

Neighbourhoods Scrutiny

24th February 2017



Report of: Strategic Director, Neighbourhoods

Title: Parks and Green Spaces – moving towards cost neutral

Ward: Citywide

Officer Presenting Report: Strategic Director, Neighbourhoods: Alison Comley

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Recommendation

That Councillors note and comment on the approach being taken to addressing the parks budget and to increasing income into the parks department.

Summary

The budget proposals being presented to full council on 21st February 2017 detail significant savings from the parks budget, with an aspiration to make the service cost neutral by 2020. This report details the approach that is being taken to achieving this.

This report also summarises some recently published national research and guidance which will enable ideas to be generated to meet the budget challenge which will help inform our approach.



Context

The first major piece of work to address the budget challenge is to explore the possibilities for income generation in parks, alongside some ongoing reductions in costs without significantly changing the service offer. Work on this is currently commencing.

There is some useful national work that has been recently completed that can help to guide this work, including a select committee report that was released earlier this month. A summary of this is included in the appendices of this report.

Bristol's Parks and Green Spaces strategy is being updated and the income generation plan and plans for future spend will take into account this strategy, as recommended by the select committee report.

Key stakeholders (e.g. Parks Forum, parks groups, local residents) will work alongside councillors and officers on the development of the proposals.

Alongside the Select Committee report, there are some other pieces of research that will help inform the thinking, including the NESTA "learning to rethink parks" report which showcases some best practice nationally and internationally: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/learning-rethink-parks> . There is also another document in the national archives called "Paying for Parks" which contains ideas of how to generate income from green spaces: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110118095356/http://www.cabe.org.uk/files/paying-for-parks.pdf>

Proposal

That Neighbourhoods scrutiny notes the contents of the national reports.

That Neighbourhoods scrutiny as part of the work plan, provide input and challenge into the development of the approach. A fuller more detailed report will be provided at the next scrutiny meeting.

Appendices:

Summary and conclusions of the Select Committee report.

This additional paper highlights the Executive Summary and Conclusions and Recommendations arising from the **House of Commons Select Committee - Communities and Local Government Committee Public Parks report** (published on 11th February 2017) accessed at :

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/communities-and-local-government-committee/news-parliament-2015/public-parks-report-16-17/>

Summary

Our inquiry into public parks asked three key questions: why parks matter, what challenges are facing the parks sector, and how we can secure a sustainable future for parks. The level of response has clearly demonstrated the strength of the feeling people have for their local parks and green spaces, and how much parks are valued by individuals, families and communities.

Parks and green spaces are treasured assets and are often central to the lives of their communities. They provide opportunities for leisure, relaxation and exercise, but are also fundamental to community cohesion, physical and mental health and wellbeing, biodiversity, climate change mitigation, and local economic growth. These benefits have long been recognised, but within a context of budget reductions and tightening financial circumstances it is increasingly important that we find ways to quantify the wider value of parks in order to access new sources of funding and target investment in areas of greatest impact.

Parks face considerable challenges. As shared community assets, they must serve many different purposes, and be able to respond to the different and sometimes clashing needs of local communities. They must compete with other services for investment to secure their short and long term sustainability. Distribution of parks is unequal across the country, with many deprived communities struggling to access the benefits which green spaces can provide. Planning policy, particularly as a result of pressures to increase housing supply, may not always give enough priority to parks and green spaces, or to other elements of our green infrastructure.

Meeting the challenges which face our parks and green spaces and securing a sustainable future for them will require responses on many levels. Communities have a role to play, whether through friends, volunteers, or other community groups. We welcome and appreciate the contribution such groups make, and believe that the time and efforts which people give to their local parks should not be overlooked; but it would be unfair and short-sighted to lay responsibility for resolving the challenges parks face wholly at their doors. Innovation in management models and funding sources is also needed. We have received a wide range of suggestions for

alternative funding sources and management models, and we urge the Minister, the Local Government Association, and local authorities to reflect on them.

We do not underestimate the challenges and the risks of transforming services. Local authorities will require both financial and expert support. They will also need leadership and coordination at a national level. We therefore welcome the Minister's commitment to establishing a cross-departmental group. We believe the group should have a continuing role in providing the coordination and the leadership which many of our witnesses want. We call on the Minister, in his response to our report, to set out the details of how this group will operate, and how it will work with stakeholders from across the parks sector to deliver a sustainable future for our parks and green spaces.

We heard many calls throughout our inquiry for a statutory duty on local authorities to provide and maintain parks in order to raise the profile of parks within local authority prioritisation and budget allocation. We recognise that reductions in local authority budgets may disproportionately disadvantage discretionary services, such as parks. However, we are not persuaded that such a statutory duty, which could be burdensome and complex, would achieve the outcomes intended. Instead, we recommend that the Minister publishes guidance to local authorities that they should work collaboratively with Health and Wellbeing Boards to prepare and publish joint parks and green space strategies that clearly articulate the contribution of parks to wider local authority objectives, and set out how parks will be managed to maximise such contributions. We believe that this would increase joint working within local authorities, raise the awareness of parks and green spaces and their contributions to wider goals, and facilitate support for parks and green spaces from other service areas.

Parks and green spaces matter. They make a vital contribution to many of our most important strategic objectives, such as climate change mitigation, public health and community integration. However parks are at a tipping point, and failure to match their value and the contribution they make with the resources they need to be sustained could have severe consequences. We believe that our recommendations will help to ensure that parks receive the priority they deserve, and to prevent a period of decline.

Throughout our inquiry we have heard the passionate voices of many individuals, friends and community groups, and other parks stakeholders. We will return to the issue of parks before the end of this Parliament to assess what progress has been made, but in the meantime we call on those who care about parks to maintain momentum, to continue to hold local and national government to account, and to carry on their work to support, promote and enhance our parks and green spaces.

Conclusion

135. The significant interest in, and the overwhelming response to, our inquiry is a clear indication of just how strongly people feel about their local parks, how much they value them, and how important it is that action is taken to safeguard and secure the future of England's parks and green spaces. Our witnesses—individuals, friends groups, local authorities, and other bodies—describe parks as being at a tipping point. As Cllr Trickett of Birmingham City Council told us: “We have been innovative and we have looked at alternatives, but the cuts are in very great danger of tilting the balance too far”.²⁶⁵ If action is taken, and appropriate priority given to parks, we do not believe it is too late to prevent a period of decline. However, if the value of parks and their potential contribution are not recognised, then the consequences could be severe for some of the most important policy agendas facing our communities today.

136. There is, clearly, no ‘one size fits all’ solution. Responsibility for parks lies primarily with local authorities. We believe that local authorities are best placed to make decisions which are appropriate for their local circumstances. However, within a context of declining local authority budgets, we believe that there is a role for central government to play in providing vision, leadership and coordination, facilitating the sharing of lessons learned and best practice, and ensuring that the role of parks, their contribution, and their function as just one element of our wider green infrastructure networks, is recognised.

137. We intend to return to the issue of parks before the end of this Parliament to assess the progress which has been made. To assist us with this, the Minister's cross-departmental group should publish annual written statements to the House providing an update on the group's activity, progress made against our recommendations, and the progress made by local authorities and Health and Wellbeing Boards in the preparation and publication of joint parks and green space strategies.

Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction and background

1. We strongly agree with those who have emphasised the importance and value of parks to individuals, communities, and to wider national agendas such as public health, and climate change and flood risk mitigation. Parks are a treasured public asset, which are greatly valued by their communities. They help to bring communities together, and should remain freely accessible to everyone. (Paragraph 29)

Why do parks matter?

2. We recognise that parks have traditionally been seen as financial liabilities for local authorities, and understand that assessing the value of parks to their communities in wider terms can be complex. However, we strongly believe that without being able to demonstrate the contribution made by parks to broader agendas, local authority parks departments will find it difficult to secure sufficient priority for their parks, or to access alternative funding sources. For this reason, we welcome the new models which are emerging to help assess the value of parks' broader contributions in a more nuanced way. (Paragraph 35)

3. The amenity and leisure value of parks is important and should not be overlooked. However, taken in isolation, this value does not accurately reflect either the wider value and purpose of parks or the full contribution they make to local and national agendas. We believe that thinking differently about how to assess the value of parks and their broader contribution could help both to access alternative funding sources and to target investment more effectively. However, the models which are emerging, such as natural capital accounting and social return on investment are complex, and may not be accessible to local authority parks departments. *The Minister's cross-departmental group should prioritise support for the development of robust and accessible transferrable models which local authorities in England can use to assess the value of their parks. The Minister's group should work with the Local Government Association to support and encourage local authorities to use such models to assess the real value of their parks, and to take account of such assessments in their strategic planning and prioritisation.* (Paragraph 39)

What challenges are facing the parks sector?

4. We recognise that a community asset which is freely available to all will, quite naturally, give rise to some tensions when the requirements and wishes of different sections of the community, or different groups of park users, come into conflict. We accept that striking the right balance between open access to parks, and revenue-raising activities such as events or granting exclusive use to particular groups is challenging. However, it is necessary. We believe that if parks are to truly serve the communities within which they are located, local authorities must take into account the needs of all of their residents. In the planning and management of parks, local authorities must engage effectively in dialogue with their communities to assess and understand their needs, and to explain the decisions which they take. We recognise that it may be appropriate at times for local authorities to grant exclusive access to a park or a part of a park, whether on a temporary or a permanent basis, to particular user groups or organisations. It may also be appropriate for local authorities to charge for some uses of a park, especially when parks are used by commercial ventures as part of their business models. However, such exclusive use or charging

must not disproportionately affect or hinder access to the park for other uses. *To ensure transparency for local communities, and to enable them to hold their local authorities to account for the decisions which are made, local authorities should consult on, and publish, policies which set out the criteria upon which:*

a) any application for exclusive use of a park or part of a park will be determined;

b) any decisions about whether park users will be charged for the use of the park, park facilities, or clean-up costs will be based. (Paragraph 45)

5. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate for local authorities to seek non-financial contributions from some park users to the upkeep and maintenance of parks and green spaces. For example, community activities which do not charge members for participation or raise revenue, such as parkrun, might nonetheless be encouraged to contribute volunteer time for park maintenance or fund-raising activities. *As part of developing their exclusive use and charging policies for parks and green spaces, local authorities should work collaboratively with relevant groups of park users to identify the range of ways in which they can contribute to their parks. (Paragraph 50)*

6. The level of response which we have received to our inquiry, and the evidence which so many people have provided, is a clear indication to us of the strength and depth of concern which people and communities across the country have about the effect of budget reductions on their treasured parks and green spaces. We share these concerns. We too are worried about the potential deterioration or even loss of a service which is of great value, both as an amenity, and for the contribution which parks make to wider policy objectives including community cohesion, improvement of air quality, and biodiversity. The actions taken thus far by local authorities and volunteers have mitigated the effect of budget reductions in the short term, but this support may not be sustainable in the longer term. The contributions made by friends groups, and other volunteer and community groups, are very important: but they must not be taken for granted. While we recognise the difficult choices with which local authorities are faced, we believe that when planning their parks services, or taking decisions about funding allocations, they must give sufficient priority to supporting, building relationships with and coordinating volunteers. (Paragraph 62)

7. We understand how strongly local friends and community groups feel about their own local parks. However, it is a matter of concern that friends groups may be forced into competition with each other for scarce resources and that some parks are losing out to others. We believe that local authorities should consider their parks to be part of one portfolio, rather than as disparate individual sites. In this way, we believe that they can manage their parks more efficiently and effectively. We welcome the growth of parks forums, in which friends and community groups can come together to share resources, ideas and learning. We believe that such forums will improve the way in

which local authorities can work with their communities in coordinated and efficient ways. *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. Where local circumstances require it, this may include coordination and cooperation across local authority boundaries.* (Paragraph 63)

8. We acknowledge the difficult choices with which local authorities are faced. However, it is essential that our parks are places which are safe for our communities to enjoy. When planning parks maintenance, and allocating funding, local authorities must prioritise safety, especially in relation to children's play equipment. *To ensure that health and safety in parks is given appropriate priority, the Minister should collect data on the number and distribution of accidents in parks across England centrally. He should monitor this data, identify any trends or patterns, and work with relevant local authorities to address problems.* (Paragraph 66)

9. Sufficient priority must be given to the sustainability of ongoing maintenance and the revenue funding needed. When commissioning new park facilities or elements local authorities should ensure that the level of ongoing maintenance required is feasible, and that plans for capital investment are accompanied by sustainable plans for ongoing revenue requirements. We believe that local authorities should be allowed to use Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy funds to cover parks' revenue requirements. (Paragraph 71)

10. We recognise the importance of parks and green spaces to national strategic issues such as obesity, flooding and climate change. We are therefore concerned about the unequal distribution of parks and green spaces in England, and the consequent impact on the ability of all of our communities to benefit from the many advantages of access to quality green space. We are concerned that the UK may not meet UN Sustainable Development Goal 11.7 in respect of safe and inclusive access to parks and green spaces by 2030. *The Minister and the cross-departmental group should identify what action can be taken to improve the provision of parks and green spaces, for example by accessing funds available under public health strategies such as the Obesity Strategy. The Minister should also monitor the provision and distribution of green space across England, and provide Parliament with annual updates, by way of written statements, on whether equality of access is improving. If access to high quality parks and green spaces does not improve for deprived communities, the Minister should identify local authorities where provision is inadequate, and work with them to improve access.* (Paragraph 81)

11. We agree that green space should be at the heart of planning as it is fundamentally important to creating and shaping communities where people want to live, and where they are able to thrive. *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. This will require effective fulfilment of their duty to cooperate with other local authorities, whether on a bilateral basis or within the structures of devolution deals. (Paragraph 89)

12. Parks are not synonymous with green infrastructure—parks deliver important leisure, health, wellbeing and amenity benefits which other types of green infrastructure may not, and large green spaces like parks make particular contributions to absorbing water run-off to mitigate flood risk and combating the Urban Heat Island Effect—but we believe that thinking about parks as one element of wider green infrastructure networks may be beneficial both to parks, and to the profile of other types of green infrastructure. For example, understanding parks as part of wider networks of green infrastructure helps to highlight the value of green corridors and networks for biodiversity, wildlife, and active travel networks. (Paragraph 93)

13. *We recommend that the Minister's cross-departmental group should engage with the parks sector to assess whether the expanded guidance for local authorities on green infrastructure frameworks published in February 2016 adequately provides both for parks as such, and for their role as a part of green infrastructure networks.* (Paragraph 95)

14. *The Minister should work with his colleagues in Defra to ensure that parks, and green infrastructure more widely, are properly recognised in the Government's forthcoming 25-year Environment Plan.* (Paragraph 96)

How can we secure a sustainable future for parks?

15. We welcome the contribution made to parks by friends, volunteer and other community groups and individuals across the country. The time and efforts which people freely give to their parks should not be underestimated, and nor should the benefits for parks, communities and for the individuals themselves. (Paragraph 101)

16. Our review considered evidence on the governance of parks across the country. While many parks are very well run directly by local authorities in a traditional management structure, we also saw evidence that alternative management arrangements have been beneficial in some areas. We believe that these alternative management arrangements may have benefits in some additional other parts of the country, dependent on local circumstances, however, where they are used such arrangements must be suitably accountable to local people. *The Minister should issue guidance to local authorities setting out key principles for the appropriate governance and accountability arrangements in non-traditionally managed parks which could be put in place as part of any emerging or alternative model for parks*

management. Such principles might include the involvement of local people in the governance and oversight arrangements and decision-making, or the establishment of appropriate objectives with which the activities of the management model must be aligned. Whatever innovative arrangement may be adopted, ownership of parks should stay with local authorities, as democratically accountable bodies. A new trust, for example, should have a long lease of a park, rather than taking over the freehold. (Paragraph 108)

17. We hope that the additional funding for local authority service transformation will be made available without further delay, and expect the Minister to keep us updated on the allocation and impact of the funds in the development of sustainable parks management models. (Paragraph 109)

18. We believe that addressing the challenges which face the parks sector in a way which secures a sustainable future for England's parks may require fundamental service transformation, which takes into account the wider value and benefits which parks deliver, beyond their amenity and leisure value. We have received a wide range of suggestions for alternative funding sources for parks, and examples of different approaches to parks management. We have not listed all of them, or explored the merits or otherwise of each in detail—the applicability of each for specific parks or local authorities will depend on local circumstances. However we would urge the Minister, the LGA and local authorities to read and reflect on the evidence we have received as part of our inquiry, and to consider whether and how to take forward the various suggestions made. (Paragraph 111)

19. To support service transformation which parks require, the Minister and his cross-departmental group should work with local authorities which are pioneering alternative management models or funding arrangements, to address the barriers and manage the risks which arise and identify additional transitional support or funding which may be appropriate to nurture the development of such models. For example, 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. (Paragraph 112)

20. The Minister and his cross-departmental group should encourage and facilitate the evaluation and benchmarking of emerging models for parks management, and the sharing of best practice within England and from elsewhere in the UK or internationally as appropriate. (Paragraph 113)

21. We recognise that the pressures on budgets may disproportionately disadvantage discretionary services, such as parks. However, we are not persuaded that a

statutory duty on local authorities to provide and maintain parks, which could be burdensome and complex, would achieve the intended outcomes. (Paragraph 119)

22. We share 38 Degrees' desire to ensure that parks do not slip through the cracks. However, we are not persuaded, for the reasons we have outlined above, that a statutory duty to provide and maintain parks is the most effective way to achieve this objective. (Paragraph 120)

23. We recognise, in principle, the benefits of designating senior elected members and officials as parks champions with responsibility for highlighting and coordinating the contribution which parks make to the achievement of broader council objectives, and for preparing strategies for their parks and green spaces. Local authorities which do not yet have such champions could consider appointing them. However, we are concerned that, in practice, the parks champion title would simply be applied to those senior officers and members who already have responsibility for parks and green spaces, and would not, therefore, make a significant difference to the status quo. Local authorities which currently value their parks and green spaces and recognise the wider contributions they make would continue to do so, and those which do not would be unlikely to see significant changes. (Paragraph 123)

24. We acknowledge the argument that a statutory duty on local authorities and Health and Wellbeing Boards to prepare and publish parks and green space strategies could encourage greater joint working within local authorities, increase the profile of parks and green spaces and their contribution to wider local authority objectives, and facilitate the contribution by other service areas to parks and green space services. Such strategies might also serve to improve the quality of data available about parks and green spaces. We would expect local authorities and Health and Wellbeing Boards, in the preparation of such strategies, to 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—as well as to the responsibilities of other bodies, such as the Environment Agency. *We recommend that the Minister issues very clear guidance to local authorities that they should work collaboratively with Health and Wellbeing Boards, and other relevant bodies where appropriate, to prepare and publish joint parks and green space strategies.* (Paragraph 126)

25. *The Minister's cross-departmental working group should monitor the preparation and publication of joint parks and green space strategies, and report annually on progress made, by way of written statements to the House. If the guidance does not prove effective in encouraging local authorities and Health and Wellbeing Boards to collaborate on the production of joint strategies, or the joint strategies which are produced do not prove effective in raising the profile and priority afforded to parks,*

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. (Paragraph 127)

26. We welcome the steps taken by the parks sector in England to fill the gap left by CABI Space and Greenspace, such as the establishment of the Parks Alliance and the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, the Future Parks project led by the National Trust, and the work undertaken as part of Nesta's Rethinking Parks programme to bring together a database of people and groups with an interest in parks. However, these initiatives, although important and commendable, will not necessarily be enough to provide the coordination and facilitate the sharing of best practice which we believe is necessary to secure and support a sustainable future for England's parks. We believe that the importance of parks to national strategic objectives such as climate change mitigation and public health mean that there needs to be leadership and vision at the level of national government. We look to the Minister to provide this. (Paragraph 132)

27. We welcome the Minister's confirmation that he recognises the current lack of coordination, and his intention to establish a cross-departmental group to consider our report and recommendations. *We believe that the Minister's cross-departmental group should have an ongoing role in providing coordination and leadership within the parks sector to ensure that the Minister's vision for parks is delivered. We call on the Minister to publish, in his response to our report, details of the cross-departmental group's membership, terms of reference, initial priorities, how often it will meet, and how it will work collaboratively with the parks sector and the Local Government Association to secure a sustainable future for England's parks. We believe that early priorities for the group should include:*

- *establishing and maintaining an online parks information hub to make it easier for local authorities to find out about what other authorities are doing, to facilitate the sharing of learning and good practice, and to provide signposting to other sources of information or advice;*
- *working with the Local Government Association to develop and implement options for establishing and supporting national or regional park manager forums in England, learning from the approach taken in Scotland. (Paragraph 134)*

5 Conclusion

28. *We intend to return to the issue of parks before the end of this Parliament to assess the progress which has been made. To assist us with this, the Minister's cross-departmental group should publish annual written statements to the House providing an update on the group's activity, progress made against our recommendations, and the progress made by local authorities and Health and*

Appendix A

Wellbeing Boards in the preparation and publication of joint parks and green space strategies. (Paragraph 137)