



Bristol Parks Forum

representing resident led park groups and citywide organisations involved in protecting and improving Bristol's green spaces

A Foundation or Trust for Bristol's Parks?

January 2018

Background

Bristol City Council (BCC) is currently consulting on reductions to its budget for maintenance of its parks & green spaces. Proposals include both reduced spending through reduced provision and possible sources of additional income.

While these proposals cover only the next two financial years, budget pressures are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Parks are not a statutory service and as such are likely to suffer further cuts in the future. Increasing income from parks would help address this, provided it can be ring-fenced for parks .

Many other cities throughout the country are in a similar position of making cuts and there have been discussions at a national level of possible alternative models for funding parks. These options include forming Trusts or Foundations to take over some of the responsibilities in respect of parks from the Council.

Trust Option

Within the consultation BCC ask for views on 'the Parks Service being delivered by a Trust or similar organisation rather than the City Council'.

BCC state:

A Trust would be an independent charitable organisation that took responsibility for managing parks and green spaces.

The Trust could be responsible for all green spaces or just some of them.

How the Trust operates would be a point of negotiation as it was being established. However it could mean that:

1. All decisions on the management of parks in the city would be made by a Trust Board separately to the council;

2. The Trust could seek funding contributions from sources that the council cannot, such as grants and charitable donations;
3. Income raised would be held solely for parks management and maintenance – none would be available or used to support other council services (for example if a surplus was made).
4. The council would not give money to the Trust in years that income fell below expectations.
5. Assets may be given over to the Trust as part of a long-term lease i.e. 100+ years.

This would be similar to the proposals currently being progressed by Newcastle City Council with support from the National Trust and others.

Foundation Option

The structure of a Foundation would be similar to a trust, but it would not take on responsibility for managing the parks and there would be no transfer of ownership.

Bournemouth formed a Foundation for its parks in January 2015 and other cities are also considering similar proposals. Parks Foundations are common in the USA.

Bournemouth Borough Council has retained overall responsibility to maintain and develop Bournemouth's parks but the Foundation works alongside them with the aim to raise much needed funds for improvement and enhancements above what the council provide. The Foundation also aims to raise awareness of Bournemouth's parks

www.bournemouthparksfoundation.org.uk

Council Option (existing)

The proposals within the BCC consultation do not depend on a Trust being formed. The proposals for raising additional income are based on the assumption that the Council would manage and administer the additional income streams. This would require some additional staff and admin support. Commercial and marketing functions would be required that are not currently carried out by the parks service. The Council would also need to change from being reactive to being a more proactive organisation that attracts new businesses to operate in Bristol's parks.

Any income raised over that anticipated when the budget was set would in effect create an underspend and be absorbed in to the central council funds. If less money were raised then the Parks service would be under pressure to reduce its spending to meet the budget requirements.

The Best Option for Bristol?

Bristol Parks Forum committee believe that Bristol Parks as a Council department is likely to face challenges in raising funds as proposed and that a charitable body, Trust or Foundation, would be better suited to this task and more likely to succeed.

Some of the benefits of a charitable body would be:

- 1) Staff working for a charitable organisation would be focused on parks and not be distracted by other BCC priorities;
- 2) The public & businesses might be more likely to contribute knowing that the funds would be ring-fenced for parks by being held by the charity;
- 3) People could also be sure that payments by events & activity organisers would be ring-fenced;
- 4) A charity might be able to attract staff who would not want to work for a local authority;
- 5) A charity would be able to be more flexible in dealing with small suppliers etc.
- 6) A charity would be able to promote and market Bristol's parks through its own website etc.

In considering whether a Trust or Foundation is the better option both financial and political considerations need to be taken into account. Newcastle envisages some cost savings in operational costs but these are minimal. The costs of setting up a Trust including the transfer of staff and concluding the details of the necessary long-term leases would be high. Existing covenants on some of the land might also present difficulties. In addition there are likely to be concerns raised by both Councillors and residents about the Council losing control of its parks.

In view of the above Bristol Parks Forum believes that a Foundation model is likely to be the best option for Bristol and is worth exploring further.

In our view establishing a Bristol Parks Foundation would help address some of the challenges that Parks will face in raising income, while avoiding the legal and political hurdles involved in setting up a Trust.

Foundation Scope

Bristol Parks Forum envisages a Parks Foundation with a wider and more ambitious remit than that set up in Bournemouth. There are many details that would need to be agreed but the following is an outline of how a Foundation might operate.

The Foundation would be set up as a charity, with a board of trustees that could include some Councillors but also others with appropriate expertise. In addition the Foundation would have a separate trading arm that could run or manage businesses in parks commercially to raise funds for the charity.

There would be an agreement with BCC setting out the roles and responsibilities of the Foundation and the Council, with the BCC handing over responsibilities for certain activities.

A business plan would need to be developed so that the Foundation would expand its activities over a period of perhaps five or more years, at the end of this period the Foundation would aim as a minimum to be carrying out the following:

- Operating a website to promote Bristol's parks & green spaces;
- Seeking donations for specific projects and enhancements;

- Working with park groups and others to seek out and apply for grants and other forms of funding;
- Working with park groups and others to encourage and facilitate volunteering in parks;
- Approaching local businesses and organisations to secure sponsorship to support maintenance of parks;
- Directly operating or managing franchises for cafés or other concessions in parks to raise funds:
- Encouraging the use of parks for commercial events and activities appropriate to the sites and maximising income from those events;
- Running and/or managing small scale events and activities to raise funds;
- Encouraging community use of parks.

Responsibility for managing parks would remain with the Parks Service as would enforcement of byelaws.

The Foundation would require support from BCC or find alternative funding to cover its initial set up and operating costs.

A funding agreement would need to be in place to ensure that any funds raised by the Foundation and passed to BCC directly benefited Bristol's parks & green spaces.

**Rob Acton-Campbell,
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Bristol Parks Forum Website: www.bristolparksforum.org.uk

Bristol Parks consultation: www.bristol.gov.uk/parksconsultation