



**Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping a moment and think of it.**

# **Report of the Event**

## **“Making Our Futures”**

### **History, Value, Future and Stewardship of Bristol’s Open Spaces**

#### **A. Executive Summary**

In September 2023, 50 active citizens convened to help initiate the practical processes that we need in order to secure the benefits of open spaces for future generations.

The attendees were people experienced in many walks of life, from dog walker to activist to public sector managers to artists to traditional professionals to wildlife lovers and many others among them. Most have or had taken leadership and innovative roles in one or more aspects of Bristol’s life. That evening they had the opportunity to leave any representational responsibilities behind, work and learn with each other and contribute to thinking through some truly pernicious issues in a creative, productive, safe-to-be-bold moment.

The discussion was informed by inputs offering personal, historical and future scanning perspectives, as well as the huge range of skills, lived and practical experience the room. We were all there to start securing a “generational legacy” – supporting a growing and diverse population for instance: climate change mitigation, energy generation, social spaces, healthy, active lives and communities, play and sport development, biodiversity and wildlife corridors.

## B. Outcomes

Practical opportunities and proposals were offered at the operational, sector, cross-sector and strategic levels including exploring and developing:

- 1) better (e.g. more effective, smart, repeatable) ways of assessing long term community value, health and ecological benefits and securing them over the long term.
- 2) more sustained support for voluntary (e.g. “Friends of Parks”) groups, wildlife corridors, improved planting regimes, foods production, sports play and community facilities.
- 3) better understanding of the nature of “the Bristol estate” of open land public, entrusted, commercial, etc. and how those elements link up with other, share strategic opportunities and challenges and can enhance the outcomes of 1)
- 4) better communication between bodies interested in how our parks and open spaces work and could be developed (a standing facilitated network including those people attending this session and their organisations?)
- 5) an intense and urgent exploration of alternative models of stewardship and resourcing our parks and valued open spaces (including trust/endowment model of ownership at macro or local levels for wider and inclusive public benefit?).

## C. Recommendations for further action

- I. The organising parties set up formal liaison with BCC as soon as possible to support the “Big Conversation” that Bristol needs to secure the value, future and Stewardship of our Open Spaces”.
- II. Given the success of this event in bringing together stakeholders and challenges: that the local RSA Fellowship, “Your Park, Bristol and Bath” and The Schumacher Institute continue to be engaged in this area of work as a team, bringing in skills and connections, and possibly resources, through their different attributes thus helping all parties maintain focus and momentum.
- III. Convene a facilitated network as per outcome 4 above, which may *inter alia* help inform outcomes 1-3, involve an even wider range of stakeholders (for instance play and built environment interests) and look deeper into difficult practical issues (for instance, safety, engaging with developers and investors) and help set up a round table to explore outcome 5).

## D. The issues

With the population of major cities (including Bristol) increasing by up to a third from millennium levels, the pressure on our urban centres is intense. However, planning for and securing public benefit from open spaces are usually talked about in separate channels e.g. parks, health, statutory and master planning, play, wildlife, flood prevention, sport, etc. Within each of these “silos” networks, business models, lobbies etc. are developed to respond to opportunities and challenges from the perspective of particular interest groups, which is fine, except rarely do we recognise the complexities of “Green Infrastructure” and assess the “system” as a whole.

There are repeated crises and sometimes quite negative communications around this vital aspect of our lives and our futures. Both “Bristol Parks Forum” and “Your Park Bristol and Bath”, and leaders within the City Council, have recently been advocating a “Big Conversation” (or similar terms) to open up wider engagement and to step away from the



## ii. Value expressed in case studies

Sarah Laking, the Health and Community Lead of the “Your Park” team presented three case studies, based on lived experience, of the mental and physical benefits of being in green spaces and park life: these included mood changing, physical activity, social interactions, observation. Some excerpts below:

*“The feeling of being able to breathe again and feeling calmer is a common side effect of being in nature. Through our green care sessions in the parks, we aim to promote a sense of peace and calm for participants. We have one participant who attends our green social prescribing programme, Roots to Wellbeing. When he first attended the sessions, he was struggling to sleep due to anxiety, he was suffering from loneliness and he was suffering from a lot of complex physical health problems. By attending the sessions he reports improved sleep, he has made friends through the group and they have shared on things that helped them with joint pain. He has also has seen an overall decrease in his blood pressure and he is able often stressed when taking his blood pressure, but his blood pressure dropped when a nurse asked him to imagine a peaceful place and he brought his mind back to our sessions in the park.*

*Another person who’s story I want to share is of a lady, who before attending our Roots to Wellbeing activities had not been able to leave the house for anything other than hospital appointments in the previous three years. She had always struggled with mental health difficulties which she used to cope with through physical exercise but had recently found herself wheelchair bound. She has tried previous groups but struggled to get anything out of them and struggled around other people. During our sessions, she re-discovered her connection to nature, and to others and found hope by attending our weekly sessions in the park. After a little while, she found confidence to practice walking during the sessions. She is now an active member of a friends of group and a valued member of her community.*

*There are others who have found friends, gained confidence, and even discovered a new career path by attending our activities in the park. Even for those who experience little changes, noticing the beauty of a spider’s web rather than trampling the spider out of fear or feeling useful and proud after doing a bit of litter picking. All these little moments of connection, lead to improvements in quality of life, and these are all due to our parks.”*

During the development process of this event the organisers received other input regarding the value of parks and open spaces, especially from Health and Parks professionals, and some input from sport, play and nature, employment, skills, community development, planning, development and flood prevention points of view. (The recently published draft strategy for parks demonstrates a sense of value integration by referring to various Bristol City Council policies and objectives and the “one city approach” of the present administration).

Whatever the political make-up of our public bodies in the future, it is clear that exploring and articulating this kind of complex and multi-faceted sense of value will be important to policy and practice in the future. **A recommendation is to develop on these estimates of value to bring forward an even clearer perspective of the importance of our parks and open spaces, and the impact of losing this value, or not delivering it effectively for generations after generation.**

### iii. Contexts

For this section we wanted to give an idea of the “gubbins” within the parks and open spaces agendas. Nothing is a “given” everything we have had a story, purpose, sponsors, characteristics of which have shaped them and their neighbourhoods together, and which have changed over time. So, we tested out both diachronic (referencing over history) and synchronic (exploring the situation now) points of entry (like cutting a cake in different ways to understand it more, if not perfectly).

### iv. Historical

Local historian Eugene Byrne related histories of parks to contemporary issues, giving some tangible examples of how parks were “made to be” i.e. there is nothing essentially new about our present concerns nor antiquarian and exotic about what happened in the past. His talk was illustrated by a wonderful array of slides illustrating and illuminating the background to our rich green (and blue) estate.

Eugene also drew our attention to how a society’s general mores affect the way we value or present parks and open spaces, that not all these mores are shared (in performance, at least if not in noble statement). By acknowledging that while there may be “acceptable and designed for” (not Eugene’s words) ways of using parks (such as nature conservation, play heritage landscape etc.), we should also notice how they are actually used and the more informal value of these spaces which are both central and liminal to many lives and communities.

**Another Recommendation would be to research further into the way in which parks actually are used, and have been, using secondary sources, and, if resources are available, then field research that does not necessarily prioritise formal mores – such as narrative or lived experience methodologies. This can be included in the way we formally assess value over time – to create a more meaningful approach to stewardship activities, that are not just target driven.**

### v. Contemporary stewardship issues and options

Ted Fowler gave a necessarily partial overview of the complex strategic and policy context which the stewardship and development of parks and open spaces are in now. The primary policy context is that virtually all activities under this general heading are not statutory responsibilities for any public body, so do not have to happen and therefore difficult to prioritise when other statutory priorities are struggling for resources etc. This in the context of the general diminution of tax raising, commissioning and regulatory powers for local government in comparison, for instance with the level of responsibility and authority (however distributed and delegated) that we knew in the mid last century.

- Bristol covers an area of 11,000 hectares (27,000 acres), the Bristol City Council (BCC) estate covers 4,747 hectares of that (12,000 acres), the parks estate covers 2,850 hectares (over 7,000 acres) of the BCC estate. This equates to 60% of the BCC estate or 25% of Bristol.
- The Parks and Green Spaces service at BCC has been working to a declining budget since 2010. In 2010 the parks service received circa £7.5m support through the general fund. In 2023/24 financial year the service received £1.6m from the general fund. To mitigate the budget pressures the service has introduced a series of income streams which goes to

directly support the parks and green spaces service which help to mitigate the budget pressures. Meanwhile the design, development and outreach functions associated with BCCs stewardship of parks and open spaces have minimalised.

- Population growth estimates vary widely but they are unlikely to be less than 80-100k new homes in the Bristol area by 2030 – a stress on open space and an opportunity to secure more for the wider public!
- The above covers BCC estate, there is a lot of other open space under private or trust stewardship, **researching this wider/the aggregate blue green infrastructure estate is another recommendation.**
- There are a number of stakeholder groups that aim to impact on the management and future of our open spaces: developers, sport, local history, wildlife, civic amenity, schools, parent, older people, cyclists, drainage and flood prevention, trees, play, and planners to mention a few. These stakeholders rarely meet – across zones of interest, and if they do it is responsive to crises rather than pro-actively. They often seem to operate in parallel and in ignorance of each other, or see each other only as competitors. This is also very demanding on individuals who link across lobbies. **Developing a platform where common interests can be worked through in practical ways might be another achievable goal.**
- Nationally and locally, there are a number of more-or-less independent bodies involved in park management most of them appear to be analogous to, for instance, the Bristol Museum Trust, i.e. “spin outs” from public sector ownership into charitable or CIC structures, some of which may have, or will, merge with other localised spin outs (similarly to City Academies over recent years). Most of these are still very dependent on Local Government service agreements, commercial income raised from the open spaces themselves (such as parking, cafes and plant sales, energy generation), and charitable funding. Usually these involve competing with other good causes, and often each other, for funds from local and national sources. These spin outs do demonstrate different approaches and business plans for independence.
- To inspire us to be open to alternative resourcing models, attendees watched a short film from Milton Keynes which outlined the way in which the Development Corporation endowed a Trust to look after parks and open spaces – through ring fenced commercial income. This enabled parks budgets to be separate from UK Government public spending regulations and independent of local authority challenges (although still able to work closely with local government and other partners. and is actually doing rather well financially and appears to be delivering a range of progressive benefits to the cities’ communities: <https://www.theparkstrust.com/our-work/our-story/>

#### **Milton Keynes Parks Trust: Our Story - About The Parks Trust**

Established as an independent charity in 1992, The Parks Trust expertly cares for over 6,000 acres of beautiful and inspirational green space in Milton Keynes including parks, ancient woodlands, lakes, river valleys and 80 miles of landscaped areas along the city’s grid roads.

In most towns and cities, parkland is owned by the local authority but Milton Keynes’ founders were pioneers and decided to do things differently. Their vision was to create a



new town where the parkland and landscapes would be protected forever by a charity that was separate from local government. Doing so would ensure that, as the new town grew, its green spaces would never be compromised or have to fight for funding.

That all became a reality when The Parks Trust was set up in 1992. The new charity was given a 999-year lease on a total of 4,500 acres of Milton Keynes and an endowment of property valued at £20m. Returns on these carefully-managed investments generate the primary source of income required to fund the charity's wide-ranging work today and forever.

Over 100 staff and 240 volunteers deliver the essential work of The Parks Trust. In addition to landscaping and maintenance tasks, that also includes providing valuable recreation and leisure facilities, connecting communities at over 500 outdoor events each year and advancing public education around the wildlife, biodiversity and the environment.

As Milton Keynes grows, so does The Parks Trust. Each year, the charity takes on new green spaces and endowments from developers to cover costs in perpetuity. This approach ensures that all new areas of the city benefit from the same quality of inspiring, connected landscape and Milton Keynes remains a great place to live, work and play.

**Researching into and developing on different models 'locally and from elsewhere', to scale and with a long-term perspective, would also be a "stretch" but achievable goal. To be effective, this process would need the full engagement of Bristol City Council and other significant local stakeholders, including media partners, residents and employers as potential direct and indirect investors as well as beneficiaries.**

#### **vi. Complexity and systems solutions**

- Lilas Privateer, of the Schumacher Institute, presented an urban anthropology perspective - as the act of uncovering the hidden stories, cultures, and connections that thrive within the bustling heart of our cities, illuminating the rich tapestry of urban life and emphasized its pivotal role in urban experience and planning. She invited the audience to explore the concept of displacement through the diverse observers' perspectives and encouraged a fresh examination of what seems familiar to us, viewing it through new lenses to gain fresh insights into urban dynamics and development.

#### **vii. Plenary – Sensing what to do next**

- With this more flexible framework in mind and taking on board the contextual and other inputs that attendees have accessed throughout the event and each other, we wanted to ensure that participants have a first chance to reflect and contribute their ideas to help shape the future of our parks and their stewardship. Attendees were encouraged to meet up in groups of 4 and use their imagination to consider the following "what if" questions:
  - “what if using Bristol's open spaces was integrated into every school curriculum?”
  - “what if every urban development across the city had a new quality green areas?”
  - “what if there were enough funds for each park in Bristol to flourish for generations?”
  - “what if we redesigned all parks to respond to the climate emergency?”

“what if all the parks were put into commercial interest to ensure good maintenance?”

“what if every green space was handed over to its local community/ies?”

"what if we could ensure open spaces continue to provide benefits for people & wildlife?"

And then to discuss:

- Why is this important? what needs does it address?
- What could be done to progress this?
- What resources, people, networks could be involved?

Attendees reported back to the final plenary, each with a key point from their broad range of responses and ideas. What follows is a brief distillation of both rough notes of the plenary feedback and the hand written sheets that each group returned to the organisers. The remaining working documents are visible in the appendices to this report and they pay tribute to the wide range of attendees and responses at both strategic and operational level.

The value of parks’ “Friends” groups in establishing a community who help look after, interpret and develop neighbourhood green spaces (with play equipment, new planting, keeping them clean and tidy, building up a sense of community responsibility) as well as some of the more entrepreneurial initiatives (such as the Ardagh in Horfield Common and Redcatch Community Garden were mentioned). **They need consistent support, including a range of technical aid and investment.**

The value of different aspects of stewardship were highlighted: e.g. looking after trees; making sure parks are safe and accessible for all including children and teens and older adults; developing and managing inclusive sporting activities (formal and informal); enhancing entrepreneurial freedoms for parks groups; deeper focus on, for instance green corridors – less grand or formal open spaces.

The importance of making sure that parks are valuable to all citizens e.g. encouraging imaginative use, more creative media coverage, promoting access and safe and welcoming spaces for people to enjoy; investing in Park Rangers and other staff who can stimulate positive activities and maintain oversight. **Perhaps we need to understand how parks are informally prioritised, i.e. what makes a good park, back to the value issue.**

We commented on the opportunity to recognise the poetry and resonance inherent in our experience of places.

We also noted that also that front gardens and verges add to the quality of the urban environment and (the other way round for many people) parks are the closest they have to a garden space, for example flat residents.

Can we create an endowment with the support of wealthy commercial supporters perhaps local carbon offsetting rather than planting trees etc., elsewhere? Also, a development levy?



## G. Summing Up

The final contribution was made by Mrs Peaches Golding OBE CStJ His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant for Bristol:

*"I am encouraged by the breadth of individuals, institutions and constituencies that value our open spaces for what they give us in social, economic, environmental and other terms. Likewise, I am keen for local people to own and invest in their locality for this generation and those to come. Finally, I do believe The King, a strong environmental steward, is always keen to be made aware of novel solutions to everyday opportunities. I think we have an opportunity to do something and that we must be brave enough to start somewhere rather than wait for perfection."*

## H. What next?

This was a one-off event with very limited resources. We are very aware that some voices and interests were not present – there was less awareness of sports, play, food growing and cultural events, for instance, as well as limited communication of specific needs of disabled people, those of diverse backgrounds (including differentiation of young people, people with large families, single older people). We hope that future conversations will take these into deep consideration.

Discussions are already in progress with practitioner and academic bodies to pick up on recommendation 4) – better communication e.g. a standing facilitated network, including those who attended and would have like to (at least 20 others). This might provide oversight for recommendations 1-3) and a launch-pad for recommendation 5): "an intense and urgent exploration of alternative models of stewardship (including trust/endowment model of ownership at macro or local levels for wider and inclusive public benefit?)."

The common opinion at the session was that little substantial progress can be made on recommendation 5) – but in reality also with the others, without the active engagement of Bristol City Council at political and officer level, so some work may have to wait until after the elections and the recent draft Parks and Open Spaces Strategy is published and the Local Plan finalised (to help determine development opportunities and threats to the existing and future public realm).

However there does seem to be the opportunity to scope out the 5<sup>th</sup> recommendation and the Fellowship of the RSA will be happy to convene that discussion, perhaps in the form of a 'Round Table'. The Milton Keynes Park Trust are happy to provide input and there are other bodies and individuals with immense experience that we could bring in to help our City's Open Spaces if we show willing in tangible ways to support such a process. Some known significant "influencers" of public policy (and probably some less visible ones) were among the attendees of this event, all would have been aware of the challenges this agenda might bring. A paper attached to this report by Daniel Black et al., assesses the barriers preventing healthy urban development in the UK by talking directly with a wide range of decision makers. Support for good practice is available in many places as well: see the parliamentary evidence document which straddles a range of policy concerns, also NESTA have published a set of essays and the Town & Country Planning Association sponsored [Green Infrastructure Partnership](#) has a lot of resources – largely aimed at Local Government audiences.

## I. Appendices

[Manson's Bristol Miscellany — Bristol Books CIC](#) Chapter: “The Third Unhealthiest City in England: Parks & Open Spaces”

[mk-inspirational-landscapes-now-forever.pdf \(theparkstrust.com\)](#)

[Rethinking Parks: Visions to shape the future of parks | Nesta](#)

[Overcoming Systemic Barriers Preventing Healthy Urban Development in the UK: Main Findings from Interviewing Senior Decision-Makers During a 3-Year Planetary Health Pilot | Journal of Urban Health \(springer.com\)](#)

[Revaluating Parks and Green Spaces | Fields in Trust](#)

### **Delivery Partnership**

**The RSA** is the royal society for the encouragement of arts, manufactures and commerce. Where world-leading ideas are turned into world-changing actions. Our vision is a world where everyone can fulfil their potential and contribute to more resilient, rebalanced and regenerative futures. The RSA has been at the forefront of significant social impact since 1754. Our proven change process, rigorous research, innovative ideas platforms and unique global network of changemakers, work collectively to enable people, places and the planet to flourish in harmony. <https://www.thersa.org/>

**Your Park** is an independent charity empowering communities through inclusive, nature-rich and engaging park activities. Your Park Bristol and Bath enables everybody to benefit from green spaces because they are vital to our health, wellbeing and quality of life:

- Championing, enabling and consulting local people to improve access to parks, so that everyone can feel safe, enjoy and benefit from parks and green spaces.
- Improving mental health and wellbeing of communities through initiatives that provide outdoor wellbeing activities for people in need.
- Creating, enhancing and maintaining natural habitats with local communities, supporting nature's recovery and contributing to the Ecological Emergency Action Plans.

<https://yourpark.org.uk/>

**The Schumacher Institute** is a diverse network of fellows and associates dedicated to delivering innovative systems solutions to the world's most pressing problems through research, training, events and consultancy. Evidence shows that dominant economic, social and political systems are not working – for the majority of people, and certainly not for the planet. The Schumacher Institute seeks to find more sustainable options to enable all species to flourish while protecting and conserving our environment for current and future generations.

<https://schumacherinstitute.org.uk/>

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