



# Bristol Parks Forum

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

## Communities and Local Government Committee

### Public parks inquiry

### Submission from Bristol Parks Forum

#### Executive Summary

- Parks are a valuable resource used by all parts of the community.
- Continued funding of maintenance of parks is vital to avoid a cycle of decline.
- Parks make a major contribution to health and wellbeing.
- The impact of cuts in Local Authority funding is beginning to have an impact.
- The long-term impacts of cuts need to be considered.
- Provision of a minimum standard of well maintained parks should be a statutory requirement for Local Authorities.
- The Government should commit to funding maintenance of parks.
- Funding streams for capital investment in parks should also provide funding for maintenance.

#### 1. Who we are

1.1 Bristol Parks Forum (BPF) is as an umbrella organisation for community park groups and organisations in Bristol with an interest in their local parks and green spaces.

1.2 We are an independent group run by volunteers who work with Bristol City Council as 'critical friends' to ensure Bristol's parks & green spaces are well looked after and to help local groups enhance their green spaces.

1.3 As volunteers we are also active with our own park groups working to promote our local green spaces and to bring about enhancements by raising grants and other funding; organising events and carrying out practical tasks on the sites.

1.4 This submission has been prepared by the elected BPF committee. BPF committee members are representatives of BPF member groups. We are all volunteers who care about

our local parks and green spaces. More details about the BPF can be seen on our website at [www.bristolparksforum.org.uk](http://www.bristolparksforum.org.uk) A list of BPF committee members and contact details are included at the end of this submission.

## **2. Definition of parks**

2.1 Prior to responding on the Committee's specific issues we wish to be clear what we mean by 'public parks'. We consider that the term covers all green space that is open to the public and managed by the Local Authority, with the exception of highways land ie road verges etc.

2.2 In Bristol 'parks' therefore include the city's large estates, nature reserves and various informal areas of green space as well as traditional Victorian parks. Some of these spaces (but not all) include facilities for park users, such as children's play areas, cafés, tennis courts etc. In size they vary from many hectares to a few square metres.

2.3 Bristol's parks are mapped on the Council's public mapping system which can be accessed here: <http://tinyurl.com/gkonk9r>

## **3. Bristol's Parks & Green Spaces Strategy**

3.1 Bristol City Council has adopted a comprehensive Parks and Green Spaces Strategy (P&GSS). The full document and some background information can be found on the parks Forum website at [www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/Bristols-Parks-Green-Space-Strategy/](http://www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/Bristols-Parks-Green-Space-Strategy/) The P&GSS envisaged capital spending of £87m over 20 years to improve Bristol's parks. Money would also be set aside to fund 'lifecycle maintenance' ie replacement of equipment as it became worn out, with 15 years being considered as an average lifespan.

3.2 As part of the work to put together the P&GSS Bristol City Council carried out a lot of public research, some of which is referred to in our specific responses below. While this research was carried out 10 years ago much of it is still relevant.

3.3 The strategy set minimum standards for the provision of public open space of each of four main categories:

- Natural Green Space (including Nature Reserves)
- Formal Green Space
- Informal Green Space
- Children's Play Areas

3.4 The funding model included in the P&GSS envisaged the disposal of some areas of land for capital investment in improvements to parks and to create an endowment fund for lifecycle maintenance. Areas for disposal were to be those that were considered to be of 'low recreational value' in areas where the minimum standards for provision were exceeded. In order for the anticipated level of capital funding to be realised some 90 acres (2.4%) of park land would need to be sold. Though sites for disposal had not been identified at that stage Council officers suggested that up to 120 acres might fall into that category.

3.5 The Council carried out a detailed assessment of all its green spaces to establish which might be suitable for disposal. Some spaces were suggested for disposal but following public consultation most of these were withdrawn with the Council accepting their value to the local community. The proposed disposals caused considerable public outcry. In the event very few areas were sold and no significant funding raised. Some of the press reports and other information are available at [http://www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/information/pgss\\_wp/](http://www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/information/pgss_wp/)

3.6 As a result of the public pressure the spaces that have been retained have been designated as 'Important Open Space' in Bristol's Local Plan to give them a degree of protection in planning terms. Consultation on the Local Plan and potential development sites had been run concurrently with that for the P&GSS.

3.7 The Council has been unable to find alternative sources of funding to replace this funding stream and as a result of the 2008 credit crunch anticipated income from developers in the form of Section 106 funding has also been lower than anticipated. As a result Capital investment in Bristol's parks has been much lower than envisaged in the Strategy.

3.8 The consultation process on the P&GSS and the possible sale of sites raised political awareness of issues around parks and has helped ensure that to date budget cuts have not been as severe as they might otherwise have been. However, the Bristol Parks Forum is concerned that further Government cuts in funding to Bristol City Council will see significant reductions in spending on parks maintenance in the future.

3.9 Having established the importance of green spaces to the local community through the P&GSS process and having had this recognised in the Local Plan, the BPF will strongly oppose any proposals to dispose of any of these sites in the future or to reduce the protection given to the spaces by the designation in Bristol's Local Plan.

3.10 The disposal of parks to raise funds for revenue (day to day maintenance) is clearly not sustainable and should never be considered. Disposal to raise funds to improve other parks should only be considered following a full assessment and where it is supported by the local community.

#### **4. Who uses parks and open spaces, how often and for what**

4.1 Parks are used by a huge range of people of all ages and background for a wide range of activities. From our own observations it is clear that different spaces are used in different ways and it is important to have a range of spaces available to avoid possible conflict between different users. Some of the major uses and user groups are listed below but there are of course many others

- Families & children visiting formal play areas
- Families and children for play outside of formal play areas
- Dog walking
- Recreational walks
- Picnics and sitting in a pleasant green environment
- Off road routes for cycling or walking (including commuting)
- Meeting place for young people
- Running/jogging
- Formal sports – football, tennis, bowls and others
- Wildlife and biodiversity education for both children and adults
- Venues for community events
- Venues for commercial concerts and festivals
- As a resource for other organisations such as in health & social care
- Growing food

4.2 The research done for Bristol's P&GSS which covers this subject can be seen at [www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/Bristols-Parks-Green-Space-Strategy/parks-reports-public-research.htm](http://www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/Bristols-Parks-Green-Space-Strategy/parks-reports-public-research.htm) The document 'Young People and a Bench' is a particularly interesting study.

4.3 While the above uses are perhaps obvious there are other indirect uses that should also be considered. For example many people benefit from the views of parks & green spaces (or the trees within them) from their homes, place of work or as they travel through the city without necessarily having to enter them.

4.4 In any consideration of the use of a space it is also important to separate the actual use from the potential use if the space was made more attractive and welcoming. Parks that are not well maintained and are without good facilities attract less people and are then more susceptible to vandalism and anti-social behavior; this can lead to a cycle of decline. Attractive well maintained parks attract more people and the presence of more people will in itself encourage others to visit. Often relatively small investments in improvements can greatly increase park use, if the park is also well maintained.

4.5 A particular issue in Bristol has been the lack of an easy way for people to find local parks. The Parks Forum has attempted to address this by working with the University of the West of England to develop the Parkhive App which enables users to find their nearest park – see [www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/parkhive/](http://www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/parkhive/)

## **5. The contribution of parks to the health and well-being of communities**

5.5 There has been much research on this both in this country and the United States, we are aware that the HLF will be presenting its latest State of UK Parks report so will not repeat that here.

5.6 In Bristol there are three aspects that we particularly want to highlight:

5.6.1 Parks can form a focus point for the community. Park Groups give residents a sense of belonging and often a chance to volunteer either to actively help manage the space (green gym) or to organize events and to promote the space. The health benefits of volunteering are promoted on the NHS website at [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/volunteering](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/volunteering)

5.6.2 Bristol has a large number of very active walking for health groups who make great use of Bristol's parks & green spaces, see [www.bristol.gov.uk/healthwalks](http://www.bristol.gov.uk/healthwalks)

5.6.3 The presence of green spaces (and their associated trees) make a significant contribution in countering what is termed the Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect, where built-up areas are by their nature significantly warmer than surrounding areas which are not. Discussion papers highlighting the benefits to communities of green infrastructure can be found under the heading 'Discussion papers - balanced and sustainable communities' at [www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/Bristols-Parks-Green-Space-Strategy/parks-supporting-docs.htm](http://www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/Bristols-Parks-Green-Space-Strategy/parks-supporting-docs.htm)

## **6. The impact of reductions in local authority budgets on parks**

6.1 While to date Bristol has to some extent been able to minimise the reductions in its budget, impacts are already being felt. As park groups we have already noticed an increase in the use of unskilled labour, resulting in incidents such as areas with bulb planting being mowed before the bulbs flower. There is also an increase in 'firefighting' where managers and operatives are increasingly spending time responding to incidents and reports, for example of obstructed paths, rather than being able to plan work in the most efficient way. We have also noticed that the maintenance of parks is now falling below the standards that are required as defined by the parks' Management Plans.

6.2 It is clear that with the current level of resources non urgent tasks are being put to one side in order that the core tasks of grass cutting and emptying bins are maintained at a reasonable level. We have examples of the numbers of bins being reduced. Further cuts will inevitably make this situation worse leading to a decline in the appearance of parks in general.

6.3 Bristol no longer takes part in the Green Flag Award as it sees this as an expense that is a drain on resources without commensurate returns.

6.4 We mentioned in 4.4 above the potential for a cycle of decline if parks are not well maintained. This is not an overnight process and that while at the moment the cuts appear to have had only a small impact, the cumulative effect of even the current reductions in maintenance could be enough to trigger a decline in use over the next few years.

6.5 It can take several years for the impact of cuts in maintenance to become apparent, for example benches left unpainted might lead to rotten timber needing replacement in several years time. Paths with untreated weed growth might start to break up in future winters. We are concerned that the true effect of today's cuts are yet to be seen and the long-term impact should be considered as well those immediately visible.

## **7. What the administrative status of parks should be in light of declining local authority resources for non-statutory services**

7.1 Bristol Parks Forum is firmly of the view that provision of at least a minimum standard and quantity of parks and open spaces should be a statutory requirement for local authorities.

7.2 We would propose that standards similar to those set out in the Bristol P&GSS for quantity and distance to different types of space should be adopted nationwide. These standards should also be considered within Local Plans to ensure that green space is protected from development.

7.3 We believe that given the health and other benefits of parks then spending money on a minimum provision will in the long term save money in increasing the health & wellbeing of the population.

## **8. How new and existing parks can best be supported**

8.1 Core funding for maintenance of local parks needs to come from either local or national taxation and we call for a commitment from the Government to provide this funding through Local Authorities.

8.2 Funding capital investment to improve parks (or for new parks) can be supported through schemes such as the Lottery and the Landfill Communities Fund, but only if the funds are also available for day to day and lifecycle maintenance, see also 9.5 below.

## **9. What additional or alternative funding is available and what scope is there for local authorities to generate revenue from park users**

9.1 Bristol Parks Forum, Bristol City Council, and LUC secured funding from the UK 'Rethinking Parks' Programme run by Nesta in partnership with the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Big Lottery Fund in 2014 for our ParkWork Project, it was one of 11 projects to have received funding from 209 Expressions of Interest – see [www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/parkwork/](http://www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/parkwork/)

9.2 The Parkwork project was mentioned in an article in the Guardian [www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/aug/13/out-to-grass-local-park-under-threat](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/aug/13/out-to-grass-local-park-under-threat) 'One success was the Bristol ParkWork scheme, which saw 17 unemployed people given temporary maintenance roles in the city's parks: this led to seven later gaining jobs, while saving the council £27,000'

9.3 While the project undoubtedly is a success it is clear that £27,000 is a drop in the ocean compared with Bristol's overall parks budget. It's wider benefit has been proven with 20 participants having now either gone into employment or full time education as a result of being on the project.

9.4 Given that our project was one of the more successful in a national project it is clear that finding alternative funding streams is difficult.

9.5 The National Lottery has provided some funds for improvements to parks through the HLF and other streams. Parks in Bristol have also benefited from the Landfill Communities Fund; details of a current project can be seen here [www.troopers-hill.org.uk/play](http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk/play). However, a difficulty with the use of these funds is that they do not provide funds for maintenance of the enhanced facilities either in terms of short-term day to day maintenance or longer term 'lifecycle' maintenance.

9.6 Bristol City Council is increasingly reluctant to sign up for Lottery funded projects because it cannot be sure that it will be able to meet its maintenance commitments in the future. To overcome this problem, we would support the use of Lottery Funds to provide an endowment to fund future maintenance alongside any money granted for capital improvements. This is a common approach for projects that have an extended lifecycle.

9.7 While increased use of parks for large public events can bring in some extra revenue it is our view that this should only be done with the support of the local community. This support can be won if the time for which parks are occupied and the area taken is minimized and if the financial benefits to the park is clear and transparent.

9.8 Concessions, such as catering vans, can also bring in some funds, but care needs to be taken that they are sited appropriately and do not detract from the ambience of the park. The vagaries of the British weather also limits the potential for profits for operators of these concessions and therefore the rental that they are willing to pay.

9.9 Given the evidence of the health benefits of parks there are opportunities for primary health care trusts to prescribe activities in parks as alternatives to the provision of expensive drugs for some conditions. It may be cost effective for health budgets to be used to improve local parks to allow more activities to take place and the Committee should consider ways that this could be done.

## **10. What the advantages and disadvantages are of other management models, such as privatisation, outsourcing or mutualisation**

10.1 Any model for the maintenance of parks outside the direct control of the local authority will fail if it is not properly funded.

10.2 We are aware of the 'Parks Trust' in Milton Keynes, this appears to be successful but we understand it was funded through an endowment of property given at the time Milton Keynes

was established. It seems unlikely that Bristol City Council would be able to give a large enough endowment to make such a trust work in Bristol.

10.3 The National Trust and the Canals & Rivers Trust are examples of two charities that operate nationally and have large areas of which are effectively parks to manage. While these can work on a national scale (with Government funding and /or sufficient endowments) we cannot see that a charity based only in Bristol would be able to raise sufficient funds, especially if it were in competition with other local areas as well as the National Trust and others.

10.4 Any outsourcing model would be tempted to cherry-pick large ‘destination’ parks with the capacity for increased facilities and the potential to develop attractions that people would be willing to pay for, an example might be Ashton Court in Bristol. We are concerned that such models would leave the smaller local parks and green spaces which are of equal, if not greater, importance for wellbeing without adequate funding and no way of raising it. It is important that funding of the city’s parks is considered as a whole.

Bristol Parks Forum Committee

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### **For Bristol Parks Forum**

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