



Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities

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Clive Betts MP
Chair, Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
Committee
House of Commons
London

10th March 2023

Dear Clive,

Thank you for your letter dated 18th October to the then Secretary of State, Rt Hon Simon Clarke MP, requesting an update on public parks policy, and for an update on progress towards implementing the recommendations of the Committee's report of 2017. I am responding as the lead minister for parks and green spaces in the department. Please accept my sincere apologies for the delay in responding to you. As you will be aware, not all the matters raised are owned by my department, so my officials have consulted with other government departments where necessary.

In 2017 the Committee for Housing, Communities and Local Government made 17 recommendations in total and came to some broader conclusions. At that time, the Ministry (as it was) responded with an assessment of those recommendations and a commitment to carry forward many of them.

Since 2017 conditions have changed dramatically, as have citizens' relationships with their neighbourhoods, in particular parks and green infrastructure. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, over the last two years the emphasis of the Government's work on parks was focused on public safety, including to prevent the further spread of COVID-19, and now that we are living with COVID-19 on the role that parks have to play in recovery – such as providing mental and physical health benefits including combatting obesity, and providing access to the outdoors. Some of the recommendations accepted in 2017 have been superseded by policy arrangements pertaining to comparable goals that better reflect the reality facing parks and park users today.

Commitment to regular updates and data

Spend on parks

You asked for more clarity on parks spending. During the COVID-19 pandemic, parks proved their status as lifelines for local communities. The lockdowns during the pandemic emphasised the importance of public parks to the physical and mental wellbeing of their communities, and many councils took steps to sustain and increase their provision. The Government announcement on 23rd March 2020 that parks would remain open during the national lockdown to enable individuals to take regular daily exercise cemented the status of parks as vital local resources, freely available to everyone. However, whilst they remained open, the pandemic

put increased burden on many local authority parks services and has partly contributed to the loss of external income that many councils experienced because of the pandemic.

The Government allocated over £15 billion directly to local authorities in England over the course of the pandemic to tackle the impacts of COVID-19. An unprecedented level of this, over £6 billion, was not ringfenced, recognising that local authorities were best placed to decide how to meet COVID-19 pressures and needs in their local areas – including expenditure on parks.

On Monday 12th December 2022, we published a policy statement outlining the government's intended proposals for the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2023/24, alongside providing certainty on aspects of the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2024/25. This will allow councils to plan ahead with more confidence over the rest of the spending review period.

On Monday 19th December, we published the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement for 2023/24. Further details can be found [here](#). This makes available up to an additional £5 billion to councils in England in 2023/24, an increase of 9% in cash terms on 2022/23. This also confirmed that all authorities will see at least a 3% increase in their Core Spending Power before any local choices about Council Tax levels.

This funding means that local authorities have been able to make decisions about maintaining parks, along with other public services, in line with the priorities of their area.

More than 20 of the projects receiving funding from the £2.1 billion [Levelling Up Fund](#) include significant improvements to parks and green spaces. These include an outdoor activity park in Barnsley, improving green spaces in Canterbury and new green space in Folkstone's town centre.

You also asked whether we would consider providing annual data on expenditure on parks. This information is already published by the government on an annual basis. The last year for which this information is available is 2021/22 and can be found [here](#). The document entitled "revenue outturn cultural, environmental, regulatory and planning services (RO5)" provides this information in line 131: 'Parks and Open Spaces'. For England, the gross expenditure across all LAs in 2021/22 was £1,057m, with a net expenditure of £709m.

Monitoring Accessibility to Green Spaces

You asked for an update on monitoring of accessibility to green spaces. The People and Nature Survey gives us valuable data to help us understand how people use, enjoy and are motivated to protect the natural environment. It allows us to monitor changes in the use of the natural environment over time, for the general public and also for key groups within the population. More information and the latest results can be found online [here](#).

In addition, the Green Infrastructure Framework is being developed by Natural England with other partners and stakeholders, as was committed to in the 25 Year Environment Plan. The aims of the Green Infrastructure Framework project are:

- to deliver more good quality green infrastructure that provides benefits for health, nature, climate and prosperity, in particular for disadvantaged urban communities;

- to help the country recover from COVID-19 and improve health, fitness and overall wellbeing by ensuring good quality green infrastructure (GI) is available to all;
- to mainstream GI as essential infrastructure in place-making and in associated planning and land use decisions; and
- to embed the framework within national planning policy and guidance and support local authorities in assessing their GI against the framework of standards.

As part of the Framework, Natural England has developed the award-winning Green Infrastructure Mapping Database. The [GI Mapping Database](#) brings together around 40 England-wide datasets to provide information on a wide range of Green Infrastructure assets. This includes data on: green infrastructure accessibility; a 250msq 'greenness grid' based on the proportion of natural to man-made surfaces; distribution of private gardens in urban areas; Public Rights of Way network; Blue Infrastructure and accessible paths along waterways; along with reference data on designated and defined areas and sites, and a range of socio-economic datasets.

The mapping includes the first England-wide Accessible Natural Green Space Standards (ANGSt) Assessment using [the new expanded system of 6 ANGSt Standards](#) ranging from Doorstep Green Spaces (sites of at least 0.5 ha within 200m proximity), all the way to the largest Sub-Regional Green Space (sites of at least 500 ha within 10km proximity). Innovative work on green space inequalities has identified places that have a relatively low proximity to a range of green space sizes, overlain on Index of Multiple Deprivation to help us understand where gaps in access to nature are most likely to impact on local communities.

Levelling Up

Parks and green spaces are an essential part of local social infrastructure which supports more connected, stronger communities. They provide places for social connection, support health, fitness and wellbeing, and can be a foundation for social capital which underpins local opportunity and prosperity.

The benefits of regenerating and revitalising parks and green spaces for communities may be lost if people do not feel safe in these places. That is why the Government recognises that reducing anti-social behaviour will help to increase safety and pride in public spaces, such as our parks, and we are engaging local and national partners to consider the different drivers of anti-social behaviour.

People's lives are shaped by the social and physical fabric of their communities. The local mix of social and physical capital, which includes good quality green spaces, gives areas their unique character and vibrancy and makes residents proud to live there.

Levelling Up Parks Fund

In the Spending Review 2021 announcement, the Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP announced the £9 million Levelling Up Parks Fund, which will create over 100 green spaces across the UK on unused, undeveloped, or derelict land. This built on the previous 'Pocket Parks' schemes implemented by the department.

The Fund will:

- increase access to quality green space in deprived urban areas across the UK;
- use urban green space to instil pride in place within deprived communities as part of the effort to level up the country;
- test new ways of working in and with the parks sector; and
- be available UK-wide.

Rather than asking local authorities to bid for a share of the fund, DLUHC allocated shares on the basis of need, using data from Natural England and ONS to identify the neighbourhoods where high deprivation coincides with poor green infrastructure. This ensures the greatest support reaches the places with the greatest need. Funding is going to 85 local authorities in England, and to the Devolved Administrations, to create new or significantly refurbished green spaces in urban areas that need it most.

Community Ownership Fund

The £150m Community Ownership Fund helps communities across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to take ownership of assets at risk of closure. This ensures that important parts of the social fabric, such as parks, can continue to play a central role in towns and villages across the UK.

Communities can bid to this Fund to save a treasured community asset such as a park, provided this meets the eligibility requirements as outlined in the prospectus. That will help to safeguard the small, but much-loved local assets on which we cannot put a price.

Wider work on parks and green spaces

As you noted in your letter, in the Levelling Up White Paper we committed to invest a further £30m to deliver “up to £1m to at least 30 local parks in England for refurbishment with an emphasis on facilities for young families”. You asked whether it would draw on the expertise of sector stakeholders and lessons from previous initiatives, including the Future Parks Accelerator. I can confirm that my officials and I will work with sector experts, and review lessons from previous initiatives to develop an approach to delivering this funding.

We are also continuing to invest in access to nature more broadly, including in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. For example, nearly 800 miles of the England Coast Path is now open to the public. When complete, it will be the longest waymarked and maintained coastal walking route in the world at an impressive 2,700 miles. It will create 250,000 hectares of new open access land within the coastal margin. We have also published our proposal for the new Coast to Coast National Trail, which will stretch across the north of England and add over 190 miles to the existing National Trails network in England and Wales. And as we implement our response to the Landscapes Review, we will help increase access to our protected landscapes, so that everyone can enjoy these special places. For instance, the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme provides funding for farmers and other land managers to work in partnership with National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty to deliver projects across the four key themes of the programme: climate, nature, people and place. In the first year (July 2021 to March 2022) we funded around 1,000 projects, including almost 200 supporting public engagement, 150 to make the landscape more inclusive for visitors, 78 delivering educational access, and 39 permissive paths.

In urban areas specifically, through the England Trees Action Plan we have created Woodland Creation Partnerships and Community Forests, enabling the creation of large scale publicly accessible woodlands near towns and cities. In August last year, £44.2 million was awarded to our Community Forests and Woodland Creation Partners, which will be used to plant 2,300 hectares of trees. Over 80% of this land has access and is in peri-urban areas, significantly benefiting the wider communities access and engagement with nature.

We are also investing via our £5.77m cross-government 'Preventing and tackling mental ill health through green social prescribing' programme. The programme is working in both rural and urban locations, and activities include local walking schemes, community gardening projects, conservation volunteering, green gyms, and arts and cultural activities which take place outdoors.

Systemic Funding Changes

On your point around systemic funding changes, the Government has invested in local growth through a wide range of competitions and grants but recognises that the sheer number of different funds has become onerous for some councils to navigate and deliver. The Government will streamline these funds, reducing inefficiency and bureaucracy, and giving local government the flexibility, it needs to deliver for local economies. We will set out a plan for streamlining the funding landscape shortly and will continue to engage with local government and other key stakeholders as this work progresses.

Future Parks Accelerator Programme.

You also asked about the Future Parks Accelerator Programme. The Government was pleased to be able to provide catalyst funding to support the early development of the Future Parks Accelerator Programme, and lessons learnt from this, and other previous parks programmes have fed into the development of subsequent initiatives, including the Levelling Up Parks Fund. There are no plans to engage further with the Future Parks Accelerator Initiative or provide further funding for this programme specifically.

Long-term Sustainability

UKSPF

You noted that some witnesses raised the long-term sustainability of the funding landscape for parks, in particular revenue funding, and asked how the Government will support local authorities who cannot afford to provide the regular revenue funding to maintain their green spaces. As you will be aware, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund provides both capital and revenue funding for the rest of this Spending Review period (until end of Financial Year 24/25). Local places will be able to use the Fund to complement other funding streams, which can include revenue support for parks. The UKSPF has an intervention specifically targeting the creation of and improvements to local green spaces, within the community and place priority.

Legal Duties

You also asked whether the Government would consider a legal duty to manage green space to a set standard. I do not believe that this would be the most effective way of ensuring that

parks are accessible for a diverse range of people. I am mindful that any new legal duty, including a duty related to parks, would place new expectations on local authorities, and is therefore a less desirable option than continuing to work with the sector to build capability based on local needs and priorities.

Pocket Parks Evaluation

You asked whether there will be a formal evaluation of the Pocket Parks scheme. Financial support through the Pocket Parks scheme was delivered across three tranches from 2015 to 2019. The supported communities set out to improve the physical appearance, use of, and satisfaction with their green space. All recipients were asked to provide detailed local evaluations of their achievements, nearly all of which have been resoundingly positive.

In Accrington, for example, 100% of local residents surveyed by the project team said that the Rising Bridge Park had been improved and attracted more visitors than before. 83% said that they use the area more after the improvements than they did before the changes were made, and 47% of people using the site at the time of the survey said that they didn't use the site at all before these changes were made.

At the same time, local authorities also highlighted the challenges in maintaining new and improved green infrastructure, so that the value does not diminish over time. The Government understands the importance of long-term, sustainable funding so they can continue to provide excellent services for their residents, including green spaces.

Local authorities were asked to provide end of grant forms so that government could capture learning from the programme. This method was intended to balance any burdens on local authorities that can come with a formal evaluation with the opportunity to gain learning that could be used to inform future government policy. Although the timing of the programme meant that many local authorities needed to prioritise their response to the COVID-19 pandemic rather than providing monitoring information, we did receive some excellent case studies demonstrating how the funding made a significant impact to communities across the country. This has been used to help inform the development of subsequent government programmes such as the Levelling Up Parks Fund.

The DLUHC ambition is to ensure we have evaluations for all key programmes in each policy area. We also commit to all new programme business cases containing a Theory of Change and evaluation plan set up from commencement. We are mindful that given resource constraints, we must take a proportionate approach, to account for budgeting and staffing, and for the feasibility and cost of evaluation activity. We will also ensure we take account of any demands that evaluation activity can place on our delivery partners and local areas. We use a number of criteria to guide our decisions on the most appropriate approach – including evaluation priorities. In doing so we consider:

- Outputs, reach, and impact of the policy (including equalities impacts where appropriate);
- The extent of innovation / novelty inherent in the programme;
- Costs, financial commitments and liabilities incurred by the policy;
- The profile of the policy and likely level of scrutiny;
- Contribution to the evidence base and ability to fill key evidence gaps;
- Feasibility and cost of evaluation activity; and

- Impact on delivery partners¹.

Green Infrastructure

Green infrastructure will help urban districts and local authorities to meet their statutory duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity. [The Green Infrastructure Framework](#) includes a new standard for Urban Nature Recovery, which will help urban authorities plan for the creation and restoration of wildlife rich habitats. Mandatory biodiversity net gain under the Environment Act will be one mechanism for funding investment in green infrastructure, alongside other green finance opportunities and the public funding for parks set out in this letter. The Government is putting in place the national policy framework to enable Local Nature Recovery Strategies to commence preparation across England from April 2023 which will support local green infrastructure policies that promote nature conservation in urban areas.

Parks Action Group and stakeholder engagement

Parks Action Group

You asked about the Parks Action Group (PAG), and about cross-departmental/cross-policy action more broadly. The Action Group delivered a number of workstreams that remained active until the outbreak of COVID-19. The group's achievements include:

- The Parks Alliance's report into the vision and value for parks, 'Making Parks Count', which highlighted for example the economic case for parks, with £7 worth of value for health and wellbeing and the environment for every £1 invested.
- Work on standards for green infrastructure, chaired by Fields in Trust and Keep Britain Tidy, and now being taken forward through Natural England's GI Framework Steering Group.
- Knowledge and skills research carried out by the Association for Public Sector Excellence, which explored the gaps in knowledge and experience, the current training provision, and the current profile of parks resources across the local government sector.
- An analysis of funding available for public parks. This analysis and the experts who delivered it for the Parks Action Group have directly advised the Government on the design of the new Levelling Up Parks Fund, ensuring the learning captured since 2017 is applied.

We currently have several forums which allow us to engage across departments on issues related to parks and green spaces and with people on the ground.

Stakeholder groups

An advisory group was put together for the Levelling Up Parks Fund work which included representation from several departments, including DLUHC, Defra and Natural England, and the Department for Education. Several other groups are in place to provide views to government on parks and green spaces and to bring cross-government colleagues together.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dluhc-evaluation-strategy/dluhc-evaluation-strategy>

These include the Access and Engagement with Nature Stakeholder Forum which brings together a range of stakeholders from across the access to nature agenda. We also have a wide range of stakeholder groups focused on specific work programmes; for example, the Green Social Prescribing Programme Board brings together stakeholders from across the healthcare and green sectors to advise on the delivery of that programme of work.

Whilst not specifically part of PAG, Natural England played a key role during the outbreak of COVID-19 by hosting the Urban Stakeholder COVID-19 calls which provided a mechanism for all Action Group members to connect with MHCLG. This allowed the group to highlight issues with COVID-19 guidance and on the ground usage and management, shaping common communication messages and sharing sector knowledge and advice. Natural England's work on the updated Countryside Code was seen as important contribution, applying to parks as well as waterways, coast and countryside.

Natural England has continued to host these Urban Stakeholder Network meetings, and we are currently revisiting the terms of reference and adapting to a post-pandemic situation. The group is keen to continue as a place to share insights and best practice. Defra and DLUHC will engage with the group on parks related matters.

Natural England worked with APSE and the Midlands Parks Forum to set up a recent training event for parks and green space managers on Biodiversity Net Gain and explore how urban parks and other green infrastructure could be providers of biodiversity units. Natural England is also working with the Landscape Institute to develop its Parks and Green Space Professional Development Programme.

In addition, Natural England is currently taking forward recommendations in the Landscape review and Government response, to develop new approaches that recognise the importance of landscapes in towns and cities. We are exploring with partners and stakeholders the idea of a 'Nature City' accreditation which would incentivise urban greening and put nature at the heart of place-making, as part of identity, culture and pride.

We are also working with Groundwork Trust to develop the concept of green community hubs which would re-purpose existing built/green infrastructure to co-create green community hubs in deprived neighborhoods that act as the focal point for nature-based services linked to social prescribing to meet local needs.

In addition, government groups have helped to develop or deliver:

- The Children and Nature Programme, which ran from 2018 to 2022, and aimed to supports children from disadvantaged backgrounds to have better access to natural environments.
- The updated Outdoor Recreation Valuation model (ORVal). Recommended by HM Treasury Green Book, this tool is used in appraisal and natural capital accounting exercises to demonstrate in monetary terms the recreational value of parks and paths.
- The Green Infrastructure Standards Framework: Principles and Standards for England to show what good green infrastructure looks like to provide benefits for health, nature, climate and prosperity, in particular for disadvantaged urban communities.

Planning

The National Planning Policy Framework, most recently amended in July 2021, requires that planning processes look to deliver high quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places, including encouraging the creation of appropriate green and public space within new developments so as to support healthy and inclusive communities, improve biodiversity and help respond to climate change.

Further guidance on design and placemaking is provided for local councils in the National Model Design Code, also published in July 2021, and the National Design Guide. Local planning authorities should take account of this national guidance when preparing their local plan, design guides and codes and taking decisions on planning applications and this includes involving local communities in shaping new development in their areas.

You asked whether to expect a National Development Management Policy for parks and green spaces. National Development Management Policies are intended to cover generic planning considerations that apply regularly in decision-making, of the sort already found in national planning policy. Nevertheless, it is also important that we are able to update National Development Management Policies when nationally important matters arise over time, such as supportive policies addressing climate change. We note your suggestion that green spaces is another area for us to consider.

You also noted the LGA's call for public open space to be protected in planning guidance. The National Planning Policy Framework is clear that open space should not be built on unless there is clear evidence it is no longer required, or that equivalent or better provision is secured in a suitable location, or that development of the site is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss of the current or former use.

Local planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities as well as opportunities for new provision, which plans should seek to accommodate.

Communities can designate land as Local Green Space through local and neighbourhood plans, ensuring green areas of particular importance to them are identified and protected. Local Green Space may also be nominated to the local authority for listing as an Asset of Community Value by parishes and community organisations. If listed, the community interest group will have an opportunity to bid if the owner wants to dispose of the land.

We are expecting to update National Planning Practice Guidance to supplement any potential policy changes in due course.

UN Sustainable Development Goal 11.7

Finally, I wanted to turn to your letter from June to Neil O'Brien MP, the then minister for Levelling Up, where you asked about progress towards UN Sustainable Development Goal 11.7. We are on track to provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces. We are achieving this through a number of vital interventions, such as the 44 protected landscapes in England (National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) which provide universal access (through being free to access) to green spaces. They attract

more than 260 million visitors per year. Their accessibility is mixed, affected by the under-provision of public transport in some more remote areas and barriers to disabled access. Inclusivity is also an issue that was flagged in the Glover landscapes review and there are plans to tackle this through strengthened management plans and more diverse boards etc. We have plans in place to increase access to our Protected Landscapes. For example, we have started work to establish a new national landscapes partnership to tackle common objectives such as improved public access.

This Government is investing an unprecedented £2 billion in walking and cycling over this Parliament, building hundreds of miles of high-quality cycle lanes and increasing access to a range of places including green spaces. And we are also taking steps to increase children's access to green space specifically. For instance, the new National Education Nature Park is an initiative aimed at harnessing the collective potential of the education estate in England to increase and improve biodiversity. Increasing the biodiversity of the educational estate will give children and young people the opportunity to take action to improve their environment while developing a connection to nature.

The National Planning Policy Framework is clear that both planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places which enable and support healthy lifestyles, especially where this would address identified local health and well-being needs. This could be achieved for example through the provision of safe and accessible green infrastructure.

Thank you for contacting the department about parks, and once again, my apologies for the delay in my response.

With every good wish,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dehenna". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

DEHENNA DAVISON MP