Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Public Parks, HC 45

Wednesday 23 November 2016

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Helen Hayes; David Mackintosh; Melanie Onn; Mary Robinson; Alison Thewliss

Questions 106-142

Witnesses

I: Lydia Ragoonanan, Senior Programme Manager, Nesta, and Eddie Curry, Chair, Core Cities Parks and Greenspace Group.

II: Mark Walton, Director, Shared Assets, Alan Carter, Director of Portfolio Management, Land Trust, and David Foster, Chief Executive, the Parks Trust Milton Keynes.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Lydia Ragoonanan and Eddie Curry.

Chair: Good morning and welcome to our inquiry this morning, as part of the hearing that we are having into local parks. Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us. Just to begin with, members of the Committee will put on record any interests they may have in this area. I am a Vice President of the Local Government Association.

Helen Hayes: I employ a local councillor in my staff team.

Q106 **Chair:** That is our interests on the record. For our record as well, if you could, just say who you are and the organisation you represent.

Lydia Ragoonanan: Hello. I am Lydia Ragoonanan. I work at Nesta and I run the Rethinking Parks programme.

Eddie Curry: Good morning. I am Eddie Curry. I am the head of Parks, Open Spaces and Investment Funding at Nottingham City Council and also the Chair of the Core Cities Parks and Greenspace group.

Q107 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming to give evidence. I do apologise for the mis-spelling of your name. I think we found an extra "n" from somewhere to add into it, so apologies for that. I think you said to the official before the meeting that you have been called many things. I suppose you could join the club then, as far as MPs are concerned, so we are together in that sense. Thank you very much for coming and, once again, apologies for that slight error.

This is an important subject, and the inquiry into public parks has heard quite a lot of evidence about the state of parks. Things may not be going as well as people might wish and money is tight. How should parks be funded?

Eddie Curry: In general terms, as you will know by now, many park services have struggled significantly with the scale of the cuts over the last five years or so. In general terms, those cuts have ranged between 40% and, at the very worst, up to 97% of the budget cut from some service areas. The scale and the pace of the budget cuts and the impact on services has been quite dramatic.

Equally, in terms of the way forward, it has forced many park services to think very creatively and think very innovatively, and to start generating a whole range of new innovative, entrepreneurial activities within parks and open spaces. From a capital funding perspective, there seems to have been very little change in terms of our ability to access capital funds to drive forward improvements in parks. The real challenge for us is having the capacity and the skills in house to deliver those projects. Often the nature of those projects is now very much focused on capital investment in order to create new facilities that can generate more income through an invest-to-save type of model.

Right across the Core Cities, there are examples of old buildings being turned into cafés, leases with organisations to run high-ropes facilities or changes to the maintenance regimes to relax them to improve biodiversity. A huge range of both reducing costs and generating new income has really helped us to offset the impact of the cuts over the last five years. The challenge for us moving forward now is that we are really at the edge of making more small-scale investment funding opportunities. Certainly the big shift over the next three years, as the budget reduction continues to drive forward more cuts to our services, will be the big challenge for us. That is where the real support and investment are needed to help services make that big change over the next few years. That will very much be around a different operating model and an opportunity to do things in a completely different way, which is quite different from what we have heard in the past.

Lydia Ragoonanan: To take a different approach from Eddie, I am sure you would have heard from other people giving oral evidence and written submissions of all the benefits that parks give to society, whether they be health and wellbeing benefits, whether they be ameliorating environmental effects, whether they be lifting property values if you live closer to a park and so on. All of those things contribute and mean that parks, to some extent, are a public good, but obviously we are in a context where the public purse is being stretched.

With the Rethinking Parks programme, which we ran with the Heritage Lottery and Big Lottery funds, what we were trying to do was explore whether there were other business models and other ways that could fund parks beyond the public purse. What we found from that very early-stage experimental programme, which took new ideas that had not been tested in the UK before, was that although there are certainly ways to innovate—there is absolutely a space for innovation and for finding new ways to complement the public purse—we would certainly always see always a role for some sort of public investment in parks, because they are a public good.

None of the models that we were able to get up and running in the time of the fund showed that they would completely meet the cost of running a park from the predicted income that they were seeing. Having said that, many of them would take a really good step in addressing the gap that is seen in the distinction between the costs that are there to run a park and the income that they are receiving, most from local government, at the moment.

Some of those ideas that we tested, explored and we think have promise are opportunities for the public to give to parks. For example, in Bournemouth they set up a parks foundation that enables people to give one-off donations, to give subscriptions and to leave legacies. In fact, this is the sort of model that is very popular in the United States, where they do give large contributions towards their parks, particularly in terms of capital projects and capital investment.

We also saw schemes where parks can be solutions to other issues. For example, in Bristol we trialled and worked with the Bristol Parks Forum and Bristol City Council to look at a scheme that would not only help maintain parks across Bristol better, but also give an employment route or a skills training route for people who were previously unemployed. Now, a lot of these schemes do not necessarily always give a good payback for the park; they are very good for the benefit factors to help them get employment. We found through this scheme that the financial return on investment for the park was £2.40 for every £1 invested by the local authority. There are different ways to pay for parks.

There is also an opportunity to tap into business contributions; that might be sponsorship, but what we tested were ideas where perhaps the business community can run training or development events in the park and contribute to maintenance. There are also areas where people from business can give their skills to think about new options and new business models. That gives you a flavour of some of the other avenues for parks to be funded.

Q108 **Chair:** Just to come back to the hard issue of money, the evidence we have had is that you can sometimes access lumps of capital. Lottery and other areas might be open to provide funds but then local authorities, once they get that and do a park up, struggle to maintain it, because the ongoing revenue is being reduced. Some of the schemes that Nesta has been involved with are interesting. It is great that people in

Bournemouth made a contribution, but it is £40,000. In reality, it hardly buys the tulips and the daffodils, does it? It is that sort of scale; it is not going to take over and deliver the sorts of funding that parks need in the absence of the local authority funding that has been cut.

Lydia Ragoonanan: I think that is a matter of parks needing to diversify. What we would recommend from the report that we did around Rethinking Parks was that parks should diversify their funding model. It is a matter of having lots of different layers of funding. Public contributions will be part of that. We see that probably some sort of contribution from public entities will be part of that and volunteering.

Q109 **Chair:** Can it match the scale of the cuts? If local authorities cut their budget by 50%, are all these initiatives, worthwhile as they are and encourage them as we should, really going to make up that gap?

Eddie Curry: I suggest that that is probably not possible with the current state of the funding regimes. Across the Core Cities, there have been a number of recent examples of cities that have really tried hard to work in partnership to create a new operating model, particularly in Sheffield, where an endowment model has been tested for quite a number of years now to see whether or not they can establish a new trust fund to maintain the parks in perpetuity. The value of that endowment fund to offset the annual maintenance of the parks was somewhere in the region of £100 million. Assembling that level of capital investment to put into a trust fund to pay the perpetuity of the parks' maintenance is a real uphill challenge for any authority to accumulate that level of funding.

The other key issue, as Lydia says, is that some of the more successful projects that we have delivered, particularly in Nottingham, have all been multi-funding-agency approaches. There has been a clear partnership between the private sector, the voluntary sector, the community and the council. Aligning all those objectives in a very clear partnership has enabled us to deliver some quite transformational projects and deliver a sustainable business plan and management model, moving forward.

Q110 **Chair:** Have local authorities got the skills to actually take on board funding that might be there? One of the concerns that has been raised is not merely are there fewer park keepers and people to cut the grass; there actually are fewer people in management and other positions in local authorities to actually grab hold of these projects and make them work.

Eddie Curry: That is a very clear message that comes across time and time again. Certainly within the big Core Cities, we are still quite fortunate that we have some people. We have the economies to have some of those skills in the wider council but, for many authorities, where there are very small departments, having the right skills—the business entrepreneurial skills and the market skills, the vision and the strategy skills—is a real challenge to be able to drive those changes.

Lydia Ragoonanan: The State of UK Public Parks reports have shown that those skills, if they were there, have been stripped out through funding cuts, to some extent. There are definitely people who are great leaders in the parks community, but it is certainly an issue.

Q111 **Helen Hayes:** Before we talk about innovation in park management, I have a couple of follow-up questions. Is it not true to say that there has been an enormous failure to properly quantify and understand the benefits that parks provide, including the benefits to the public purse? While there are examples of innovation around, as the Chair was saying, pulling together different small pots of funding to supplement a gap, the innovation that is really needed is innovation in quantifying the benefits that parks bring and in joining up the parts of the public sector that draw down those benefits directly. I am thinking particularly of things like public health, air quality and climate change. We know and have heard evidence in this Committee that parks play an enormously valuable role, which is valued by people, individuals and families in terms of the quality of their everyday life, but also deliver savings to the public sector. If parks were not there, there would be a more direct cost to the public sector in other areas of expenditure. Is it not the case that, actually, the innovation that we need is really working out how to quantify and draw down that value in a way that then enables the funding to be delivered that is really needed, because it is offset against savings that are made elsewhere?

Eddie Curry: From a national perspective, one of the things that the park sector has struggled with, for many years, is the lack of a real national benchmarking quality standard, so that we can compare ourselves effectively with each other and quantify exactly what is in the services, how they compare and compete against each other, in terms of their value to the community. There has been quite a lot of work done recently on natural capital accounts, which very much look at the health benefits, the biodiversity aspects and the value of a park in terms of how it affects the local economics, tourist value and all the rest of it. That is a model that still needs to mature, but also the lack of any real advocate and voice for parks at a national level to get that message out and keep it consistently in the public eye and the political viewpoint shows a desperate need to really readdress those issues.

Lydia Ragoonanan: I might also say that there is some evidence, but it is right that the evidence in some cases perhaps might be patchy. Actually, if you talk about public health, institutions may have money to invest in park schemes, but it happens in patches. It may not necessarily be within their gift to do so at the moment. Even if that was overcome, they need to have the resources and ability to fund. That is something that came through the National Trust work, where we were working with them on their endowing parks model. What they found is that, of course, many public health trusts understand and absolutely recognise the benefit that public parks play in keeping keep people healthy, but they are not set up to be able to fund parks. Even if that happened and that standard of evidence or level of attribution was there, people would still not necessarily be able. There is an appetite to do that, but they are not necessarily always able.

Q112 **Helen Hayes:** That is helpful, thank you. On the basis of your experience, which park management models would you recommend that local authorities consider and which are the ones that do not really get there that you think should be avoided?

Lydia Ragoonanan: Within our Rethinking Parks programme, we only tested a couple of different management models. The thing about parks management models, as opposed to setting up a separate charitable foundation that still enables the local authority to manage the park and some of the other things we tested, is they were relatively straightforward to establish. Setting up a new management model is very complex and difficult. Certainly there are overseas models, for example the Central Park Conservancy, which is a very long and well established way of managing the park separately. It has a massive philanthropic base as well. Within the UK, there are some trust models that have benefited from that kind of endowment. They work well. They are able to manage a portfolio and I suppose have a wider range of options.

There are two models that we tested that looked at different models of management within Rethinking Parks. One was the National Trust model, which you would have already heard about, which certainly looks like a viable approach, but has not yet been tested in practice, so it is difficult to say whether that would work long-term. That is not to say that it would or would not. The other one that we tested was one where we looked at the local community being able to take on a much greater role in managing the park. I know that Lambeth Council has also explored this particular model. That is not without its difficulties. What we have tended to find is that, while parks groups and others have a real appetite to contribute back to their parks and public spaces, the level of skill, the level of effort and energy involved, really does require some sort of professional expertise that it is perhaps beyond the realms of parks groups necessarily to be able to have.

Q113 **Helen Hayes:** Do you think there is perhaps a perception that, in seeking to involve the community, particularly in the context of cuts to funding, in running a service that the community feels to be very important, seems like a demotion in practice of the importance of that service? It is something that people feel to be very, very important; the council comes along and says, "Members of the community, why do you not run this service, partly because we have so little money to put into it anymore?" There is a mismatch between the extent to which people feel it to be important and the level of importance that it feels like it is actually being given, irrespective of how those models actually pan out in practice.

Lydia Ragoonanan: That is something I do not have a direct sense of.

Eddie Curry: There is a general view of the role that the community can play in our parks and green spaces. It is often quite easy to get large numbers of volunteers to come and maintain your great cultural asset and the heritage parks are a real treasure to work in but, actually, in those small, little gritty open spaces in the middle of a council estate, where it is just about picking up the litter on a Tuesday morning in February, it becomes a less exciting option to be doing every week. Having some consistency in the level of participation and maintaining the enthusiasm to continually volunteer to maintain those spaces, the reality is that that is just not there. It is not at the level that it needs to be to make that transition.

I suppose in any authority the scale of some our portfolios is quite vast. We have 125 parks in Nottingham of varying degrees, from world-class destination sites right down to very small-scale open spaces with no real assets in them at all. It is just about finding the right mix with a real mixed economy approach to that portfolio, where you can really build a strong partnership with a number of agencies, as well as the community and the council, to make a real difference in terms of that transformation.

Q114 **Helen Hayes:** Do you think the appetite is there in local authorities for innovation? What do you think are some of the barriers that prevent councils from innovating as much as they could?

Eddie Curry: In terms of the transformation, we are at a point now where we need to start thinking more differently. We have done all the cuts; we have done all the innovative, creative thinking to generate more income, but there is a limit to what you can take that to. As Lydia says, it is not likely to be a fully funded service based on more income and budget cuts. The big change and the transformation now needs to be in terms of a different operating model. Whether or not the councils have the right skills, capacity and funding to make that shift is the big concern. In reality, to set up a trust, the legal expertise that is needed, around TUPE transfers and pension strains—all of that needs to be funded and that is the real challenge to enable councils to move that agenda forward.

Q115 **Mary Robinson:** Just a little bit of an explanation, if you would not mind, around the community model: we have heard evidence that some community groups have attempted to get leases, and there have been difficulties or delays with that. Is that the sort of mode that you would be thinking of? Are there inherent difficulties in actually getting that processed and the legalese of it?

Eddie Curry: I can give you some examples from my own authority, Nottingham, where we have done a number of leases with small community groups to manage specialist spaces. There is always a time lag, because there is only a limited amount of capacity in any authority to do the estates management, asset transfer and also the legal lease documentation. It is really not about the expertise in some case; it is just about the capacity, when there are multiple strains on those departments, to support wider council facilities. That is where the real challenge is.

Q116 **Melanie Onn:** Just to delve a little further into the roles of communities, councils, businesses and charities, in terms of parks management or park support, what more do you think those different sectors could do to create that mixed economy that you have talked about?

Lydia Ragoonanan: From our programme, one of the things that we are really hopeful about and saw is that many new people came forward to support parks. One of the new things that can be done is tapping into the different interests of people. We all use parks, but often the go-to people to support them might be your "Friends of" groups, which do not necessarily always represent the breadth of experience, skills and passion in the community.

Some of the ideas that we tested—for example, in Hackney with Groundwork there was a programme called Park Hack that looked at engaging entrepreneurs and people who were creatives in the Hoxton area of London to say that, actually, the way that they wanted to engage in the park or help the park was not about giving financial contributions, but they have lots of great ideas and lots of entrepreneurial spirit. Actually, part of the relationship with them and part of the way the council worked with them was to say, "What ideas do you have for making the space better and giving yourself a better sense of community where you work?" and actually giving them the permission to take those ideas forward and implement them. There is something in that, not just for entrepreneurs but other sets of society that can really contribute to parks and open spaces, in ways that perhaps traditional "Friends of" groups have not necessarily always thought of. There is great potential.

For example, in the States I was talking to someone the other day who had been on a tour of parks there, understanding that even things like branding give people a better sense of connection to a space and a better sense that, "This is my space." Some of that marketing and design does not necessarily need to undermine or mean that the park space is less nice, but means that it is actually one that people feel part of and feel that they want to contribute to. There is definitely a world and a space in which other interests and other contributions can be made.

Eddie Curry: Aside from that, one of the key things that I have learned from working with community groups over the last 20 years has been that, whilst there is a real willingness to get involved and make a big contribution, the community does value having an expert, a park ranger or a skilled member of staff working alongside them to help guide them, to train them and to ensure that they are not doing things inappropriately or are doing things in the right way and the safe way. It is a real recognition of the fact that actually communities, to get more involved, still need some support and that support is already there, but is under risk at this moment in time.

Q117 **Melanie Onn:** As more charitable organisations, if I think about my local park, are taking over the cafés and are taking over what were the greenhouse sections, or as businesses are involved, high ropes, running more professional organised activities that you would pay to take part in, in parks, how do you do that if you are going to innovate and continue to make parks pay and still be available in the way that people understand they should be available? How do you do that and still keep them accountable to local people, so they still feel like the parks are working for their benefit?

Eddie Curry: Again with the Rethinking project and all those commercial opportunities that you can deliver in parks, there is always a bit of a fine line between what is acceptable with the local community and over-commercialising a park. It is often a bit of a challenge and a bit of a rub with the local community. We have certainly seen a huge rise in the number of events taking place, private hires with large activities, which are brilliant, attract a big audience and make a big contribution to the annual budget, but often there is a little bit of a downside there in terms of the state of the park afterwards, the noise that comes from it and the closure of the park at a certain time.

It is about trying to work very closely with your park's Friends groups to identify what the acceptable level is and the level of understanding about the scale of the challenge that we are facing. We are not doing these things purely to make money; we are doing them to offset the budget and to sustain the service. While there may be a small-scale time-limited impact on that community, the long-term benefit helps to sustain the gardeners and everything else that is in those services.

In general terms, there is no one fix for any of the income generation. There are lots of projects that we did through the Rethinking project, but we need to be doing all of them, all at the same time, because none of them is a one-stop shop to fix all our funding problems. They are all relatively small-scale invest-to-save pots. Having the capacity to drive multiple projects to accumulate the masses of funding that is needed to sustain the service is a real uphill challenge.

Lydia Ragoonanan: Can I just add something? You asked before about barriers to innovation and skills. One of the things that we did through our Rethinking Parks programme was to first ask people, "How do you know what people think of your idea?" Often giving people the skills and ability within a local authority to understand how to run that community engagement in a more collaborative way helps tease out where the opportunities are that enable more funding to come in, without passing the problem of wider public interest.

We asked people to do market research, for want of a better word, of their particular ideas with who the target audiences are and also to understand, as you progress things, to get feedback on it too. A really good example might be in Burnley, where they did something new: they rethought how they planted in their park. Their predicted savings are up to £117,000 by 2020, which is a fair whack. It is a good percentage with small shifts. One of the reasons they came to doing different planting mechanisms was that people like to be closer to nature in their park, and they understood that because they asked them, "What do you like about being in these spaces?" That then enabled them to think about moving from large numbers of formal lawns to wildflower planting, moving from annuals to perennials, which are less expensive but also improve the biodiversity of the area, depending on what plants you put in. That was measured through engagement and some of the first feedback was not just about the wildflowers, but what they did was keep an eye on it and put systems in place to learn. They put it in place for a set period of time and actually found that there were no complaints of that nature. Giving people not just the skills to be able to try something new, but to be able to know how to engage people without just going, "This is our consultation," where it is a formality, as opposed to it being a different sort of idea, not only brings people on board but actually brings new ideas to the fore as well.

Q118 **Mary Robinson:** Across the country different things are being done in parks and by organisations, by community groups and by local authorities. Are there lessons being learned from the innovation in the parks sector being shared efficiently?

Lydia Ragoonanan: They are being shared. One of the things that we did with our programme was to build up a database, for want of a better word, of over 1,000 different people in the parks community who are directly interested in our programme. It represented about 300 different national organisations and there was some other interest as well. We asked them, "How do you want to be communicated with?" and also where the barriers were. With that programme, one of the things that we have understood is that the ability to share information and to make people aware of what is out there is patchy.

There is the newly formed Parks Alliance, which is still getting off the ground and perhaps does not have the reach it could. Actually, there is really no national organisation. Beyond an organisation, people really like to be able to meet together and share information. That is a very effective way of being able to learn and to see things in practice. One of the consequences of having less budget is that a great barrier to people being able to learn, rather than just read something online or cast their eye over it, is the ability to come and meet, see something in practice, really understand it well and converse about what works and what does not. That is a barrier for the sector.

With our programme, what we have done is produced eight "how to" guides of the projects that got further through our programme, which enabled people to pick them up. One would expect that you would almost need a bit more than that to be able to innovate effectively and to really adapt ideas.

Eddie Curry: Just from a national perspective, since CABE Space and GreenSpace both were removed some time ago, there has been a real gap in terms of the national learning and sharing of general good practice. That has been part and parcel of the reason why the Parks Alliance has been formed to try to fill some of that gap but also, beyond Greenspace, there was a national network of regional forums, where parks managers and community groups would engage together. That again has been filled in some part by the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces and a whole host of local community forums, like the Nottingham Parks and Open Spaces forum and the Birmingham forum.

There are lots of community organisations that are now working together to share good practice between Friends groups directly. Many parks departments are actively involved in attending those meetings, sharing good practice and encouraging opportunities to work together.

Q119 **Mary Robinson:** Is that the whole story or is there a structural need for something else to be put in place to co-ordinate? Obviously the co-ordination is happening, but does it needs to have a structure to it that aligns government, local authorities and groups together?

Eddie Curry: Personally, I would say that, yes, there is a need. There has been a huge gap in the level of information compared to what there was when CABE Space was alive. I am not saying that we create another CABE Space but, actually, having a strong national advocate that has a real capacity to continue to spread good practice is a real infrastructure need across the sector.

Q120 **Mary Robinson:** We have heard evidence previously on the statutory duty on local authorities to provide and maintain parks. Would this be an improvement and would it make a difference?

Eddie Curry: Before I came here, we had a meeting of the Nottingham Open Spaces forum, who absolutely said to me, "If you can do one thing today, drive home the point about the need for a statutory duty and the importance of funding a park service effectively." That is just me passing on that message but, in reality, we all know that a statutory duty comes with an increased expectation to deliver a standard and understanding what a statutory duty means. Having a statutory duty that is not just a blunt instrument and does not really mean anything could also not do anything or not meet the expectation of what the community might want.

There are certainly aspects that I would like to see in any statute moving forward, certainly around green space strategies and having a very clear understanding of your green space network and how that fits into the planning framework and the wider regeneration. That is an absolutely critical point. Equally, with having some form of parks lead—and I am not just trying to safeguard my own job—the reality is that having a controlling mind and someone who can lead that strategic framework, and drive the partnerships and engagement with the community is absolutely critical. We see seen, time and time again over the last five or six years, where park departments have disappeared and the agenda suddenly slips off the political agenda and disappears in importance in terms of its profile. Parks deteriorate very quickly if they are not given a very clear profile.

Equally, the whole issue about funding, in the context of wider local government funding, is a real challenge for any service. Not least am I mindful that there already some statutes in the green space network like allotments, but it does not really protect them. It does not give them any more funding. Providing a statutory service that actually means something needs to be given some consideration.

Q121 **Chair:** Can I just pick up one thing with Mr Curry? You referred to the

Sheffield involvement with the National Trust looking at a model to raise an endowment there. Sheffield has had a challenge with the amount of money for one thing and also the perception that parks would probably no longer be publicly owned and managed. Whether it was true or not, that perception was there. We went to Newcastle the other week, and Newcastle is looking very seriously at going ahead with that model, because they do not believe the endowment would be as great. They think they can generate more income out of it. Are you talking amongst yourselves?

Eddie Curry: Absolutely. The Core Cities group represents the 11 big core cities outside London. We have a great deal of sharing of best practice. We have been listening very keenly to the experiences of Sheffield, Newcastle and Liverpool, which are quite advanced in some form of trust model, be it a mutual social enterprise in Newcastle, an endowment in Sheffield or a full trust in Liverpool. There is a great deal of sharing of those experiences, but what we are looking for is one of those projects to land and create a national good practice project that can be rolled out across the country.

Chair: You are all waiting for each other then.

Eddie Curry: Absolutely.

Chair: Newcastle look as though they may be first.

Eddie Curry: Given the scale of the budget cuts over the last five or six years, it has forced the drive behind trying to find an alternative model. Newcastle has been quite fortunate to get some gap funding from their public health departments, which has held up the service for two or three years, while they do this transitional period of investigative work into the whole feasibility of a social enterprise. The key point, which as I mentioned earlier will be the challenge for most authorities, is just having the funds to drive that transformation, whether that is pension strain, legal costs or just the consultation and engagement costs. It is not just a matter of transferring the service. We need to give them some real consideration.

Chair: There is a challenge of ownership as well at many of these sites. Nobody quite knows what the actual boundaries are or the precise arrangements for the initial transfer, when they were given to the authority.

Eddie Curry: Many parks come with endowments or covenants from previous land, philanthropic transfers and gifts from past years, which can often make the transfer into a new trust model quite challenging to overcome. Unpicking all those legal conditions can be a bit of a challenge at times.

Chair: Thank you both very much for coming to give evidence to us today. That has been very helpful to the Committee.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Mark Walton, Alan Carter and David Foster.

Q122 **Chair:** Good morning. Welcome to our second panel. For our records, could you just say who you are and the organisation you represent, if you just go down the table, please?

Mark Walton: Mark Walton, Director of Shared Assets.

Alan Carter: Alan Carter, Director of Portfolio Management at the Land Trust.

David Foster: David Foster, I am the Chief Executive of Milton Keynes Parks Trust.

Q123 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming this morning. You have obviously been listening to the previous witnesses, and we finished there looking at new models and maybe trust arrangements and endowments. What can one of those models do, do you think, for the future of parks that the current management arrangements are not able to do? Do you have experience of one?

David Foster: I have experience of one, yes. We have been going in Milton Keynes for 25 years. We came about from the new town development corporation, which of course did have significant assets to hand over. We started in a fortunate position with a £20 million endowment, but I would just urge you to look beyond that. That to me is not the big issue, where you find the endowment to set up a trust and enable a trust to run. The Nesta project with the National Trust in Sheffield has shown that it is possible to get there and create an endowment, if you can get everybody on board.

The real benefit of having a trust is not so much about the funding; it is about setting the parks free and the people who run the parks—setting them free to be innovative and creative. As you have heard earlier and in your earlier evidence, there are lots of ways in which funding can be brought in from many, many different sources—commercial, voluntary, community, lottery, ice creams and everything you could possibly imagine—but you need a model in place, a mechanism in place, which will allow that to happen. The local authority model stifles that. There are great people there and lots of will, but it is not the best way in which to do it, whereas an independent trust that has nothing else to do but to promote the parks, get them well managed and bring the money in to manage them, with a single purpose, is much more likely to succeed in making them work.

Alan Carter: From the Land Trust perspective, the approach has to be to have the long-term investment in those parks and green spaces to make sure, at base level, that the parks are open, they are safe and well maintained, and deliver all the great benefits that we know about and have talked about. We have a number of financial models that work on that basis that we use around the country. Some of those are endowment-based, which is both for public and private land that comes to us, where an endowment comes over and that can be used. The service charge model also works, whereby a service charge is charged on residential or commercial tenants, especially around a new development. That can fund, in perpetuity, the long-term management of that green space and deliver those health, educational and other social benefits that come from that.

It may be a land disposal model and we have some examples where that is working as well, where a small part of land is disposed, perhaps land that is not really delivering any real benefit to the community. The money that is raised from that can be invested in the long-term management of the remaining green space. Perhaps it is even through a planning system. We have other examples through the planning system, either through section 106s or section 75s up in Scotland, through the SANG model, where money can be released through the development process, in partnership with the local authority. That can come over with the land to make sure that that land is managed appropriately.

There is an element of scale that the previous witnesses were talking about, with the problems that come with local communities taking on direct ownership and control. The liabilities that come and the legalities of dealing with land ownership can be tricky, but it is really crucially important to get the local community involved in making the decisions and having what I call the soft ownership: "It feels like it is mine; legally and technically it might not be, but it feels like it may be mine." They make the decisions about what that green space is used for and what benefits really come from that green space.

For that to really happen and for parks and green spaces to release their full potential to the wider community, there are a couple of things that really need to be delivered and secured. One is that the park is safe, it is well maintained, the grass is cut, the trees are safe, the litter is picked and social behaviour is dealt with. It also needs the right personnel in place, on site, whether that is a traditional parkie, a ranger or a community group. We appoint a lot of community groups to manage some of our spaces on a day-to-day basis. Getting that right individual or individuals in place who know the local community, are part of the local community and can engage is crucial. With the right environment, in the broadest sense of the word, and the right individuals involved, then all the health benefits can really come from that: the sense of wellbeing that comes, that resilience within the community and the educational benefits can come from that. The trick is to have all those coming forward, and I think that needs a diversity of different financial models coming together to bring that forward.

Mark Walton: There is the trust model, setting up an entirely new trust to manage these kinds of assets. You also need to consider and see the potential of asset transfer or long leases to social enterprise organisations and potentially site-specific charitable trusts. There is also the potential for partnerships between local authorities and other organisations, people like Groundwork, TCV and existing Friends and community organisations, which might have an involvement in specific sites. It is about seeing a range of potential options that can either replace or add value to the existing local authority role.

Some of the potential benefits there are around things like engagement and community involvement, particularly bringing entrepreneurial approaches to the management of sites and in particular to the thinking about not just the income generation potential, but the delivery of additional social benefits, so actually seeing the park not just as a park, but as a platform for delivery of wider health, wider educational or other wider social benefits. That is what social enterprise approaches can bring into this space.

Q124 **Chair:** Two questions arise from that. It all seems too good to be true, does it not, if all these wonderful ways of improving things are out there? First of all, why is everyone not learning from each other and doing them? Is there a mechanism for that to happen or, in fact, is everyone just ploughing along, doing their own thing and not sharing their best ideas?

Mark Walton: As Shared Assets, we have been involved in a range of different projects across the country, partly as a result of things like Rethinking Parks, which you have already heard about, but also things like the Community Ownership and Management of Assets programme and Delivering Differently, both funded by CLG. I would say that there are a lot of people trying these different approaches and there are places where some of these different approaches work, some instigated by local authorities, some of which have arisen independently. There is certainly a lack of joining-up currently. There has been a lot of public money invested, both through things like HLF, Big Local and things like that, where people are taking control of local spaces and delivering new models, but also through these other government programmes around asset transfer, but there is not a lot of capturing of that going on. Local authorities are quite good at peer learning, I would say, and identifying where people are doing interesting things and going and asking, but there is not really that kind of centralised capture and sharing that would really add benefit and stop people having to reinvent wheels, which there is a lot of happening at the moment.

Alan Carter: Within that, it is happening but in small-scale places around the country. If you look at the work that is going on, there are a lot of hectares of land in Milton Keynes, which are managed there. We have over 2,000 hectares of land under management, a pipeline of new sites that will come through over the next few years way in excess of that. In terms of the local authority model, and we are talking with a number of local authorities, there is a nervousness around how we approach this. What is the best way? What will the public think around this? To have a central organisation, a minister body—there have been a number of different proposals come forward through the inquiry process—making those recommendations as to the way forward, giving permission that this is a way forward is possible.

As has already been mentioned, we are talking to a number of different local authorities about different ways and different models to work, but it all boils down to the same decision points: can we manage this best ourselves, or actually can we pass it to a third party? That is the fundamental decision. Having some sort of permission and authority to make those decisions, going with it and working that through in a process is important. There is no doubt in my mind that the current system is only going in one direction in terms of local authority parks. There just is not the funding and a decreasing amount of funding is available.

Q125 **Chair:** In terms of the trust model then, Mr Foster, clearly you have as much experience as anybody in Milton Keynes of working this model, but you came at it from a particular circumstance of the new town that was being created, which makes it different from most other authorities. Are there downsides to the trust model? We heard Sheffield looked at the £100 million and said it is harder to raise £100 million in endowment than it is to find £2 million to keep the current maintenance going. Is that a challenge beyond most authorities?

David Foster: It certainly is. It is quite a challenge to set it up and it will not happen unless central Government gets behind it and gives local authorities authority, encouragement and support to set these models up, and maybe some pump-priming funding, some passing on of expertise and giving them a mandate to do it, perhaps through local enterprise partnerships or through DCLG. I do not know, but I certainly think it will not happen without that. We are hearing good stories from Newcastle and Liverpool. Maybe they can make it work and that will be the kickstart that is needed. Ultimately, it is going to need central Government to give it a lot more support.

One of the key things that people are very fearful of, and you have experienced it in Sheffield, is that it is very easy for someone to say, "The local authority is selling off the parks. They are trying to cut costs again and trying to absolve themselves of their responsibilities." That is a real problem. When the Parks Trust was set up in Milton Keynes, the local authority did not want it—that was 25 years ago—and fought it in the High Court. Now they are very glad that they have a Parks Trust, but it has taken a long time to get over that. One of the keys is the ownership point that you raise, Chairman. You do not have to give away ownership of your parks. We have a 999-year lease of our parks. It is almost as good as ownership, but it is not ownership. It means that we cannot sell them; we cannot develop them; we cannot build on them, not without the consent of the local authority. The ultimate ownership remains in democratic control, but we are free to make good things happen and to find new ways to run the parks.

Q126 **Chair:** Has anyone been knocking on your door saying, "How do you do it? "Can we have a look?"

David Foster: Yes, lots of people. We have people from all over the world come to see us. In China they are making something similar work, but not yet in this country, sadly. People cannot get over those two problems: first, where does the endowment come? Secondly, when they go back to their local authority, the local authority politicians naturally are very worried about it, because they are worried that the public will say, "You are flogging off our parks and green spaces."

Mark Walton: You asked about downsides. We were involved with the National Trust in looking at the Sheffield trust model, particularly at governance. One of the concerns that we have going forward, in terms of some of the charitable trust models, is how you ensure proper transparency and local accountability. Charitable trusts can be self-perpetuating oligarchies where the board is simply replaced by a tap on the shoulder and new people are invited in. How do you ensure that there is local accountability for what are public assets? I think it is really important that we retain that sense that these are public assets.

Chair: We will probably pursue that again in a little bit.

Q127 **Mary Robinson:** We have discussed various models, but alongside the models comes the money. What alternative funding streams are available for parks?

Alan Carter: There needs to be the long-term financial model that makes sure that the parks are safe and well maintained, and there is that base level that the park is open and the community can come and use that in a safe and controlled way. There is then other funding that can come on top of that, be layered on top of that, in addition to some of the funding streams we have already talked about. It perhaps will come and go and be slightly more transient in nature, whether that is grant funding—and we have had some grant bodies here giving witness—or some sort of commercial income, coming from events and suchlike.

We need to be careful about the over-commercialisation of our spaces. If someone takes their children to the park, they pay for car parking, they pay for an ice cream and they pay for a bouncy castle. Before long, 40 quid has gone. There are some risks around that. That, combined with a range of different funding things, grant funding or contracts from CCGs or health organisations, can come in and can work and deliver more from that green space, but that base level of funding is crucial for the long-term management of it.

Mark Walton: I think two things. One is that, from our experience of working on these models over the last couple of years, there is no silver bullet. There is nothing that gets this off the public accounts, in a way. There is also nothing new. There is already income generation from things like leases and concessions. There are already donations and sponsorship. There are already examples of things like levies on businesses, through bids for public realm and also on residents, either in terms of ground rents or a levy on council tax or precepts. There is then the endowment model. All of these things already exist. It is about making them work better. There is a mixture; it is not rocket science. You are aiming to reduce your costs and increase the level of income that you can generate from this range of different sources. Rather than thinking only in terms of the deficit and trying to make up a deficit, it is about saying what the potential of these things is as assets and what we can deliver from them. Therefore, what do we need to do to enable that?

David Foster: Yes, I fully agree with all that. There are many, many different sources of income. I think local taxation will still have to be the main source of income for parks and open spaces. Do not forget that, although local authority budgets have been cut very, very significantly and they are probably far too low now for maintaining the parks that they have in most areas, they are still spending a lot of money. If you can capture that money and make a pledge to a trust or a charity that they will get that money for maybe 25 years ring-fenced—that money is going to be guaranteed to them for 25 years—that trust could then make some great things happen by leveraging in other sources of funding, being innovative and creative.

The fear about governance that you quite rightly raise is a concern as well, but you can legislate for that. You can say that your trust that is going to run the parks must have a certain number of local authority members on the board. We have three on our board of trustees. Our posts are all advertised so that anybody can apply for them. They are time-limited, so the trustees have to move on after a certain amount of time. You can cover off all those things and there are plenty of examples of them around the country.

Q128 **Mary Robinson:** You have not really mentioned section 106 or CIL. Is that not relevant?

Alan Carter: It is very relevant. We have examples from a number of green spaces that have come to us that are funded via section 106. They are entirely funded via the section 106 process or part of the funding package. We may well have situations where the land is either publicly or privately owned; a sum of money comes over from the owner, along with the freehold or long leasehold of the land, but through the planning process, perhaps even in stages as different amounts of units are released and occupied, then amounts can be paid over and invested to create that long-term permanent endowment.

Just picking up on the trust model, one thing that is important to note is the sense of scale. The cost of running a trust—and we both have experience of this—is high, HR-wise, with the corporate governance, and making sure that the finances are managed well. Unless there is a large scale involved in that, then actually it becomes cost-prohibitive, because all the money and the resources are spent on feeding the trust, rather than actually on delivering the space, but there needs to be local accountability. It is absolutely crucial that we have that, and that local involvement.

Q129 **Mary Robinson:** The local involvement is important. Just to move on, given that there are a number of different ways to do things, different models and different funding streams, do local authorities have the right skills in place, the resources and sometimes even the political appetite to make the most of different funding streams and models?

Mark Walton: I would say that it is currently a fairly mixed picture. It is partly about skills. It is also partly about attitudes, and so attitudes to risk, attitudes to entrepreneurialism, the willingness to let go and to allow new models to develop and thrive. There needs to be a change in focus in local authorities. Other witnesses have spoken about the importance of planning, about the importance of making sure that the right strategies are in place, that the right local plans are in place and that development control happens well to create good spaces that can be well managed.

Local authorities have historically done everything in the park sector. They have done all of the management and the operations. They need to think much more about strategic role and how they can enable other people to undertake some of those management and operational roles. That means focusing their resources much more into that strategy and planning process. What do they want from their local parks? How do they ensure that funding from health, CIL or whatever helps to support that? How do they enable and support others to undertake some of those operational roles? There needs to be a transformational change in how local authorities see their roles and therefore resource the skills required for that.

Alan Carter: It will be different for different local authorities. We find this across the country, where some come to us and they will transfer their land to us. Sometimes it is individual green spaces or sometimes is it the whole portfolio of green spaces that will come to us. They want to have an involvement in the decision-making, but want no further involvement. Some of them come to us, the land is transferred to us and they will actually take on the day-to-day management of it. They do not want to be involved in the ownership of it but actually, through their ranger service, they are really happy to manage that. Other local authorities are just happy to fund. They may not have ownership there or day-to-day involvement, but they see the benefit that that green space will bring to the community, which meets the requirements that they have set out, and so they are willing to fund that operation, activity or programme on that site.

Q130 **Mary Robinson:** For local authorities would a statutory duty help? Would it make a difference?

Alan Carter: Would it help? Yes, it may do, but would there be additional funding for it? That is the key challenge, as I see it. Looking at it from our perspective, I cannot see there being more money available. There still would be the debate about whether we spend it on adult social care or the other statutory duties that we have. There need to be other models for managing the green space, rather than what appears to be the simple solution of making it a statutory duty.

Mark Walton: We come from the perspective of saying that there should basically be public rights to freely accessible green space. These are recognised by UN-Habitat in the sustainable development goals. These are globally recognised rights and requirements to free-to-access public space to enable people to meet their basic needs. Therefore, there probably should be a statutory duty for local authorities to provide a minimum level of accessibility. There is a particular public duty around equity, around ensuring that there is equity of provision, but I recognise that there are risks associated with this. There is a risk of the race to the bottom. It does not necessarily create protection. In a way, a local authority should have a fundamental baseline duty, but actually the adding of the value and making these things properly work as assets might well need to be taken elsewhere.

Q131 **Melanie Onn:** You are talking about transferring management of parks from local authorities to a trust or other organisational models. If we look at what local authorities have done previously when they have outsourced, in reality, all it has done is to set up a new organisation that has paid the same people who previously were employed by local authorities a lot less under the new guise of another organisation specifically designed to deliver something like adult social care, for example. Is that not exactly what we are discussing today? Nobody has really mentioned that.

Mark Walton: I would say not. We are not talking here about outsourcing to private contractors that are going to do this.

Melanie Onn: No, but we could talk about an arm's length management organisation that again has a charitable status or a charitable element.

Mark Walton: One of the things that we are working on with local authorities at the moment is thinking differently about commissioning. If you are simply commissioning to say, "We want the grass cutting twice a week, we want the bins emptying and the railings painted," then, yes, you are going to get a cut-price service to do the same thing. If you are saying, "What we are looking for is outcomes from the management of this park, so we are looking for better health outcomes, we are looking for better educational outcomes and we are looking for better climate mitigation outcomes," how can you deliver that? That will require the grass being cut, the railings being painted and the bins being emptied in order to deliver all of those services, but you are getting added social value on top of that. You are not commissioning in terms of just maintaining those spaces; you are commissioning in terms of the outcomes that you have from the management of those spaces. That is a very different way of looking at things. I do not think it is about trying to do the same for less.

Alan Carter: The other challenge within that, or the other point to make within that, is that some of the examples that you have mentioned are a three-year contract or a five-year contract. There are risks that come with that and challenges that come with that, which you have talked about. What we are talking about is the long-term handing-over of the day-to-day management of that. We have talked about, and you have received witnesses and evidence around, getting volunteers involved in the day-to-day management and carrying out some of the works. We have talked perhaps about some of the issues and problems around that. Volunteers need to be managed and there are costs associated with that, but if volunteers are only engaged because of what we want them to do then, at times there will be limits to that. However, those volunteers can be engaged because of what that get from that process.

If you look at our Green Angels programme or our Health for Life programme, actually we are taking people and we are encouraging them to volunteer. They come and they volunteer, but they learn key skills that will enable them to get jobs. In our Green Angels programme in Liverpool, 60 people went through the pilot programme, which was funded via Big. They were from families that were long-term unemployed, with joblessness throughout a number of generations within that family. Half of those people have gone into employment because they have been through that volunteering and education programme. That would not have happened if it was not for our involvement there.

Q132 **Melanie Onn:** Is there education associated with that? You just mentioned education.

Alan Carter: Yes.

Q133 **Melanie Onn:** What do you do alongside the volunteer programme? Is it almost like an unpaid apprenticeship?

Alan Carter: In that particular programme, a day a week there was training provided, and a day a week there was volunteering putting that training into action. Over a 12-week course, there was a module, whether on environmental education, how to manage certain types of vegetation or trees, or whatever it was that the individual was interested in getting involved with. It was very much that training is provided and then the opportunity to put that training into practice.

Q134 **Melanie Onn:** Did they have a qualification at the end of it?

Alan Carter: Yes.

Q135 **Melanie Onn:** Did they volunteer entirely? They were not compelled to do it through a work programme?

Alan Carter: No.

Q136 **Mary Robinson:** Finally for the Land Trust, does your service charge model for new green spaces work in deprived communities, as well as in more affluent ones?

Alan Carter: Yes, it does, and quite a number of the sites that are coming forward are in what we would perhaps class as deprived communities. The values that are being achieved in terms of a service charge are perhaps much lower, but the densities of the houses that are built there are probably higher. The model works on a flexible amount and we work through the planning process, with the client and the local authority, to make sure, for the green space that is being created or being managed, the scope of services that are going to be delivered on that green space—and therefore the cost to deliver those services and all the other travel benefits that we talk about, whether that is health or education or suchlike—can be delivered for an affordable amount per year for the individual who comes and buys that house. It varies from area to area.

Q137 **Melanie Onn:** In the submissions that the Committee received, the Land Trust talked about outsourcing by local authorities and the need to make sure that they are outsourcing to the right type of organisation. Shared Assets also talked about the danger of it being seen as a cost-cutting activity, rather than value-adding, which I think you just touched on. My concern is about how you make sure you get the right type of organisation, how communities feel that it is the right type of organisation and how you engage with local residents around parks to make sure of the activities the right type of organisation might choose to undertake in their immediate local spaces.

David Foster: In the model that we have and the model I have in mind that could be set up in other towns and cities across the country, it is quite easy to legislate for that. You would require the trust to involve the local authority, for them to be statutorily involved in that mechanism, for it to have local people on the board of the trust. The trustees would all be from the local area, living, working or both in the local area. Within the charitable objectives of the trust, you would make sure that it was there to maintain parks and open spaces, but you would also give it some social objectives, which could include training or could include education. Our charitable objectives include those things, so that is what we are required to do.

The money is ring-fenced within the charity and cannot be spent on anything other than the charitable objects, otherwise that is a breach of trust. The Charity Commission is very strict on that, so the money is absolutely ring-fenced and cannot leak out of the charity on to other purposes. This is not about outsourcing. This is about a whole new way to approach the management of parks and open spaces in towns and cities. It is not about trying to do it cheaper. It is not about finding cheaper ways to maintain parks and open spaces. It is about a completely new approach.

Q138 **Melanie Onn:** It is though, is it not? It is about sustainability and that is about how much money you have to have a viable public space.

David Foster: Absolutely it is about sustainability, but it is about finding new ways of bringing income in to tackle the problem. Most local authorities have already outsourced the maintenance anyway. That is nearly all being done by private contractors, I would have thought, in most local authority areas.

Alan Carter: The other thing to bear in mind within this is that, if a community is involved and engaged with a process, if the organisation has a track record of delivering the real charitable benefits, the health benefits, the environmental benefits and the economic benefits that come from having well managed green space, then, actually, the risks are still there, but are much lower than if it was to another organisation. As David has just talked through, there are a lot of protections in place in law that mean that the community can be reassured, but there needs to be an ongoing dialogue. We work with the local community and get them involved in the management and making of decisions, whether that is via a "Friends of" group that can be formally recognised or via some sort of steering group. There are different ways that the community can be engaged in that process and know that they have not just a phoney kind of power, but actually real power to make the decisions on what happens there.

Mark Walton: There are two separate things. One is if you are transferring asset, so if you are transferring either the ownership or a long lease to an organisation, then ensuring that that organisation has community involvement in governance, so that there is a degree of community control and that the objects of that organisation are both focused on the maintenance and upkeep of that that space, but also delivering social outcomes as well. You are ensuring that built into the foundations of that organisation there is a community benefit and there is a level of community control around that. That is the transfer aspect.

If you are then delivering aspects of a service on the space, whether that is managing the café or undertaking some of the maintenance of one or more sites, then what is the social purpose of that organisation? Is it a not-for-private-profit organisation? What are the benefits of being commissioned along the way? Are you simply saying, "We want someone in to cut the grass?" or are you saying, "We want someone in to deliver training and educational services and, by the way, you need to upkeep the space in order to have the right to deliver those off this site?" There is democratic accountability there, because you have the comeback on the local authority. If you are transferring the asset, then you need to build that into the governance of the organisation.

Q139 **Helen Hayes:** Just briefly, how do you ensure the ultimate accountability of any arm's length organisation running a park? There has been a lot of use of the word "community". Ultimately, local authorities are democratically accountable to the whole of their community. Park users, non-park users and people from every demographic have the opportunity to vote every four years on how things are going and whether they like what the council is doing or not. There is all sorts of scope for any arm's length organisation to engage and to engage very successfully with a section of the community or some sections of the community, and there is scope for arm's length organisations to do things that are very popular with some sections of the community.

Ultimately, you can see a situation where, for some parts of some communities, parks have always been the free space where they are completely welcome, where their engagement and their involvement is not conditional on any particular transaction that takes place in that space, and some of those communities will see quite substantial changes taking place in those spaces: the introduction of many more things that you have to pay for, the introduction of new branding that changes how it looks and feels, and the introduction of new organisations. That changes the contract with the community around parks in quite a fundamental way and in a way so that the whole community does not very easily have any kind of direct accountability chain to the organisation that is running it. That is a big challenge and I just wonder what your response is to it.

David Foster: You are right, but I do not think local democratic accountability is serving parks very well at the moment in this country. Most people you have had here have told you the parks in this country are absolutely in crisis, so that local democratic accountability is not working. It is not resulting in local authorities putting more money or sufficient money into the maintenance and management of their parks and open spaces, because they have other much more pressing priorities to fund.

I think our model, the Parks Trust model, is very accountable and responsive to the local community. My board is made up of local people who all live and work in the local area. We have nothing else to do with our money and our time and our energy than to make the parks work, to make them sing and to make people really happy and proud of their parks in Milton Keynes. That is all we have to do, so why would we try to do anything else? No one can benefit from the money we have, other than the people who use the parks in Milton Keynes. It is very tempting to think that democratic accountability is the solution, but is clearly is not. It is clearly not working at the moment.

Alan Carter: It is making a balanced decision as to couching all the different risks that come with making the decision. Should the parks stay with local authorities? It is not working particularly well at the moment, as has been highlighted. Could they be passed to a small community group to look after, who has the ultimate decision? There are some significant risks that come with that, whether that is the longevity of that and what happens in five or 10 years' time, when the lead person within that group retires, moves away or has other priorities that they need to consider. It is about there being the accountability that can be built in within the freehold sale, within the lease or within the long-term management arrangement, and making sure that there are elected members if that is appropriate, who are part of the governing body or steering group, who can still influence all those things.

The legal ownership is not actually the real issue, in my mind. It is about having that accountability to the widest sense of community that comes there. Speaking as an organisation that works with a lot of communities, I want to engage with as diverse an amount of the community that I can. Actually, the challenge is that sometimes the communities do not want to engage and the problem is the other way around. We work with a lot of our managing partners who are local community groups, who actually live within the community, to engage with the community they live with, whether that is TCV, Groundwork, Wildlife Trust, a local authority or a small community group, which can really understand what is going on within the community, lives within it and can engage there.

Mark Walton: I share some of your concerns. There are some red herrings around having local authority representatives on boards because, actually, once you are on the board of an organisation, your responsibility is to that organisation and not any other representative role. One of the issues of governance is that you get quite poor governance when you have people who are there thinking that they are wearing some other representative hat, because they are not thinking about that organisation.

The other thing is that talking about engagement in a very broad sense can also be dangerous. It creates a sort of warmness and a lack of challenge around who is being engaged, who is not coming, why they are not coming and why they do not feel that this is their space. Particularly given some of the social context that we have at the moment, there are some real issues around some elements of the community not feeling welcome in some public spaces. There is a real danger that we empower some parts of the community and disempower others. There is a real role for a local authority there in ensuring that there is non-discriminatory practice, broad engagement and equity of provision. That is a real role for local authorities.

There has to be some challenge for community organisations about who you are serving, how you are engaging people and how people hold you to account. That could be through elections. It could be through membership and elections to a board, but there are participatory forms of democracy, so engaging people in creating strategies and management plans, and engaging people in operations. Having a real challenge at all times around, actually, who is being represented here and how you are being held to account is a very valid question.

Q140 **Alison Thewliss:** I just want to follow up on one of the points that you made there, Mark. I am very lucky to represent some of Glasgow's most beautiful parks—Kelvingrove, Queen's Park, Bellahouston and Glasgow Green—in my patch. They are all very different and very special in their own way. On the point you made about boards, accountability, who you are accountable to and what hat you are wearing doing that, I wanted just to ask how you balance the need for commercial activities and money coming in, if you are a trust and you need to make enough money to do those things, because of your obligations to any staff you might then employ, against the needs of that local community that surround the park. I say that when the parks in Glasgow are all council-managed. I had an accusation fed back to me by a third party that a council officer had accused me of being in the pocket of local residents, which is exactly what a councillor should be. How would you guard against that if that officer was a member of that trust and was trying to get commercial development, but the councillors then had more of a difficulty in holding that to account?

Mark Walton: You could put in safeguards around some of that stuff. As you said about not transferring the freehold but transferring the leasehold, the decisions about things like disposals have to be taken by the local authority, where that democratic accountability is built in. One of the things that we find when working with community organisations and local authorities around making some of those difficult decisions about what happens in terms of making something sustainable is just being open about what the costs and deficits actually are. People can take very defensive positions until they see the books, and then they get quite creative about going, "How can we address that? What can we do about that? Yes, maybe we do have to consider some disposals," or whatever it might be. Having that open process enables people to take ownership of some of that decision-making. You also need to have other safeguards in place around transferring the freehold or who makes those final commercial decisions. Certainly you have to be sustainable. You cannot go bust. Some difficult and potentially unpopular decisions sometimes have to be made around commercial operation.

Alan Carter: If the base level of funding is there, via some sort of endowment or service charge provision, which covers the base maintenance, then it is a choice and a consultation with the community and the elected members, if need be, which says, "Okay, we could deliver a big health programme to meet the particular need within the community, but that is going to cost X. How are we going to find X?" We know the park is going to be well maintained, it is going to be safe, open and free to use, but we want to run a particular programme to meet a particular need. That can be costed out? How are we going to do that? Are we going to hold a series of events? Are we going to seek some funding and work with a CCG or anyone else to do that? We can build that in within the process to deliver that.

Q141 **Chair:** Finally, that is an important point. If the trust is going to be sustainable for the long term, there has to be that base funding there, so it is not simply an open cheque, where you go back to the local authority, "This is how much we have spent this year. Please give us the money."

Alan Carter: It is crucial in my mind to move it away from a situation where there is still that question mark over the funding, so the service could be significantly cut and gates may need to close. That long-term investment is crucial to make sure that the quality of green space—it is not just about the quantity but the quality of the green space and the parks—is maintained for that community benefit, which can deliver that real community aspiration of what they want the green space for.

Chair: Also the local authority has the certainty that they are not going to have to fill a black hole at some point with extra funding.

Alan Carter: Yes, and some local authorities, while they struggle with their revenue budgets, are okay in terms of capital. On the invest-to-save principle, some that we talk to or are in conversation with are interested in investing in their green space, on the basis that they will reduce their long-term revenue cost. Mix that with a bit of 106. Mix it with perhaps a little bit of disposal of tertiary land and then you have a solution for that local authority.

Q142 **Melanie Onn:** I have a very quick final point. It feels very much that, if you have a 999-year lease or something shorter, the ultimate insurance remains the local authority. If it all goes wrong, the local authority remains the backstop. Would you agree with that?

David Foster: I think so, and that is probably the way in which it should be. That is the asset lock that you would want on public assets. Yes, there is absolutely no question in our case that we would ever go back to the local authority and ask them to help us out, if we were short of dosh. The local authority would have a fit if they thought that that might ever be the case. It has never been necessary and nor would it be. My trustees would never put the local authority in that position.

Alan Carter: From our perspective, we are quite relaxed. If the local authority wants to have that more detailed level of control by having a lease or some sort of other long-term arrangement, but be the ultimate insurance policy against it, you could argue, we can work with that. If actually the local authority does not want to have any risks associated with the freehold ownership, then we are happy to take the freehold ownership as well. That will come down to a decision that is made by the elected members, at the appropriate time to make that decision, as to what is right for that local authority and for the community.

Mark Walton: It is not just about being a backstop and the last resort. This is fundamentally public land. They are public assets. There is an important principle there around public ownership, but there may be a diversity of delivery on top of that. I would want to see, as far as possible, that public ownership retained.

Chair: Thank you all very much for coming and giving evidence to the Committee today. That has been very helpful to us. That brings us to the end of our public proceedings for today.