



Uncertain Prospects

Public parks in the new
age of austerity

A short report by The Gardens Trust

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written by Katy Layton-Jones

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Preface

This report has been written in response to increasing alarm about the effect of budget cuts on councils' capacity to maintain their public parks. That alarm has been most recently embodied in a House of Commons Select Committee inquiry into the future of public parks, held in the autumn of 2016.

The Gardens Trust was formed in 2015 from the merger of the Garden History Society and the Association of Gardens Trusts. It has inherited the GHS role as a national amenity society and a statutory consultee on planning applications affecting parks and gardens on the national Register. It is also the umbrella group for the network of 36 county gardens trusts in England and is affiliated to the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust. In 2016 the Gardens Trust published *The Planning System in England and the Protection of Historic Parks and Gardens: Guidance for Local Planning Authorities*.

The report was written by Dr Katy Layton-Jones, an independent historical consultant. In 2005 she was engaged as a Research Associate on the Liverpool Parks and Open Spaces project, a collaboration between Liverpool City Council, the University of Liverpool, and English Heritage. She has since been commissioned to research parks and parks policy for a number of organisations including Historic England and local authorities. She has researched and published widely on the subject of public parks. Dr. Layton-Jones lectures for the Open University and holds a research post at the University of Leicester.

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Introduction

In 1993, the Garden History Society and Victorian Society published *Public Prospects: the historic urban park under threat*, part of a wave of concern about the crumbling condition of the nation's public parks. Its photographs of burnt-out boathouses, lakes choked with litter, weed-infested flower beds, vandalised statuary and boarded-up toilets still make grim viewing. Nearly a generation on from *Public Prospects*, many people can barely credit that parks were once in such dire straits.

However, there is increasing evidence that a new downward spiral has begun. Since 2010, cuts of 40% and more to parks budgets have seriously undermined the progress of the previous twenty years and threatened to put much of it into reverse. For those parks which have not benefited from investment (by far the majority), the situation is even more alarming. There is clear evidence of reduced maintenance, increases in litter, graffiti and vandalism, closure of amenities such as toilets, removal of play equipment, reduced on-site staff presence, and loss of skilled personnel at all levels. It is time for the alarm-bells to be rung once more.

Between 1996, when the Heritage Lottery Fund announced a new £50m Urban Parks Programme and 2010, when the new coalition Government embarked on its austerity programme and imposed unprecedented cuts on local government budgets, there was a renaissance in the public parks and gardens of the UK. So far over £850m has been invested by the National Lottery alone, and across the UK there are beautiful examples of restored parks and their features. Bandstands, glasshouses, lakes, shelters, seats, and ornamental planting have once again taken centre stage within our civic realm, while new playgrounds and cafes have brought renewed vibrancy to forgotten corners of historic parks and gardens.



Fig 1. Avenham Park Pavilion, Preston, Lancashire. Ian McChesney's design won an international competition in 2005 and was funded by AvenCentral Regeneration Partnership (SRB), the Heritage Lottery Fund and Preston City Council. The building provides a base for the park manager and rangers, and houses a café and meeting / exhibition space. The Pavilion can be hired for weddings, providing a valuable revenue stream.

The period has also seen a huge rise in awareness of the historic and design interest of public parks and their cultural value to communities. There are now thousands of Friends groups supporting their local parks in different ways, organising events, fund-raising, leading walks and other activities, litter-picking and weeding and increasingly taking more responsibility.



Fig 2. Annual Boer War Commemoration, Mesnes Park, Wigan (2014). Photograph courtesy of B Squadron Queen's Own Yeomanry.

Over the last two decades a huge investment has also been made in research on the history, management and funding of public parks, and also on their social, economic and environmental importance. We are better placed than ever to value and protect our public parks. However, despite all that knowledge of the value of good quality parks, the cuts since 2010 have revealed their continuing vulnerability and we find ourselves again at a point of crisis.

In recognition of mounting concern, the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee announced in July 2016 that it would hold an inquiry into the future of public parks. At the time of writing, the Committee had received 384 submissions from every sector of society, as well as a 273,000-signature petition, demonstrating the high value placed on public parks across the country and the breadth of concern over the current crisis.

While the problem and solution are essentially simple – you get the parks you are willing to pay for - the issues are political and sit uneasily with the nation's current political direction. Control of taxation, the shrinking role of the state, and privatisation are key matters for the future of parks but are also major political policy debates. The challenge is enormous, but after two decades of investment, research, campaigns and voluntary efforts, it is unthinkable that we should fail.

In recognition of mounting concern, the House of Commons Communities and Local



Fig 3 Gelli Park, Rhondda Cynon Taf (2016)

The Parks 'Renaissance' 1995-2010

In 1996 the launch of the Heritage Lottery Fund's Urban Parks Programme marked a momentous turning point in the fortunes of British public parks. Over the past twenty years the HLF, with Big Lottery, has invested heavily in a range of sites, demonstrating the benefits of substantial spending on park architecture, horticulture, staffing and strategy. It grant-aided both nationally and locally important parks; it supported not only repair of historic features but the introduction of new buildings and amenities; and it also attempted to address long-term maintenance through funding for staff posts and a requirement for 10-year management plans.

1996 also saw the launch of another scheme that raised and maintained standards across Britain's public parks. The Green Flag Award® scheme made its first awards in 1997 and today provides a benchmark of excellence. Over the past 20 years the scheme has expanded and today also operates the Green Flag Community Award, formerly Green Pennant Award® (2002) for spaces managed by community groups and volunteers, and Green Heritage Site Accreditation (2003) for sites of historic interest. The number of parks attaining Green Flag status rose steadily from 7 in 1997 to 1400 in 2015, a trajectory that testifies to the investment of money, time and commitment by local authorities, charities, and communities.

The positive impact of HLF's Urban Parks Programme and its successor, Parks for People, can be seen across Britain alongside restoration projects funded by the European Union, local authorities, charities and national government schemes.



Fig 3 Cassiobury Park, Watford (2016).



Fig 5 Magnesia Well Tea Room, now 'Ripley Ice Cream and Café', Valley Gardens, Harrogate (c.2015).



Fig 6. Sefton Park Palm House before restoration.



Fig 7 Statue now reinstated outside the Palm House, 2006.



Fig 8 Bridge and Dell in Sefton Park, 2006.

Sefton Park, Liverpool

By the early 1990s, the iconic Sefton Park Palm House in Liverpool was in a state of almost total dereliction. The building was closed for safety reasons in the mid-1980s, and Public Prospects recorded that ‘the statues which stood outside the Palm House have been removed for safekeeping’ (5).

Around the same time, ‘Save the Palm House Campaign’ was founded, which led in turn to the formation of ‘The Friends of Sefton Park Palm House’ (later The Palm House Preservation Trust). Limited sums made available in 1993 through the Government’s Urban Programme funded some emergency repairs, but it was the arrival of the HLF Urban Parks Programme in 1996 that secured the future of the Palm House. In March 1998, Liverpool City Council received an HLF grant of £2,442,000 to support the preservation and repair of Sefton Park Palm House. The project was the result of a protracted and heated campaign by local residents who witnessed the decay of this striking building. Together with funds from English Heritage, the European Regional Development Fund, Sefton Park Palm House Preservation Trust, and the City Council, the building underwent complete restoration. The impact extended beyond this one structure. Other communities witnessed what could be done and began to campaign to rescue their own precious glasshouses. The dire state of other historic features within Sefton Park also began to attract public attention. In 2004, HLF awarded Liverpool City Council £4,958,000 to fund the restoration and regeneration of the wider Sefton Park.

Although many historical park features have been rescued and restored since 1995, it has proved impossible or unviable to save every structure. Sefton Park boathouse, which also featured in *Public Prospects* suffered another decade of neglect, resulting in its complete destruction by arson. The arrival of HLF funding enabled the construction of a new boathouse café, which is now run as a private business under ‘Boat House Kiosk Ltd.’ Lewis Hornblower’s timber framed boathouse, which had survived for over a century, was lost just a few years before the essential funding arrived. The rapidity with which the condition of this long-standing and much-loved structure degenerated highlights the urgency of the need for protecting what remains of historic parks’ fabric.

Heaton Park, Manchester

Heaton Park is representative of many of the nation’s public parks in that it originated as a private estate. Elements of the landscape date from the late eighteenth century, but it underwent considerable changes and additions after 1902 when it was acquired by the Manchester Corporation. In the 1960s, the Post Office Tower and a water treatment plant were built in the park. Successive changes and additions make sites like Heaton Park particularly challenging to manage. By the 1990s the historic integrity of the park and its overall condition was in decline. In 1999 HLF awarded Heaton Park £5,199,000 and the site has benefitted from over £10 million of investment since the mid-1990s. The restoration project reinstated much of the original planting and landscape design which over the years had been compromised by misguided additions. The project also saw the restoration of the Grade II listed Dower House which has found a new function as the headquarters of the Manchester Beekeepers Society. Today, Heaton Park provides a community arena for events such as parkruns, concerts, and commemorative events, while a Heaton Park Trust (an umbrella organisation of local community groups) ensures that the park remains prominent on the local authority’s agenda.



Fig 9 Sefton Park boathouse, c.1895



Fig 10 Site of Sefton Park Boat house, 2006.



Fig 11 Boat House Kiosk, Sefton Park, 2014.

But Heaton Park stands as a sombre warning of the high financial cost of ill-considered changes and management drift in historic parks and gardens. Piecemeal additions combined with underfunding can cause chronic financial, environmental and social problems for heritage assets, and the site continues to face ongoing challenges in funding and management. Since the Lottery investment, Manchester City Council has had to turn to the National Trust for additional assistance and notwithstanding over £400,000 of investment from Historic England, Heaton Hall remains on the Heritage at Risk Register.



Fig 12 Heaton Park, Manchester. Photograph by Mike Peel.

Over a period of two decades, the HLF has emerged as the dominant, and increasingly the sole, investor in park restoration and regeneration. Nevertheless, not every restoration project has been funded by Lottery grants.

Between 2007 and 2009 £14 million was spent restoring key historic features within Stanley Park, including the lakes, terrace, and Gladstone Conservatory. The project comprised part of the New Anfield Project and was funded by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, European Union Objective One, Housing Market Renewal Initiative, and Liverpool Football Club. The impact of the renovation project has been significant and transformed a site that had become a 'no go' area for many residents into a popular and busy destination park. However, the investment came with considerable conditions. In return for part-funding the restoration project, in 2007 Liverpool Football Club obtained permission for the construction of a new football stadium in the south-eastern section of the park. The financial crisis of 2008 resulted in a rethinking of the Anfield Stadium scheme and the Club has since chosen to redevelop and improve the existing stadium. This is potentially fortunate for Stanley Park, although the agreement to build on a large tract of the park sets a worrying precedent, both for this site and parks across the country.



Figs 13 and 14 Gothic Pavilion, Stanley Park, Liverpool. Victims of arson 2006 and restored 2014.



Figs 15 and 16 View from the Terrace, Stanley Park, Liverpool in 2006 and 2014.

Bushey Rose Garden, Hertsmere

Designed in 1912 by Thomas Mawson under commission by the artist Hubert von Herkomer, Bushey Rose Garden is now owned by Hertsmere Borough Council and in the 1980s and 1990s suffered from neglect and under-investment. Widely recognised for its historical significance, in 2002 it was added to Historic England's *Register of Parks and Gardens*. However, in 2005 the Council was forced to close it due to vandalism. Over the next four years the Council received funds from the Parks for People programme which enabled the restoration of the summer house, cloisters, Rose temple, pergola, fountain, Rose pillars, toilets, and planting. The site now benefits from an active Friends group who work to ensure the garden never reverts to its former vandalised condition.



Fig 17 The Summer House, Bushey Rose Garden, Hertsmere.

Friends groups and community action

The funding and success of Friends groups, dedicated to a particular park, is one of the most positive legacies of the parks renaissance of the past twenty years. According to their umbrella group, the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, there are now over 5000 such groups throughout the UK and many regional or city-wide networks and forums.

A study undertaken by Birmingham Open Spaces Forum and Be Active found that parks with Friends groups benefit from an average of £35k a year in additional funding.

A clear shift has taken place since 1996 in that today Friends play a more pivotal role in the promotion and protection of public parks. Their importance is now widely recognised by Government, the HLF and local authorities. Although involvement of local people and communities was always encouraged by the HLF - and indeed the formation of Friends groups is now a condition of Parks for People grants - the loss of local authority personnel and reductions in routine maintenance since 2010 have placed increasing demands on them. While there are many benefits from this direct community involvement, including the cultivation of a sense of ownership among local people who gain a more direct say in the future of their local park, these cannot be taken for granted.

Cuts to local authority budgets have a knock-on effect even where volunteering has been relatively successful. There have been numerous attempts to mitigate the negative impact of funding cuts by developing cultures of volunteering and philanthropy, which have met with varying success. Although volunteers are cheap, they are not free. There is no doubt that effective volunteering and community participation takes significant and sustained support from local authorities: where community development staff and park rangers are cut, and indeed where small but vital levels of financial or in-kind support are cut, this can seriously undermine the sustainability of community engagement. Friends of parks need, and deserve, ongoing support from local authorities if they are to flourish.

Millennium Greens, an initiative by the Countryside Agency to transfer small areas of local authority-owned land to local communities, was launched in 1996 with the aim of creating 250 new public open spaces by 2000. Today, many struggle to raise enough money to fund even baseline maintenance tasks, such as grass cutting. The Countryside Agency's successor, Natural England, concluded that too many of the Greens were unsustainable, leading to abandonment. In some instances the local authority has become the trustee of the Green.

There are thousands of people of all ages donating their time and skills to public parks, many with a wealth of past professional experience and skills. But reliance on volunteers is likely to be unfair to poorer communities. Despite the passionate enthusiasm of thousands of individuals, communities with low levels of cultural capital, transient populations, and/or busy, working populations will struggle to meet the increasing demands placed on Friends groups.

Birmingham Open Spaces Forum

Birmingham Open Spaces Forum (BOSF) was founded in 2005 to bring together numerous Friends groups that had emerged across the city over the course of a decade. Today there are more than 130 member groups of different sizes that work alongside the City Council to enhance and protect Birmingham's open spaces. BOSF alone contributes additional grounds maintenance with a value of more than £10k a month. Following a long battle, the cost of insuring volunteers in BOSF is now covered by Birmingham City Council. However, not all Friends groups have been as lucky, and many are heavily dependent on a small core of individuals.

Research

The past twenty years have seen a wide range of research, examining every aspect of the importance of parks. The regeneration of historic parks has required not only significant sums of investment, but also a high level of professional expertise and analysis. In addition, the investment has needed support in terms of developing understanding of the wider benefits of good quality public parks. To this end, the work of HLF, Big Lottery, local authorities, Friends groups, and organisations including Historic England, the Parks Alliance and the now defunct Green Space and CABESpace has been informed and supported by myriad research projects and publications, the most notable of which are listed in the Further Reading section below.

These have addressed and demonstrated:

- the economic value of good parks in terms of economic activity in surrounding areas, value for money, attractiveness to inward investment, and property values;
- the social value in terms of social cohesion, crime reduction, quality of life, education and health;
- the environmental value in terms of biodiversity, carbon capture, pollution and urban drainage.

Most recently, HLF has spelt out the threat to parks from austerity in its two *State of UK Parks* reports in 2014 and 2016. Those responsible for the future of our parks and gardens can no longer claim to be inhibited in their actions by a lack of evidence of their importance.

Austerity 2010-

Money for the day-to-day business of maintaining public parks in decent condition has always been tight. Even during the good years described above, parks managers' budgets were being nibbled away. But since 2010 the scale of the cuts to local authority budgets along with continuing restrictions on local authorities' ability to raise council tax levels has had an impact on a different order of magnitude.

In some instances, councils have stated explicitly that there will be no

budget for public parks from 2017 onwards. Their lack of asset value in terms of hard cash has made public parks effectively invisible in the Government's calculation of council budgets. It is therefore unsurprising that a financial black hole has emerged which again risks consuming the cherished green spaces of countless communities around the UK.



Fig 18 Tea Pavilion, Ashburton Park, Croydon.

To some extent the impact of recent cuts has been disguised by twenty years of significant investment from the National Lottery. Much of the most egregious decay and dereliction was repaired, although HLF's insistence on the need for ongoing maintenance was not always heeded. For national government, it provided a comforting sense that the matter was in hand, complemented by a number of actions, such as the Urban White Paper (2000), its policy document *Cleaner Safer Greener* (2003) and the setting up of CABESpace in 2003. At a local level also, Lottery investment had created a positive mood about parks, resulting in the development of green space strategies and growth in user groups.

However, these funds were never designed as a substitute for local authority funding, nor for national leadership, and today the provision of even modest levels of partnership funding is beyond many local authorities. For many park managers, the time-consuming process of compiling grant applications, or even applying for Green Flag status, is no longer practicable. Baseline services are at risk of being withdrawn altogether, with the threat that our historic parks will once again become dirty and dangerous, and as users become discouraged, a spiral of decline will once again begin.

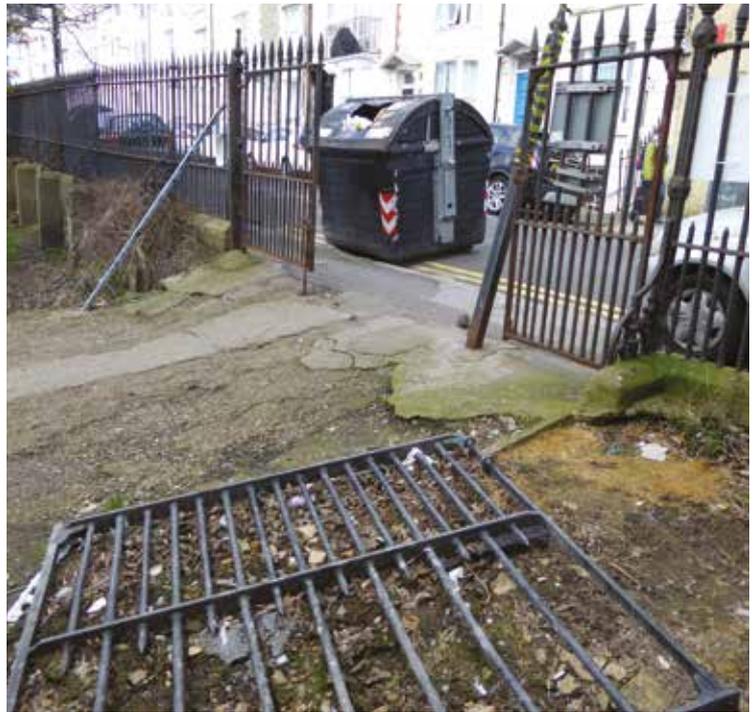


Fig 19 Damage and decay are inevitable to some degree. However, failure to repair damaged park property can create a downward spiral in condition.



Fig 20 Kingswood Park, South Gloucestershire



Fig 21 Leazes Park, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne (c.2015). Basic maintenance is one of least glamorous but most essential expenses. Litter, neglected horticulture and dog fouling can blight even the most historically-important parks

Although local authority budgets are being cut, the HLF and Big Lottery Fund have thus far continued to fund the conservation, restoration and regeneration of public parks. In fact, as local authorities have come under increasing pressure and as other sources of capital funding, such as the European Regional Development Fund, have become more elusive, the National Lottery has become the de facto 'last funder standing'.

In 2001, the HLF and Greenspace produced the Public Parks Assessment, a questionnaire-based assessment of condition and trends in public parks. It revealed the full-scale of the decline over the preceding twenty years, counting for example 57% of bandstands, and 70% of glasshouses having been lost in that period, along with 30% of toilets and 27% of ornamental gates. In addition it revealed the haemorrhage of funding: in those twenty years from 1979/80, total revenue spend had dropped by £1.3bn. This evidence largely formed the case for ongoing Lottery investment, but the achievements in reversing the decline are now under threat: re-examination of condition and trends in 2014-16 reveals that on present trends the number of parks in declining condition will be actually be higher in 2020 than in 2001.

Threats to parks

The crisis facing public parks in England today is to some extent historical in its making. Since the nineteenth century, national government has championed parks' value but missed opportunities to protect that value. One reason for this is that many people presume the 'golden age' of the public park was the Victorian period, when philanthropists donated fountains and park keepers were to be found across the country. However, in reality, high standards were never protected, and we underestimate the efforts and resources always required to keep threats at bay.

Vandalism

One of the most evident blights to public parks identified in *Public Prospects* remains a threat today. Vandalism dogged public parks from their outset and graffiti, arson, and theft have always been a challenge for park managers. Even restored parks can suffer significant damage. In September 2015 arsonists caused £20,000 of damage to the beautifully restored Swiss Bridge in Grade I listed Birkenhead Park. In some neighbourhoods, cuts to wider public services, such as policing, make maintaining an effective security presence in parks impossible. While volunteers and increasing numbers of park visitors may act as a deterrent, few sites are secured at night, leaving them vulnerable to vandalism of all forms.



Figs 22 and 23 The consequences of arson on the restored, Grade I listed Swiss Bridge, Birkenhead Park, (2006 and 2015)



Figs 24 and 25 The fountain, Wavertree Playground, Liverpool. The cast iron decorative birds were stolen by metal thieves in the late twentieth century, leaving only the feet behind.

Despite recent tightening up on illegal dealers, commercial demand for lead, iron and copper continues to pose a threat to historic statues and buildings in parks. In 2011, a bronze Barbara Hepworth statue valued at around £500,000 was stolen from Dulwich Park in South London by metal thieves. There have been similar instances across the country. Such theft not only compromises the quality of the park environment, but also places additional financial pressure on local authorities via rising insurance premiums. Many local authorities in fact have no insurance cover for public parks or only self-insurance, which in practice often means the same thing.

Competition

The competition process that determines the allocation of grants demands a significant investment of time and money on the part of a local authority. As local authorities close or merge departments and lose dedicated green space managers, their capacity to compile applications diminishes. Even in the period before austerity, the nature of funding competition meant that when applying for external funding, local authorities had to be selective in the sites they took forward. The problems facing those not chosen have been compounded as their more fortunate counterparts absorbed a disproportionate percentage of council officers' time, attention and budget. Thus, while Sefton Park has flourished, the nearby Newsham Park has continued on a downward spiral.

Revenue funding

Significant capital investment has rescued many of our most vulnerable historic park structures from imminent collapse. However, this still represents only a tiny minority of the buildings and landscapes in need of protection. Furthermore, even when restoration is achieved, it is only the start of a very long road on which financial survival is never guaranteed. Parks which do not suffer from vandalism or theft still need reliable funding streams to mitigate day-to-day wear and tear. The HLF and local authorities both recognise the need for sustainable revenue streams to secure their investment but designing such strategies is far from straightforward and has its own attendant costs. It is a measure of the difficulty of securing long-term financial commitment within local authorities that core-funding was the one subject never tackled in all the research referred to above. Ever since contracting out began in the eighties, it has become often impossible to answer the simple question: what does it cost to maintain any one particular park? The absence of this essential data increases the vulnerability of parks to cuts, which particularly since 2010 have generally been demanded without any clear understanding of their impact on the ground.



Fig 26 Boulogne Road playground, Croydon.



Figs 27 and 28 (Below) Newsham Park, Liverpool in 2006 and after a further decade of neglect in 2016



Today, the need for ongoing investment to maintain successful HLF-funded projects is increasingly apparent. As the first generation of HLF-funded projects approach their twentieth birthday, promises to protect HLF investment are being tested. In some instances park assets have been transferred from local authority control; others are threatened by changing parks strategies. Even the most famous and celebrated projects are not exempt from financial vulnerability.

In 2016, the Sefton Park Palm House Trust received a grant of £69,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund to commission consultants to advise on future business and fundraising strategies. The grant will also be used to temporarily fund the maintenance of the plant collection; a core purpose of the Palm House. Despite the Palm House's high public profile, commercial successes and historic significance, only fifteen years after restoration was completed funding strategies remain highly dependent on unpredictable public donation. The ongoing struggle faced by organisations like the Palm House Trust is not indicative of a lack of commitment or ability on the part of local communities and manager. Rather, it is the entirely predictable outcome of an underfunded and unprotected sector.



Fig 29 Bandstand, Rylands Park, earmarked for demolition by Lancaster City Council due to lack of funds.

Councils seeking to support local services have for too long been handicapped and thwarted by central government control over tax-revenue, for example through the imposition of caps on Council Tax rises. Local communities must be given the democratic opportunity to support valued local services such as parks-maintenance through local taxation. This could take the form of a specific 'parks levy' or precept but if so, should be ring-fenced for that purpose.

Development

Pressure on local authorities to increase housing density, combined with the sale of school playing fields and publicly-owned green space to raise revenue, has increased the need for public parks while simultaneously increasing the threat of their sale and development. While approximately 280 of the 1600 sites on the national *Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest* are public parks, this is only a tiny minority of the national stock currently serving our communities.



Fig 30 While some assets earmarked for sale or development have been saved, many more quickly take their place.

Sites which are not registered may be included on local lists but historic public parks of both categories remain amongst the most vulnerable of our heritage assets.

In an age of slashed budgets, local authorities are keen to exploit all alternative sources of investment. In addition to a 47% cut in the grounds maintenance budget since 2009, London Borough of Bexley has approved plans to sell four open spaces for housing development. While this has been done on the basis of a survey of the Council's estate, such thinking does not take into account the fact that each place is the local park for a community and there have been fierce protests.

When there is the chance that a development proposal may be approved, there is little motivation within local authorities to invest time or money in that site. If such proposals are unsuccessful, councils often find that the condition of the site has deteriorated in the meantime and the cost of repair increased proportionately. In some instances, this process is repeated numerous times with the cycle of proposals planning consultations, and campaigns, pushing the park into a deeper state of dereliction every time. At Crystal Palace Park in South London, numerous development proposals have been floated over the past two decades. From shopping malls to housing developments, the park has languished as different schemes are considered and rejected. Located on the intersection of three local authorities, it has become a battleground between residents, politicians, and developers.

The protection of parks in the planning system remains weak. Every year, the Gardens Trust receives some 1600 planning applications that affect registered parks and gardens and this figure is expected to rise. Those consultations only relate to registered parks and gardens and the vast majority of public parks are unregistered. Recognition of the national significance of the few must be matched by recognition of the local significance of the many.

A good number of non-registered parks are included on local lists, to which many county gardens trusts have contributed, and these in turn are often the subject of some measure of protection in the local plan. However, there remains a harmful void between the value local people place on their parks and the value placed on them by government, both national and local.

A 'non-statutory' duty

The question of whether or not maintenance of green space should be a statutory duty for local authorities has been raised repeatedly over the last two decades. It has been argued that it would reduce local democracy and that statutory services are likewise facing major budget cuts. However, in 2003, the House of Commons Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee supported such a change in its report on the ODPM's policy paper, *Living Places: Cleaner, Safer, Greener*, recommending that 'If local authorities were given a statutory duty of care for public spaces, they would be encouraged to prioritise funding to improve them.' We agree: as a non-statutory service, parks are disadvantaged in decision-making: they have repeatedly been in the front line for cuts, and budgets have been cut disproportionately in relation to statutory services, even where council members are supportive of them. We have seen this repeatedly since 2010 and we believe that if the playing field is not made more level then the decline now underway will accelerate disastrously.

Political inertia and lack of leadership

The threat to public parks posed by austerity and the current political direction extends beyond direct budget cuts. Since 2010, the Government has abdicated its role in providing leadership. There has been a complete absence of strategic responsibility at Government level since the closure of CABESpace in 2011. The Design Council, which was charged with taking over CABE's responsibilities, ignored the remit of CABESpace. The closure of CABESpace was followed in 2013 by the loss of Green Space, the charity which represented parks interests, largely due to a lack of Government support.

Compounding the absence of national leadership, there are now question marks hanging over the future of individual local authorities. The reorganisation and merger of local authorities is currently the subject of numerous consultations across the country. Dorset is one such example, where nine authorities may be replaced by just two. While advocates of the proposal champion the potential savings to be made by combining departments and reducing personnel, such a radical reformation of management poses very real risks for public parks including the loss of local personnel; the loss of long-term management experience of specific sites; interruption to and potential loss of existing local authority funding streams; instability and disjunction in the implementation of management strategies; and obscuring of accountability as authorities become physically distant from widely-dispersed parks and community groups. If reorganisation is designed to save costs, it is likely that non-statutory services such as parks will bear the brunt of so-called efficiencies.

Recommendations

The current status quo is unsustainable and the undoing of all that has been achieved in the past twenty years should be unthinkable. Yet parks are already entering a spiral of decline and this time there will be no miraculous multi-million pound bail-out by the Lottery. We must take decisive action now to save our public parks.

- Make the maintenance of public parks a statutory duty for local authorities.
- Identify and publish baseline funding requirements for all parks.
- Enable local authorities to employ taxation as a mechanism for funding parks.
- Establish and fund a national champion body for urban parks and green space.
- Strengthen protection in the planning system afforded to parks as 'Non-designated heritage assets' or Assets of Community Value.
- Acknowledge the success of local authorities in managing public parks for over a century and recognise that for most parks there is no viable alternative
- Fund a comprehensive green space mapping project to record the extent, distribution and quality of public parks across Britain.

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THE
GARDENS
TRUST 

70 Cowcross Street, London EC1M 6EJ

+44 (0) 207 608 2409

enquiries@thegardenstrust.org

<http://thegardenstrust.org>

