



Bristol Parks Forum

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

Statement to Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission

24th February 2017

Parks and Green Spaces – moving towards cost neutral

from Bristol Parks Forum Committee

Key Points

- Parks and Green Spaces are one of Bristol's key attractions they need to be treated as a vital asset, not as a burdensome cost liability;
- Further cuts to the service on the ground will lead to a spiral of decline for our parks;
- Some additional funding is possible, but nowhere near the £4m needed to achieve a cost neutral parks service;
- Bristol's Parks and Green Spaces strategy needs to lead the way in including public and preventative health, the local economy, climate change, air quality and biodiversity contributions within it, in line with CLG committee recommendations;
- The appointment of a Head of Parks now needs to be progressed as a matter of urgency.

Introduction

This statement expands on our earlier statements to Cabinet and Full Council.

The context is Bristol City Council's intention that:

'We want to work towards making the cost of running our Parks Service cost neutral to the council. There will be a robust exploration of the options available resulting in a detailed plan for the long-term future. This might include looking at commercial business models, increasing our income and working with communities.'

In order to make parks 'cost neutral' the net budget needs to be reduced by some £4m.

We welcome the fact that the Council is intending to involve the Parks Forum in the 'robust exploration' and on our part we are approaching it with an open mind. However, we remain of the view that managing the existing parks on a cost neutral basis is totally unrealistic and undeliverable.

Having reviewed the report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, and the evidence submitted to the Inquiry, we have not changed our view. We were disappointed to hear Cllr Asher Craig repeat the aim of achieving a cost neutral parks budget by 2020 when she spoke at the Full Council meeting on Tuesday.

Cllr Craig had previously indicated to us that if the review over the next few months fails to find sufficient alternative income sources then the cuts proposed for 2018/19 & 2019/20 would be reviewed to ensure that the Parks Service continues to be viable.

If the plans are not changed then the Council will be adopting a Medium Term Financial Plan that will simply not be achievable. We hope that the Council has learnt from the mistakes of the past and will listen when it is told that these savings cannot be achieved.

Reducing the budget requires reductions in spending or an increase in income, we set out below some of these issues that need to be addressed.

Reducing Spending

Bristol Parks have suffered a series of cuts in past years. In our view the service is currently only just coping with carrying out core maintenance tasks. There is no slack in the system to deal with events such as mechanical breakdown or severe weather disrupting grass cutting rounds. If staff are off sick bins don't get emptied. Things that are broken might get fixed (or removed) but there is little or no attention to the non-urgent tasks that make a park look cared for, such as keeping safety surfaces in play areas clear of moss or path edges clear of weeds.

It is clear to us that any further cuts to front line staff without any other action being taken will have a noticeable effect on the service provided by Bristol Parks. There will be more reports of bins not being emptied, grass not being cut and benches etc. not being repaired. There will be a spiral of decline in our parks. If they do not appear well maintained and welcoming people will not visit, anti-social behaviour and vandalism will increase.

There are three options that we have heard suggested as ways of reducing the impact of reduced spending:

i) Increase volunteer time working in parks

Volunteering in parks is good for the park and good for those volunteering. Getting exercise while improving your health (both physical & mental) is good for everyone and is encouraged by the NHS – see

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/volunteering/Pages/Volunteeringhome.aspx

The ParkWork scheme developed by the Parks Forum was one of only 11 schemes nationally to be supported by the Nesta Rethinking Parks programme. It has been adapted to give more volunteering opportunities and we hope that this will encourage more people to get involved.

There is undoubtedly more that could be done by volunteers, but in our view it should be seen as the icing on the cake not a method for carrying out core maintenance tasks. The major costs in maintaining our parks is cutting grass and emptying bins, these cannot realistically be done by volunteers.

Other points to consider are the fact that volunteers need to be managed and trained - this costs money. Any scheme to attract volunteers to do more in parks would also be in competition with other organisations such as Avon Wildlife Trust & TCV. There is a limited pool of people who have free time and are willing to spend it helping look after their park.

Attracting people to create new flower or food growing beds or help with wildlife habitat management for example is possible, but day to day maintenance is more difficult if not impossible.

It might be possible to persuade some groups to adopt some small areas of parks or even the entirety of some smaller parks, but we see the scope for this as very limited and not enough to be significant in terms of the budget. There would also still have to be some oversight by BCC to ensure that the areas remained safe.

ii) Transfer responsibility for bin emptying to Bristol Waste.

We can see some merit in this, especially as most parks bins are now emptied by dedicated teams rather than park keepers as part of their general duties. We would want to be assured that any savings were kept within the parks budget and that Parks wouldn't lose any valuable staff who do empty bins as well as other jobs. Collection of green waste from Parks would also need review.

iii) Stop maintaining some parks

It has been suggested that Parks could simply stop maintaining some lesser used parks. We could not support this unless it was clearly seen to have local community support and did not reduce provision below the standards set by the Parks & Green Spaces Strategy. There would also be a risk that if sites were abandoned completely then anti-social behaviour and fly-tipping might result in increased costs to the Council as the land owner which outweigh any cost saving.

There might be some further scope in reducing the number of grass cuts in some areas, but this is something that Parks have already been doing. Reducing the number of cuts beyond a certain point does not reduce costs – areas managed as meadows and cut once a year need the cuttings collected to avoid fire risk from cut dry grass, this can cost more than cutting the grass say six times during the year and in any case hay cuts are not always feasible due to restricted access etc.

Increasing Income

This appears to be seen as the way most of the budget cuts are to be achieved. This means finding a reliable regular income of around £4,000,000 per year over and above that already being received.

Some of the ideas:

i) More events in parks

There is some scope for this, but licencing costs etc mean that in reality it is only very large events that will bring significant income.

We have heard a figure of £70k mentioned as the income from an event such as the Massive Attack concert held on the Downs last year; this is the most that could be expected - an average for even large events is probably under £40k. It seems unlikely that Bristol could host more than one such event in any weekend and there are already four or five large scale concerts held in parks each year. From the limited number of weekends available (say 20 May to September) it is also necessary to discount those with other events & festivals such as the Harbour Festival, Pride, Balloon Fiesta, Bristol half Marathon etc. etc.

We think getting another £250k per year would be a very good result; but you would not be able to rely on that every year and in the longer term the Arena might reduce demand for outdoor concerts. Raising fees may also force organisers out of Bristol.

Events also come at a cost to park users, the setup necessary for large ticketed events means large areas of parks being fenced off, often for at least a week before and after the event itself. If the use of parks for events is to be increased then we would want the Council to issue clear guidance on what was expected. Organisers must minimise the period they occupy a park, with financial penalties rising quickly if they don't meet agreed time scales.

There also needs to be much more transparency, communities will support a certain level of events if they can see that the money is benefitting parks locally as well as city wide. There needs to be a commitment that increased income is not used as an excuse to cut the budget further the next year, we would like to see at least a proportion of the income put into a separate fund that park groups can access. There should be regular reports detailing the income received, this does not need to show the fees charged for individual events, perhaps a quarterly statement of the fees received city wide.

ii) More fundraising by Park Groups

Park groups have been successful in raising money from the Big Lottery and other grant giving bodies for capital improvements, such as new play areas. But it is close to impossible to win grant funding for day to day maintenance (to support the revenue budget) and of course each new play area adds to Parks maintenance responsibilities.

iii) More cafés & food concessions

Again there is some scope for this, but it is limited. Park cafés are not great money making enterprises, the unpredictable British weather makes it very difficult to run them efficiently, this is reflected in the rent that operators are able to pay. We cannot see that there are sufficient sites for this to make any significant budget contribution.

iv) Better use of buildings & other assets

Some sites, such as the depot site in Castle Park could be developed commercially after significant capital investment. Again there would need to be transparency to ensure that the money did in fact come into the parks budget.

v) Sponsorship

We would not object to this provided any associated advertising was not dominant but again we think the scope is limited.

iv) New Activities

Cllr Craig has suggested 'introducing activities within parks like GoApe, glamping, camping opportunities'. We would not object to these in principle provided suitable sites could be found where they would not significantly impact on residents' use of their local park. There would need to be discussion as to whether these were to be managed by BCC or outsourced.

One Portfolio

The CLG Committee report stated: 'We believe that local authorities should consider their parks to be part of one portfolio, rather than as disparate individual sites.'

We agree with that statement. Cllr Craig has been quoted as saying that 15 parks in Bristol are 'commercially viable', though we have seen no evidence behind this statement, nor the

list of parks. We would not want to see Bristol's parks divided up into those that have their own funding and the rest that struggle on a much reduced Council budget.

Parks and Green Space Strategy

The CLG Committee stated that local authorities should work with Health and Wellbeing Boards to prepare and publish parks and green space strategies that would “include the amenity and leisure value of parks and green spaces, and how they will be managed to maximise their contributions to broader local authority responsibilities and agendas—for example public health and preventative health, the local economy, climate change and flood risk mitigation, air quality, and biodiversity”

Bristol should take the lead on producing such a strategy (and seek funding from the Government to do so) to potentially unlock further funding streams.

Forming a Trust

We are open to options such as transferring Bristol's parks to a Trust. But trustees would need to be sure that sufficient funding was in place for the Trust to be viable in the long term. This would need a funding agreement with BCC or a large endowment of capital and/or land that the Trust could use to generate funding. This is the model used in Milton Keynes, where the Trust was given a large portfolio of commercial land when the city of Milton Keynes was established.

Immediate Actions Required

We consider it vital that the vacant Head of Parks post is filled as soon as possible to ensure that the parks team is managed effectively and that there is a clear line of responsibility to ensure that standards are maintained.

The review over the next few months will require input from someone with knowledge and experience of fund raising and commercial activities within a green space environment and who will also understand horticultural impacts. We are not aware of anyone being appointed to this role.

In conclusion we repeat our view that there is no magic wand. Whatever model is used core funding for City parks needs to come from the Local Authority.

Bristol Parks Forum Committee

Mark Logan (Chair), Sam Thomson (Vice Chair), Rob Acton-Campbell (Secretary)

Derek Hawkins (Treasurer), Hugh Holden, Fraser Bridgeford, Sian Parry

For Bristol Parks Forum

www.bristolparksforum.org.uk

info@bristolparksforum.org.uk

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