Blackman:** One final issue, which I think builds from that, is: how can parks be placed on a sustainable basis, given that there is no likelihood of the pressures on local authority budgets changing or reducing? Clearly you have to plan for the future—not the next year or so, but beyond. Does anyone want to volunteer what you are going to do?

Councillor Balfour: As far as Kent is concerned, it is to improve the offer: in other words, so that more people will come to use the cafés, more people will want to come and walk. We had a suggestion of a green burial site in one of our parks, but certain colleagues of mine said that was not something they wanted to see. It would have been a very good thing financially. “Doing it better” is really what it comes down to.

Andrew Hinchley: As councils and parks departments, we are having to look at a range of different options. It has been clear from what has been said already in past sessions in other evidence that there is no “one size fits all” solution to this, other than full local authority funding. We are looking at income generation and seeing how far we can push things like that. In Camden, as part of the Nesta piece of work, which I believe you are hearing about later, we had a Bloomsbury Square project, which was about trying to explore the opportunities to set up a BID-style improvement district for parks. A voluntary business levy would be charged on local businesses in Bloomsbury to add value to those sites and help maintain them to a high standard.

However, we found with that piece of work that there was not the appetite to voluntarily offer up a business levy just for parks. They could not see the direct impact on their bottom line, and therefore some of these models that are being put forward as the solution to parks management have real challenges and complications in seeing them through.

Ian Walmsley: Commercialisation, as Andrew said. Another thing I would like to look at is not pushing more parks into the same maintenance budgets. We should have a review of the planning; every new development brings with it new play areas and new green open space, whereas right next to them could be existing green spaces that need the money. There is a little bit of change in how we manage sites, making them a bit more commercial and ensuring that, when there is money available to create new ones, perhaps we just improve what we already have.

Councillor Trickett: Parks are an asset to the UK economy. I believe they are an asset we are yet to appropriately sweat. To understand the economic value of parks, in terms of how we take forward growth moneys, I think, will be critical. Models that have been used in the past and have been piloted elsewhere—certainly Birmingham’s number of parks came about through equity shares being offered to businesses and investors. Again, I think there is an issue about civic ownership, with localities and communities already owning those parks.

It is inevitably a mixed economy. We are looking at how we can commercialise our parks in terms of restaurants and cafés. I regret that I cannot get a decent meal, and my husband might regret that he cannot get a pint, in our parks, so there is that element. We do things like our Cofton nursery, which makes a profit in terms of plants and what it sells elsewhere, but it still comes back to that basic thing: we have to truly

understand the purpose of parks, both in terms of public health and their economic contribution.

Children spend less time going out and enjoying the outside than they do toileting. That is what the national childhood survey told us. If you think that you learn from your environment, our children are learning through a screen, rather than being challenged and tested by the natural environment. I cannot think of anything more important for the Government to invest in than our parks.

Q80 Mary Robinson: Just very quickly, I am really interested in the reaction you have had to a reducing budget. The words I am hearing are “improving the offer”, bringing more people into the parks, introducing restaurants and other commercial aspects to get people into the parks and using them. Is there an element of this that means these cuts have led to a liberalisation of your thinking in terms of your parks?

Councillor Trickett: The Greek term for crisis is “krinein”, which means opportunity. Clearly, in every crisis there is an opportunity, and we are doing things like looking at some of the pocket parks and how we can offer those up to community challenge. However, you still have to look at the overall message from local government, through the various surveys that have been undertaken, that parks maintenance has taken massive cuts, that the quality of the parks environment is declining, and that concerns about the safety and wellbeing of the environment are rising. Let us be careful. We have been innovative and we have looked at alternatives, but the cuts are in very great danger of tilting the balance too far.

Q81 Chair: Let me move on; I have one quick question. Have any of you looked at the alternative models that they are looking at in Newcastle, where we went the other day, with the trust model? The National Trust has been looking at it, and Vivid Economics has done some work for them. If you have not, that is fine, but if you have had a look, could you very briefly tell us where you have got to with your thinking on it?

Councillor Trickett: We have a range of trust models. We currently work with the Wildlife Trust. We have long leases with them, and we are looking at how we can go into a much more sustainable relationship. We are looking at the Midlands Arts Centre and how Cannon Hill Park and the surrounding area could be part of a trust model there. Equally, however, I would still go back to the point that this land belongs to the citizens of our city, and the importance of civic ownership is our overriding—

Q82 Chair: You are not looking at putting parks into a trust, then?

Councillor Trickett: We are not privatising overall into a trust, no.

Councillor Balfour: Some of our smaller sites, the National Trust deals with. We have looked again and again and again at the possibilities of getting outside management in, and we do it better.

Andrew Hinchley: There is the nursery project I mentioned earlier, and they are now exploring setting up a charitable trust and building on the work that they have done. They are not looking, necessarily, to take over the parks in that area. That is more as an added value to bring in legacies and donations.

Ian Walmsley: In Stockport I have met with people who have said that with a suitably large endowment, and great enough interest, they could run the parks for us, but we do not have enough money to do the basic maintenance, so we certainly do not have enough money to give them £100 million for an endowment. We explore leases and licences as much as we can on a small scale.

Q83 **Melanie Onn:** I am going to return to planning policy, the councillors' favourite. Section 106 contributions were mentioned; they were referred to as giving a bolt-on of green space or play areas to new developments. I just wonder if planning policy is generally perceived as being adequate in this area, in making sure that parks or green spaces are accessible to everyone.

Andrew Hinchley: It can be very difficult to secure on-site open space from developments in built-up areas when you are very constrained in terms of the amount of land that is available. Where there are large sites like King's Cross, for example, it has been very successful and has created some real quality green spaces. However, when you have a lot of piecemeal small developments, what tends to happen is that developers will give a commuted sum to the authority instead to enhance existing open space, which we do, and we make best use of that money, but it is not providing new open space. I think that is a problem with cumulative development perhaps not necessarily producing new open space opportunities.

Councillor Trickett: Development opportunities within the city boundary, and those areas that are adjacent to the city boundary, are the areas that currently are most advantaged in terms of access to parks and green areas. The areas of the city where there is very little development potential, the inner-city areas where there is high density and historic development, are the areas where there is virtually no green space, and they are desperately in need of green space. The planning policy does not necessarily help within that area. It comes back to understanding a whole-place relationship with an overall plan.

Ian Walmsley: Where new development provision is made for on-site, we have worked to change the design of the play areas that provide it, so they are not resource-intensive or high maintenance. They are more naturalistic, without fixed play equipment, for instance, but still—

Q84 **Melanie Onn:** What do they get in a more naturalistic

environment? What does that mean?

Ian Walmsley: What does that mean? I do not know. Boulders, grass lumps, things that do not require routine maintenance and do not fall under British standards for play equipment, but still offer opportunities for imaginative play.

Councillor Balfour: Personally, I think it is absolutely vital that there is proper planning. I am a District Councillor as well, and I sit on the Ebbsfleet planning committee. A curious thing at Ebbsfleet is that the first finished block has quite a big bit of park, and the people who bought there complained bitterly at these people from outside coming in and making a noise in the middle of the night and leaving their trash and all the rest of it. There is a huge management problem of new developments and how you self-maintain the environment. I do not mean cutting grass, but making sure that people do not misbehave, or if they do misbehave, they misbehave in a place where nobody else can hear them.

Andrew Hinchley: Particularly on sites where developers retain responsibility for public open space, and there has been a growth in this private-public realm, there is an issue of accountability and governance that people need to consider. How public or how inclusive are those open spaces? For many authorities, that is the only way that they could deal with new open space. We do not have the resources to take on additional open space. We are struggling to maintain the spaces we already have, but what are the implications of that alternative model of private public space delivery?

Q85 **Melanie Onn:** Do you now think that there is a good balance, when new housing development is taking place, with the provision of green space within those housing developments?

Councillor Trickett: The problem is that the way that we approach development in this country is that you have a bit of land and you look at it, and you say, "How many houses can I fit on that to make my return?" As a local authority we will look at how much we can get in terms of the affordable housing component and how much we can get on section 106, instead of actually looking at that piece of land and saying, "What is the overall contribution to our natural capital and our overall infrastructure within this authority, and how do we develop that through to actually meet that housing need and requirement, but also ensure that housing growth is inclusive, sustainable and connected to the wider community?" What then ends up happening is exactly what my colleagues have said: we can have new housing developments where we have play areas put alongside, they are not maintained or lit, and they become far more problematic and very quickly a community safety issue, while adding nothing to the natural environment. By working together and planning it through, I truly believe that we can have more cost-effective, higher-

density developments, potentially, and still make a return on natural capital.

Councillor Balfour: To my mind it comes down to good planning. The NPPF does not, to my mind, allow good planning in the sense of structure. It is fine for a site for 80 houses, or even possibly more, but when it comes down to a whole region or a county, you need much more integration of ideas and concepts of where you are going to put those bits of infrastructure that you need to provide if you are to allow the housing to come in.

Andrew Hinchley: It is towards that shift that we were talking about earlier away from a traditional sense of what parks are, under which many LDFs all over the planet have quite clear guidance about what ought to be provided per capita. In terms of shifting to a more green infrastructure approach of a wider green space network, that can often be much weaker in planning terms, with regard to how we secure that and particularly how you deliver it within a development site.

Q86 **Melanie Onn:** On a final point, Lisa, you mentioned inner-city areas being very far from green spaces. There has been mention of issues with conflicts within the space, the removal of barriers and the idea that parks can bridge communities, but we know that the most affluent 20% of wards in the country have access to about five times as much green space as the poorest 10% of wards across England. What do you think we can do to give those deprived communities more access to green spaces or traditional parks?

Andrew Hinchley: It is very hard to create green space in central London, as you will appreciate.

Melanie Onn: Maybe not the creation, then. If it is not about creating new space—

Andrew Hinchley: It partly needs to be, because there is a limit to the capacity of existing spaces. We have a huge portfolio of housing land that is not classified as parks but as green space. It is how spaces like that, or highway areas, can perhaps be used more creatively. We are exploring the creation of a new public park near Tottenham Court Road, and transferring highway over to green space, to try to achieve that additional green space in different ways.

That is the crucial way for us to address it. In terms of the investment that we make, we are very clear on targeting investment now at those areas of greatest need—those deprived communities or areas that currently have under-provision of green space. That is where we target our capital investment.

Councillor Trickett: An example at the weekend was a 1980s housing association development, which won loads of awards at the time, so clearly has been a difficult estate to manage from day one—eight different

housing associations, and end of development where each housing association carved out little bits of green space that have just become under-utilised in an area where there is no park land. With CLG funding, with funding from Greggs, a pocket park has been created.

One of the things we are doing in my ward is working with the local mosque to get the community to work towards planting within the pocket park. If the younger generation have done something as part of that, they are less likely to abuse it, and those kind of ongoing things. There is something about sweating and making better use of the green pockets that we have. We will be issuing some of our pockets of land that are in local authority ownership to take risk and say to the community, "Can you do something with this?" Some will work and some will not; that is a risk we will have to take, and I hope the media is sympathetic towards us.

There was a film done recently about green space and play areas, and there was a lad interviewed from Tottenham. This lad was referring to the signs saying, "No ball games here". How can we do that? There are tower blocks; the only green space available to those children is outside those tower blocks, and the first thing we do is to slap a sign on it with, "No ball games here". Those young people are growing up with an identity that says, "You are not welcome here." It is not just what we do on the green space; it is how we make children and young people feel part of their communities. Again, when we look at our inner-city areas and high-density inner-city estates, we have to look at that totality of green space and make sure that it is accessible and inclusive to all.

Ian Walmsley: In Stockport we mapped where our parks were and the facilities that were in them. It is urban areas that have a great concentration of the natural park-looking parks, because they were presented by politicians in the past. However, the cost and maintenance difficulty, because they are highly used by lots of different competing groups, is maintaining them at a reasonable standard for those people who do not have access to the natural environment that is around Stockport.

It is also ensuring that everybody does have access to some part of the park. The bowlers want their bowling green; they do not want footballers playing on it. It is finding the resources to maintain the parks to a good standard that keeps them open to everybody in the urban areas, rather than supplying parks. We have a lot of green space in the town centres and urban areas already.

Q87 Rushanara Ali: I just wanted to go back to the question of capacity and whether you feel, in light of the changes in pressures—budgetary pressures and other pressures—that councils have the right skills and expertise now to cope with the kinds of challenges that the parks sector is faced with. We have heard today lots of good examples of good practice; what do you think could be done to make sure there is proper learning across the country? Obviously, there are the local government networks and

so on. Could you shed some light on how we can make sure that the lessons are learned and shared across the country?

Councillor Balfour: You are absolutely right: it is important that peer pressure is used, and some sort of comparison methodology must be right. However—and I am going to get my word in now—what was said about the broken window syndrome, keeping up standards, place and community, and the community being proud of where they live, is vital. I am sure that everyone has noticed that the quantum of litter now is getting out of hand across the country. It is not particular to particular areas. Part of that is that people have lost that innate connection between where they live and how they live. My colleagues here have described that beautifully. We need to make sure that communities respect and are proud of where they live.

Andrew Hinchley: In London in particular I think we are quite lucky in terms of networks. Parks for London run a number of working groups that we are able to attend and learn from other London boroughs. There is a good benchmarking forum, where you can post questions via email and receive responses. That is a helpful tool, but what is missing is something at a national level. There seems to be a void since CAGE Space and green space disappeared, which is not pulling together the best practice that we talked about earlier.

Because of the shift to where we need to look at wider benefits of green space, there is a need to step back and take that strategic look, and that is more difficult when there is not someone collating it for you at a national level. There is a lot of repetition and reinventing the wheel going on at the moment among authorities, because that is not there.

Q88 **Rushanara Ali:** Perhaps that is an idea our Committee might take forward. Can I just finish off on the question of volunteers? We all know that volunteers cannot just go and do stuff; they need co-ordinating, and you have mentioned some of this already. Can you all give some reflections on how you think the budget reductions will have an impact? Where are the negatives in relation to budget reductions, in terms of the volunteer co-ordination and maximising the potential?

We have a great tradition in this country of volunteering, but it seems to me that there is a risk that we are going to lose out on community involvement if that is not properly co-ordinate and backed by resources at the centre to get the most out of involvement.

Councillor Balfour: You have to invest to save. We need to put what little resource we have into increasing the quantum of volunteering. The volunteering hours that are put in in Kent are amazing, absolutely astonishing across the piece, across all subjects. Unless we make it easy and effective for them, they will not come, and if you do make it easy and

effective for them, they will come and you will have more of them. That will, in the end, save you money.

Andrew Hinchley: It is good that volunteering is seen as something that needs resource to manage, oversee and support, because I think there is a risk that it is seen as an easy solution here: "Oh, volunteers can take it on; they will run our parks for us." What we have found helpful in Camden is that we are trying to take a more strategic approach to volunteering. We have a programme called Green Gym, where we are working in partnership with the Conservation Volunteers. They now, with volunteers, manage nine of our nature conservation sites and are also looking to enhance nature conservation value across our parks themselves. That is helpful. We do not have the skills in-house necessary to do that, but they are able to deliver that far better. It also means that we can target efforts at those areas of greatest need.

There is a risk with volunteers that sometimes, if you wait for them to step forward, it can be some of the perhaps better-off areas, which have more confidence and skills, that step up to the plate. Deprived communities without those skills do not necessarily have the capacity.

Councillor Trickett: One thing we have to remember and utterly respect is something I have learned with volunteers. The area that I represent has more than its fair share of social capital. At times, it feels like we are awash with it. That social capital, and the volunteer contribution to a whole range of things, from Moseley in Bloom to Moseley Park to all kinds of different things is absolutely fantastic. However, people volunteer for things that interest them. Those volunteers are fantastic and their contribution to the area is brilliant, but that does not make those volunteers want to contribute to the pocket park in the most deprived part of my ward where the drug dealers are.

In part, if what you do is by total reliance on volunteers, you find that those excluded communities continue to be the most excluded. Also—we have tried to take lessons from Brexit; we are a 50/50 city in terms of the vote—in our inner-city areas, where there have been regeneration programmes and ongoing engagement, there is a whole range of community groups that have volunteers within the parks. In some of our deprived white working class areas, with an ageing population alongside a much more transient population, we do not have those volunteers and that capacity, or we have an ageing volunteer set. The issue is how you build that capacity and that connection with those communities.

We now have, with private renting, estates that were previously stabilised through Right to Buy, with no rehousing provided. Those properties are now increasingly being used as private renting. We are finding quite stable areas becoming very transient, which means nobody is interested in volunteering on those estates and supporting those green areas anymore.

Q89 Rushanara Ali: The upshot is to invest in the strategic requirements and also the inequities, to make sure—

Councillor Trickett: Absolutely.

Rushanara Ali: And then to enable innovation and creativity alongside, rather than trying to substitute one for the other.

Councillor Trickett: Yes, absolutely. I could not have put it better myself.

Chair: Thank you all very much for coming this afternoon and giving evidence to us. It has been very helpful to the Committee.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Katy Layton-Jones, Merrick Denton-Thompson OBE, Julia Thrift, and James Harris.

Q90 **Chair:** Good afternoon. Thank you for coming to give evidence to us. Just for our records, could you go down the table and say who you are and the organisation you are representing?

James Harris: I am James Harris. I am the Policy and Networks Manager at the Royal Town Planning Institute.

Julia Thrift: I am Julia Thrift, the Director of Projects and Operations at the Town and Country Planning Association, the TCPA.

Merrick Denton-Thompson: I am Merrick Denton-Thompson; I am President of the Landscape Institute.

Dr Layton-Jones: I am Katy Layton-Jones. I am representing the Gardens Trust, but I am an independent historical consultant who wrote the report on funding public parks.

Q91 **Chair:** Thank you for coming. You have probably heard some of the evidence we had already from the previous witnesses. We began by asking what parks were really used for now, about the issue of natural capital and how you could assess the value of parks, and whether local authorities really have the skills to do that. What is your take on that?

Dr Layton-Jones: The idea that we have to rediscover what parks are for is slightly horrifying. They are for what they were always for, and they have continued to be that, which is incredibly diverse. It involves, yes, looking at flower beds. I am not sure why everyone laughs when we say flower beds, but they do. It involves allowing people to take part in formalised sport—yes, in the form of football if they want to, but also a kick-around between their mates; it does not have to be a football pitch. Enjoying trees and birds, talking to each other, and getting away from the bustle and the pollution of modern life. It was that in 1830 when people started talking about them; it is that today in 2016. The fact that we are still going around this circle 170-odd years later and trying to figure out

what they are for is slightly disingenuous and rather worrying. They are for everything, and they always have been, and they have served it very well.

Julia Thrift: I completely agree with that; I would say if anything that we have always had an instinctive knowledge of why the parks do us good. Some of your previous witnesses have expressed that extremely passionately and well. We now have, and it has grown over the last 10 years, overwhelming evidence from academics all around the world, looking at the huge range of different benefits that parks bring. We are no longer saying, "Yes, it is obvious; it is instinctive; we know it." We also have an enormous amount of evidence.

Only last week the World Health Organisation published an enormous report outlining all the evidence about the health benefits of green spaces. In addition to the things that were known about 100, 200 or 300 years ago, we now also have much more knowledge about things such as parks reducing air pollution and making places economically much more attractive. Highly skilled people want to live in green areas. Green areas reduce the heat island effect, which is going to be increasingly important as climate change warms up our cities. We always knew that there were benefits; we now know there are far more benefits, and we are able to quantify them.

Merrick Denton-Thompson: I agree that there are more benefits. We are really after a multifunctional landscape, are we not? I also want to emphasise that the context is changing, so we have to bear that in mind. What do I mean by that? Obviously, we are looking for greater densities in our towns and cities, and therefore demands are higher. Things like the School Premises Regulations, which were scrapped in the middle of the Olympics, were all about supporting free schools. Now you can build free schools without any land.

The previous evidence that was given mentioned children and young people, and how vitally important that connection between young people and the outside is. That is not just about play. I am afraid we tend to banish play to the playground; actually play is a very complex set. We all know that with the traditional playground, you spend two minutes on what it was designed for, and then you spend the rest of the time doing things that it was not designed for. We must look at these spaces for young people. It is experiential learning: a lot of learning goes on outside, and such a high proportion of our children learn through direct experience.

Therefore, I absolutely agree with my colleagues. Why are we revisiting this? We value it. I think you have heard a lot of evidence, have you not, that supports our parks? However, there are more pressures, and a new imperative now for that multifunctional issue to be recognised within the public sector, at every level of the public sector.

James Harris: I would agree with everything that has been said so far. On the question of whether local authorities have the skills and capacity

to deliver this kind of stuff, some of the most innovative work that we have seen in terms of framing parks as green infrastructure, planning them as such, conceptualising all the different benefits that green infrastructure can bring, that has come out of the local authority and combined authority level. It is places like London, Greater Manchester and Liverpool that are really innovators in terms of thinking about how we plan for green infrastructure—not just parks, but as a much wider, multifunctional network. They do have the skills and motivation, but as always, it is a question of capacity and resourcing.

Q92 **Chair:** My next question was: should parks be seen as part of a wider green infrastructure network? I think you have answered that one from your point of view. Well anticipated. Is it a yes as well?

Dr Layton-Jones: I am worried about them being seen in that way. I am worried that public parks, as in pieces of land that have a capital mass, which are flexible and multifunctional, will be ignored and sidelined underneath this nice new terminology of green infrastructure. Green infrastructure allows us to count every little scrap of green space and say, “Hey, look how green we are.” Public parks are not the same as some of the things that people were listing in the previous session, like central reservations. If we end up lumping it all together, we cannot play football on a central reservation, or at least we should not.

I am concerned that terms like “green infrastructure” are diverting our attention because they sound seductive. Green infrastructure is not a bad thing; I am not against green infrastructure, but it does not help us address the problem of how to fund and maintain existing large public parks, which serve our communities well. You cannot just blot out public parks and adopt a new term like green infrastructure, and expect us to serve our public parks well. They are not the same thing.

Julia Thrift: I think I slightly disagree.

Dr Layton-Jones: I thought you might.

Julia Thrift: Public parks should be seen as a subset of green infrastructure. They have their own characteristics and they are hugely important, but one of the benefits of seeing them in the context of wider green infrastructure networks is that it helps us bring in a whole new range of partners and opportunities, and see a new range of benefits. Public parks have traditionally been neglected in policy terms, and I have to say that I looked at the DCLG’s website today: none of the Ministers have parks listed under their remit. Perhaps I missed it.

It is very easy to underestimate public parks. The idea that the local community can manage the public park is one that bubbles up now and again. To even suggest that is to completely underestimate the complexity and the many values of public parks. One of the reasons for thinking about public parks as an important subsection of green infrastructure is that it could help raise awareness of their many, many

values—not just the ones we all grasp as soon as we walk into the park, but the sometimes hidden values as well.

Merrick Denton-Thompson: I support that. There was reference to the skills, and I just want to say that I think we do have an issue about skills within the public sector. Certainly, we have done a survey of our membership, and our membership are dealing with landscape planners, landscape managers, landscape scientists and landscape architects. We have certainly haemorrhaged that profession from the public sector. Certainly—we can measure precisely—we lost 25% in 2011; we believe it is well over 50%.

Why is that important? Because we need the skills to have the right policies and the right plans, in terms of the planning function, and in terms of the green infrastructure master planning—which is really what we need—incorporating the link between the town and the country. Taking the Kent example, that is about bringing the country park right into the town, to the urban park. We do not have those skills. We need the skills to ensure that the right demands are being made of the private sector, particularly the development world, and the enforcement of those demands are also in place. Those skills have gone, and it is a real problem.

Dr Layton-Jones: Not only have they gone, but when local authorities or any charities are trying to invest in them, retaining anyone in this sector, where it seems that national and, to some extent, through necessity, local government are abandoning it, is extremely difficult. Who sees their future in public park provision?

Q93 **Chair:** To be fair to Lisa Trickett, when she referred to central reservations, I do not think she was claiming that they were part of parks. She was saying that the maintenance of those was in the same budget as the maintenance of parks, which is, I think, the—

Dr Layton-Jones: Yes, but they go in the green infrastructure bracket. That is what I was clarifying.

Q94 **Julian Knight:** I just want to ask the panel: do you think the planning system, as it is currently constituted, properly protects our public parks and open spaces?

Dr Layton-Jones: I think this is a slight red herring, but I will explore it. If it comes down ultimately to the planning system protecting our public parks, then we are in a very dire situation. If it comes down to what happens in planning committee meetings as to whether or not we provide our citizens with valuable green space, then we have failed. There are ways in which the planning system, as it currently stands, assists in the protection and management of green space, but even for the sake of, say, the Gardens Trust, which will only tend to sites that are on the historic register, there are only 1,600. Even just hearing those few people from the local authorities, you can see that is a tiny fraction. Even then,

the statutory requirement is a statutory requirement for consultation. It does not protect parks.

I do not think the greatest risk today, right this second, to our public parks is the risk of them being immediately developed. There is no evidence that that is the main risk. There are examples, like Sefton park meadows, but that is not the main risk. If we end up resorting to these kind of controls, then we have already failed, and we have lost some of the great benefits of our parks, if the only thing we come down to is whether or not we can prevent people from building on them.

Merrick Denton-Thompson: I would say that generally the planning system does cover the protection. What the planning system does not give enough attention to is plan-making and the green infrastructure master planning, which we do need to be clear on and set out the proper objectives for. It is handled in different ways within different planning authorities, so I think there is a need to be much more proactive, and to see green infrastructure as infrastructure, in the same way that hospitals and roads are. These are now very, very important public facilities.

Julia Thrift: Planning itself is in a really bad state at the moment. If planning is going to solve any problems, it is perhaps rather worrying. The biggest issue you are facing here is how we maintain our existing parks, and planning can provide a little bit of funding for that, but it is not going to solve that problem. In terms of looking at new parks, green spaces and green infrastructure, we know that planning departments have been cut by a disproportionate amount through the local authority budget cuts. Planners very often have no time for training; they have no time to go on study visits; they are absolutely focused on the desk job. They have very little guidance now.

The National Planning Policy Guidance has been expanded in terms of green infrastructure, and we welcome that. However, somebody in a district where they have to understand climate change, green infrastructure, demographics—a huge array of different things—needs more guidance than just the very basic guidance provided. The other problem that is besetting planning is the viability test, which means that developers have to be able to get the return they want from any development.

Recent research by the TCPA has demonstrated that that is having an effect on individual planning applications, where the local authority might say, “We would like you to provide the following benefits,” and the developer can say, “No, sorry, because that will compromise our returns.” It is now also having an effect on policies. Local authorities are putting caveats on their policies: “We would like this, but of course you do not have to do it if you do not want to,” is a crude way of expressing it. Because of the viability test, it means particularly in areas of low land value, developers are not going to provide high-quality green infrastructure, or any green infrastructure, if they do not want to.

The final problem is permitted development. Because of the changes to permitted development, it is now possible to, for instance, turn an office block into housing without it going through the planning system. That means, firstly, that planners are not looking at things like how many families will live in that building, whether they will use the park, and whether they will need a doctor's surgery and all the other infrastructure. That is going to put pressure on our existing infrastructure, but also, critically, it will not bring in any section 106 money, because all the increase in value goes to the owner of the building. None of it goes to providing the infrastructure.

That is a potential source of funding for parks and green spaces that has been lost. Relying on planning to solve the problem of the parks world is, unfortunately, not going to be the right answer.

Q95 Julian Knight: Mr Harris, any thoughts? What planning protections do you think should be in place for smaller open spaces?

James Harris: Generally, touching on the points that were raised before, the wording of the NPPF and the National Planning Policy Guidance is generally sufficient. We can take a little credit for helping the DCLG look at the National Planning Policy Guidance on green infrastructure. That was work that we did with the Landscape Institute and the TCPA. The wording in the policy is generally fine. The wording in the guidance is generally fine. It makes links to all the other things that green infrastructure can and should deliver.

What is lacking, as we have looked at in a huge amount of our RTPI research, is the funding and resources for local planning authorities to do the big, strategic-scale thinking that you need to plan green infrastructure at the appropriate scale, which is nearly always at a scale larger than an individual local planning authority.

What you do see good examples of, again, in places like Manchester or London, or even in individual local authorities, is a local planning authority developing a green infrastructure as part of their infrastructure delivery plan, which is part of the evidence base that informs their local plan; setting out the green infrastructure assets they have, where they are, and where they would like to see improvement; if they are resourced to take a more active role in things like land assembly, putting together sites for development; and allowing developers to bid for development on the parcels of land that they own, if they take a much more proactive role in assembling land and encouraging developers to bid to develop on them. They then have more power to ensure that when individual developments come through, every bit of green space and open space that they are contributing fits into this wider strategic plan for green infrastructure that they have already set out. You are not just seeing developments putting in a playground here and a playground there; they understand what is

required of them from the local plan, and they can make sure that everything they put in feeds into that greater whole.

What we would also like to see, and what we would call for when we are looking for a more muscular, proactive local planning authority, is this: if we enable them to do, and incentivise, large-scale housing development and big strategic sites, then there is naturally more money knocking around for infrastructure of all kinds. That can be placed into trusts or endowments, and helps to build the economy of scale that you need for big strategic green infrastructure investment.

In terms of whether there is enough protection in place for smaller parks, you have things like the local green space designation, which does allow you to protect smaller pocket parks and smaller green spaces. There is quite a lot in planning policy already that we have heard about before from the previous speakers, such as conservation areas and metropolitan open land in London. The protections in policy are probably sufficient. It is a question of empowering and resourcing planners to do the big strategic thinking that shows what the benefits of green infrastructure are, and gets consensus from all the different parties about wanting to invest in it and protect it.

Dr Layton-Jones: The notion that if we can get developers to develop more strategically and to include large parcels of green space, however we want to realise that, historically has failed. Ultimately, the funder of last resort is the local authority. When that business fails at some point, or if the model fails or there is a house market crash, and the people who live in those houses do not want to pay a premium for this piece of private land, guess where that piece of land goes? It goes to a local authority that never got any money for it in the first place.

I am very cautious about us repeating mistakes that we have repeated for over 100 years. If we can get planning policy like that, which works but also weds in some of those costs for the future—for 50, 60 or 70 years' time instead of just, "This will be really nice, and it is raising the house prices, and people who buy this house today are going to be prepared to pay an additional rate for 10 years while they own it"—what happens in 120 years' time? I bet you that land is with local authorities.

Q96 Julian Knight: Do you have any other thoughts on how we balance housing need with ensuring good quality parks and green spaces?

Julia Thrift: I would agree with what James has said about the need for strategic plans at the local authority area level, and at bigger than local authority area level. There is a lot of evidence that local authorities that have a green infrastructure, public space or green space strategy do better by their green infrastructure. It partly comes back to issues of equity. We know that the best and largest green spaces tend to be in wealthiest areas.

If you take a strategic look at your green space, you can start to put the resources where they will have most effect. It might even be that some areas have an over-provision of green space while others have an under-provision. You may even have a good reason to sell off a small patch of green space in one area, and invest that money in improving and expanding green spaces in another area. If you have a strategic view you can do that, in consultation with your community. If you do not, it becomes a hotchpotch, and you end up with these tiny little playgrounds that nobody wants or uses, rather than thinking about how you can maximise the benefits.

Q97 Helen Hayes: I wanted to explore a little bit more the difference between capital and revenue contributions through the planning system. The planning system has, until the recent changes to section 106 and permitted development, been relatively good at delivering green space to meet the needs of an expanding population. What it has not been good at is delivering ongoing revenue funding to secure the ongoing maintenance and management of those spaces. That has had the effect, in some areas, of stretching the budget for parks maintenance across a larger number of parks and across a wider set of spaces. I wondered whether you have ideas about the ways in which the planning system might be used more effectively to secure revenue for the ongoing maintenance of new parks and public spaces, and possibly existing ones as well, alongside the capital contributions.

Julia Thrift: That is a really good point. You can use a community infrastructure levy for parks, if you go through that process. The overwhelming problem here is that planning is being very much focused on delivering numbers of new homes, for obvious political reasons. Everything is being skewed towards that, and resources are being focused on that; that is where the political interest is. Whether plans are deemed to be sound or not has come down to that issue above everything else. Yes, there are opportunities, but at the moment it is unrealistic to think that if there is any money around, it will not go into affordable housing, which is of course also very important. People like the National Trust have been looking at other models. If you look at the garden cities, they have a fantastic model of using land value capture to pay for their green spaces in perpetuity. You can do that sort of thing if you are starting with a brand new place, but we are not building very many new large-scale developments at the moment, so it is going to be limited.

James Harris: As Julia says, one of the benefits of doing fewer large-scale strategic developments, as opposed to a whole host of piecemeal incremental developments, many by appeal, is that you end up being able to capture a huge amount more infrastructure funding for a development. One of the areas the RTPI is interested in is the notion of land value capture, and whether, if you had a proactive, better resourced

planning department, they could play a much bigger role in working with landowners and developers to capture a lot more of the uplift in land value that you get when planning permission is granted or new infrastructure like a railway station is provided. There is a huge amount of unearned income, which currently goes off to landowners and into private hands.

With a more proactive approach, and with more work done at the beginning in terms of deciding which sites you want for development, bringing the developers in and laying the groundwork for exactly what you want to get out of them, there is a huge amount more infrastructure funding to capture there. Again, it could be spent across a much wider area.

Merrick Denton-Thompson: It is an obvious point to make, but the planning system assumed then that more houses meant more council tax. We had not got beyond that thinking. We have to think totally differently.

Dr Layton-Jones: Many of these examples, while they may raise funds—and sometimes quite impressive funds, if you have a big development—are not ongoing revenue-raising. That is the killer. The issue is predictable, reliable revenue.

Q98 **Melanie Onn:** If we want to see a long-term future for parks, is there an alternative management structure that would assist in securing that?

James Harris: You have heard already from the previous speakers some of the concerns around placing them into a single trust, but again there are some examples. I know Liverpool has done quite a lot of research on the idea of placing some of their larger green assets, at least, into a trust. For me, if you can work around some of the issues that were raised before, such as getting a big enough endowment to kick the trust off, and having one body that is responsible for the green infrastructure over a much wider area, you get those economies of scale, which allow you to pull in other revenue streams from, say, the healthcare sector or water and sewage companies, which might benefit from reduced drainage into their sewer network because you have a network of parks. You can start to build that evidence that all these green infrastructure assets bring on a much wider scale. You need to have the good evidence behind you, and a good plan for how you will invest in them and make them better and better. You can then start having those discussions with health and wellbeing boards, water and sewage companies, and transit authorities that are looking to take cars off the road, and to promote active travel and people walking and cycling. You can start to bring in those kinds of strategic partners, and then you get towards the point where you can start to request contributions and funding towards the upkeep.

It is hard to engage those other big stakeholders that you need to, like the healthcare bodies, unless you are doing it at a certain scale. That is the appeal to me of a trust model; it allows you to think big. I

understand that there are concerns about it not being suitable for everywhere, and that is something that still needs more work.

Merrick Denton-Thompson: When talking about management, it would be quite good to look at the lack of leadership. For me, if this Committee is able to ensure that the Government is talking green infrastructure very, very seriously, along with all the new demands under natural capital and biodiversity, clean water and clean air, it would be very helpful if we had a Minister. To pick up my colleague's point, it would need to be a corporate Minister, who could actually make the connections rather than dealing with Government in silos.

On the point about bringing in health, we need strategic leadership that can make the connections between multifunctional green infrastructure and all the demands that society is making upon us. It would be great to have that leadership; it would also be great to have that leadership, if you had a Minister, serviced by a senior single point of contact. We could then connect from all the various organisations. If you could make that sort of recommendation, that would be very helpful so that we could deal with it.

On your point about management, there are lots of different ideas and they have not settled yet. Inevitably it is great to have still a lot of discretion for local solutions. Out of that come all sorts of good ideas. You will not stop good ideas flowing in this area, but we do need the skills in the public sector. We would be recommending that you recommend a head of landscape and biodiversity, or ecology, located within every local authority, so that all these good ideas and connections and the proper strategic planning can be made.

Dr Layton-Jones: In direct answer to your question, no. When you look at alternative models to what we currently have, the most promising one is the trusts, and it is not merely a little bit of an obstacle to get around. For example, Milton Keynes is the one that people go to, to say, "Well, this works." They were handed an enormous property portfolio and £44 million. If we have that knocking around, brilliant; but if not, it is local authority model. It is taxation. We can dress it up as taxation through a special levy on business, and we can put it on council tax, but it is taxation.

Nobody has these massive wads of cash sitting in their local authority budgets to buy out of the responsibility and to hand it to a trust. There are so many people who would love to do that. Local Friends groups say, "We want to take the parks on," and then they look at it and say, "To be honest, we do not." It is just not viable; it is completely unviable.

Julia Thrift: One of the big problems is that parks are paid for out of local authority amenity budgets—this small, insignificant, very uninfluential bit of the world—and yet the benefits that they provide are going right the way across society. One of the major problems is that it would be incredibly difficult to get all of the beneficiaries to chip into the pot in a sensible way. Yes, you can get the water companies, who benefit

enormously. There is the health service, and there are local properties whose value goes up, etc. In big cities, it might be possible to make that work, and I suspect some of the big cities, through their innovation and thinking, will make things work.

I am worried about the little district authorities, who have one person who is supposed to be facing the local community and meeting its needs, and understanding some of this new economic thinking. Will they really be able to do all of that, too? Vivid Economics are doing some fantastic work, but you cannot expect the local park manager to understand how to turn that theoretical economics into money for their park.

If you look at other forms of infrastructure that benefit the whole of society in the same way that the parks do, you come to the conclusion that the way they are funded is through general taxation. It is not politically very popular, but it is the obvious answer to how you fund that sort of infrastructure with those multiple and enormous benefits.

Q99 Melanie Onn: You have led me very nicely to the next point I was going to ask, which was about funding streams. Aside from taxation increases, are there any other feasible means of alternative funding?

Dr Layton-Jones: There are, and they have used them for 150 years. This idea that local authorities have just been sitting there gobbling up tax is nonsense. There have been cafés and restaurants in parks, and small concessions and fancy fairs and fundraisers. They have been taking place in our parks for over a century. The benefit of having these large parks is that you can do that. The previous panel talked a lot about balance, and they are right that you have got to get this balance right between them.

However, I am very cautious that if you start to talk about capital in relationship to parks, and you change the relationship that a citizen has with the park, a lot of those thousands of volunteers and Friends that people have talked so positively about are extremely anxious and hostile about the explicit monetarisation of their parks. They do not mind cafés; they do not mind people paying for the odd concert and they will embrace it; in fact, they will even volunteer to help at it. What they do not want to see is their park becoming essentially equated to a mall or some other kind of capital-raising revenue.

This is a special place in our community. It has special status, and people want that protected. There are ways to raise money, and it has been raised, and they continue to do that. However, if it is raised it has to be ring-fenced for use in that park, because otherwise it is money down the drain.

Julia Thrift: Nesta recently did a report called *Rethinking Parks*, where they applied some incredibly innovative thinking to look at how money could be raised for maintaining parks. It was some fantastic work: all sorts of new ideas and new people got involved in thinking about it, but at

the end of it, what became absolutely apparent was that, yes, you can innovate, save a bit of money or do things differently, but that is marginal. You still have to pay for parks. There is no magic answer to it, and that came through so powerfully from that work.

James Harris: I see potential from the devolution agenda in terms of places being able to bring together all of their funding for things like housing, transport, health and green space and combine them. Again, I agree with other panellists that local authorities are doing everything that they can at the moment. I do not imagine there are many avenues that have not been explored already. Taking a place-based approach that combines lots of different local authorities and looks at the most efficient spend of all different types of budgets, I think you would probably find that there would be good evidence for spending health and transport money, etc, on strategic green infrastructure networks.

However, it is better to do it at the scale of, say, a combined authority than at the scale of individual local authorities. Again, that is one of the big reasons why devolution is so important, but I think to date probably devolution has not sufficiently focused on strategic green infrastructure and all the benefits it could bring. That should be another arrow to the bow of why devolution is important.

At the national level, there is the point Julia made about those who are not in a combined authority, but in a smaller local authority that does not have recourse to do this kind of thing. It is a huge concern. We know that Defra is leading the development of the 25-year plan for nature, but that is meant to be a plan for nature that encompasses all Government Departments. We heard from them at an event last month that the plan for nature is going to be embedded in green infrastructure, and they will use that kind of thinking to shape the plan.

It is very important that that plan engages with all the different Government Departments who have something to gain from more and better green infrastructure. It is also important that it does not just look at rural environment areas, but takes a look at the provision of green space and green infrastructure in all places, in urban areas, peri-urban areas, suburban areas and rural areas. It has to be a proper strategy for green infrastructure across the country that figures out how to deal with these potential inequalities.

Merrick Denton-Thompson: Can I just add a tiny comment? Obviously, we would like to see how far and how deep the natural capital exercise will go. The pioneers and pilots are out now; the announcement has been made, has it not? It will be Manchester on urban. If that really goes to the final line, then we are going to have to see a whole new mechanism for funding, because presumably the Treasury will make all the connections we have been dying to have.

Chair: On that optimistic note, we will move on to the next set of questions.

Q100 **Bob Blackman:** Looking at both the evidence we have received and also some of the comments you have made, local authorities are placing less priority on parks and open spaces than they previously have. We can look at the stats about the numbers of authorities that have a councillor dedicated to look at parks; we can look at park strategy; we can look at the impact on whether parks are improving or not. One of the solutions that is proposed is to put a statutory duty on the provision of parks. Do you think that will make a difference, and if so, how would that be introduced?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: Certainly we believe it would make a difference. It would demonstrate the Government's commitment to green infrastructure. Yes, I fully understand that there being a statutory requirement to provide it does not necessarily mean there is the money for management, and the parallel situation with libraries has been shown. What I think we would say is that we also have to be very attentive to the balance between wealth generation and public investment.

We are suggesting a slightly nuanced interpretation of this—that local government ought to have a statutory obligation to provide it, or to use its regulatory functions for the private sector to provide it. It gives an option, and that seems to be very healthy and provides an opportunity for other mechanisms to provide and manage it. That would be our recommendation. The recommendation is that there be a statutory obligation to provide it or use the regulatory function to provide it.

Julia Thrift: It is a much more complex issue than it first appears, because it is a statutory duty to do what exactly? Is it just to provide parks, or is it to maintain them to a particular standard? We then have the problem that the only standard we have is Green Flag. Green Flag was set up to be a basic standard; it was not supposed to be the best park in the world. It was supposed to be a basic good standard, but we know that the majority of our parks are nowhere near Green Flag standard.

If we say that local authorities have a duty to provide parks to a Green Flag standard, that will require an enormous investment. If we are just saying they have a statutory duty to provide parks, they do that anyway. We know from the last time that parks were in a very bad state that what happens is that local authorities do not close their parks. It is not like a library or a swimming pool, where at some point you have to say, "We have run out of money; we have to switch the lights off, lock the door and keep people out." That does not happen with parks. When the money runs out, they just sit there and rot, and gradually become worse and

worse. However, there is never a point at which the gate is closed, because that would cause a local political outcry, and nobody wants that. Although being a statutory duty might send a good signal, I am not sure, particularly in the context of local authorities being desperate for cash and struggling in many places, quite what a statutory duty would achieve.

Dr Layton-Jones: We do have better guidance on this than a lot of people presume. Greenspace Scotland has set up benchmarks and assessed what levels would be acceptable for different types of green space. They have done it really effectively. They have also quantified all their green space. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. The Gardens Trust would present an argument that there should be a statutory duty. It cannot be beyond the realms of our Government and our representatives to devise a way of what we consider to be acceptable.

I have heard the arguments from the previous panel. I know that people say it will be at the bottom of a list of other statutory duties. That may be, but without it, it is not on the list; this is the great problem. It is just disappearing. Somebody talked about a 40% cut. I know that Liverpool is facing those cuts. They have not closed the doors on them yet, but they are going to. I do not think this is like before; we are in a new age, they have a more desperate situation, and they are looking to dispose of their parks. It has to be on that list simply for it to count at all. It does not solve every problem, but if it is not on there, we do not have a chance of solving those problems.

Q101 **Bob Blackman:** Just to come back to a point you made in an earlier answer, in relation to usage of parks and charging for services, if it is a statutory duty, then charges would not be appropriate or allowed. That is a revenue loss straight away. Even though, as you quite rightly pointed out, if you raise money it should be invested in that same park, that revenue opportunity would be lost, would it not?

Dr Layton-Jones: There is still the potential to have concessions within parks. They exist at the moment. There are all these weird hybrids, like those that Sefton Park in Liverpool has come up with. There are also ways that you can put certain things into community trusts. There are different options we can look at, but if we do not make this a statutory duty, then all of this becomes a moot point. How many of these Committees and discussions have we had? Yet it always comes down to the same things, the same answers. I do not believe this solves every problem, and it may create some new ones, but it gives us a fighting chance of winning.

James Harris: I mainly agree with what Julia said. I can see that a statutory duty sends the right signal, but in a climate of continual funding cuts, you would have to be alert to the question: if you made this a statutory responsibility and funding had to be spent on it, what other finances would that put the squeeze on? It would include other things that are non-statutory duties but that we would all regard as very important.

You would have to be aware that the cuts would then probably fall elsewhere, and you would have to plan for that.

I am also concerned about, as Julia said, not just the difficulty in coming up with a benchmark against which you would assess it, but also the resources that it takes to monitor compliance with statutory duties. Local planning authorities and local authorities are under such severe strain in many cases that simply adding a new legislative thing to do may not have the outcome you desire, unless you have the funding to accompany it.

I do agree that it runs the risk of just getting lost without something to give it more weight. What I would look for, I think, is support for local authorities in gathering that evidence base, in order to present a really compelling economic argument for why it is needed, rather than a new legislative requirement.

Q102 **Bob Blackman:** But if the Government decided to make the provision of parks a statutory duty under the new arrangements, they would have to fund it. Extra funding would come the way of a local authority. Would that make a difference, do you think?

James Harris: If it came with sufficient funding—

Bob Blackman: It will come with funding. The argument about “sufficient” is always a moot point.

James Harris: That is the question: whether the funding is sufficient. If it was, I could see an argument for it, but I cannot imagine in the current climate you would get anything like what you would need.

Julia Thrift: If I could just add one point, I am not against parks being a statutory duty, and it might well help. I just do not think it will solve all the problems. What would be extremely useful, though, would be if local authorities had a statutory duty to provide a green space or green infrastructure strategy, because then the different things that are going on could be fitted into that wider strategic framework.

Q103 **Bob Blackman:** To carry on with that point, in London there is a big challenge on provision of green space for people; in the countryside there is less of an issue on providing green space, because there is more of it. Should there be duties, then, that provide limits on access to green space across cities and urban spaces?

Julia Thrift: That could be looked at, and it could be things like accessibility. It would be a local answer to local needs, but at least if you have a strategy you have thought about what your local needs are and who your local population is. You can then start making sensible decisions rather than random decisions.

Dr Layton-Jones: That also just helps the local authority to prevent other organisations dumping green space on them that they do not want.

Julia Thrift: Yes.

Q104 **Rushanara Ali:** I wanted to wrap up on the question of what

steps you think could be taken at a local, regional and national level for more co-ordination, in terms of addressing the challenges facing parks. I know that earlier on, Mr Denton-Thompson, you mentioned the need for a Government Minister, somebody with a vision for co-ordination and so on. Your second suggestion, around having somebody in local authorities looking at these issues—landscape, biodiversity and so on—sounds very resource-intensive. It is a good idea. Could you all elaborate more on some of those ideas, but also others that you think could be beneficial in co-ordinating across the different tiers?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: Could I just finish the package, then? It needs somebody to service the Minister: perhaps a head of green infrastructure in DCLG. There is lack of clarity about the roles between Defra and DCLG and some of Defra's agents. That is a real mess. When I was on the board of Natural England, it had a brief for all green space, both town and country. Where that has gone, I have no idea. I think the messages from Government are not clear, and that would be good to see. We need a chief officer, somebody of director-level, or more senior than director-level, in DCLG, with a specific responsibility to service the corporate Minister. I do not know whether there is such a thing, by the way, as a corporate Minister. I should be coming here with arguments well-rehearsed, so I am sorry that I do not know that. However, I believe this is a corporate Government issue across all these silos of Government. We could have that Minister, serviced by a director at DCLG. What I am not talking about is an industry. When I was in a local authority, I had 32 landscape architects, 22 ecologists and 15 archaeologists. I am not talking about reinventing that level of expenditure. What I am talking about is somebody who has direct responsibility to the Members for issue identification and policy development, and then the intelligent client function in the commissioning of the private sector to deliver the services. I am not talking about an industry; I am really talking about somebody senior and corporate, who can pull all these things together and act, as I say, as the intelligent client in the commissioning from outside. Is that clear?

Q105 **Rushanara Ali:** Yes. Would anyone else like to comment?

James Harris: There are a few different layers in which I would want to see it. In terms of devolution, as I have already said, I think it would be something that you would look to see in devolution deals and city deals, when powers and resources are being handed down from Government to combined authorities. We would want to see that a strategic green infrastructure plan was part of what they were doing in order to justify the receipt of those funds.

On a Government level, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is already working with Ordnance Survey to create a national register of open green spaces, I believe. Having that finished is

very important, because you simply need to know what you have and where, in order to make proper decisions about it. I would add on top of that as well that one of the things we call for very often at the RTPi is a register of who owns lands and who owns options on land. Understanding ownership within the land market is also critical to making good strategic planning decisions about where you can invest and how you can incentivise development.

Guidance for local enterprise partnerships would be useful in getting them to understand the benefit that green infrastructure and parks brings to the economic success and productivity of a particular place. I mentioned already the 25-year plan for nature; that is a national-level green infrastructure thing that is happening. The other body that is funded and is doing work on this type of thing is the National Infrastructure Commission. That is obviously looking at the infrastructure needs of the country and how they can be met.

We said in our consultation on how they should conduct their methodology of infrastructure assessment that they should also look at green infrastructure. We advised them to look at how you can use green infrastructure, mainly at the regional and sub-regional level, to deliver a lot of the stuff you would otherwise deliver through hard grey infrastructure, such as flood defences, transport networks, and that sort of thing. There are a few different national things going on that would benefit from a focus on green infrastructure, that being one of them.

Dr Layton-Jones: Everyone is still quoting CAbE Space, and I think that is important. We are still heavily reliant upon that organisation. The responsibilities of CAbE Space were supposed to pass with CAbE to the Design Council, and they have done nothing. I am not surprised, because I do not think it fits their remit well. However, the fact is that CAbE Space did, in a very short space of time, make a significant impact. If those responsibilities were taken out of the Design Council and we could have an organisation like that, which is outside the direct control of Government and can make objective research comments and inform opinion, that is desperately longed for by everybody. We disagree on lots of things, but we want something like that.

Julia Thrift: I have to declare an interest, because I was the first Director of CAbE Space 11 years ago. I am very proud of what we achieved, and I am also horrified that 11, 12 or 13 years later the publications we produced then are still being used. That is sad, because so much has moved on since then, and that is still the best that seems to be out there. There is clearly a need for an organisation that can champion parks and green spaces, and whose prime objective is to do that.

The problem is that parks are always, “Dah-di-dah-di-dah—and parks.” They come bottom of the list and they are neglected and forgotten. It is a problem at a national level across Government. We have got Defra responsible for the natural environment, DCLG responsible for urban

green spaces, DCMS responsible for playing fields, and NHS estates responsible for large quantities of green space around hospitals. We have BEIS mapping green spaces. It is a muddle and it is not co-ordinated. Whether it is a job for the Cabinet Office, I do not know, but we somehow have to get parks and green spaces out of this very marginal local authority leisure place, and right up to being really important national strategic infrastructure. The National Infrastructure Commission should have a role here.

One of the things that I would like to say finally is that we know about all the benefits that green spaces and green infrastructure provide. They are providing that without us really trying. We are not designing, managing and maintaining green spaces for optimum value for society. We are piddling around doing this and that. If we really, really tried, the potential is enormous. The real risk here is a lack of ambition: that we try to go back to the 1950s or something. We should be looking ahead, as other countries are doing, and being bold and ambitious, realising that we have inherited this fantastic portfolio of assets that we should make the most of.

Chair: That is probably a good point on which to finish. It is a good challenge for us on the Committee, as well as everybody else, to take that sentiment on board and see how we can develop it. Thank you all very much for coming this afternoon and giving evidence to us.