

Written evidence - The Parks Management Association (PTC0005)

Introduction

The Parks Management Association has been established in the last 18 months as a representative body for those park managers and professionals who work in the public, private, and charitable sectors. Its members include all the most experienced and well-recognised professionals in this field.

Our submission addresses the following questions from the inquiry's terms of reference under Housing and Green Spaces:

- 1. What is the long-term impact of the pandemic likely to be on housing and green spaces in towns and cities?**
- 2. How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities within towns and cities?**
- 3. How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities between towns and cities?**
- 4. What action is needed from the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others to mitigate the risk of any increasing inequalities?**
- 5. How could the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others use their response to the pandemic to reduce inequalities in housing and green spaces?**

We further note that in the oral evidence session on 22 June you included the following additional discussion point:

*** The intervention and innovation required to ensure that housing and green spaces and the use of space help to create vibrant and sustainable post-pandemic towns and cities.**

Our answers will be confined to the area of green spaces, on which we represent an unrivalled body of experience and expertise.

Summary

The lockdown of 2020 saw a major increase in the use of public parks, and widespread recognition of their contribution to public health both physical and mental, and to the sustainability of towns and cities. But the spike in use, along with the impact of covid on local authority resources, also demonstrated the lack of resilience in parks services. Ten years of austerity have undone much of the good which resulted from twenty years of National Lottery investment; budgets continue to be cut and trends in condition are downward. We call for parks to

be recognised as an essential service and therefore needing to be included specifically in a national recovery plan including a ten-year funding strategy to secure them for the future.

1. What is the long-term impact of the pandemic likely to be on green spaces in towns and cities?

The lockdown of spring 2020 saw a surge in the use of public parks, most notably in densely populated urban centres, which continued into the summer. It is too early to tell whether this heralds a permanent re-adjustment or not, although anecdotal reports from spring 2021 suggest that user numbers continue to be high in many public parks.

Parks were a bright spot in the grim news of 2020. Photographs of families enjoying their local park, of people finding either much-needed exercise or much-needed tranquillity in green surroundings located close to home were everywhere in the press. The Communities minister, Robert Jenrick, demanded that parks remain open, making them a *de facto* essential service.¹

So, one long-term effect may be greater use of parks, as people re-evaluate their travel and leisure choices, and also as many adjust to lower and/or less secure incomes. We might see an increased connectedness of local people to their local green spaces which might result in greater community involvement through volunteering or development of Friends groups, although this will depend on councils' ability to support and foster such community participation.

While welcome in all sorts of ways – the benefit to public health, the improvements in community cohesion, the reduction in carbon-generating travel – greater levels of use will also mean greater pressure on parks and parks services. It will mean greater wear and tear on infrastructure; it will mean more frequent litter-collection, so evident in parks as lockdown was eased;² it will put greater pressure on already stretched annual maintenance budgets.

Parks maintenance is not a statutory service and as a result local authority parks budgets have suffered disproportionately compared to other areas of expenditure in the ten years since austerity was introduced in 2010.

So the second long-term impact of the pandemic is likely to be increased pressure on local authority green space budgets. This pressure is unlikely to be answered by councils already under unprecedented financial pressure as a result of the pandemic and lockdown. That in turn means that there is a significant risk of a sizeable gap between needs and available funding. This will inevitably lead to the kind of spiral of decline which occurred in the 1980s and 90s and

¹ 'I have made it clear to councils that all parks must remain open', Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State, 18 April 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/communities-secretary-robert-jenrick-on-covid-19-response-18-april-2020>

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/uk-parks-rubbish-covid-lockdown-weather-b1824882.html>

which turned many urban parks into no-go areas, and which was becoming more evident during the intense period of austerity.³

2. How might the long-term impact of the pandemic increase, or decrease, inequalities within towns and cities?

During the period 1996-2018, the National Lottery pumped over a billion pounds into public park repairs and restoration, at an average cost of over £1m per park. Across the UK, most towns and cities benefited from at least one park having been restored, unfailingly to widespread public applause and political support. The social, economic and environmental benefits of good quality parks were demonstrated in numerous studies and research reports.

But the Lottery cash only addressed a fraction of our 27,000 public parks. In each of those towns and cities, most of the parks did not benefit from a major capital investment. The example of one premier park certainly did encourage parks managers to seek funds to repair other local parks, but there was no other source of capital funding on the same scale as the Lottery.

As a result there are already inequalities of provision within towns and cities. This was clearly demonstrated by Urban Green Nation which stated "The provision of parks in deprived areas is worse than in affluent areas" and that "People from minority ethnic groups tend to have less local green space and it is of a poorer quality".⁴

Funding has been drawn towards principal, premier or central parks, most notably parks which have the capacity to generate income from cultural or sporting events or franchises for food and drink or recreational activities. The Government's *Natural Environment White Paper*, 2011, acknowledged that 'while many people enjoy pleasant green spaces near where they live, this is not the case for everyone. People in deprived areas are nearly six times less likely than those in affluent ones to describe their area as "green"'. There is no evidence that this inequality has changed since then.

As the *British Medical Journal* and others have commented, the pandemic has demonstrated how unequal access to good quality green space has become in Britain.⁵ Despite genuine efforts to maintain equality of provision, every town and city has left-behind parks in left-behind areas. Although, unhelpfully, its analysis fails to stress the importance of quality, it is still telling that the *Fields in Trust Green Space Index 2021* found that 2.78m people live more than a 10-minute walk away from their nearest park or green space. Challenged

³ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4874762/Britain-s-parks-no-areas.html>

⁴ Urban Green Nation (2010) CABE Space
<https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/resources/report/urban-green-nation>

⁵ <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/07/03/covid-19-has-highlighted-the-inadequate-and-unequal-access-to-high-quality-green-spaces/>

communities benefit most from green space provision but have less provision; and the *Index* concludes, 'The problem is set to get worse'.⁶

One of our members has remarked that 2020 saw a widening divide between resourced/improved spaces and those that were already teetering on abject decline. Parks which had seen sustained investment were resilient and attracted increased use; those where maintenance had been minimal for years failed to provide the solace and benefit so desperately needed, not least because the culture of using and valuing green space had been so eroded in the community.

3. How might the long-term impact of the pandemic increase, or decrease, inequalities between towns and cities?

The *State of UK Parks* reports carried out for the National Lottery in 2014 and 2016, and now again this year for APSE (as yet unpublished), indicate that there are some clear regional differences in the data, principally north-south.

Inequalities between regions have been tracked for decades.⁷ The general pattern is reflected in parks maintenance funding as well. In 2016, the *SoUKP* report concluded: 'Parks and park services have been affected more by cuts in some parts of the UK than others, with the Northern and Midlands regions of England hit hardest.' Emerging evidence suggests that there is still a significant disparity between London and the north.

During the pandemic, Friends of the Earth researched the links between access to good quality green space and ethnicity and income. Their findings, set out in their report, *Access to Green Space: Are You Missing Out*, are unequivocal. 20% of neighbourhoods are rated E, with the lowest levels of green space access; that represents 11.6m people or 21.6% of the UK population; 3.3m BAME people live in those neighbourhoods (43% of the UK BAME population). Nearly one in five UK residents, and approaching half of black or ethnic minority UK residents are deprived of access to decent quality green space.⁸

The trends are grim. In 2016, the last time the *State of UK Parks* research was carried out, it was reported that:

*'maintenance budgets are continuing to fall. The number of park staff continues to be cut and fewer park managers report that their parks have been improving in the past three years.There is a growing deficit between the rising use of parks and the declining resources that are available to manage them. This gap does not bode well for the future condition and health of the nation's public parks'*⁹

⁶ <http://www.fieldsintrust.org/green-space-index>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/patrick-butler-cuts-blog/2015/jan/14/council-cuts-burden-falls-again-on-north-and-inner-cities>

⁸ <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/access-green-space-england-are-you-missing-out>

⁹ <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/publications/state-uk-public-parks-2016>

Initial research this year carried out by Community First Partnership, on behalf of APSE, suggests that the number of parks in poor condition is up fourfold and that 2016-21 saw parks condition declining to the levels of 2001, largely prior to the Lottery's investment. There is a real risk that we are returning to the state of parks prior to that unprecedented injection of money; a real risk that the last ten years have undone the work of the previous ten, continuing the boom-bust cycle of decline, restore and decline again. Surely this is not sustainable.

4. What action is needed from the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others to mitigate the risk of any increasing inequalities?

In May 2021 the Parks Management Association wrote to *The Times* stating the following:-

If proof were ever needed it isn't needed any more: good quality public parks are one of the essential public services (UK lockdown rules: what you are allowed to do from Monday, 29 May 2020). During the lockdown, people have found physical exercise and mental solace in their local park. Park closures early in the lockdown prompted furious protests; park staff have been classed as key workers in keeping parks open and clean, and the Secretary of State announced, parks must stay open. No ifs or buts, parks are as vital to our wellbeing as food and water, sanitation, housing and energy.

Yet before the lockdown, park budgets were in freefall; they are the pre-eminent example of the impact of austerity. Because they are not a statutory service, parks are always the first to take the brunt when local authorities are ordered by government to find savings. In these last ten disastrous years, local authority parks budgets have been cut by some 60% on average. In 2016 the State of UK Parks report, looking at trends in condition, projected that by 2020 most parks would be in worse condition than they were in the mid-1990s. Austerity has effectively wiped out the £1 billion invested by the Lottery since 1996.

We have had years of statements from ministers about how they value parks, while subsequent policies have hollowed out parks departments along with all other public services. This has to stop and now is the time to stop it and fully recognise the value of public parks to everyone. The Parks Management Forum [Association] is now asking Government to:

- *Acknowledge the success of local authorities and all other relevant organisations in managing public parks during the COVID19 lockdown;*
- *Recognise the important role parks and open spaces had during the pandemic and will have in the ongoing recovery process and in the health and well-being, socio-economic and environmental agendas and to allocate emergency funding to support this role;*

- *Ringfence appropriate funding to protect and sustain services for future generation linking parks and open spaces to statutory and non-statutory functions;*
- *Support nature recovery plans as part of the Environment Bill; and*
- *Encourage all local authorities to adopt a Green Infrastructure or Green Spaces Strategy, underpinning the value of parks and open spaces for public health, regeneration and well-being, social equity, biodiversity and climate change resilience.*

No more platitudes; we need government to support the parks and open spaces sector to halt the spiral of decline in public parks. The Parks Management Forum [Association] currently represents those professionals working in public parks and will be writing to all MPs and Local Authority Chief Executives stating the value of public parks. It is now time to take action.

We followed this up with a letter to all Ministers across England, Scotland and Wales and received a small number of responses (total 3no). This was followed up by a meeting with Lillian Greenwood MP, Chair of the APPG for Parks and Green Spaces.

In May 2020, the Committee on Climate Change wrote to the Prime Minister on the subject of building a resilient recovery, and says, 'The importance of urban greenspace to people has been highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis, but is in decline both in area and quality. Restoring parks, urban tree planting, and supporting the green roof and sustainable drainage industries can help to bolster the UK's slow-growing adaptation services sector.'¹⁰

The cost of good quality parks must form part of government calculations on revenue funding support for local authorities. It is not good enough for government to abdicate any responsibility for what it treats as an essential service. If central government is insisting that parks stay open as part of our collective response to the pandemic, then central government needs to help with the cost of that provision.¹¹

Central government needs to recognise that, while in some cases, other management bodies – such as trusts - might be viable, for the vast majority of public parks local authorities remain the only practical option for both ownership and management.¹² The most vulnerable parks have been those which have – forcefully encouraged by central government - become heavily reliant on income streams deriving from commercial activity, such as cafes, events, car parking

¹⁰ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/2020/05/06/take-urgent-action-on-six-key-principles-for-a-resilient-recovery/>

¹¹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/parks-fit-future>

¹² This point was forcefully made in the 2016 report by Historic England, *History of Public Park Funding and Management. 1820-2010*
<https://research.historicengland.org.uk/Report.aspx?i=15442>

and hiring out facilities. The vulnerability of that funding has been all too apparent during lockdown when that activity largely ceased, and local authorities themselves, often using reserves, have made up the inevitable shortfall in revenue.¹³

The need for a national Covid recovery plan is widely agreed and accepted by government. Such a recovery needs to build in resilience to our towns and cities and communities, not just against the next pandemic but also against other anticipated risks to our systems, for example the risk of lower levels of disposable income for holidays and travel; the risk of increased levels of long-term physical and mental health problems; or the increasing risk of ecological breakdown with grave long-term implications for the UK.

Access to **good quality** green space and parks is fundamental to mitigation of all these risks. It must no longer be treated as discretionary; as demonstrated during the lockdown, parks are an essential service and must be protected and maintained as such, and where provision is low, addressing that inequality should be part of the government's levelling up agenda. They are **the** "Natural Health Service".¹⁴

Sir Michael Marmot has said in *Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review*, that 'Crowded housing and lack of green space were a problem before the pandemic and have become more so during it.'¹⁵ Parks need to be seen in the context of essential services, like housing or public health, not as a nice-to-have, optional extra.

5. How could the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others use their response to the pandemic to reduce inequalities in ... green spaces? What interventions and innovations are required to ensure that green spaces and the use of space help to create vibrant and sustainable post-pandemic towns and cities?

In November, 2020, the Prime Minister published his Ten-Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution "*helping to make our nation cleaner, greener and more beautiful*".¹⁶ Whilst there are many valuable intentions stated here, there is nothing in the green recovery plan about the 27,000 public parks nationwide that serve 84% of our population who live in towns and cities. Yet during the pandemic, the Government were stating how valuable our parks had been.

The evidence collated over the last 20 years into the value of one of our greatest assets – public parks – is overwhelming, from 2004 with the landmark *Natural Fit Study* by the RSPB¹⁷ endorsed by the Faculty of Public Health to more

¹³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-covid-19-has-devastated-councils-park-services>

¹⁴ <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-importance-of-the-natural-health-service>

¹⁵ <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-ten-point-plan-for-a-green-industrial-revolution/title>

¹⁷ http://ww2.rspb.org.uk/images/natural_fit_full_version_tcm9-133055.pdf

recently *Improving access to green space – a new review for 2020* published by Public Health England.¹⁸

Point 9 of the Government's Plan has completely missed an opportunity to include our many urban parks and green spaces. It is these spaces that offer the greatest opportunity for access to natural green space, enhancing local biodiversity, and ensuring our towns and cities are more vibrant and sustainable. There are many excellent examples and case studies across the country, but the distribution and inequalities are significant.

The Parks Management Association is therefore asking the Government to revisit its Ten Point Plan and to include in its Green Recovery Plan the enhancement of our many parks and green spaces by the creation of a **new fund** made available to local authorities, parks trusts and charities. The National Lottery Heritage Fund have invested over £1 billion and it is estimated that to bring our parks and green spaces up to acceptable standards, a further £500 million investment is required, in the form of a ten-year investment strategy addressing both capital and revenue costs. After years of austerity, now capped by the financial earthquake of Covid, local authorities and other management bodies such as charitable trusts, are unable on their own to deliver this much needed restoration.

Central government needs to build on and further support the good work already being done by individual NHS trusts, GP practices and local authorities in optimising the public health benefits of good quality parks and green spaces. In addition to their contribution to people's well-being and happiness, such optimisation would offer major financial benefits to local and central government. Measurements identified by Public Health England in its 2020 report *Improving Access to Greenspace* include:

- £2.1 billion per year could be saved in health costs if everyone in England had good access to greenspace, due to increased physical activity in those spaces
- in Birmingham, the annual net benefit to society of their parks and greenspace is nearly £600 million, which includes £192 million in health benefits
- in Sheffield, for every £1 spent on maintaining parks, there is a benefit of £34 in health costs saved, with local residents being the primary beneficiaries¹⁹

¹⁸

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

¹⁹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

6. The intervention and innovation required to ensure that ... green spaces and the use of space help to create vibrant and sustainable post-pandemic towns and cities.

Over the last 20 years, academics, parks professionals, consultants, agencies and funders have wrestled with alternative ways to manage public parks and green spaces and whilst models have been trialled, none have proved innovative enough or more suitable than the model that has worked since Victorian times – public parks should be managed by the public sector, but with sufficient resources to enable the appropriate quality to be achieved. This was summarised in a report commissioned by Historic England and authored by academic Dr Katy Layton-Jones and stated that:

*'There are an estimated 27,000 public parks in Britain and 2.6 billion visits to parks each year. Many of these parks are of historic and cultural interest, and some 300 are registered as nationally important. For over a century, the vast majority of public parks have been provided and run by local authorities but these authorities have no statutory duty to fund or maintain public parks. In July 2016 the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee announced an inquiry into public parks to examine concerns that public parks are under threat. Historic England commissioned Dr Katy Layton-Jones, a cultural historian and historical consultant, to provide an overview of past public park funding models, and their management. Her research findings show a long history of funding problems but also the important role of local authorities in developing, and often rescuing parks, and delivering public parks for all over 170 years. Historic England has included this research report in its submission to the inquiry as in looking for new funding solutions we also need to understand why funding issues have arisen. The research report will also be of interest to local authority portfolio holders, parks teams, friends groups, amenity societies, and urban historians'*²⁰

This was a vital piece of work. If we are to provide vibrant and sustainable post-pandemic towns and cities, we need to resource local authorities, parks trusts and those charities managing these green spaces. This is not achievable without central government funding and with agencies such as the Parks Management Association, Fields in Trust, Keep Britain Tidy, The Landscape Institute, Chartered Institute of Horticulture, the Local Government Association, APSE, the National Trust and many others working together and collaboratively to ensure this happens.

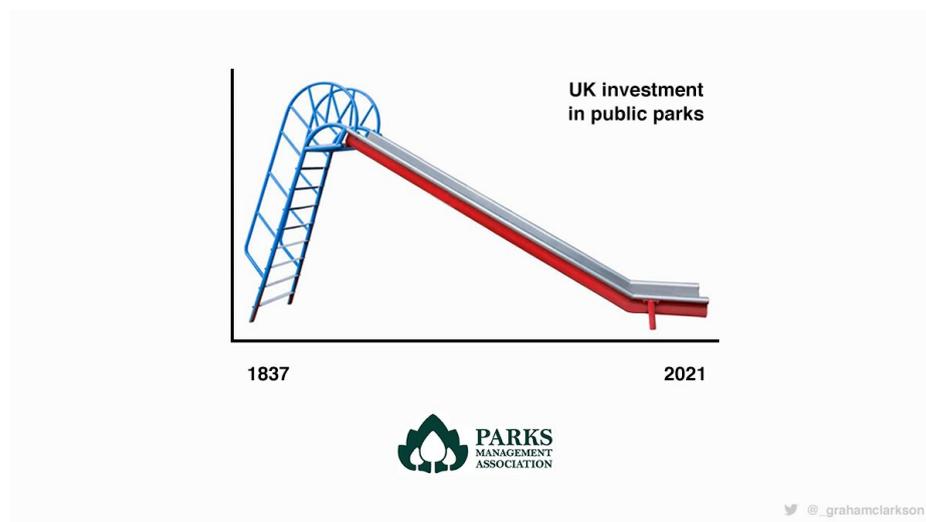
With adequate funding, managers can adopt a whole-system approach, with good quality green infrastructure that is part of neighbourhood plans, community and other partnerships, delivering a vital role in the green recovery, public health and nature recovery but most importantly building resilient communities,

²⁰ <https://research.historicengland.org.uk/Report.aspx?i=15442>

better equipped to deal with those future risks and shocks which are inevitably on their way.

In summary

Parks and green spaces were a vital part of our towns and cities before the pandemic, and it was during the pandemic that their importance was once again highlighted. To ensure they are part of our vibrant and sustainable post-pandemic communities, they must be resourced adequately and be urgently included as part of the Government's Ten-Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution.



28 June 2021