

Copy of Letter from Bristol Parks Forum to Secretary of State for EFRA

Sent 19th July 2019 by Email

Dear Secretary of State

ENVIRONMENT ACT – OPPORTUNITY TO INCREASE THE BENEFITS OF PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE PARKS AND GREEN SPACES

I am writing on behalf of the Bristol Parks Forum to ask you to include in the Environment Act a new legal duty.

This legal duty is for public bodies to maintain to a good standard all publicly accessible parks and green spaces (PAPAGS) for which they are responsible.

The Bristol Parks Forum is as an umbrella organisation for community park groups and organisations in the city of Bristol with an interest in their local parks and green spaces.

The Bristol Parks Forum is currently the only 'community voice' that is dedicated to all of Bristol's green spaces. We work with Bristol City Council to ensure our city's public parks & green spaces are well looked after and to help local groups enhance these green spaces.

In its recently adopted Vision at <http://www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/vision> we are committed to "Campaigning for a legal duty to ensure that parks and green spaces are managed to a good standard" as recognition of the vital need for public bodies to have the necessary funding.

Background

Bristol is rightly proud of its Parks and Green Space, which have contributed significantly to the view of Bristol as a vibrant City.

Bristol City Council owns most of the PAPAGS but has had to significantly cut the maintenance budgets of the relevant Departments, and seek new approaches to the funding of these areas for the future.

Our experience is that this has reached the point where green spaces are being maintained to a lower standard which is affecting the ability of people to use and enjoy them. This in turn could mean that new initiatives to improve our areas, and projects where enhanced green spaces are provided as mitigation for development, could be lost in the longer term without sufficient resources for maintenance.

We believe that this increasing lack of maintenance also reduces the ability of our parks and green spaces to provide a wide range of services to people and wildlife in urban areas.

The Government's 25-year Environment Plan itself recognises that already the number and condition of green spaces has declined; and current investment is confined to specific projects. This decline should not be allowed to continue and a legal duty and appropriate funding brought forward as a matter of urgency.

A definition of "good" could be based on the Green Flag Standard - <http://www.greenflagaward.org/media/1019/green-flag-award-guidelines.pdf>

Benefits of the opportunity.

We agree with the 25 Year Environment Plan which states that the natural environment is our most precious inheritance – and acknowledges the critical nature of the environment if the next generation is to flourish.

In urban areas like Bristol, hundreds of thousands of people rely on local parks and green spaces for numerous opportunities to take exercise, find peace, experience nature, socialise etc.

This is especially important if you are unable to travel far to reach green spaces due to social, economic or medical reasons.

Some the services provided by our Parks and Green Spaces are:

1. Clean Air

There is increasing evidence that natural features such as forests and individual trees can filter certain types of air pollutants such as Particulate Matters (PM) which can have negative effects on people's health.

2. Thriving Plants and wildlife

PAPAGS already play a significant part in providing habitats for species, and could provide the backbone to Nature Recovery Networks in urban areas.

There are also significant opportunities for them to contribute to wildflower recovery areas which would make it easier to visit flower rich meadows, grasslands and other wildlife habitats close to their homes. This in turn would contribute to the current Pollinators Policy.

3. Climate Change and Reduced Flooding/Increased Water Absorption

In a recent report the Committee for Climate Change (July 2019) states that:

“Urban greenspace, which has a host of benefits for reducing flood and heat risks, continues to decline, from 63% in 2001 to 55% in 2018.”

Publicly Accessible Parks and Green Spaces are a critically important part of Urban Greenspace.

4. Health and Well-being benefits

The 25 Year Plan acknowledges the benefits that parks and green spaces can bring to our mental health and well-being (Chapter 3).

Additionally, the addition of the duty would positively affect the Government’s contribution to the UN Sustainable Development goals, such as those related to Good Health and Well-being; Sustainable Cities and Life on Land.

Finally, we note that in the 25 Year Plan there is the Commitment, under “Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment”, that

“Making sure that there is high quality, accessible, natural spaces close to where people live and work, particularly in urban areas, and encouraging more people to spend time in them to benefit their health and well-being”

We believe that the legal duty above will make a very significant difference to the ability of public bodies and others to contribute to that commitment.

Taking forward the opportunity

As a group of volunteers who spend significant amounts of time and energy to support our parks and green spaces, we have a good understanding of what makes a successful park/green space.

We recommend the best way forward with delivering the duty would be to:

- Require Public Bodies to ring fence part of their financial budgets each year, or for a five year period, so that the agreed standards for good PAPAGS can be met.
- Ensure all PAPAGS related bidding opportunities from Government and other sources include an element of maintenance for a set period of time, in addition to delivering improvements/ new infrastructure
- Public Bodies to be able to raise funds, with community group support, directly from other non-government sources such as charities and trusts, without having to set up arms-length organisations.

Most importantly Public Bodies need to be provided with additional funding from Central Government which would ensure that duty becomes the positive and valuable measure that it needs to be.

This letter has been copied to the following people and organisations:

- Cllr Asher Craig, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Parks, Bristol City Council.
- Richard Fletcher, Head of Parks, Bristol City Council
- Kerry McCarthy MP, Darren Jones MP, Karin Smyth MP and Thangam Debbonaire MP
- West of England Nature Partnership
- National Federation for Parks and Green Spaces
- Open Spaces Society
- Fields in Trust
- Bristol Parks Forum members

We look forward to your reply.

Reply from Cllr Asher Craig 21st July 2019

Thank you for sharing the contents of your letter to the SoS.

Our administration supports the call that the provision of parks should become a statutory service for councils. As you have highlighted, Bristol City Council has seen its budget for Parks & Green Spaces reduced from just over £6million in 2010 to just over £2million in 2019. The message from communities has been consistent and clear over the years, they are not satisfied with the current state of play. Government has failed to provide us with the tools, funding and statutory powers to protect our PaGS and this needs to be reversed.

The Labour Party has set out clearly its ambitions for changing the way our fundamental asset is used, owned and governed. We are proposing reforms to the Land Compensation Act 1961 which will make it easier for councils to create new parks and urban green spaces.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Bristol Parks Forum and indeed all the volunteers who work tirelessly alongside our parks staff to help maintain and protect the City's vast portfolio of green spaces in what continues to be a very challenging environment.

Reply from Ministerial Contact Unit

Sent: Wednesday, August 14, 2019 12:15 PM

Subject: Environment Bill, Parks and Green Spaces - TO2019/15587

Dear Mr Wyatt,

Thank you for your email of 19 July to the Secretary of State on behalf of the Bristol Parks Forum about the Environment Bill, parks and green spaces. I have been asked to reply.

As I am sure you are aware, the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 places a duty on public authorities to have regard to biodiversity in the exercise of their functions. We agree that further action can be taken to make sure that public authorities take steps to integrate biodiversity into their decision making. We are actively considering how we work with public authorities to focus their efforts on identifying opportunities to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

The Government will bring forward the first Environment Bill in over 20 years, which will put our flagship 25 Year Environment Plan (25 YEP) into law. The Environment Bill will also include ambitious legislative measures to take direct action to address the biggest environmental priorities of our age: air quality, nature recovery, waste and resource efficiency, and water resource management. Further detail of what it will contain was set out in a policy statement published in July. This includes a new statutory requirement for Local Nature Recovery Strategies which will help to map out important habitats and opportunities for the local environment to be improved.

The 25 YEP, published in January 2018, aims to hand over our planet to the next generation in a better condition than when we inherited it. It uses natural capital as the underpinning framework in order to drive a far more integrated approach to managing the environment than has been the case in the past. The 25 YEP clearly states that there is good evidence that the natural environment plays an important role in supporting people's health and wellbeing and that spending time in the natural environment can improve our mental health and feelings of wellbeing.

The Government has committed to actions that seek to help people improve health and wellbeing by using green spaces. Evidence shows that urban greenspace is unequally distributed. The provision of more and better quality green infrastructure, including urban trees, will make towns and cities attractive places to live and work, and bring about key long-term improvements in people's health. We want to encourage more investment, in part by doing a better job of explaining what 'good' green infrastructure actually looks like. We are doing this by defining a

framework of standards in close consultation with stakeholders, including the Parks Action Group.

Last November, Natural England commenced a project to develop a framework of green infrastructure standards, ensuring that new developments include accessible green spaces and that any area with little or no green space can be improved for the benefit of the community. A cross-Government steering group was established to oversee development of the framework, led by Defra and Natural England, with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the Department for Transport, the Forestry Commission, the Environment Agency and Public Health England, to provide insights from policy and practice.

The new framework of standards will promote common understanding of what 'good' green infrastructure is, and the attributes that are needed at a range of scales (from regional to neighbourhood) to deliver different outcomes such as health and wellbeing, ecological networks, green walking and cycling routes and sustainable urban drainage.

The standards will provide the 'level playing field' desired by developers, when adopted into Local Plans, by clarifying the principles and processes that underpin the planning and delivery of good green infrastructure provision within new urban extensions. They will assist local authorities in their audits of green infrastructure and local greenspace, promote local use of existing green infrastructure standards and support a strategic approach to planning green infrastructure and accessible green space provision.

In addition to our work on green infrastructure, in February the Government announced a £13 million package of funding for parks. This included £9.7 million for local authorities to continue to maintain and develop good quality, accessible parks and green spaces. The funding will enable principal local authorities to undertake remedial work and renovation to bring parks that have fallen into disuse and disrepair back into community use, and to enhance the green spaces available to local communities. It will ensure local authorities are able to target funds to those parks where there is the greatest need for support.

A further £2.75 million has been committed to support the Pocket Parks Plus programme, launched in December 2018. The additional funding is providing support for hundreds of community-led projects, to develop new parks, but critically also to renovate existing parks that have fallen into disuse or disrepair. Applications closed on 25 January and payments were allocated to successful applicants on 18 March.

The Government invested a further £1.2 million into the National Trust and The National Lottery Heritage Fund's Future Parks Accelerator initiative. This will expand the programme and the number of areas to test and pilot new models of parks estate management, capturing learning and sharing knowledge for the benefit of the wider parks sector. This latest funding will support bold proposals to help renovate and restore existing parks and create new vibrant, safe green spaces for our communities.

You mention in your email that when referring to greenspace, a definition of 'good' could be based on the Green Flag Award. We are already encouraging local authorities to adopt the

highest quality standards in parks through these awards which, owned by MHCLG and operated under licence by Keep Britain Tidy, provide a recognised accreditation setting aspirational standards for parks and green spaces across the UK. The Green Flag licence was extended for a further five years in September 2017 and runs until 2022. In the UK, 1,759 green flags were awarded in 2018/19 and we continue to work with the parks sector, local authorities and community groups to increase participation in the scheme.

Through this support, this Government reaffirmed its commitment to creating great places to live and work and ensures communities can enjoy the benefits parks and green spaces bring to local life, offering valuable spaces for communities to get together, to socialise and to exercise and play.

Yours sincerely,

Andy Cartmell

Ministerial Contact Unit