

# **Written evidence from the Midlands Parks Forum (PTC0030)**

## **Introduction to Midlands Parks Forum**

The Midlands Parks Forum (MPF) is a networking and advocacy body representing 67 Local Authority and green space organisations within the Midlands region. Our members come from the public, private, commercial and charitable sectors and are all responsible for the day to day management, development, maintenance and design of public parks. MPF was founded as a charity in 2019 but prior to that our sister organisation West Midlands Parks Forum was in existence from 1986; we represent 35 years of professional experience and knowledge about parks and green spaces and are passionate and dedicated to our subject. The Forum organises conferences, workshops, educational forums, site visits, case studies and research to learn from each other and share best practice.

In our submission below, we attempt to address

- What is the long-term impact of the pandemic likely to be on green spaces in towns and cities?
- How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities within towns and cities?
- What action is needed from the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others to mitigate the risk of any increasing inequalities?
- 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?

## **Importance of Parks and Green Spaces during the pandemic**

The value of parks to all our communities has been well demonstrated during 2020 and 2021. With green spaces being the only public space to remain open during lockdowns, this 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 and just being outdoors and locally.

The benefits of parks were already widely known before the pandemic, but the role they have played, and continue to play, has 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 and physical health cannot be underestimated. 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 and have helped 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.

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.

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

The increased demand comes with implications for the very infrastructure of our parks. Warm dry days are bringing a huge increase in visitors, resulting in large volumes of litter and problems with car parking. The impact of increasingly wet winters has led to extensive damage to the footpath networks and grass areas, some of which will take many months, even years to repair. The closure of parks' toilets over the years has seen a rise in defecating in our parks. These issues will all continue until such a time that necessary long term investment is made. Already our communities are demanding that facilities are replaced and improved at a time when the financial pressures within local government mean that they are themselves at breaking point.

The summer of 2021 will see far more holidays taken in the UK and this will lead to increased visitor numbers, not just to those green spaces in typical tourist destinations but also to destination green spaces in and around towns and cities.

Most urban green spaces have not seen capital investment in the past 10 years due to austerity cuts so key infrastructure referred to above was wearing out or had been removed pre Covid 19.

Covid 19 also caused significant losses of commercial income to local authorities from cafes, events, buildings etc thus causing an even bigger decrease in parks' budgets.

Thus, the long-term impact is a widening of the gap between how much people value urban parks and greenspaces and how much local authorities can invest in order to meet those expectations.

### **How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities within towns and cities?**

Access to quality green space is not equal and this is most evident in our most disadvantaged communities across the UK. Although only 8% of white British residents have no access to a garden, this rises 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 that good quality, well managed green spaces can bring.

Friends of the Earth have produced a map of those areas that are most deprived of green space; they estimate over 10 million people have poor access to parks.

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

Fields in Trust have also mapped access to green spaces and have predicted these against growing populations, which shows the declining levels of access over the next few decades.

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

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.

This all re-enforces the work of CABI Space in Urban Green Nation in 2010 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".

We have known since Victorian times that there is a link between parks and public health but it has taken a pandemic to remind us of just how vital that link is to those in the more disadvantaged parts of our society.

Work has been carried out in parks through green social prescribing, increasing physical activity, improving mental health and well-being and they form the natural venue for this especially as so many lie at the heart of the most disadvantaged communities.

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. Urban green space once again has a pivotal role in addressing climate change and biodiversity

We owe it to the tens of thousands of people that have sadly died and the many thousands of people in the NHS and key services who have pulled us through this to bring a legacy of change and improvement to our nation's green spaces. A legacy where we value things that matter, that provide a sense of community and place, and where the wider public benefit of parks and green spaces is acknowledged, rather than them being seen as a budgetary item to cut where possible.

Investing in green space in the more disadvantaged parts of the country will create the biggest impacts in terms of health and well-being, mitigation against climate change and levelling up.

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

A national strategy and vision for our urban parks which looks to the future of what they can deliver for our communities and environment, which is replicated at a local authority level. Such a strategy should be based on evidence, as with Covid-19. We should follow the science, the current regime of funding short term highly competitive projects, requires skilled bid writers who are often not found in Green Spaces Management; we need an evidence based approach leading to a long term investment strategy.

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

95% of urban public parks are managed and maintained by local authorities, yet these are not eligible for any of the green recovery funding. Both capital and revenue funding streams needs to be provided to all levels of local government from Town and Parish Councils to unitary authorities. This also needs to reflect that some authorities have no parks development staff left to fill in forms and "bid" for funding so this needs to be thought about very carefully to ensure there is systematic change in the way investments are made. This reflects the call above for an evidence-based approach and it is within the ability of government departments to map health deprivation, green space investment, IMD, green space provision (quantity and accessibility), usage of green space and green space quality and then to combine this with emerging work on green infrastructure.

But that investment must start with and be channelled through local authorities and must be a blend of capital for infrastructure and revenue for staffing and activities.

Investment in new green jobs across the urban park sector is now vital. Emerging research is showing that green space development roles have been cut disproportionately as local authorities protect front line jobs to try to maintain standards as witnessed by park users. We now have a situation where the number of Friends groups and the number of people volunteering in parks is higher than ever and predicted to increase, yet there are virtually no staff left to support those individuals and groups. Virtually no staff to write funding bids, apply for awards, develop new projects with the community. This skills and experience drain is also not equally spread across the UK with certain regions losing more than others.

Investment in green jobs also needs to be targeted at young people. The age profile of the sector is mostly over 40; we need to create career development pathways for young people with a variety of interests, qualification and

backgrounds – parks are relevant to human geographers, social scientists, public health students, planners, landscape architects, ecologists, historians and so many more subject fields.

Linked to a national strategy we need investment in strategic planning at a local level to develop the costed plans that are needed for climate change, biodiversity and public health.

At MPF we recognise that not all urban parks and green spaces are provided by local authorities but it is the vast majority and we strongly believe that councils are the best delivery vehicle for green recovery, health recovery and that significant investment in urban green space will deliver long lasting and meaningful change for some of our most disadvantaged communities.

*6 July 2021*