

# Communities and Local Government Committee

## Oral evidence: Public parks, HC 45

Monday 5 December 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 December 2016.

### [Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Rushanara Ali; Bob Blackman; Helen Hayes; Kevin Hollinrake; Melanie Onn; Mr Mark Prisk; Mary Robinson; Alison Thewliss.

### Questions 143 – 199

#### Examination of witness

Witness: Andrew Percy MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Minister for the Northern Powerhouse, Department for Communities and Local Government

Q143 **Chair:** Welcome, Minister, to the final session of our inquiry into public parks. Thank you very much for joining us this afternoon. Just to begin, I will get Committee members to put on the record any interests they may have. I am a vice president of the Local Government Association.

**Bob Blackman:** I am a vice president of the LGA as well.

**Chair:** That is all we have to put on the record this afternoon. Thank you very much for coming to be with us. I think you have been to the Committee once before, but never in the star role, as I remember. It probably will not take quite as long this time for you to get a question directed at you. You have been in the job for a few months now, Minister. Obviously in the last few days you will have done nothing but spend your time thinking about parks and the questions we are going to ask you about them. In the normal course of a week, how much time do you spend on parks? Is it one of the things they tacked on to your brief at the end when nobody else wanted to do it?

**Andrew Percy:** Thank you, Clive, for the introduction, and thank you for that helpful first question. It is a pleasure to be here and be able to speak this time. As you rightly pointed out, I did not have a great deal to say last time. That is a shame, or not, depending on what I would have said.

I am really happy to have taken this responsibility on. I cannot give you a set number of hours that I have spent on this. If I were to think of the last couple of days, I can certainly say it has consumed most of my time in this role. I have been meeting various groups involved in this sector. One of the first things I did as a Minister in the first couple of weeks was to go to the Heritage Lottery Fund's parks event here. I sat down to discuss parks with the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Parks Alliance just a couple of weeks ago.

I cannot give you a set time. I am happy to be doing this and to have this particular responsibility. I used to be a trustee of a Victorian park in Hull when I was on the city council. I have led a number of campaigns locally around parks, including a designation of a village green. If you go on my website you will see I have done lots of work around various parks in my own constituency over the last few years: raising money for them, helping to support their funding bids. That is precisely because I do appreciate the value of parks. I have a long list of other responsibilities as well, but some of it cuts across. I am happy to be in this role and have this responsibility.

**Q144 Chair:** You have DCLG responsibility for parks. When the Town and Country Planning Association came to give evidence, they said that Government responsibility for parks and green spaces was a muddle. They thought it was unclear and that no one really had absolute responsibility. Defra, for example, has wider responsibility for the natural environment. It was not always clear who was taking the lead and whether there was any joined-up thinking in Government about the issue.

**Andrew Percy:** You could say that about a whole range of policy areas in which different Government Departments are involved. One thing I have made absolutely clear since you started your inquiry is that parks are very much one of my responsibilities. I have had it added to the DCLG website, so that external stakeholders can understand that. My role is to lead.

Across Government, my officials are working with officials in other Departments on this area of policy. One thing I am happy to say to the Committee is that, once you have issued your report, I want to bring together a cross-departmental group, to look at the recommendations of this inquiry and see whether there is more we can do to ensure we have proper working between Departments.

**Q145 Chair:** That very effectively answers my next question, about how often you meet with colleagues in other Government Departments and agencies. The answer is probably that there is not a formal arrangement at present, but you will be interested in setting one up to have a look at the recommendations we make.

**Andrew Percy:** I will look at what your recommendations are. This is probably going to be very helpful. It is very timely for me as the new Minister, with this new responsibility and thinking about how I can drive this forward. We are probably all on the same page in terms of where we want to be.

I look at things like the Future High Streets Forum, where we are bringing together people from the sector and across Government to try to deal with some of those issues affecting the high street. I am happy to bring together a group—stakeholders and other Government Departments—on this policy area as well, once you have issued your report of course. That would be helpful. It would be helpful for me in understanding the role and responsibility of other Departments in this area too.

Q146 **Chair:** One of our recommendations is: “Will you bring a group together across Government to look at the issues?” You have answered the question already, so we have at least one tick in the box there.

**Andrew Percy:** I am very keen to look at that, and personally I think it would be very helpful.

Q147 **Melanie Onn:** Minister, it is very reassuring to hear your commitment to parks and green spaces. It is not just you who shares that concern; the United Nations also has a concern. I wonder if the UK is on track to meet the UN’s sustainable development goal 11.7 by 2030.

**Andrew Percy:** Yes, I am aware of that particular commitment. It is a very difficult one to measure, because there is no set metric of how you determine whether or not we have hit that particular target. We certainly have an issue in this country, in that accessibility to green spaces varies. We know, for example, that people living in more affluent areas are much more likely to have a green space or a park around them, compared to people in less prosperous areas.

That is one of the reasons we introduced, for the first time in a number of decades, the Pocket Park scheme. That was £1 million of funding, often targeted directly at deprived communities, to make sure we can create those urban green spaces. That is a really laudable target and aim to have. We have put some action behind that, through the Pocket Park funding, to increase accessibility to green space in line with that.

Q148 **Melanie Onn:** 11.7 is particularly around the safety, as well as the inclusivity and accessibility, of the parks, and in particular making them safe for women and children, older people and those with disabilities. Perhaps you could tell us a little more about that.

**Andrew Percy:** There have been some really good examples, through the Pocket Park programme, of parks created with those sectors and those groups in mind. Lovell Park flats pocket park in Leeds, for example, was very much around supporting children. They created a special safe space for children as part of that. Similarly, we saw that Gladstone Green pocket park in Rugby was a very inclusive pocket park, specifically aimed at supporting those with disabilities.

There are a whole range of other examples. At Johnson Place in Wolverhampton, the park was designed in such a way as to support disabled and young people. It helps the rehabilitation of tenants suffering poor health and it provides a green allotment space for families and their children.

A lot of the Pocket Park programme has been about trying to bring different and sometimes isolated groups of society together around their new green space. That is an important commitment, as is the work that goes on in more established parks up and down the country by councils to support more vulnerable people.

Q149 **Melanie Onn:** The reason for this inquiry is because we know that local government is under significant strain with its budget. One of the earliest casualties of that is funding on green space maintenance. Do you think that those vulnerable groups will still feel as safe in parks that have deteriorated, perhaps in terms of littering, antisocial behaviour or graffiti? Do you think that is a direct result of local government cuts, or are there other influences?

**Andrew Percy:** In the last Parliament, we all voted for and signed up to reducing budgets for local government. Nobody went into any election promising more for local government.

I do not think the statistics would support the idea that they have been first in line for local government spending reductions. Local authorities were spending 0.71% of their budgets in 2010-11 on green spaces. In 2015-16, it was at 0.73%, so as a percentage of local government spending it has gone up ever so slightly. I do not think councils have taken what sometimes might be termed the easy hits. Of course, that is an increased percentage of a shrinking pot. I fully accept that.

The picture is mixed across the country. Some councils have invested a great deal more. For example, Birmingham City Council has spent two thirds more on green spaces in 2015-16 compared to 2010-11. I asked my own local authority, North Lincolnshire Council, to provide me with its capital grants to support parks over this last period. In 2009-10, it provided £36,000 of grants to green spaces and play areas. Last year, it provided £245,000.

The picture varies. It is for locally elected councillors to set their budgets. I was a locally elected councillor before this. It is not for Ministers to interfere in that. Many of them have proven that they have protected their green spaces. In some areas, they have increased the amount of money they are spending in green spaces. That is something that is left to local discretion.

Q150 **Melanie Onn:** You mentioned deprived communities earlier. Can you tell me specifically what you are doing to improve access for deprived communities to green spaces and parks?

**Andrew Percy:** The Pocket Park programme was specifically aimed at those. 87 pocket parks were created from that with grants of between £750,000 and £15,000. I provided you with a couple of examples earlier that were targeted and located in deprived communities. The one in Leeds is an area I know reasonably well. It is a worry that our most affluent 20% of wards have five times more green space than the most deprived 10% of wards. That is the figure I was trying to relate to

earlier. As I say, through the Pocket Park programme we have tried to address that.

Beyond that, it is very much for local authorities to make the decisions as to how they are going to fund local parks and what they are going to prioritise. We have now provided the public health grant to local authorities. It is possible for that public health funding to be used to target support at the most deprived and vulnerable communities, where often you have the greatest health inequalities. I would hope that the green space and parks available in communities can be part of that too.

Q151 **Mr Mark Prisk:** Minister, we have heard evidence that just 48% of councils have a current green space strategy. Why do you think councils are not making this a higher priority?

**Andrew Percy:** That is a question for local authorities.

**Mr Mark Prisk:** What is the Government's view?

**Andrew Percy:** The Government's view, quite clearly, is that it is for locally elected politicians to determine their priorities locally. I am someone who passionately believes in that. I sat for 10 years on a local authority where we were increasingly dictated to by central Government and told we had to have a plan for this, a plan for that. We had more and more duties placed on us, not always with the money to follow. I do not think it is for Ministers to tell local government what it should and should not prioritise.

This is a time when we are asking councils to make very tough decisions about funding and spending commitments. I am intrigued by the idea of local authorities having parks champions or green space champions. That is something I want to perhaps consider promoting among local authorities, once I have considered the recommendations of this Committee and talked to some of the sector.

It is up to local councils. Some of that will depend on what the electorate demand from them as well. I do not want to see Government telling local authorities what they have to do in this area. Our view is very clear. We feel that they should want to preserve, enhance and protect urban green space, or green space in general, but it is for them to determine themselves.

Q152 **Mr Mark Prisk:** But clearly you are not happy with the current proportion

**Andrew Percy:** Just because you do not have a plan, it does not mean that the green spaces are not well maintained. Plenty of councils probably would maintain that, without the need to have a formal green space management plan or whatever, they are protecting their green areas and investing in them appropriately. I do not know whether it necessarily follows that having a formal plan adopted by the local authority means you are therefore doing a better job of maintaining your green spaces than authorities that do not. I would have to see some more evidence on that.

Q153 **Mr Mark Prisk:** We have had a lot of representations as to whether or not the only way to change this is to institute a form of statutory duty. It might be a duty around providing or maintaining parks. It might simply be around making sure there is a clear strategy in place. How would you respond to that? You said you are going to look carefully at the way in which this Select Committee reports. What is the Government's view on that?

**Andrew Percy:** I have looked at and followed some of the evidence you have had. It is fair to say that the view of the sector is mixed on this. I met with the Parks Alliance last week or the week before. The Parks Alliance does not support a statutory duty. I believe the Heritage Lottery Fund is also unclear on whether it would support it.

The sheer variety of what is included when we talk about green space in general means that having a statutory duty could be quite challenging. I am not convinced that it is needed. At a time when Government are requiring local authorities to make some relatively difficult decisions around funding, I do not think we should be placing upon them extra statutory burdens and duties, which may not do a great deal to protect green spaces or the amount of funding a local authority puts towards them.

I am not convinced that that is necessary or required. I am very keen to work with the Committee and people in the sector to look at what the alternatives to a statutory duty might be. This idea of having a parks champion at local authority level is perhaps one way towards raising the profile of parks and green spaces within local government, without the formal need for a statutory duty.

Q154 **Mr Mark Prisk:** What would your view be of a clearer responsibility that is not necessarily a full statutory duty?

**Andrew Percy:** I am happy to look at what the alternatives are. As part of what I hope to convene once you have provided your report, I am happy for us to look at that with the sector, to see what alternatives there are that fall short of a statutory duty.

**Mr Mark Prisk:** That part of the report may not be fully considered in quite that way, but we understand the argument you are making.

Q155 **Bob Blackman:** Minister, a lot of parks issues are related to local decision-making. Devolution to local authorities gives an opportunity. What opportunities do you think exist as a result of combined authorities taking a much more strategic view of parks and open spaces?

**Andrew Percy:** That is a really interesting question. It is not one I had considered as part of the devolution discussions we have been having around the country, which is another area I have some responsibility for. That is because the devolution deals we have negotiated thus far, be it Manchester, Liverpool, Tees Valley, Cambridgeshire, have all been at a very high level. We have not necessarily dug down to the specific detail of something such as urban green space or parks, and I do not think we would expect to.

We would not necessarily build this into a devolution deal, because these devolution deals are very high level. You have local authorities working together through the combined authorities, and many of them sharing and pooling public health responsibilities. That offers the opportunity for local authorities at that level to perhaps consider this area of policy more broadly across a geography.

It provides an opportunity. Again, that would have to come from those individual combined authorities. If the authorities within a particular devolution area consider this as an area of importance for them, the structure enables authorities to work together, whether it is from the public health angle, from the housing angle, in terms of creating proper space where people want to live, or simply on the social front. However, I do not think it is anything we would write into a devolution deal.

Q156 **Bob Blackman:** The Government are devolving responsibility on public health in particular. If there are parks and open spaces where people can exercise, get some fresh air and an improvement to public health, is this something that your Department could look at, in terms of agreeing these strategies? One of the problems that local authorities will always say is, "Very sorry, we have not got enough money. We cannot do it." If devolution goes to a combined authority that is a bit larger, then they can look at it as a strategic area, particularly in areas where regeneration is taking place.

**Andrew Percy:** What do the devolution deals bring with them? The devolution deals bring with them extra cash. Each of them is bespoke, of course. For example, in Manchester the entire health budget is being devolved. Where you have devolution of that nature, which more naturally fits the health agenda, it is for those authorities that are part of the combined authority under new mayors, when they are elected next May, to determine whether or not this is something they want to do at a local level.

The agreements with devolution areas are at quite a high level of saying, "Here are the powers. Here is the cash. Go off and make the decision yourself." It would run a bit counter to that if we were to say, "But as part of that we expect you to do this." It is a very local issue, where currently responsibility lies with local government, not with central Government, to write that into the devolution deal. The structure of what is created through the combined authority gives the ability for local authorities to think strategically, make some of those decisions, tie those decisions in across different policy areas and different geographies, not just when it comes to this area of policy, but more generally on a whole range of different policy areas

Q157 **Bob Blackman:** Would you accept that, while we have lots of evidence about the neglect of parks and public spaces, and the need to potentially invest, at an individual local authority level that is often very difficult? However, by bringing together a series of areas, be it a county area or be it across urban authorities, that is an opportunity. I would suggest urban authorities are much more important in this respect, because those parks and open spaces are much more under threat.

**Andrew Percy:** Absolutely. We are creating the structure to enable that to happen. I do not think it is for me as the Minister, or for Government, to then say to these structures, "You must go on and do this." They should want to do this if it is the right thing to do. We have certainly created the structure to enable that to happen through devolution. One would think, particularly when it comes to public health, this is an area where local authorities will increasingly want to use the combined authority structures, where they exist, to collaborate more. I absolutely accept the premise of the question.

Q158 **Alison Thewliss:** It was nice to see that you were intending to do some kind of meeting following on from the publication of the report to bring people together. Some of the evidence that we have heard from the likes of the TCPA, Nesta and the National Trust is calling for greater co-ordination nationally on parks issues, to support the learning and sharing of best practice at a national level. Do you think there should be a body or a person with responsibility for doing this?

**Andrew Percy:** I am more than happy to use my responsibility to try to lead on some of this. DCLG officials are working across Government, where there is good practice, to try to bring all that together. We are very engaged with the sector. Depending on what your recommendations are, and having given those some thought, bringing everybody together is something I am keen to do.

It is very difficult to have one body that just represents parks, for example. As I said earlier in response to another question, what actually constitutes a park or a green space is so varied across the sector. Similarly, a lot of the groups that are involved are very varied. It is very hard to imagine you would have one body overarching all of that.

Bringing the sector together, sharing best practice, is something we are very keen to do. I am personally very keen to do it. That is why I made the offer at the beginning of this session to bring together a body around that, once your report is concluded.

Q159 **Alison Thewliss:** One of the things that we have done in Scotland, in response to the *State of UK Public Parks* report that the Heritage Lottery Fund did, was that Greenspace Scotland set up the park managers forum across Scotland. That brings together all 32 local authorities' park managers for regular meetings, so that they are able to share best practice. I was wondering if that is something that could be of assistance, maybe not on a national, English-led basis, but perhaps on a regionalised basis.

**Andrew Percy:** There is a lot of best practice already being shared across the sector. Groups like the Parks Alliance, Heritage Lottery Fund and our officials in DCLG are already sharing that. I am happy to look at the Scottish example, and see how it operates and how transferrable it is across to England.

Q160 **Helen Hayes:** Planning policy largely makes reference to parks in relation to their amenity value to residents, which is of course vitally

important. Separately, planning policy makes requirements of councils to consider climate change and to take steps to manage and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Do you think that planning policy currently adequately supports and encourages the development of parks and open spaces as green infrastructure, particularly given the pressing challenges of climate change and the role that our open spaces play in that regard?

**Andrew Percy:** I do. As you have highlighted, the National Planning Policy Framework clearly recognises that access to high-quality open spaces and opportunities for sport, recreation and suchlike are really important from a health and wellbeing point of view. We have ensured through that that there is very strong protection for parks and green spaces within the planning framework.

Through the local and neighbourhood planning structures, we have allowed local communities to designate green areas that are of particular importance to prevent development. Through the system, we are offering quite robust protection for green spaces and parks.

Q161 **Helen Hayes:** We are trying to deliver many, many more homes across the country. More than just protection of existing parks and open spaces, is there adequate support and encouragement for the development of new green infrastructure, as our communities are expanding and new settlements are being created to meet our demand for new homes?

**Andrew Percy:** What is built into the green infrastructure often varies across the country and across developments. The system is relatively robust in ensuring that there is sufficient leisure and green space within developments. I am happy to look at the evidence on this. I am relatively new to this Department. Going back to being a councillor, we were always very keen, through Section 106 or through planning conditions, to ensure that there was appropriate green infrastructure as part of any development we approved. A lot of it goes down to a local level, as to how robust councils are in requiring this as part of their planning processes.

Q162 **Helen Hayes:** This Committee produced a report in April of this year on the National Planning Policy Framework. That made a recommendation that the NPPF is comprehensively reviewed within the life of this Parliament. We have yet to receive a response from the Department to that report. Would you be able to tell us today whether there will be a review of the NPPF before the end of this Parliament?

**Andrew Percy:** My note from my officials says I have to apologise to you. It was not my fault; I was not in post. The serious point is that I am sorry it has taken so long to respond on this issue. I am a relatively new Minister. I know, from when I sat on Select Committees and when I have done other things in this place, that it is very frustrating when Government do not respond in a timely fashion. Having been made aware of this, I certainly intend now to make sure that we respond in an appropriate timeframe. Sometimes an appropriate timeframe can mean a very long time. I want us to respond swiftly to you on this, because April is a very long time ago. I accept that. All I can do at this stage is

apologise. I was not aware of this, but we will do everything we can to get a response ASAP.

Q163 **Bob Blackman:** We have had a lot of evidence in relation to the pressure on housing, the need for housing, as Helen has just referred to, and the fact that green spaces and parks, particularly in urban areas, are being nibbled away at. In large parts, there are small pocket parks that are a key challenge to maintain. At the moment, are local authorities getting the right balance between the need to provide much needed housing, but also the need, given that the housing is much denser and tends to be taller, to provide parks and open spaces where people can exercise and just gain a green lung?

**Andrew Percy:** We are very clear in the framework that local authorities' planning policies have to be based on a robust and up-to-date assessment of the need for open space for sports and recreational facilities, and the opportunities for new provision. We have also been very clear through the framework that open spaces, sports and recreational buildings and suchlike should not be built on unless an assessment has been undertaken to clearly show they are surplus to requirements. Then that stuff will often be re-provided elsewhere.

I have to say, if I am being perfectly honest with you, having only been in post a few months, I do not have a general view across the country as to how different authorities are doing on this issue specifically. We have built it fairly robustly into the framework. That is something I will want to spend more time considering in this role.

Q164 **Bob Blackman:** One of the issues that we have had evidence on is the fact that, when developers build housing, as part of their obligation to provide green spaces for recreational use, they tend to not maintain them to the required standard. Having sold the properties, they disappear rapidly, leaving it to the local authority to pick up the pieces. Under those circumstances, the green spaces are unusable by local people. What protection can be given to ensure that the green spaces are available for the people for whom they were intended?

**Andrew Percy:** This is an issue I have seen in my own constituency with play parks and green spaces on new developments. It is a long-standing issue. Some local authorities manage that differently by conditioning in certain things around those green spaces as part of the planning permission. I would have to see the evidence as to what is happening around the country more generally.

The tools exist through the planning system for those conditions to be put on, to ensure that green space or the play areas that are created as part of these new developments do not just disappear away or slowly fade into poor repair. I think we have all seen that in our constituencies, on new housing developments in particular, over the last couple of decades.

Q165 **Bob Blackman:** The National Planning Policy Framework regards certain parks as not significant. What protections can be given to those, to prevent them falling into disrepair and then potentially being developed,

so they are available for local people?

**Andrew Percy:** Bob, are you talking in terms of parks that are on private developments or just general parks?

**Bob Blackman:** Just general parks, yes.

**Andrew Percy:** That is a matter for local authorities and local communities to determine. Through neighbourhood planning policies, local people are able to designate a particular green space or park as part of their local or neighbourhood plan. We have given the local communities the power to do that. Similarly, we have even provided a toolkit for individuals who want to know how they can protect their green spaces, available on DCLG's website. That gives people the information so they know how they can register a particular green space, or protect it as part of a neighbourhood plan.

Q166 **Bob Blackman:** One of the problems is that local authorities, and I can speak of my own, will often allow parks to just fall into disrepair, on the basis that they will claim they do not have the resources to maintain them. They do not necessarily have the requisite planning protection for those parks, with the hope and expectation that, in the long run, "We will just turn it over to be housing land." Then local people have not only lost their park, but they also potentially have housing, which is probably unsympathetic to their local area, being developed as well. What extra protections are the Government thinking about for those particular areas?

**Andrew Percy:** The local green space designation we introduced is one way of protecting that, but a lot of these are questions for local authorities that are not maintaining green space in the way that members of the local community would wish for it to be maintained. We can protect them in law through the local green space designation, and residents have a power to do that. Without looking at specific examples, I can only talk in the general. The framework is there. It is relatively robust on green space. Neighbourhood plans are relatively robust. There is power available there to local communities. Beyond that, it is for individuals to pressure their local authorities on those particular pieces of land. Without specifics, I cannot say much more than that.

Q167 **Melanie Onn:** The Government have decided that local government will keep all its business rates. Do you think that will be enough to protect green spaces and parks?

**Andrew Percy:** Look at where we are at the moment in terms of local government finance. The actual proportion of local government spending on green spaces and parks has risen in the last five years. I accept it is as part of a—

**Melanie Onn:** You keep saying that, but people look around their local areas and they do not see parks being maintained to the same standard. We have had so much evidence come forward that people are having to change the way that parks run to reduce costs and naturalise them. That is a fancy way to say not cutting the grass so often.

**Andrew Percy:** You mean wild: it is a more wild park. You can look to authorities like Birmingham. You can look to authorities like Oldham, which is spending more money. You can look to even your neighbouring local authority, my local authority, North Lincolnshire, which is spending hugely more on grants to local parks.

**Melanie Onn:** Is that the area around the civic centre where the council is based?

**Andrew Percy:** It is a wonderful park, isn't it?

**Melanie Onn:** Isn't it.

**Andrew Percy:** They have just had a lovely water feature, Splashpad, added at great expense to the public. Without going too parochial, there are lots of examples of local authorities that spent more money on parks, despite a situation of falling local government budgets, which we are all signed up to. I will just remind everybody round the table on that. All of us signed up to not giving local government any more money in the last Parliament and at the last election.

**Melanie Onn:** For those who were elected.

**Andrew Percy:** We all accept that local government finance is where it is. However, some councils, of different political leaderships—Labour, Conservative and whatever else may or may not exist—have decided to spend more money on their parks. It is a varied picture across the country. The longer-term settlements we provided to local government, of which there has been a 97% take-up, are a way of ensuring a sustainability of funding for parks.

Q168 **Melanie Onn:** How much do you think local government is going to use that? How much do you think the local authorities are going to use out of business rate retention to support parks?

**Andrew Percy:** That is a question for individual councils. I do not think it is for me to tell them how much they should spend. They have to make that decision on the basis of what they feel the priorities are in their area. What we are doing is giving, on the business rates issue, local authorities what they have asked for for a very long time. Along with that, we have given these long-term settlements, which all but 3% of councils have taken up. Beyond that, it is for the electorate and the local community to demand from their local council what it is they want to see.

Councils make decisions all the time around prioritisation of different services and go out to the electorate on that at council elections. All I would say on business rates and the long-term funding settlements is that they give councils a stable position to plan for into the future, rather than these year-on-year settlements we used to get, which presented us all with a headache.

Q169 **Melanie Onn:** In terms of having that long-term support, that is something that has been mentioned by quite a few of the organisations before us. When it comes to things like funding through one-off capital

grants or lottery and heritage funding, they are looking for the long-term funding to make sure that they can continue to maintain whatever it is the park looks like in the future.

**Andrew Percy:** Local authorities, even before the long-term settlement plans, produced four-year plans anyway, so that you know how much is going to be spent roughly on each area of council responsibility each year. What we have done beyond that is to provide them with a guarantee of what they are going to get from Government as well, in order to undertake the long-term financial planning. Again, these are local decisions that are best taken by the locally elected representatives of the particular area.

Q170 **Melanie Onn:** You mentioned earlier the health benefits of parks, green spaces and open areas. Health inequalities are severe in my area. Do you think there is a role for public health authorities to start making a contribution, if the concentration should be on prevention rather than cure of some of those issues?

**Andrew Percy:** The public health grant goes to the local authority now since the 2013 changes.

Q171 **Melanie Onn:** What about the CCG making contributions?

**Andrew Percy:** Of course that money is ring-fenced for public health funding but, if local authorities want to use some of that to support activity within a park, it is perfectly acceptable for them to do that. Again, those are decisions that are best taken locally, and it is for the relationships between the CCG and the local council to develop on a local level. Clearly, many public health services are now using our green spaces as part of their activity. I have one in my own area based around the cardiac support group. They are out using the green spaces and more besides to support people's health. In terms of the contribution, that is for the local authorities to determine themselves.

Q172 **Melanie Onn:** If the CCGs are using them for cardiovascular assistance, then, should there not be a contribution from them directly to support the space or the facilities that they use?

**Andrew Percy:** That is something to be determined locally. When it comes to public health, of course, that public health funding now sits with local authorities in a way that it did not before. Previously it was with the PCTs, so that conversation was probably more difficult. Now it sits with local authorities themselves. They have that ring-fenced public health grant. If they want to use some of that to support the activity that is taking place in parks and green spaces, it is open for them to do so.

Q173 **Melanie Onn:** How do you think that access to revenue funding for parks can be improved?

**Andrew Percy:** Again, at a local level, it is for local councils to determine how much they spend on their parks. Many local authorities are in partnerships and working with different structures of funding, to try to leverage in other funding. There are plenty of examples of that happening at a local level, but the revenue funding is from the local

authority and it is for the local authority to determine how it sets its budget.

Q174 **Melanie Onn:** Do you envisage the Pocket Park scheme being a long-term scheme?

**Andrew Percy:** We have created these 87 pocket parks. I am very keen to get a read-out on that more generally in terms of how successful it has been. I cannot make spending commitments as to what will happen in the future, because that will probably guarantee a very short ministerial career. I cannot make those today. What we have required, on the part of the Pocket Park programme, is a sustainability strategy as part of their funding, but we will have to assess the value of how that has gone. This is the first funding for new parks for decades. It is a really great project, and it would be interesting to see what possibilities there are to expand it in the future. We will obviously have to make a decision at some point in the future on that.

Q175 **Helen Hayes:** We have heard a lot this afternoon, Minister, about the responsibility that local authorities have towards parks. It is clear that, particularly in relation to areas like public health, many local authorities are struggling to maintain the current services that they provide because of the cuts that they have received to their budgets. That is certainly true in the local authorities that I represent. Do you accept that the Government have any responsibility at all towards parks in local areas, above and beyond that which local authorities have, to secure them as a strategic part of our physical fabric and our community life?

**Andrew Percy:** Yes, of course Government have a responsibility, which is why, through the National Planning Policy Framework, we have created protections for green spaces and public parks. That is part of it. Of course, it is central Government that have set out the long-term funding for local authorities. We have a responsibility there, in that the funding for that comes from here. I have mentioned the Pocket Parks project, which is a central Government-funded programme. We have provided other funding through Our Place and Delivering Differently to help support other alternative funding models for parks. As I have already made clear, we share best practice and engage with the sector to spread that across the country.

I do not, as Minister, have specific control over individual parks or individual local authorities, but one thing I can do as Minister is bring groups together to share that best practice. The power of convening is one of the most useful and powerful tools in a Minister's toolkit, and I am happy to do that, once I have seen your recommendations, to try to support this area much more.

We have specific responsibilities at strategic level, in terms of the planning policies, of what we have delivered through the National Planning Policy Framework but, at a local level, it should be about local decision-making. It is for local councils to determine what it is they want to invest in.

Q176 **Helen Hayes:** If councils are facing a series of impossible choices because their budgets are stretched so much, and there is clear evidence that parks are one of the areas of responsibility that are the casualties of those impossible choices, do the Government have any role in addressing that issue?

**Andrew Percy:** First of all, let us just be clear: the percentage of local government spend on parks and green spaces has gone up in the last five years. I am not glossing over the fact that that is a very diminishing pot and we are all in agreement in terms of support for that diminishing pot, so let's not pretend otherwise. Beyond that, where Government can be helpful and support this is in the sharing of that best practice where there are other alternative funding models in use.

I reiterate that it is mixed. There are plenty of local authorities that are spending more on parks than they were five or six years ago. Oldham and Birmingham are the two examples that I have used this afternoon. My own local authority, when it comes to capital grants, has been very generous in North Lincolnshire. It has varied across the country.

Q177 **Chair:** You have said a number of times, Minister, that local authorities will make their own decisions in local areas, and you have said that the Government have been helpful in terms of overall planning policy. Generally speaking, when new housing takes shape, local authorities can look to a developer to make contributions to the extra demands put on them: space for parks, playgrounds and other things. That is not true, is it, where permitted development occurs and commercial property is turned into residential property? The local authority then is left with no choice but to pay for it itself. Is that a case of Government being helpful?

**Andrew Percy:** Government face a whole set of changes, and we all know where the particular housing challenge is at the moment. We are very clear about the council's need to have a robust plan on green space as part of new developments. You are quite right about permitted development rights, but they tend to be smaller scale developments compared to some of these larger housing developments. In cases where it has been urban, the Pocket Park project was one way of addressing some of that.

Q178 **Chair:** So the Government will give grants for pocket parks where permitted development occurs.

**Andrew Percy:** No. A lot of the permitted developments, as you know, when it comes to commercial and retail spaces being turned into housing, have been in urban town centre areas, which is where the Pocket Park programme was based. However, the two are not tied; I am not pretending for a moment that they are.

Q179 **Chair:** You are encouraging local authorities to put bids in for Pocket Park funding.

**Andrew Percy:** The Pocket Park project to deliver these 87 parks was focused very much in urban areas, where there is the biggest challenge on green space.

Q180 **Rushanara Ali:** I wanted to go back to the local versus national dimension, Minister. I know that you are relatively new in your position, but I do not see enough passion and vision behind what you are saying, and a lot of it seems to be that “the local authorities can do X, Y and Z”. Do you feel that you could be a more passionate champion for parks and help local authorities meet the gaps, where they exist, in the light of the funding challenges that they face, rather than what we are hearing at the moment? The tone seems quite defeatist. I know you have to protect your career and you do not want the short ministerial career, as you said yourself, but you could make this brief a really exciting one by showing the leadership that is required here.

**Andrew Percy:** That is outrageous. I had a coffee and a Kit Kat before this session, so I came across with a lot of passion.

**Rushanara Ali:** Please show it.

**Andrew Percy:** I am very saddened that I apparently do not have any passion. Perhaps it is just how I am as a dulcet Yorkshireman. I started by saying that I spent 10 years as a local councillor and I was a trustee of a Victorian park. I have raised lots of money for parks in my own area. I absolutely understand and appreciate this, and I am passionate about it.

**Rushanara Ali:** Okay.

**Andrew Percy:** Let me answer this question very quickly. I am trying to prove the passion. You have to let me prove the passion. I get the importance of this, but a lot of the decision-making around this sits at a local level, and so it should, because decisions over green spaces and parks are things that local councillors should be responsible for. Those decisions are best made locally.

**Rushanara Ali:** With respect, you are falling back into that trap, which is why I asked the question.

**Andrew Percy:** It is just a fact, though. That is where the responsibility is and always has been.

Q181 **Rushanara Ali:** Hang on a second. There are other briefs and I appreciate that Ministers, nationally or in local areas, in tight spending climates have to make choices between core services and those that might be seen as more of a luxury in some cases. I do not see it as a luxury and most people in communities do not either, especially in areas where there is a limited amount of space.

Take, for instance, the arts brief that some of your colleagues will have, where similar points are raised: in tough times, you have to focus on the bread-and-butter issues rather than the “fun things”. However, take Ministers like the former Minister Ed Vaizey, who was a great champion of the arts, even though there were pressures on funding. I suppose I am saying that perhaps there is a need for strategic oversight, which Ministers can provide, where you can act as a champion working closely with local authorities, because otherwise it just comes across—and perhaps you do not intend to do this—as if you are delegating

responsibility: they have a lot of funding challenges and you are washing your hands of that. You have a really important role to play, and a leadership role, and it is not coming through, Minister.

**Andrew Percy:** That is a failure on my part, and I am very sorry if it has not come across as that, because I have been absolutely clear in the offers that I have already made to you today. I do not want to pre-judge your report, but I have already said very clearly that I am keen to bring people together across Government and across the sector, in order to share best practice and to consider the recommendations of this Committee. I have said already that I want to look at the alternatives to a statutory duty. Neither of those things has happened up to now.

I have also made very clear that I want this. I have added it to my DCLG responsibilities and made sure it is on the website in a way that it has not been before. I do not know the last time when anybody had parks listed on their ministerial responsibilities. I want to be that champion across Government and bring Government Departments together. My officials are already working with officials across Government on this sector. I have already this afternoon said that I am keen to collect and receive the examples of best practice and make sure that we spread them across the network. We are doing some of that through the website, and there are more opportunities to do it.

These are local decisions; let us not pretend otherwise. I am sure you think that that is an excuse but it is not; it is just a fact. That is where responsibility for parks lies, and quite rightly. My job is to share that best practice and bring the sectors together across Government. I have made those offers to the Committee this afternoon and that was not happening a week ago, so hopefully that is a positive and passionate response.

**Rushanara Ali:** It will be one of your open cases, then.

Q182 **Helen Hayes:** It is clear from the evidence we have heard that, while responsibility for parks rests predominantly with local authorities, collectively across the country parks have a huge role to play in some of the most important issues we face as a country: obesity, air pollution, climate change and mental health issues. Parks are playing a role and people value the role they play, and yet the funding is not filtering through to look after and care for our parks in the way that people want to see. It is just a plea, Minister, that you think about that strategic role, which is a national role, and articulate a national vision and a role for national Government, as well as the role that local authorities quite rightly play.

**Andrew Percy:** Helen, that is exactly what I have offered today in terms of convening people across the sector and sharing best practice. As I have already said, and in some of the evidence that you have heard, there are excellent examples of where local authorities have grasped this at a local level and understand its value to mental and physical wellbeing, and I want to share that best practice. I want to go and see some of it

for myself, of course, and that is exactly what I would hope to do in this role.

Q183 **Rushanara Ali:** Moving on to a slightly different subject, can you say a bit about what you are doing to support the development of alternative park management models?

**Andrew Percy:** This is one of those areas where my role as Parks Minister can perhaps be most useful in sharing this best practice across the sector. Our Department, long before my appearance there, had a number of examples of where it supported this. I will not focus too much on it today, but there is something else that we are looking at and announcing in the next couple of weeks that might help in this area as well. We have had, of course, the Our Place and Delivering Differently projects, which are funding streams that were in place previously.

Lambeth Council, for example, used Delivering Differently in Neighbourhoods funding from our Department and created a new structure to put decision-making in the hands of park users. It set up a not-for-profit business operating as an industrial and provident society, with over 4,000 stakeholders and a co-operative management organisation, to look at parks in Lambeth.

Plymouth did a similar thing with the Delivering Differently in Neighbourhoods funding, so they re-designed all their green space to include more wildlife-friendly maintenance regimes and community engagement teams.

Q184 **Rushanara Ali:** Is there an evaluation process underway and a process for learning lessons?

**Andrew Percy:** Absolutely. One of the other funding regimes was Our Place. Some of these alternative funding mechanisms or structures go back very many years. Milton Keynes Park Trust was in 1992. The offer that I make to the Committee today is: I want to get a proper handle on how these different approaches have worked, what lessons we can learn from them and, where there is best practice, how we can share that across the sector.

That is why we should bring this together, and I do not mean for a one-off: we should do this regularly, in the same way as we did with the Future High Streets Forum, where we were able to bring key players together to help us formulate our policies in this area. That would of course include assessments of the various different structures. Newcastle City Council is moving to a new management model as well, based around the social enterprise.

Q185 **Rushanara Ali:** Is there a transitional funding arrangement for authorities that are trying out new models, and are they being incentivised and rewarded in any way by national Government? You mentioned various pots of funding.

**Andrew Percy:** There have previously been pots of funding. We are looking at another fund at the moment, based around communities,

which we have not fully determined on yet. This is something I have been keen to pursue, and hopefully we will make an announcement on it in the next couple of weeks. It would invite local authorities to bid and to look at doing things differently. Generally on transitional funding, though—again, you might not like the answer—if this is to the benefit of local authorities in many ways and if they are investing to save in the longer term, then we would hope that some of those transitional arrangements could be established locally.

**Q186 Rushanara Ali:** Is there something that will be announced in two weeks' time?

**Andrew Percy:** I do not want people to run away with it, as it is a small amount of money for a whole range of different outcomes, not just based around green spaces and parks. More generally, there is not a pot of central Government money on transitional funding. We would expect that to be provided as part of the local arrangements.

**Q187 Rushanara Ali:** Turning to the question of the parks trust models, have you had discussions about the barriers to local authorities developing these and what the national Government can do to support them? Do you feel confident that local authorities can raise sufficient endowment funds to establish new park trusts?

**Andrew Percy:** I am aware of the Milton Keynes Park Trust, which goes back a very long way. I have to be completely honest with you and say that I have not had a great deal of discussion around this model yet. I am still trying to get a handle on all the various alternative ways of delivering in this sector that exist out there. That is why I have started my meetings and engagement with various different groups in the sector. I mentioned the Parks Alliance and Heritage Lottery Fund, but this is something that I want to look at more and, through the body that I want to put together, is a way in which we can assess the value of these and the barriers to some of these different alternative funding structures.

**Q188 Rushanara Ali:** Minister, I have one final question on a different subject, about safety and maintenance. I raised this issue in a previous session. One of my constituents died in Mile End Park because the children's facilities were not properly maintained. There are real concerns about funding gaps and lack of maintenance and oversight, and I would be grateful if you, in your role, could look at whether there is a trend in terms of this challenge for local authorities. We do not have to worry about the ones that are doing the good work that you mentioned but, for the ones that are struggling, I feel that national Government have a really important role, in terms of oversight and accountability, to make sure that this does not happen again. She died on her birthday when she went to play and it was covered extensively in the media. There is an ongoing inquiry into this. I would be grateful if you could look at this and look at the lessons that can be learnt nationally, so that other communities do not have to face this sort of tragedy, given the pressure that I and others are under—I know her mother is—to make sure that lessons are learned so that other children are not put at risk in other areas.

**Andrew Percy:** You have raised this on the Floor of the House before. I have been in the Chamber when you have done that. It was a terrible situation and I am very sorry for what has happened in that incident. I am always happy to learn lessons around that and to see what lessons we can learn more generally across the sector.

On safety, I have to say that many of our parks and green spaces, particularly when it comes to play equipment, are in the hands of parish councils or community groups. Having been responsible for one of these in a previous role as a parish councillor, I would say generally that the trend in the last decade or two has been of improved safety in many of our parks. I do not have statistics on this to hand but, in my own experience at the front-line on this, as you know, safety audits are now required as part of the insurance processes. I would hope that things have got better over the last couple of decades in terms of park equipment safety generally, but it is a really important case that you have raised.

Q189 **Rushanara Ali:** Would you be willing to get your officials to look at the evidence base and the trends, so that you have an overarching picture and can take steps to look at various ways to prevent problems where there are signs that there may be problems?

**Andrew Percy:** We want to be absolutely clear. My general impression is that communities that are responsible for parks are far more conscious of their responsibilities than perhaps in the past. I compare the parks I played in as a kid and the state of the equipment to now, where audits are taken regularly and, as soon as there is an issue, that equipment is closed down and sectioned off. I take a fairly open approach. If something is a reasonable request, I am more than happy to pursue it, so I will ask officials to look at the request that you have made.

Q190 **Rushanara Ali:** Perhaps we can have a report back, because it would be helpful to get a national picture.

**Andrew Percy:** We can try to get something back to you as part of this process.

**Rushanara Ali:** This death happened last year, despite everything you are saying.

**Andrew Percy:** It is truly awful and, in the circumstances as well, just awful. It is a reasonable request and I am more than happy to ask officials to look at that.

Q191 **Chair:** I just want to follow up on the trust model. Kevin Hollinrake and I went to Newcastle, where they are now looking to go ahead with a trust model. Mention was already made of the problem of raising sufficient money under endowment. They think that might not be a particular challenge there.

There were two other issues that they raised with us, in which they think Government might be helpful. First, when you are dealing with land that may have been transferred to the local authority 150 years ago, deeds

often do not exist and the records are not there. An authority that then moves to a different form of ownership or long-term leasehold could end up being challenged by people who think they have a claim on the land, because the legal work has not been done correctly and no-one knows the basis to start from.

The other issue is that, very often, there are lots of covenants around, including covenants to stop money being raised in a park, which you would not think of as being necessarily relevant today. That could take an awful lot of time to unravel, and Newcastle mentioned some sort of public interest test where, if it is in the public interest to do it, the authority could get round these sorts of problems.

Government could be helpful in both respects, possibly, and I just wondered whether you had had a look at that yet or whether you would be open-minded to have a look. The challenges Newcastle face are ones that other local authorities may face in a very similar way if they choose to go down that route tomorrow.

**Andrew Percy:** I am aware of this, having been on the other end of it when I was a trustee of Pearson Park in Hull, which is a park provided by Zachariah Pearson, one of our great Victorian forefathers in the city, where we organised a sporting event and then realised that no organised sport was allowed on a Sunday as part of a covenant, so we opened ourselves up to challenge. Part of me as a historian wants to maintain their wishes as best as possible, since they gave us this park. We also had something about no carriages being allowed to move around the park. It was very strange.

I have not looked at that. As I say, I have been on the receiving end of it in terms of a difficulty we had as a trustee of a park. I will have to come back to you on that, because it is not something that I have had a chance to look at as a general problem across the country.

**Chair:** It is one of these issues that we could end up with every local authority trying to grapple with separately, when Government could help all authorities collectively.

**Andrew Percy:** Where it is to do with trust law and deeds, some of these covenants are very difficult and require lengthy legal processes to overturn them. I am happy to look at them. If this is a general issue, I would hope, through the forum that I want to convene, that we could perhaps share practice and hear some of the problems, so that we get an impression of how big an issue this is generally. I am happy to look at that, but I am simply not in the position to be an expert on it.

Q192 **Alison Thewliss:** I would be interested in talking further about the innovative park management models. You have talked about the finances of that. I am quite concerned, as were some of the people giving evidence, about the accountability of those models, once they are set up and running. You would know as a former local councillor that, if something happens in a park, somebody can complain to their councillor and something can be done about it. Have you given any consideration to how local residents and park users are protected, when it goes to that

arm's length model?

**Andrew Percy:** My position as Parks Minister is that, whatever the funding model, parks are for the public benefit, they are for the public good and they remain a public resource. In terms of the governance structures, they will depend upon what the agreement is locally. Whether it is the trust in Milton Keynes or the social enterprise model in Newcastle, you would expect robust structures to be built in, in terms of accountability and delivery. From my position, with whatever influence I have, I am absolutely clear that, whatever the alternative structure is, these are public parks that are open and available to the public and that should not change. There has to be clear accountability so that people know who is responsible for that park and where to go in the event of an issue.

Q193 **Alison Thewliss:** Is that something that you would go so far as issuing guidance on?

**Andrew Percy:** I will look at your recommendations closely if that is something you feel strongly about. Similarly, if we bring a body together to look at this, one of the work streams should be about the alternative funding models, best practice and worst practice, and what we can learn from that. I am happy to look at your report on that and to consider the evidence.

Q194 **Kevin Hollinrake:** Minister, I would like to follow up on the Chair's point about identifying the ownership and boundaries of land. You may be aware of the BEIS mapping project that is due for delivery in March 2017, which should give free maps of all open access areas for local authorities. Is that the pure intention of that project: to provide these local authorities with some more information on exactly what they own and where?

**Andrew Percy:** BEIS is leading on that. One of the things I can do in this role as Minister for Parks is to promote that work between BEIS and Ordnance Survey to local authorities. One of the questions I asked when I looked at this and thought that it could be a really exciting tool was whether you could populate all the events that are going on in different green spaces as part of that platform. I am told that that is not possible and I do not understand the technicalities as to why not, but what I understand is possible is that local authorities are able to take that data and use it at a local level. If we know where all our green spaces are, it helps in terms of the public identifying what is and what is not in their area. We then have to make information easily available to the public in terms of what they can do to protect that green space that is not already protected.

Once this mapping exercise is complete, it is something that I want to encourage local authorities and the public to utilise. If they can take this data set and populate all of what is going on in the green spaces across the area, that will be all for the good.

Q195 **Kevin Hollinrake:** Given the example you mentioned of your local authority being uncertain about the area that it looked after—and we

certainly heard this in Newcastle as well—if the local authorities do not know what they own, how will the Ordnance Survey and BEIS be able to identify that?

**Andrew Percy:** I will have to write to you on that, on the basis that, as soon as it got technical, it became very confusing to me. I do not know how the mapping works in terms of when it looks at the relationship with land ownership. I will have to write to you on that, I am afraid. I do not know.

Q196 **Kevin Hollinrake:** I will move on to benchmarking, which may pick up some of my colleague's points about safety, as well as the standard of parks. Green Flag, to some extent, provides a certain quality standard but that only covers about 6% of parks in the UK. Is that the best we can offer or is there an alternate vehicle that we can use to drive standards in green spaces?

**Andrew Percy:** The Green Flag standard and the Blue Flag standards for beaches are very positive. You are right that it is only 6%, but it does set a gold standard by which others can be judged. We are very keen to see that expanded. Something I am happy to offer up is that I will continue to work with Keep Britain Tidy, in order to grow that brand and the number of successful applicants. Where a park is not successful, it receives feedback and support to help it re-apply, if that is what it wishes to do. I am looking at expanding this internationally, because that could be an income stream to help support the programme here in the UK. We will have to see how this can tie in with the mapping exercise as well; there may be a way that it can tie in with that.

Q197 **Kevin Hollinrake:** I do not know what your figures show in terms of applications for the Green Flag award, but I understand that there has been a slight decline. Is it too burdensome for local authorities to apply or is there an easier way to bring applications forward?

**Andrew Percy:** According to the figures I have, 151 Green Flag community awards were issued in 2016, which is up from 143 in 2015. As far as I am aware, the figures have gone up.

Q198 **Kevin Hollinrake:** Those figures are for awards, but do you have any figures for applications?

**Andrew Percy:** The number of successful applicants in England apparently rose to 1,265 in 2016, which is up from 1,219 in 2015-16, but I am always happy to check figures.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** Some will be unsuccessful.

**Andrew Percy:** Yes. I do not know the proportion of unsuccessful applicants, but I am happy to try to provide that to the Committee. In terms of successful applicants and the total number, it has of course been increasing.

Q199 **Melanie Onn:** Minister, if you have a vision for the future of parks, what should we expect to see by 2020 under Andrew Percy's leadership for parks?

**Andrew Percy:** Steady on now when it comes to leadership. It is a really good question and one that I am grateful you asked me. Thank you for also confirming that you think I am going to stay in ministerial office until 2020. You perhaps have more faith than many of my colleagues do.

It is a really difficult question to answer, on a serious point, because it is difficult to say what a park is. We know that there is such a variation in what green spaces and parks mean to local communities. What is my vision of what a successful park is? I can point to many in my own area and the ones that I have been involved in. They are spaces where, regardless of ethnicity, race or social background, people can come together in a space that sometimes they would not ordinarily have access to for a mix of leisure and social activities. The vision I have for parks is that we maintain that and that we all understand it, across Government, local government and business. Remember that it is not just the public sector that has an investment in parks. We can look back to the great Victorian industrialists who appreciated the value of an urban lung or green space to the benefit of their workers and to society generally.

I cannot set a figure and say “this number of parks” and “this amount of green space” as the benchmark by which I wish to be judged. What I can offer—as I have said, and I hate to repeat it again—is this: let us look at what is happening around the country and try to bring that together. One thing I can do in this role is to share some of that best practice, so that more of our parks are more sustainable in what are very challenging financial times for local government—I do not pretend otherwise—as a result of decisions taken here. I am not hiding from that.

If we can at least make a bit of a difference in bringing that practice together and sharing it for the benefit of all our green spaces, then it will have been a success. I am happy to champion that and to make the argument. Parks are not just an add-on. They are not just a nice extra because it looks a bit pretty. As a kid, I spent a lot of time in two particular parks in my area where you met with kids that you would never normally meet with. Our parks are a great social leveller and, if we can appreciate, across both the public and private sector, that that is what their real value is, just as Victorian industrialists understood, then that will be a success.

**Chair:** Thank you, Minister, very much indeed for coming to answer our questions this afternoon. You will get our report in due course. You can go away and have a drink now, and recover from the experience.