

## **CLG Select Committee Report on Public Parks**

### **Purpose**

For discussion and direction

### **Summary**

The CLG select committee has published a [report](#) about the state of public parks. The report includes a number of recommendations for the LGA, councils, and central government.

This board report outlines those recommendations and a suggested response.

### **Recommendation**

For discussion and direction.

### **Action**

Officers to progress as directed.

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## **CLG Select Committee Report on Public Parks**

### **Background**

1. The Communities and Local Government Committee launches an inquiry into public parks to examine the impact of reduced local authority budgets on these open spaces and consider concerns that their existence is under threat.
2. The Committee invited submission of written evidence to its website on the following issues:
  - 2.1 Who uses parks and open spaces, how often and for what;
  - 2.2 The contribution of parks to the health and well-being of communities;
  - 2.3 The impact of reductions in local authority budgets on parks;
  - 2.4 What the administrative status of parks should be in light of declining local authority resources for non-statutory services;
  - 2.5 How new and existing parks can best be supported;
  - 2.6 What additional or alternative funding is available and what scope is there for local authorities to generate revenue from park users;
  - 2.7 What the advantages and disadvantages are of other management models, such as privatisation, outsourcing or mutualisation.
3. The LGA did not submit written evidence. Although we accept the importance of public parks to communities, this has not been an area where we have been able to allocate resource, and it was felt more appropriate to allow our member councils to directly feed in their experiences. A number of councils did provide evidence, including Newcastle, Birmingham, Sheffield and Rugby councils.
4. The final report was published [here](#) on 11 February 2017 along with a number of recommendations, including some directed specifically at the LGA. The LGA issued a media statement at the time, which is in **Appendix A**, and this was included in the media coverage of the report. Cllr Peter Fleming, Deputy Chairman of the LGA, also appeared on BBC Radio 4's Today Programme this morning to discuss the issue.
5. The report concludes with the statement 'We intend to return to the issue of parks before the end of this Parliament to assess the progress which has been made.'

### **Key facts identified by the report**

6. There are an estimated 27,000 public parks in Britain.
7. Local authorities have no statutory duty to fund and maintain public parks.
8. A 2014 report by the Heritage Lottery Fund found 86 per cent of parks managers had seen cuts to their budgets since 2010.
9. An estimated 2.6bn visits are made to public parks each year.

**Key findings in the report:**

10. Public parks are at a tipping point and face a period of decline with potentially severe consequences unless their vital contribution to areas such as public health, community integration and climate change mitigation is recognised.
11. Parks management budgets have been cut by up to 97 per cent [Newcastle City Council], and the need for parks to compete with other services for funding and planning policy is not giving them enough weight, particularly as a result of pressures to increase housing supply.
12. Councils should publish strategic plans, which recognise the value of parks beyond leisure and recreation and set out how they will be managed to maximise their contribution to wider local authority agendas, such as promoting healthy lifestyles, tackling social exclusion and managing flood risk.
13. The Government should issue guidance to councils to work with Health and Wellbeing Boards and other relevant bodies to publish these joint plans and consider making producing such a strategy a legal requirement if the guidance proves ineffective.
14. Parks should not be made a statutory service, but innovation in management models and funding sources is needed to sustain parks in some council areas. However, parks should remain as
15. Parkrun should be encouraged to contribute volunteer time for parks maintenance or fundraising activities

**Key recommendations from the report:**

16. **Cross-government group:** The Minister, Andrew Percy MP, should establish a cross-government group to work with the LGA to:
  - 16.1. develop models to assess the real value of parks;
  - 16.2. collect data on the number and distribution of accidents in parks;
  - 16.3. issue guidance on governance of parks where this has been transferred from local government oversight;
  - 16.4. issue guidance to councils on working with health and wellbeing boards to publish joint strategies on parks;
  - 16.5. develop and implement options for establishing and supporting national or regional park manager forums in England, learning from the approach taken in Scotland.
17. **Charging:** Local authorities should publish policies which set out when they will and will not charge users for the use of the park, in the context of organised events which may require exclusive use of the park.

18. **New delivery models:** Local authorities should encourage and support the development of friends group forums, and work with them in a coordinated way to ensure that needs are properly assessed, and resources are prioritised and targeted appropriately.
19. The Minister should consider the proposals made by the National Trust and Newcastle City Council for indemnity for local authorities which wish to transfer land to parks trusts, and for the establishment of a public interest test to enable local authorities to overturn restrictive covenants, where such covenants hinder the authority's ability to safeguard public parks.
20. **Planning and strategies:** When preparing or updating their Local Plans, local authorities should take a whole-place approach which recognises the importance of parks and green spaces both to existing and to new communities, in accordance with paragraphs 73 and 76 of the National Planning Policy Framework.
21. The Minister's cross-departmental working group should monitor the preparation and publication of joint parks and green space strategies [by councils], and report annually on progress made, by way of written statements to the House...[If these are ineffective] the Minister should consider legislating to place a statutory duty on local authorities to collaborate with Health and Wellbeing Boards to prepare and publish joint parks and green space strategies.

### **Analysis**

22. The report makes a welcome recognition of the important contribution that parks can make to key objectives on public health and promoting physical activity. Greater recognition of this in government policies and funding will only help councils as they make critical decisions about parks provision.
23. The report also makes a welcome statement on the question of requesting that heavy group users of parks should make a contribution, in cash or in kind, to the upkeep of the park. It is appropriate that councils are transparent about how they determine when these requests are locally appropriate.
24. The Committee's determination that parks should not become a statutory duty is also welcome, enabling councils to retain the greater freedom this allows in determining effective provision.
25. However, the Committee makes a number of recommendations about government guidance, potentially legislating for joint strategies, and collecting new data which could be burdensome. These would all need further discussion to confirm whether they are the right approach or whether alternative solutions could be found.
26. DCLG is responsible for responding to the report and accepting or rejecting the recommendations made within it.
27. The Minister appeared before the Committee to give oral evidence, and committed at that point to the establishment of the cross-government group. DCLG officials have also been in touch to enquire about the collection of health and safety statistics (16.2), so it is likely that both these recommendations will be accepted in principle.

28. In many ways, the report identifies the same issues and makes the same recommendations as we have seen for libraries, museums and archives – particularly around assessing the broader contribution of these services to other policy objectives, and in the development of new governance models.
29. These recommendations could therefore be relatively easily incorporated into the LGA's existing workstreams by, for instance, including some alternative delivery models as case studies on the new cultural hub. Innovation in parks delivery is already featured on the Sports Leadership Essentials Courses through an example provided by Birmingham Council, which has placed parks at the heart of a new approach to promoting physical activity.
30. Proposals to require councils to publish joint strategies would introduce an unnecessary burden, given that councils already make assessments of this impact as part of their planning responsibilities, and the majority are already recognising the value of parks in their work with Health and Wellbeing boards. This good practice could be emphasised by working with public health colleagues to include a parks session in key public health conferences.

### **Next steps**

31. As DCLG is responsible for providing the response to the committee, there is no urgent requirement for an LGA response. However, the LGA expects to be involved in DCLG deliberations over the proposals.
32. To inform these deliberations, members are therefore invited to:
- 32.1. provide an initial reaction to the proposals;
  - 32.2. identify an recommendations that should be particularly supported;
  - 32.3. identify any recommendations where a sector-led approach could provide a more effective solution.
33. We also suggest that the Board writes to Andrew Percy MP seeking a meeting to discuss the findings of the report.

### **Implications for Wales**

34. The report covered England, Wales and Scotland.

### **Financial implications**

35. None at this point in time. The establishment of park manager forums, legislating for park strategies, and collecting health and safety information would all incur costs that should be considered under the new burdens doctrine.

## Appendix A

### LGA Media Statement

1. Responding to a new CLG Committee report about public parks, Cllr Ian Stephens, Chairman of the Local Government Association's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, said:

- 1.1 "Councils understand how important parks are to residents and the value they have in promoting health and fitness, local heritage, public art, festivals and wildlife walks.

- 1.2 "Councils are taking innovative approaches to using park spaces, such as providing pop-up spaces, hosting local events and giving communities a say in how their parks are run.

- 1.3 "Ensuring parks remain open and accessible to our communities is a key concern for councils. However, over the previous parliament central government funding for councils was reduced by 40 per cent in real terms and they continue to experience funding pressures. Despite this difficult backdrop, councils are doing everything they can to provide the best possible park services."

2. **Case studies:**

- 2.1 **Be Active Birmingham**

- 2.1.1 Active Parks provides free physical activity opportunities for local people through Birmingham's network of parks and open spaces. A key strand of Birmingham City Council's Wellbeing Service, the scheme is run in conjunction with the friends of parks networks across the city, supported by Birmingham Open Spaces Forum. The activities on offer have been chosen by the local community and include – among others – conservation, bush craft, walking, Tai Chi, Zumba, running, tennis, canoeing and rowing.

- 2.2 **Bristol City Council** is offering training and skills development to help people get into permanent jobs. The [ParkWork](#) scheme trains them to work in parks, which both improves their skills and helps maintain parks.

- 2.3 **Park Hack, Hackney**

- 2.3.1 Hackney Council is looking at how they can offer new services, such as pop-up meeting spaces to local businesses, across a range of parks in Hackney. The aim is to increase income to support local services at a time when councils are under increased financial pressure, without reducing the experience or availability of the park to the wider public. Research shows many businesses are willing to pay for services within parks, and recognise being near to public parks makes them more attractive to employees and customers.