

## **Written Evidence – Mr Christopher Worman MBE (PTC0001)**

Parks to the rescue, but who will rescue parks?

The value of parks to all our communities was well demonstrated during 2020. With green spaces being the only public space to remain open resulted in an unprecedented demand. Anecdotal evidence suggests that park use more than doubled during the year. This is a trend that is likely to continue for many years to come as more people have recognised the value of exercising outdoors and locally.

The benefits of parks were already widely known before the pandemic, but the roll they have played, and continue to play, have pushed parks to the forefront of the public's mind, as parks have come to our rescue. The vital role they have played in supporting the nation's mental health cannot be under estimated. They have helped to enhance quality of life during a challenge period in our history. They have provided emotional wellbeing, reduced depression, anxiety, and fatigue. Reduced stress and improved our resilience. They have reduced rates of hyperactivity and inattention to keep us physically fit.

However, parks themselves have been in crisis for many years and whilst many people have rediscovered these green spaces, they have found them neglected, untidy, and with few facilities such as drinking water and toilets left.

As we see lockdown restrictions coming to an end, we need to consider what investments will be needed to make the 'New normal' work in our parks, particularly given that Covid will be with us in some form for the foreseeable future.

The increased demand comes with implications for the very infrastructure of our parks. Warm dry days are bringing a large increase in visitors, volumes of litter and problems with car parking. The impact of increasingly wet winters have led to extensive damage to the footpath networks and grass areas, some of which will take many months, even years to repair. The loss of toilets over the years has seen a rise in defecating in our parks. These issues will all repeat until such a time that correct long term investment is addressed. Already our communities are demanding that facilities are replaced and improved at a time when the financial pressures within local government are themselves at breaking point. Yet with millions of pounds of emergency funding being allocated to heritage, the arts and sports, to date, parks once again have been overlooked. The silence from the government is deafening and disappointing as Rishi Sunak was once our Parks Minister.

Access to quality green space is not equal and this is most evident in our most disadvantaged communities across the UK. Where only 8% of white British residents have no access to a garden, this raises to nearly 25% across the BME

population. This makes outdoor green spaces even more vital to address both health and access inequality. We also need to recognise that poor quality green spaces benefit no-one, and society loses out on the collective benefits good quality, well managed green spaces can bring.

As we start to move into the recovery phase from one global crisis, we move ever closer to the next one. Which of course is climate change. Once again our parks and green spaces will be at the forefront of the practical response to help mitigate things such as high levels of rainfall, providing shade in the intense heat, encouraging local biodiversity and improving air quality.

So where is our national vision?

We owe it to the tens of thousands of people that have sadly died and the many thousands more in the NHS and key services that have pulled us through this to bring a legacy of change and improvement to our nations green spaces. A legacy where we value things that matter, that provide a sense of community and place, and where the wider public benefit is acknowledged, and not on how much it costs to cut the grass.

Equally we need to stop referring to parks as a non-statutory service. These very words imply it's not important, when in reality our parks and green spaces are an essential part of all of communities so should be treated as such. I would go as far as to say they are essential infrastructure and should receive the same priority as our roads and railways.

All is not yet lost. In September 2020 a new All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) was established to address the most urgent issues affecting our parks and green spaces, including but not limited to funding, skills, inequality of access and provision, climate change, biodiversity and the impact they have on the nation's health and wellbeing. The big difference between this and the Parks Action Group (which the government has not convened for over 18 months) is that this is a cross party group of MP's who are keen to push this agenda further. The Chair is Lilian Greenwood, MP for South Nottingham.

Moreover they will be celebrating and advocating the benefits of parks and green spaces by providing a voice within parliament for the sector. The national environment charity Keep Britain Tidy, who manage the Green Flag Award, which the international standard for parks and green spaces, are providing the secretariat for the APPG. It's also important to note that an APPG is cross party as they cross over party politics and align with aspirations that are hard not to agree with. To quote a recent interview with a member of the public on the BBC Politics East Midlands programme, "I can only see benefits of investing in parks".

We are therefore not only at a critical moment for our nation's parks and green spaces. But we are at a critical moment in how we will respond to a public health

crisis. Let's not forget history, as it was in response to a public health crisis that parks were originally created.

Will we fulfil a vision whereby our parks and green spaces are part of integrated thinking around sustainable inclusive communities, providing equal access to quality parks and green spaces in every neighbourhood, delivering on health and wellbeing, biodiversity, climate change and community cohesion. Or will this be the end of our parks as we manage decline until ultimately they close and are lost forever. The choices are that stark, and that real and I for one will not be resting until they get the true recognition they deserve.

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