

FUTURE OF PUBLIC PARKS: PUBLIC INQUIRY – 5 YEARS ON

The Inquiry's Report

In 2017 the House of Commons published the Communities and Local Government Select Committee's highly detailed and considered Report on the Future of Public Parks [1]. This followed an Inquiry that had generated a huge response from the parks sector and indeed the public. To quote from the Report's Summary:

Our inquiry into public parks asked three key questions: why parks matter, what challenges are facing the parks sector, and how we can secure a sustainable future for parks. The level of response has clearly demonstrated the strength of the feeling people have for their local parks and green spaces, and how much parks are valued by individuals, families and communities.

Meeting the challenges which face our parks and green spaces and securing a sustainable future for them will require responses on many levels.

We heard many calls throughout our inquiry for a statutory duty on local authorities to provide and maintain parks in order to raise the profile of parks within local authority prioritisation and budget allocation.[2] We recognise that reductions in local authority budgets may disproportionately disadvantage discretionary services, such as parks. However, we are not persuaded that such a statutory duty, which could be burdensome and complex, would achieve the outcomes intended. Instead, we recommend that the Minister publishes guidance to local authorities that they should work collaboratively with Health and Wellbeing Boards to prepare and publish joint parks and green space strategies that clearly articulate the contribution of parks to wider local authority objectives, and set out how parks will be managed to maximise such contributions.

Parks and green spaces matter. They make a vital contribution to many of our most important strategic objectives, such as climate change mitigation, public health and community integration. However parks are at a tipping point, and failure to match their value and the contribution they make with the resources they need to be sustained could have severe consequences. We believe that our recommendations will help to ensure that parks receive the priority they deserve, and to prevent a period of decline.

We will return to the issue of parks before the end of this Parliament to assess what progress has been made, but in the meantime we call on those who care about parks to maintain momentum, to continue to hold local and national government to account, and to carry on their work to support, promote and enhance our parks and green spaces.

The Minister for Parks responded to the Report's 17 recommendations in detail, supporting many of them, and committing to further investigation of most of the rest [3].

The Parks Action Group

As a result, in 2017 the Minister convened a sectoral Parks Action Group, set up, funded [£500,000 allocated] and tasked by the MHCLG to carry forward the Recommendations of the Report, and its wider objectives. This was to be linked to and supported by a Cross-Departmental Group of Government officials.

The PAG Terms of Reference state [4]:

The overall purpose of the Parks Action Group will be to take action to safeguard and enhance parks & green spaces for future generations and to inform and shape government's future policy-making on parks and green spaces. The terms of reference reflect the collective agreement of both the sectoral and cross-departmental groups. [Section 1]

The recommendations accepted by government are 1, 2, 3,4,7,9, 10, 12, 13, 16 and 17. The Group will seek to action these recommendations as a priority. The Inquiry also made recommendations the government wanted to explore further before making a commitment on them. Those recommendations include - 5, 6,8,11 and 14. However, over the longer-term the group may decide to explore beyond the recommendations in the Government response. The group

[1] Report: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmcomloc/45/45.pdf>

[2] This includes the 322,000-strong petition to the Inquiry, and submissions by NFPGS. See pp54-58 of the Report.

[3] Government Response to Report Recommendations:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/645570/Cm_Govt_Response_Future_of_Public_Parks_Accessible.pdf

[4] I can't locate the PAG Terms of Reference online

should devise timely and appropriate actions in response to these recommendations. The Parks Action Group will need to determine an appropriate and feasible timetable for delivering on each of the accepted recommendations. [S3]

It is significant that the Government's '25 year Environment Plan' [January 2018] included a specific long term commitment to:

Supporting the Parks Action Group in its work to help England's public parks and green spaces meet the needs of communities now and in the future

For 2 years the national greenspace organisations in the PAG worked hard to progress the agenda.eg:

- The PAG 'Empowering Communities' Working Group I chaired oversaw 3 projects, including a series of community-level mini-conferences in 2019 in every region of England to advance Recommendations 3 and 4 of the Report, as backed by the Minister.[5]
- The PAG 'Vision and Values' Working Group produced a persuasive Business Case for the much needed additional investment needed for parks, eventually published by The Parks Alliance [6].
- The PAG 'Funding' Working Group commissioned a detailed expert high-level analysis of the 'Funding of Public Parks' in November 2018, showing the alarming continued decline in the resources available for the maintenance and management of parks. [7]

However, despite the PAG participants' continuing enthusiasm and commitment, and the continuing desperate need to advance the PAG work and Government backing for effective action for our parks, MHCLG hasn't convened any meetings since the middle of 2019. I believe the Cross Departmental Group only met in full once in 2018.

Continuing efforts and conclusion

The Sector continues to make the case to Government. This includes:

- 24 national organisations (many from the PAG) calling on the Government to back a Charter for Parks [8].
- Major national research reports. For example: The National Trust (calling for a £5.5bn Urban Green Infrastructure recovery fund), and Friends of the Earth (calling for £4bn annual investment for 5 years) [9]

The covid era has demonstrated the central importance of access to well-run parks for all sections of every community. Since the Select Committee Inquiry the funding gap to achieve this has continued to grow, and the crisis for the country's parks is deepening. The Inquiry needs to reconvene urgently.

Dave Morris

- Chair, National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces (NFPGS)
- Coordinator of the Parks Action Group 'Empowering Communities' workstream

[5] <https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NFPGS-PAGCE-2019-conferences-aggregated-report.pdf>

[6] <https://www.theparksalliance.org/making-parks-count-the-case-for-parks/>

[7] 'Creating a True and Robust Picture of the Funding of Public Parks and Green Spaces Across England'. See conclusions and recommendations pp 24-27. Awaiting publication.

[8] www.parkscharter.org.uk. Supported by: National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, Friends of the Earth, Keep Britain Tidy, Unison, 38 Degrees, The Parks Agency, Fields In Trust, Llais y Goedwig (Wales), The Gardens Trust, The Parks Alliance, Greenspace Scotland, The Conservation Volunteers, The Open Spaces Society, Sport and Recreation Alliance, Urban Bee Keepers Association, Lantra, MyParkScotland, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Trees for Cities, Keep Scotland Beautiful, Soil Association, National Federation of Cemetery Friends, Countryside Management Association, Town & Country Planning Association, Paths For All [Scotland], Countryside Jobs Service. Also supported (in part) by the Daily Mail: <https://www.mymail.co.uk/pages/save-our-parks> A Government Response was sent to the NFPGS from Rishi Sunak, then Parks Minister. He didn't reject the Charter and looked forward to working with the Parks Action Group to 'safeguard and enhance parks and green spaces'.

[9] <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/press-release/new-research-shows-55bn-fund-needed-to-level-up-access-to-urban-green-space-as-part-of-uks-green-recovery> and <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/englands-green-space-gap>