

PLACES TO BE

| Green spaces for
active citizenship

Ed Wallis



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CONTENTS

	Introduction	4
1	Co-ordination at the centre	6
2	Local leadership	10
3	Enable participation and citizen control	19
	Conclusion	26
	Principles for democratic public spaces	27
	Endnotes	28

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Summary

Our green spaces more than ever provide a crucial community ballast, where we can come together, build relationships and reverse society's long-term journey towards individualism and isolation. These are the places - be it a large park, a small play area, woodland or waterway - where people walk their dogs, greet their neighbours, play with their children; they are where we go to take exercise or take time to reflect. But they are increasingly under threat. Central government funding for local authorities has fallen by around 40 per cent, leaving councils without the means to adequately maintain facilities or engage with local people. Spending on parks is predicted to be reduced by 60 per cent by 2020.

So the next government is going to have to find ways of keeping our green, outdoor spaces open to all during an extended period of austerity. But it's going to have to do more than this: it needs to make them accessible arenas for active citizenship. Here is the opportunity to manage our green space in such way that empowers citizens, bolsters people's sense of place and encourages democratic engagement.

Local authorities have so far sought to manage shrinking budgets through efficiencies. But the scale of cuts still to come for local authorities means that this is not a sustainable approach and in many areas a more radical re-imagining of services will be required.

This needs all levels of government to take a new role and this report considers each of these in turn and how to recalibrate our existing institutions to support a popular environmentalism.

1. Co-ordination at the centre: Across the country there are examples of councils and communities creating and maintaining vibrant green spaces in spite of - and often because of - the lack of state support. These outstanding examples of innovation respond to specific local circumstance and characteristics. We need to find ways to co-ordinate, sustain and grow the good practice that already exists across the country. *A reformed Natural England should provide a central hub to share expertise with local areas, think holistically about the rural and urban environment and embed the importance of 'green infrastructure' - our interconnected network of green spaces - across government.*

2. Leading locally: Despite diminished capacity, local councils remain crucial guardians of public assets. But this requires a different role for councils, not necessarily doing the delivery but seeing themselves as custodians of place and the convenors of local action. *Each local authority should do this by forming a Green Partnership Board and ensuring they have an up-to-date green space strategy.*

There are also a number of existing mechanisms that could be put to work in support of vibrant and democratic open spaces:

Neighbourhood plans can enhance the ownership people feel over their local area. Local authorities, through a Green Partnership board, should support communities to defend the sites that are most important to them, by using local green space designation and helping people develop neighbourhood plans.

Local enterprise partnerships should build in a strategic role for green infrastructure planning into their remit and broaden the narrow definition of 'economic value' that LEPs currently operate on, putting natural capital and environmental sustainability at the heart of our regional growth strategies.

Health and wellbeing boards should recognise the importance of local green spaces in preventing physical and mental health issues in their strategies and seek to preserve and enhance green spaces as part of their public health responsibilities.

3. Enabling participation and citizen control: New approaches to green space can engage citizens in community life. But volunteers need to feel supported, and effective management of green and open spaces requires a level of skill and experience which is likely to be beyond most volunteers. A partnership between local councils and local communities is crucial. *Community organising and development; parish councils; and asset trusts; all provide opportunities to rebuild community spirit and ensure the continued viability of green space.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the next parliament, our green spaces face an existential crisis. In rosier economic times, the last Labour government embarked on a major program of investment in the public realm. There was not just a sense that our major public services were beginning to buckle – ‘24 hours to save the NHS’ – but that our social fabric was becoming dangerously frayed. During this period, decline in quality of urban green spaces was halted: by 2005, 84 per cent of urban local authorities believed their green space was stable or improving, up from 44 per cent in 2000.¹

But now the state continues to withdraw from public life at a hurrying pace. December’s autumn statement made it clear that austerity is not nearing an end: it’s not even halfway through its work. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) reports that the government’s spending plans are for a total cut in public spending of 10.1 per cent of GDP over 10 years. At this halfway stage, 48 per cent has happened, 52 per cent is still to come.²

With spending on health, schools and international development still protected, the burden on the other, already stretched departments is likely to intensify. The OBR projects a real per capita cut to unprotected departments of 43.4 per cent from today’s level by the end of the next parliament. Adopting its best Sir Humphrey tone, their analysis of the autumn statement says:

“The implied cuts in [departmental spending] during the next parliament would pose a significant challenge if they were confirmed as firm policy, one that would be all the greater if existing protections were maintained. But we do not believe that it would be appropriate for us to assume, *ex ante*, that these cuts would be inherently unachievable.”

Whether they are “inherently unachievable” or not, it’s obvious that an already precarious spending situation is about to get considerably worse. Between 2009-10 and 2013-14, spending by English local authorities (excluding those with a national park) on open spaces has fallen by 14 per cent, almost £15.5 million.³ A significant number of authorities are considering selling or transferring management of some of their parks and green spaces over the next three years.⁴

But in a globalised world that feels increasingly complex and out of control, these local places matter more than ever. The Fabian Society’s report *Pride of Place* recently showed how people forge their identities in the environment that surrounds them and the communities they live there with.⁵ Local parks and play areas, woodland and waterways are where people walk their dogs, greet their neighbours, play with their children and connect with

nature; they are where we go to take exercise or take time to reflect. These are the community sites where we develop our sense of self and way of understanding the world. These spaces are often taken for granted. But we saw what happens when we feel they are under threat: an attempt to sell-off the nation's forests was met with huge public resistance, a genuine sense of popular uprising, fueled by a feeling that something integral to our identity was being taken away from us.

Pride of Place found that the ties that bind people together are felt to be eroding. In a poll, 68 per cent said they felt that community spirit has declined over their lifetime. As you might expect, this view was particularly strong among the over 60s (over 80 per cent) but more than half of 18-24 year olds felt the same. This is in many ways the defining challenge of our times. How to keep our society together in the face of powerful forces that are driving us apart, at a time when our political institutions are suffering from perhaps terminal mistrust, and Whitehall's traditional policy levers are no longer felt to have the answers.

Our open green spaces more than ever provide a crucial community ballast,⁶ where we can come together, build relationships and reverse the long-term trend towards individualism and isolation.⁷ How can we ensure our green spaces continue to exist and allow nature to thrive, that they are properly managed and remain accessible to all during a period of continued austerity? And how can this be done in such a way that maximises civic life and community participation? The traditional model of council-maintained open space may no longer be available to us, but a new path offers what Jon Cruddas calls "radical hope": as the old order fades, tremendous opportunities present themselves for thinking anew.⁸

We can manage our green spaces in such a way that empowers citizens, bolsters people's sense of place and encourages democratic engagement. To create, as the academic and former MP Tony Wright puts it, "accessible arenas for active citizenship".⁹

Local authorities have so far sought to manage tight budgets through efficiencies: either through the smarter deployment of resources, like concentrating maintenance budgets on significant or historic public parks, or by seeking to commission elements of service provision in a way that drives savings. But the scale of cuts still to come for local authorities and other public agencies involved in provision of access to the environment means that this is not a sustainable approach. In many areas, a more radical re-imagining of services will be required.¹⁰

This needs all levels of government to take a new role and this report considers each of these in turn and how to recalibrate our existing institutions to support a popular environmentalism. It suggests that Natural England should be reformed to lead the co-ordination of green infrastructure across government and ensure that its wide social, economic and environmental benefits are recognised by all departments. It stresses the continued importance of local authorities for leading this agenda. Even with reduced resources our local authorities must continue to be the custodians of the places we live and Green Partnership Boards could provide strategic leadership of the local environment. And it outlines a series of opportunities to engage people more directly in social action to protect and enhance their local environments. But first and foremost, this agenda will require political leadership, making the reinvention of our parks and natural spaces a national political priority for the next government.

1

CO-ORDINATION AT THE CENTRE

Across the country there are examples of councils and communities creating and maintaining vibrant green spaces in spite of – and often because of – the lack of state support. These outstanding examples of innovation respond to specific local circumstance and characteristics. We need to find ways to co-ordinate, sustain and grow the good practice that already exists across the country. Reform of Natural England provides an opportunity to do this within the existing institutional landscape.

Government ‘silos’ are a well-understood but stubborn public policy problem. But the persistent inability to ‘join-up’ government has particular relevance for the promotion of our green space.

Firstly, there are two departments with a particular interest in this agenda: the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). These two departments have been the worst affected by the 2010 comprehensive spending review’s programme of cuts. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the DCLG communities budget lost 67.6 per cent in real terms and local government 26.8 per cent.¹¹ DEFRA has seen a 30.9 per cent cut, leaving some suggesting the department is on the brink of collapse.¹²

A crucial problem is lack of clarity for who is responsible for green space at the highest levels of government. For example, one participant at an expert roundtable for this project told of how it had eaten up a great deal of their organisation’s time simply establishing who the minister responsible for parks was.¹³ It was eventually found to be Stephen Williams MP, parliamentary under secretary of state for communities and local government in DCLG. For Labour in opposition, responsibility for parks sits with the shadow DEFRA team. DEFRA has overall responsibility for the urban and natural environment – though not climate change of course, which sits in the Department for Energy and Climate Change. DEFRA has responsibility for the national parks and broads, and administers the Environment Agency and Natural England, the arms-length bodies that survived the coalition’s ‘bonfire of the quangos’. London’s royal parks sit with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and these are planned to be handed over to the London mayor.¹⁴ There are other government departments with roles, like Health or Business, Innovation and Skills.

Finding a way through this labyrinth tests even the most engaged, and while machinery of government changes can seem technocratic and slightly dull, we desperately need to improve government leadership of this agenda. Without clear lines of responsibility, there is no focal point for campaigners, nobody whom advocates can go to, no one to co-ordinate the various agencies and government departments, no one who can be held publically accountable

for failings or celebrated for successes. Without someone clearly in charge, whole policy agendas can fall through Whitehall's cracks, never to be heard from again.

There will always be a range of bodies with responsibility for green space but it is crucial that we improve leadership of this agenda within the existing framework. In the absence of CABI Space, which led the design and management of parks and public space and was merged into the Design Council in 2011, there is no single organisation that is able to advocate for and provide evidence for the value of green and open spaces. The Heritage Lottery Fund has taken some steps to fill this void¹⁵ and Nesta is running a 'Rethinking Parks' programme to trial ideas and explore new ways to manage the UK's parks.¹⁶ Since its inception in 1996, the Green Flag Award scheme has become the benchmark national standard for parks and green spaces across the UK. It has an assessment framework which recognises good practice in park management across eight key criteria including community involvement, cleanliness and maintenance, safety and sustainability. There are also some significant alliances and groupings like the Green Infrastructure Partnership, the Parks Alliance and the Love Parks initiative. But we lack a central body that can test and support innovative ideas in a controlled way across the whole range of our green and natural spaces.

Quangos are politically unfashionable, having become a byword for public sector opacity and inefficiency.¹⁷ The government quickly implemented the coalition agreement's promise to "reduce the number and cost of quangos",¹⁸ and Cabinet Office research showed that the number of public bodies had been cut by 220 by 2012. Yet the same research showed nine new bodies were also created, and research for the *Shrinking State* project concluded that "the overt focus on numbers of [quangos] misses the wider question of where functions of government are located – and many are remaining at arm's length."¹⁹ The Institute for Government report *Read Before Burning* made the case for "tightening the management and accountability of [arm's length bodies], rather than pursuing a simple cull."²⁰

Given the current spending and political climate, it is unlikely that an incoming government would find much appetite for creating a new quango. But it is clear our green space is being diminished and ill served by the current institutional arrangements.

When it comes to innovation, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Indeed, what is important about local initiatives and what makes them succeed is that they respond to the needs of a specific place and are created by the passion that people show for their particular area. Yet we desperately need ideas that address the big systemic challenges and a way of co-ordinating and learning lessons from the examples of good practice that are happening up and down the country.

Natural England provides the greatest opportunity here. Established in 2006, it is a non-departmental public body sponsored by DEFRA, and is responsible for ensuring England's natural environment is protected and improved, while providing practical scientific advice for the government. Comprising 2000 staff, with a resource budget of £150 million, it is widely accepted that Natural England's powers have been substantially curbed since 2010; one commentator argued that it has "effectively lost its voice".²¹ Natural England has already cut 21.5 per cent, or £42 million, from its resource budget over the course of this parliament, and was challenged to find a further 10 per cent, or £17 million, as of 2014.

Spending cuts have changed the organisation in a number of ways, reducing the size of corporate services, cutting the cost of delivering agricultural grants by 50 per cent - streamlining national grant management process, cutting 500 staff (meaning Natural England is now a fifth smaller than it was in 2010), and removing its regional tier.²²

It is clear from the autumn statement in 2014 that all DEFRA-sponsored bodies will continue to face severe budget cuts and they will be increasingly driven to consolidate activities around statutory responsibilities. But rather than simply leaving the institutions of an old era in place but without the money to run them properly, government needs to think clearly about how it can provide the strongest leadership with the resources available. This means 'letting go' and devolving where it can while simultaneously consolidating and tightening up its top level strategic leadership. Natural England, in search of a new role, could lead this. Despite fairly brutal cuts, it has a strong research function that could provide a central hub to share expertise with local areas. It could help us to think holistically about the rural and urban environment and embed the importance of 'green infrastructure' across government. Green infrastructure is what the Landscape Institute calls "the networks of green spaces, rivers and lakes that intersperse and connect villages, towns and cities", ranging from formal parks and gardens, to incidental 'amenity' land like roadside verges and river banks. These hold significant social, environmental and economic benefits to society, as well as providing crucial community spaces – as Box 1 shows. Someone needs to make this case across government, to act as an ideas factory and facilitate relationships. While Natural England is being reorganised, the next government should consider how to define its remit and enhance its status as advocate-in-chief of green space.

BOX 1: THE SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF GREEN SPACE

Green spaces have been shown to contribute to all aspects of health and well-being, promoting more active lifestyles. CABE research showed how being outside in a green space can promote mental wellbeing, relieve stress, overcome isolation, improve social cohesion and alleviate physical problems so that fewer working days are lost to ill health.²³ Woodland Trust research found that adults who have useable green space within a six minute walk from their home are more likely to say their health in general has been very good or good than those whose nearest useable green space is more than a fourteen minute walk away. Those who use their local green space every day or several times a week are much more likely to say that their health in general is good or very good than those who don't use it at all (80 per cent versus 65 per cent).²⁴ Public Health England advises that the provision of green space can help reduce obesity.²⁵

Green spaces lower flood damage. With DEFRA estimating that 2.7 million properties in England and Wales lie in areas that are at risk of flooding, the Landscape Institute argue that green infrastructure can reduce the number of properties at risk: "Rather than taking space from water, it makes space for water and in doing so enhances biodiversity, recreation and local character." Green space designed as sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS) reduce

the risk of flooding. There are also significant benefits for climate change adaptation and climate change mitigation.²⁶

The economic benefits of green spaces were recently made clear by the Natural Capital Committee, the independent advisory body set up to advise the government on the sustainable use of England's natural assets. A recent report concluded that there was a "significant opportunity" for the next government to enhance natural capital to enhance sustainable economic growth.²⁷ The report says that "carefully planned investments in natural capital, targeted at the best locations, will deliver significant value for money and generate large economic returns. These are competitive with the returns generated by more traditional infrastructure investments." As well as woodland planting, the committee found a strong economic case for investment in urban green spaces "which can provide enormous recreation values, benefiting millions of people in our towns and cities. They also offer significant potential for improvements in physical and mental health which in turn will reduce health expenditures and improve labour productivity."²⁸ The NCC's most recent report called for 250,000ha of new woods to be planted close to people, such was the public benefit they felt would be provided. The Aldersgate Group have also set out how the natural environment, wellbeing and sustainability are at the heart of a thriving economy.²⁹

2

LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Despite diminished capacity, local councils remain crucial guardians of public assets. But this requires a different role for councils, not necessarily doing the delivery but seeing themselves as custodians of place and the convenors of local action. Each local authority by forming a Green Partnership Board and an ensuring they have an up-to-date green space strategy.

We're all decentralisers now: so declared a Fabian pamphlet over 30 years ago. It is tempting to say the same thing again today in the hope that the instinct lasts this time. This shift has been most notable in the Labour party, which now calls itself 'the party of localism' in response to sustained critique on its centralising tendency in government.³⁰

Yet the political optimism of local potential is now colliding with engulfing gloom across local government. Barnet council's notorious 'Graph of Doom' raises the possibility that local authorities will in due course be unable to provide anything except statutory social services and refuse collection.³² While the most recent autumn statement spared local government any additional cuts, it led Paul Johnson, the director of the IFS, to posit that "the role and shape of the state will have changed beyond recognition."³³

We face a paradox. At the same time that local government is being talked of as an increasing political priority – intrinsic to the political values of left and right, and in a complex and uncertain world the most appropriate administrative unit – its continued viability is being threatened. So what role can local government play in the world that's coming?

Despite diminished capacity, local councils need to retain their role as guardians of public assets. But this means something different now in a new era, with councils not necessarily doing the delivery but seeing themselves as custodians of place and the convenors of local action.

As part of Labour's policy review, the Local Government Innovation Taskforce recently published its new vision for local government based around the idea of 'people-powered public services'.³⁴ The report proposed a 'new English Deal', which would free places to make their own decisions about spending and service delivery, representing "a step change in the relationship between the centre and localities and between citizens and the state". However, the report failed to mention the local environment once. Labour would be missing a trick if it were not to make the case for the protection and enhancement of our green and natural spaces as a central part of its vision for local authorities, so crucial are they to its political values and identity, along with their benefits to health, happiness, social cohesion and our wider environmental goals.

So how can councils best show this leadership? Research by the Heritage Lottery Fund found 59 per cent of park managers still consider their parks and green spaces to be a corporate priority for their authority, and almost 70 per cent of councils have an elected member who acts as a champion for parks and green spaces.³⁵ Park managers noted that “councillors see parks as essential local services and a priority for voters”. As green spaces are one of the most accessed council services – it’s estimated that well over half the UK population make more than 2.5bn visits to urban green spaces alone each year³⁶ – this may help explain why despite the deep central government cuts, only a third of the public have so far noticed any difference to overall levels of service.³⁷

This shows the importance of individual political leadership within a local authority. Reflecting on the differing levels of support for arts and culture across the country, a report by the New Local Government Network drew the same conclusion, that it is “the leadership and interest of members and officers that plays a key role in sustaining arts and culture on some level by local government.”³⁸

But as Simon Parker, the director of the New Local Government Network notes, many councils are “barely halfway through the process of fiscal consolidation and those cuts that some [of] the public have failed to notice have put very real strain on public servants. In some areas, a tipping point is approaching as staff exhaust their ability to soak up ever more work.”³⁹ So, it will take more than the goodwill and support of individual councillors to sustain this agenda into the next parliament.

So what can councils do to ensure they take the strong political leadership required to sustain support for green spaces in tough times? A CLG report from 2007 on ‘How to create quality parks & open spaces’ recommended three leadership models that can help drive this agenda:⁴⁰

- Appoint a champion to act as an advocate for green spaces
- Grant executive or cabinet responsibility to give a council cabinet member with specific green space responsibilities
- Set up a cross-departmental group so the local authority can invite internal and external contacts with a variety of expertise

All these options are useful, but in order to properly co-ordinate council resources, the voluntary sector, the private sector and the local community, we recommend the creation of a Green Partnership Board, chaired by the council member with executive responsibility for green space. This would provide strategic leadership of the local environment, supporting more locally-focused projects, facilitating collaboration between different stakeholders and working with the 48 local nature partnerships across England.

The Green Partnership Board could take a lead in creatively modelling ‘system-wide solutions’ to the management of green space. A lot of the current innovation activity is focused on specific parks and specific models. However, we lack the means to trial solutions that take a ‘whole system’ approach, and bring together asset management or transfer strategies, maintenance and management regimes, community involvement activities and new revenue streams.

The Green Partnership Board could also manage the local authority's green or open space strategy,⁴¹ which the Heritage Lottery Fund found were crucial to maintaining support for parks, though only half of councils currently have one that is up to date.⁴² Yet those that do were found to be more likely to have parks in good condition (64 per cent compared with 45 per cent) and almost twice as likely to have parks that have improved over the last three years (46 per cent to 26 per cent). As CABE space guidance put it, "a green space strategy sets out an authority's vision for using its green space and the goals it wants to achieve, plus the resources, methods and time needed to meet these goals." Some strategies focus on core elements of green space, including parks, sports grounds and play areas. Others are more comprehensive in their inclusion of other amenity areas, allotments, cemeteries and churchyards, woodlands and nature conservation areas. Local authorities must use their green space strategies as opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to their local environment and their role as custodian of it: each local authority must ensure they have an up-to-date green space strategy.

This must go hand in hand with reforms to Natural England discussed in chapter 1. While local stewardship is vital for managing local green space, this can only be done properly with some guidance and coordination from the national and even international level. In particular, green spaces can only achieve their vital role in preserving biodiversity with the benefit of expertise and national priorities provided by guidance from bodies like Natural England.

They must also co-ordinate with city regions and combined authorities. It was recently announced that Greater Manchester will take control of its health budget, with the 10 councils and health groups in the region to control the £6bn allocated for health and social care.⁴³ This is a positive development that will help give regions more flexibility to think about their infrastructure needs in the round, in the same way that the Labour government's Total Place programme encouraged agencies to co-ordinate 'whole area' strategies. While local authorities' green space strategies are crucial, the point of green infrastructure is that it interconnects, often across municipal boundaries. So Green Partnership Boards have the opportunity to co-ordinate green infrastructure planning with combined authority or city region boundaries.

There is also a real problem at the local authority level of the flight of expertise, as groups from different sectors who submitted evidence for this report noted. Local authorities increasingly lack the in-house staff and expertise required to think creatively and strategically about their open spaces,⁴⁴ to plan positively for biodiversity⁴⁵ or to sensitively design the built and natural environment.⁴⁶

This makes the co-ordination role of councils even more vital. Local authorities, through their green space strategies, must look to collaborate, to empower, and to pool resources. In so doing they will communicate to local people that they are developing a civic vision and leading the shared endeavour of the enhancement of public space and civic life.

Our specific landscapes define the character of an area. From the heyday of our urban parks in the Victorian era to the ancient rights to common land of our villages, the UK has a deep and abiding relationship with its land and its open spaces. As the Heritage Lottery Fund puts it, "the UK invented the municipal park movement, an enduring legacy of the industrial revolution that has been admired and imitated across the world. Every park has its own story." We also have a strong affinity with the wildlife those places sustain:

the plight of bees has spoken to the hearts of the public - a YouGov poll in 2014 found it to be people's most serious environmental concern.⁴⁷ Local authorities must seek to rekindle this pride of place and relocate the civic identity that created the parks in the first place, to make them an even better resource for wildlife, people and community.

Devolution not revolution

While seeking to improve local leadership, we should be wary of the blanket implementation of another set of disruptive institutions and a 'top down' reorganisation of our local apparatus. The focus instead should be on making the mechanisms we have work better to support this agenda. This report explores some examples of existing mechanisms that could be put to work in support of vibrant and democratic open spaces: neighbourhood plans, local enterprise partnerships, and health and wellbeing boards.

Neighbourhood plans

Neighbourhood planning was introduced through the Localism Act 2011, and came into effect in 2012. A neighbourhood development plan establishes general planning policies for the development and use of land in a neighbourhood, for example where new homes and offices should be, or what they should look like. This should allow local people to get the right type of development for their community, but the plan should also take into account the needs of the wider area. Neighbourhood plans can be led by any qualifying body including a parish or town council, a neighbourhood forum, or a community organisation.

There are seven key stages in neighbourhood planning:

- Designating a neighbourhood area / forum
- Preparing a draft neighbourhood plan / order
- Pre-submission publicity / consultation
- Submission of a neighbourhood plan / order proposal to the local planning authority
- Independent examination
- Referendum
- Bringing the neighbourhood plan into force

As of April 2014, around 1000 communities had taken the first formal steps towards producing a neighbourhood development plan, while 80 full draft plans had been produced for consultation, and 13 neighbourhood plans had been passed at community referendums.

Many who provided evidence for this report suggested neighbourhood planning had significant potential for enhancing the ownership people feel over their local area and defend what they felt was most important to the community. However, it was felt that neighbourhood plans were not currently being used as effectively as they should be and many people weren't aware of them.

Many of the UK's most precious green spaces that serve our communities are protected by national and international law. The network of sites of special

scientific interest (SSSI's), designated under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and the series of protected areas under the EU Wild Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive, are a crucial first line of defence for our green spaces. For many local communities, these laws are the only things that are able to prevent green spaces from being developed; and they are certainly the laws that do most to conserve British biodiversity. This year, the Directives will be reviewed as part of the EU's Regulatory Fitness check. A basic objective for helping communities to manage and improve their public spaces is to ensure that this baseline of protection remains and that the Birds and Habitats Directives are not weakened.

But beyond this, there is currently little protection to existing urban green spaces with no formal designation, even though these are often the spaces that provide the most benefit to local communities.⁴⁸ The local green space designation recently implemented through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in 2012 therefore creates an opportunity. This is the fulfilment of a coalition pledge to "create a new designation – similar to SSSIs – to protect green areas of particular importance to local communities." Yet it is not clear that this provision is currently being well-used. Wildlife and Countryside Link's Nature Check - an assessment of the government's progress against its commitments to the natural environment in England - gave the policy a 'red rating'. They concluded that "protection for these designations under new planning policy is uncertain, with increasing indications that such protections are not a priority."⁴⁹

Yet if used effectively and if communities are made aware of the provision, then this could provide a useful tool. Leicestershire County Council is an example of where the designation is being put to good use through their Green Spaces Toolkit:⁵⁰

"Early in 2011, the county council asked the public to say which local green spaces they particularly valued and why. This was in response to government proposals to create a new designation, to protect green areas of particular importance to local communities.

Areas were identified by communities using an online interactive map-based application and at special sessions run at the 27 Community Forums. Over 2,000 people selected more than 3,000 areas. The highest responses covered areas proposed for housing, such as Whitwick Green, Outwoods, Lubbesthorpe and Brookfield Farm.

The most common land categories people wanted to protect were country parks and woodland; community green spaces, such as village greens; playing fields; open countryside; derelict land; and private land, such as golf courses."⁵¹

The Exeter St James Neighbourhood Plan is another good example of a focus on improving the public realm and green space⁵², with a vision that "St James will be known for its strong community, rich urban character, attractive green streets and spaces and thriving natural environment."⁵³

Both DCLG and the Local Government Association need to raise the profile of neighbourhood planning – particularly in relation to its role in preserving local green spaces – profiling those areas with plans and how they work to

protect current green space. It is also the case that provisions for community involvement and empowerment are most likely to be taken up and made a success of in communities with existing capacity and wherewithal. This is why it is crucial that local authorities, through the Green Partnership Board recommended above, take the lead in preparing inclusive green space strategies and support the development of neighbourhood plans in all communities, not just affluent ones.

CASE STUDY: WE ARE BANKSIDE

'We are Bankside', Southwark, has sought to engage business in its neighbourhood planning. The wider area has seen a considerable amount of regeneration, particularly in the last 15 years, and local communities and businesses have had to face a lot of change in a relatively short space of time. This means the area's development pressures are fairly unique to Southwark.

We Are Bankside is the lead group responsible for producing the neighbourhood plan for Bankside, and its organisation structure revolved around three core themes: the constituency (those who live and work in the area), the neighbourhood forum (those who will steer the production of the plan), and the secretariat (those who oversee the progress on action of the plan). This tiered plan hopes to incorporate the interests and priorities of all its key stakeholders, including the strong residential community, the business community and the strong network of local community organisations e.g. Bankside Open Spaces Trust.

The plan also has its origins in the area's Business Improvement District plans. The priority for engaging business in the plans is manifold: bringing community assets and knowledge to the table, ensuring business works as advocates for the community, and connecting people with what is happening locally.⁵⁴

Local enterprise partnerships

Local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) are sub-regional partnerships between local authorities and businesses, which set local investment priorities for roads, buildings and facilities. They replaced the Labour government's regional development agencies and as Andrew Adonis's Growth Review put it, LEPs are "the regional voice of business". Labour has accepted that LEPs are here to stay and a review by John Healey MP and Les Newby for the Smith Institute concluded that "after a somewhat chaotic start ... LEPs have become more established and important bodies."

Yet as both reviews point out, there remain significant problems with LEPs: they are often geographically haphazard and lack a clear remit, coherent membership and consistent funding. A recent Fabian Society report *In it Together: Labour's new relationship with business*, called for the purpose and goals of the LEPs to be clarified by the next government, and there is a strong opportunity to build in a strategic role for green infrastructure planning into the LEPs remit and broaden the narrow definition of 'economic value' that LEPs, in line with mainstream policymaking, operate on.

In 2014, IPPR set out an assessment framework for LEPs which stated LEPs

should ask: “Does the plan demonstrate an understanding of the economic value of green spaces, and seek to align economic and environmental goals?”⁵⁵ A recent analysis has found “only a few LEPs took a systematic approach to environmental concerns,” with urban areas less likely to do so than rural areas.⁵⁶

The EU Green Infrastructure framework provides strong guidance for how green infrastructure can provide local benefits, saying that “investments are generally characterised by a high level of return over time, provide job opportunities, and can be a cost-effective alternative or be complementary to ‘grey’ infrastructure and intensive land use change. It serves the interests of both people and nature.”⁵⁷

As a recent Fabian Society report put it: “We have reached a point where it is impossible now to talk about sustainable economic growth without talking about environmental sustainability. In a world of finite resources and rapid depletion, a sustainable supply chain is absolutely crucial to long-term profitability of a business.”⁵⁸ Many major businesses are recognising this, such as Unilever, Pepsi Co and Marks and Spencer – it’s time our public policy did the same.

Encouragingly, Labour’s shadow environment secretary Maria Eagle has committed the next Labour government to basing its future policy on the work of the Natural Capital Committee.⁵⁹ LEPs must be at the forefront of a new way of thinking about growth. They have access to considerable amount of funding to promote economic development in their area, both from central government and from the EU. This funding should be used to help address environmental issues affecting the local economy and promote green infrastructure. This could be done by requiring LEPs to consider public benefit and sustainable development in their spending decisions, rather than simply business benefit; and linking part of the LEP budget to recommendations made by Local Nature Partnerships.

Health and wellbeing boards

Increasingly, social policy debate in recent years has been focused on moving ‘upstream’: preventing harms happening in the first place, rather than going through the expensive and cumbersome process of trying to repair the damage after the event.

With local government now responsible for public health, there is a huge opportunity for green space to be promoted, with the potential benefits of the natural environment on health and wellbeing well established (see Box 1). The Health and Social Care Act 2012 created health and wellbeing boards (in operation from 2013) as a forum where key leaders from the health and care system work to improve the health and wellbeing of their local population and reduce health inequalities – encouraging a more joined-up service from the NHS and the local council via the board’s commissioners.

Each top tier authority has a health and wellbeing board, in order to:

- Ensure stronger democratic legitimacy and involvement (involving democratically elected representatives and patient representatives)
- Strengthen working relationships between health and social care
- Encourage the development of more integrated commissioning of services

Minimum standards of board membership have been set centrally, and must include: one local elected representative, a representative from a local Healthwatch organisation (the consumer champion), a representative of each local clinical commissioning group, the local authority's director for adult social services, director for children's services, and director of public health.

The King's Fund has noted that there is wide variation nationally in progress made in health and wellbeing boards establishing themselves as a key local players in different areas of the country. While public health and wellbeing are the highest priorities in the health and wellbeing strategies of most boards, the King's Fund concluded "there is little sign as yet that boards have begun to grapple with the immediate and urgent strategic challenges facing their local health and care systems. Unless they do, there is a real danger that they will become a side show rather than a source of system leadership."⁶⁰

There is therefore a range of issues that needs to be considered by health and wellbeing boards, including broader social and environmental determinants of health, many of which can be influenced positively by interventions in green spaces and the natural environment. Health and wellbeing boards' strategies need to recognise the importance of local green spaces in preventing physical and mental health issues and seek to preserve and enhance these facilities. This is also the case for the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), where local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and other public sector partners set out the health and wellbeing needs of a local area. When these are refreshed every three years, they need to acknowledge and incorporate the green space resources that are available in their area.⁶¹

However, there is more work advocates need to do to ensure green space becomes a priority for health commissioners. While there is plenty of evidence that green space is good for mental and physical health, there is little in the way of evidence of its benefits relative to other public health interventions. In a period of austerity, public health is the language of priorities and at present there is stronger evidence that getting people to stop smoking or drink less will provide greater public health bang for buck. This should be a focus for advocates: to develop a 'wellbeing return on investment' model – similar to social return on investment – which can quantify the likely impact of different interventions and model a notional cost saving to the NHS. This type of work might pave the way to a model of investment similar to that used by the Department for Work and Pensions to fund the Work Programme. This is the so-called 'DEL/AME switch' developed by Lord Freud, where the programme is funded from future benefit savings as people move into work.⁶² If a solid evidence base were developed for the fiscal benefits to the state of 'green space' public interventions, it might pave the way for more social investment in this area.

CASE STUDIES: SOME EXAMPLES OF THE OPPORTUNITIES OF HEALTH

Bristol's 'shadow' health and wellbeing board hosted a stakeholder conference involving board members and other stakeholders such as local universities and third sector representatives, to discuss the board's priorities - while voluntary and community sector organisations held an event to feed into the discussions.

Coventry City Council has incorporated the six themes of the Marmot review on health inequalities⁶³ into its joint health and wellbeing strategy including: giving every child the best start in life; enabling the young to have control over their lives; creating fair employment and good work for all; ensure healthy standard of living for all; create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities; strengthen role and impact of ill health prevention.⁶⁴ The central role of Coventry's outdoor spaces is recognized by the strategy, along with transport, housing, social participation opportunities, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment; communication and information; community support and health services; education and lifelong learning

Camden's health and wellbeing strategy states that

"Prevention is certainly better than cure, so we need people to know how to stay healthy, and for our services and surrounding environments to influence health promotion and to help everyone to look after themselves as well as possible ... With the financial challenges facing the NHS and local government, the health and wellbeing board will provide strategic leadership to promote joined up prevention work, avoid duplication and barriers between services, to be as efficient and effective as possible – none of us can afford to waste resources."

Camden makes a key priority "working together to create an environment which simply helps people to be more active in their day to day lives, as well as supporting attempts to stay fit and healthy, can prevent heart disease and diabetes, and lead to happier lives for people and their communities."^{65 66}

3

ENABLE PARTICIPATION AND CITIZEN CONTROL

New approaches to green space can engage citizens in community life. But volunteers need to feel supported, and effective management of green and open spaces requires a level of skill and experience which is likely to be beyond most volunteers. A partnership between local councils and local communities is crucial. Parish councils; asset trusts; and community organising and development provide the greatest opportunities to rebuild community spirit and ensure the continued viability of green space.

In response to sustained budget pressures, local government is seeking a new modus operandi. As Simon Parker puts it, this is a shift “from a position where it has the primary responsibility for maintaining the public realm to one in which it shared those responsibilities much more fully with communities and business.”⁶⁷ In this context, there are both ‘business’ and philosophical reasons for putting people in charge of their local open spaces. Not only is this a potential way of adapting to the current fiscal landscape, but it provides an opportunity to engage citizens in community life.

But this cannot mean the state simply asking local people to pick up the slack as it recedes from view, a ‘use it or lose it’ approach to open space. Evidence gathered for this report has highlighted the importance of a framework for supporting community involvement. The ‘big society’ agenda explicitly pitted the state and society against each other,⁶⁸ and celebrated localism and the voluntary sector at the same time as it rapidly withdrew support for both. This created the feeling that communities were being left to fend for themselves. The Final Big Society Audit found that people are less likely now to believe they can influence decisions in their local area than previously, and civic participation, consultation and activism have all fallen significantly.⁶⁹

Instead, the state and communities need to work together. There are numerous examples of where citizens are talking the lead, forming friends groups, organising litter picks, taking responsibility for their neighbourhoods. But these are often isolated examples of motivated people going against the grain of current policy and receiving little or no institutional support.

A partnership between local councils and local communities remains key to effective community action. Volunteers need to feel supported, and effective management of green and open spaces requires a level of skill and experience which is likely to be beyond most volunteers. A survey of friends groups conducted by Heritage Lottery Fund found that that council officer’s staff time and advice is the greatest contribution that local authorities currently make to their work. Councils must provide the resources necessary to train and support community volunteers and ensure there is a framework

that sits between local authorities and community groups to support and enable community action. There are a number of opportunities within current institutions and policy frameworks to implement this agenda, to rebuild community spirit and ensure the continued viability of green space. The final section of this report considers some of the options.

Parish councils

Serving areas called ‘civil parishes’, parish councils (just like community/neighbourhood/village/town/city councils), comprise the first tier of local government, operating below the second tier of district/borough councils and unitary authorities. About a third of the English population has a first tier council representing them. Parish councils (and their first tier counterparts) do not receive government funding or business rates: instead, they are funded by a ‘precept’ added to council tax (an extra cost added to householders’ bills). Annual ‘precept’ levels vary between councils, from less than £5000 to over £100,000, and these councils are absolutely responsible for managing their own budgets.

These councils vary in size (with a minimum of 200 electors) and communities can get together to establish a first tier council in their area. However, because of the requirement of ‘precepts’ added to council tax bills, public consultation is required (including a petition with signatures of at least 10 per cent of the local population of the ward given to the local authority), alongside a strong case for the need for a new council (subsequently made at a local authority’s Community Governance Review). The councils comprise elected councillors and a mayor who meet at least four times a year. Being the authority closest to local communities, these councils are elected with a number of responsibilities, including allotments/recreation, bus shelters, play areas, grants to help local organisations; consultation on neighbourhood planning, fixed penalty fines for litter/graffiti/flyposting etc, alongside others.

Parish councils are an example of an institution which can help break down the barriers which often prevent community action. In polling for *Pride of Place*, we found that there is a bedrock of people who like the idea of community action to protect their local environment (71 per cent said it was good, with only 3 per cent bad, 18 per cent thought it neither good nor bad) and who would be willing to get involved (30 per cent were likely to get involved and 30 per cent neither likely nor unlikely). But they require support to turn this into action. When we asked a series of focus groups to design a local environmental project, many came up with the idea of a litter pick or an organised street clean. They felt this was the kind of activity they would have the capacity to do and would make a noticeable impact on the quality of their environment, creating the kinds of safe and attractive public spaces necessary to bring people closer together. What these types of activities require though is someone to take the initiative: what one participant called a “passionate co-ordinator”.

This is the kind of role a parish council could fulfil. They are particularly appropriate as they truly reflect meaningful locality. As the Blue Labour thinker Maurice Glasman points out:

“It is to be remembered that the creation of large borough councils only happened in London in 1964, and that parks were created in

the preceding hundred years within parish councils so that Hackney for example, was previously governed by councils called Shoreditch, Clapton, Stoke Newington, Stamford Hill and Hackney. Each of them had a park. Those political places, and people still say they live in them although they have no civic reality, were wiped out in favour of a politics of scale.”⁷⁰

Glasman says we need “a breakdown of political power in cities to the old parish level, so that specifically local people are responsible for the protection and flourishing of a place that they love.”

There is an ongoing debate about the need for widespread local government reorganisation and the future of two tier government, but little appetite for reinventing the wheel.⁷¹ So in the absence of political will for a ‘top down reorganisation’ of local government structures, parish councils provide an opportunity for a local vision to grow from what is special about a place to the people who live and work there, and to coordinate individuals and groups to support them in whatever action they wish to take. This then needs to connect back to the local authority and Green Partnership Board as the custodian of the local environment, devolving local decision-making and budgets but ensuring that different green spaces remain seen as part of a bigger whole which needs to be coordinated to deliver maximum benefit – from ensuring sports pitches are accessible to people who need them to providing green corridors to support bee pollination.

CASE STUDY: QUEEN’S PARK, NORTH WESTMINSTER

The right for London communities to create parish councils in their area was re-introduced in 2007, after the last London parish council was abolished in the 1930s. In May 2014, residents of Queen’s Park voted for the creation of inner London’s first ever parish council, following a successful Community Governance Review in 2012, and building on a history of community engagement in the area, including QP Community Forum (created in 2003, though funding dried up from 2008) and work with Paddington Development Trust, which first raised the possibility of establishing a parish council.

To create a community council, local residents needed to collect 10 per cent of the ward’s 8,000 registered voters to trigger a governance review – and in 2012, the creation of the parish council was supported by 68 per cent of voters. In 2014 the parish council elected 12 councillors: it now has its own Neighbourhood Planning committee and runs a range of different events each month, engaging the local community with canal clearing, bulb planting and organising the annual Queen’s Park Festival. The council also supports the ‘Community Champions’, a scheme established to encourage and recognise local volunteering.

With a population of 12,750, Queen’s Park ranks as one of London’s most deprived wards, with high levels of unemployment and deprivation, made up of 70 per cent social housing. As such the parish council’s priorities are to help vulnerable residents (especially the old and isolated), provide activities for young people (including maintaining Avenues Youth Centre), working with local police to improve community safety and cleanliness, and helping people access local jobs by providing business links and training workshops.⁷²

Asset Trusts

CABE Space's 2006 report *Paying for Parks* noted endowments as one of eight potential models for funding urban green spaces. Endowments, it notes, provide long term funding for green spaces from the interest gained on investments in assets such as property (generating rental income) or the stock market (generating interest).

The benefits of this are manifold. Endowments placed in a trust provide steady and secure income which can be supplemented by other sources of funding, while financial risks can be spread across a range of investments. One of the further benefits of a trust model is that it is absolutely focused on managing green spaces to the highest possible quality and has no other competing interests – furthermore, all income stays within the trust. However, the initial endowment needs to be big enough to yield the necessary income, and securing such a large asset may be beyond most organisations. Furthermore, managing the investment requires considerable financial expertise, which may not be available in the local authority.

As NESTA's Rethinking Parks project outlines, local funding of parks can be temperamental in the present day. While most local authorities have well-established budgets for parks maintenance and improvement, like any other discretionary service, these are subject to fluctuation as a result of political priorities, cost-saving exercises and competing demands for other services.

As such, there is a growing interest to improve the stability of annual funding by endowments, property assets and investment portfolios, held by park management organisations. Endowments have been used for decades by the National Trust: but the establishment of endowments to fund long-term management tends to be harder and therefore less popular than securing short term capital for initial construction.

Our land needs to be seen as an asset to be used for the long-term benefit of local communities. Community Land Trusts (CLTs) originated in the USA, most famously the Champlain Housing Trust in Burlington, Vermont. Here the council transferred vacant land and buildings to a new community-led body. Steve Bendle and Pat Conaty have detailed for the Fabian Society the emergence in the UK of a CLT movement that could provide an example of how to support community ownership without overly burdensome demands of responsibility being placed on citizens:

“At High Bickington in Devon, county council land has been developed to provide affordable homes, workspaces, a community centre and homes for sale. No payment for the land was made up front but on completion the CLT should deliver a payment of £0.75 million and retain £0.25 million as a legacy. And in Scotland, land reform legislation has enabled communities to buy back their freeholds and reverse years of decline. Trusts in control of the islands of Gigha and Eigg have increased housebuilding, installed community wind power, revived local businesses and as a result increased school rolls and saved local schools.”⁷³

Oldham's Co-operative Council shows how this might be applied to the local environment. The Fulwood Nature Reserve, for example, was handed over to a community group, which allowed it to use grant funding to refurbish the reserve and install community gardens, allotments, and sports facilities for local people to use.⁷⁴

CASE STUDIES

MILTON KEYNES PARKS TRUST⁷⁵

Following the dissolution of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation in 1992, £18.5 million of property assets held by the corporation were transferred to the new Parks Trust along with the ownership of 4500 acres of green space.

The Parks Trust now has an asset base of around £70 million consisting mainly of commercial property and stock market investments, growing its asset base with careful stewardship, and spending only the income generated by the assets, leaving the capital intact. It also generates revenue from the use of its estate.

Unlike a local authority, the trust is not able to generate income via local taxation, and so long term financial planning is essential.

NATIONAL TRUST: SHEFFIELD ENDOWMENT FUND⁷⁶

The endowment model aims to achieve a collaborative approach to funding, providing city-scale solutions for financial problems, and giving cities control of action. The model aims to generate £100 million to fund the city's parks in perpetuity (£5 million per year), and is city-wide to avoid unequal quality of parks within a single area.

The main sources of potential income for the endowment are:

- Health and wellbeing spending
- Eco-system services, for example flood risk, air quality, sustainable transport
- Philanthropists/high net worth individuals
- Mass public giving - public subscriptions, for example Sheffield Heeley Community Trust has £10 annual subscriptions
- Corporates / businesses

The National Trust are particularly interested in prioritising new social enterprise over traditional municipal management, enabling community engagement, as opposed to traditional management models which are less responsive to investors, or users of park services.

Community organising and development

In the initial version of the 'big society', the gap between the state and society that would support individual action was supposed to be filled by 'intermediate institutions' – churches, friendly societies, charities. However, as Max Wind Cowie notes, this was usurped by "a relentless focus on individuals going out and doing great things ... the isn't-it-great-when-everyone-picks-up-litter approach."⁷⁷

The evidence gathered for this report identified the problem that community effort generally requires paid support, to coordinate it, to train people and to reward their efforts, and to help people 'step up' to take more active roles if they want to. This supports the findings of *Pride of Place* which suggested that while people were often willing to get involved in social action

they often didn't have the capacity to take the initiative.

The UK has a long history of community development, where agencies and voluntary groups work closely with communities to help them take action in their local area. There is also currently a great deal of interest in community organising which, according to Citizens UK, is "based on the principal that when people work together they have the power to change their neighbourhoods, cities, and ultimately the country for the better". The idea is to listen to specific local concerns and then use trained community leaders to coordinate action and empower communities.

There is an increasingly important role that political parties could play here, and there have been some moves within the Labour party to refocus its activities away from door knocking and vote harvesting towards a focus on building community power, instigated by the Chicago community organiser Arnie Graf. Fabian polling in 2012 found the thing that would make those currently disengaged from politics most likely to vote at the next election would be "if people in political parties spent less time trying to win my vote and more time doing good work in my neighbourhood".⁷⁸ *Pride of Place* recommended that environmental groups could also do more to facilitate community action and were well placed to act as an 'intermediate institution'.

All organisations, from central and local government to NGOs and grant giving bodies must be looking at making community organising and development central to their plans for the UK's green spaces. In our evidence, a range of stakeholders made clear that this was regarded as absolutely critical to unlocking and coordinating social action with respect to local environments, particularly in areas with greatest need where, typically, existing community infrastructure and capacity is least well developed.

As the case study below shows, the Heritage Lottery Fund includes funding for a paid community development worker in most of their projects, to ensure that investment helps to build strong community support. As evidence submitted by Groundwork put it:

"In the case of local environments there is an untapped opportunity to build on a desire among people to have a say in how their open spaces are planned, designed, looked after and used. The support needed is a mixture of inspiring and mobilising people to act, providing practical 'start-up' support to help people take their first steps in becoming organised and then to provide an 'escalator' to enable those groups with most ambition and energy to engage more actively with local authorities and others who are seeking to devolve power, responsibility, ownership and budgets to a more local level."

The co-operative council model encourages councillors themselves to act more in this way, as 'community champions' who lead people through the process of taking more responsibility rather than sitting in meetings to decide what things to do for them. In Oldham, councillors are required to take training in local leadership to help them develop the skills and knowledge to work effectively with communities.⁷⁹

CASE STUDIES

MYATT'S FIELDS PARK IN THE LONDON BOROUGH OF LAMBETH

Myatt's received a Heritage Lottery Fund grant of over £1.5 million towards a regeneration of this historic park in 2005. The project has been community-led and includes the refurbishment of greenhouses run by the community which grow food for a café which is also run by the community. The HLF project critically included funding for a community development officer who was embedded in the local community and has worked with the incredibly diverse local audience to develop the park. Whilst the site is still owned and managed by Lambeth Council, it has been used as an exemplar of how, if a community is supported initially, it can become an integral part of delivering green space.

COMMUNITY ORGANISERS, LOCALITY⁸⁰

An outcome of the coalition government's 'big society' plans, the Community Organisers programme is a national training programme in community organising and a grassroots movement for social action. The formal programme ends in 2015, upon which a 'legacy' programme, Community Organisers Ltd (a member-led training and support organisation) will be established.

Locality community organisers are hosted in funded organisations and are paid £20,000 for their first year: they may then go on to do the job professionally or voluntarily. Locality estimates that since 2011, the programme has engaged with over 150,000 residents, supported over 4000 volunteers, worked with over 150 hosts, supported over 1500 community projects, worked in 400 neighbourhoods, and recruited over 540 community organisers.

However, the scheme has been criticized for operating on a vastly reduced scale to its original conception of 5000 full-time organisers. Also, the BBC reported that "some organisers complain that the approach can be rather too "one-size-fits-all"⁸¹.

LOVE PARKS⁸²

The year-long Love Parks Programme has been developed by Keep Britain Tidy (KBT) as an extension of the annual Love Parks Week campaign (originally created by GreenSpace), promoting and celebrating the UK's Parks and Green Spaces. As more local authorities are pulling back vital park services, Love Parks recognises and celebrates the work done by Friends Groups and volunteers in maintaining them.

Financed by the Big Lottery Fund, the programme focuses on upskilling and networking the many park community volunteer groups across the country. Area forums, bringing together groups within local areas, will provide a hub within which training and skills can be delivered through the programme, whilst allowing groups to share case studies of good practice and innovation to assist both new and established park communities. The principle aim is to enable these volunteer groups to become sustainable and equip them to provide quality support for parks.

Through the Love Parks programme, volunteers and community groups will be able to enhance the contribution they make to the maintenance and management of our parks and green spaces, working alongside park managers to ensure everyone continues to have access to this great, free resource. Love Parks aims to challenge the status quo and create a national network of volunteers and a campaigning voice for the thousands of friends groups across the country.

As of March 2015, the programme covers almost 2500 parks, engaging over 1000 Friends Groups and almost 1200 registered volunteers, while Love Parks Week has previously engaged over 1.4m people nationwide.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the last parliament, environmental issues have been hidden from political view. The hopeful spirit of the early 21st century, which saw making poverty history and securing the world from the threat of climate change as the defining challenges of a generation, has been submerged by the more prosaic politics of recession and recovery. *Pride of Place* showed that people do care deeply about their local environments and there is a resonant spirit to conserve the places we love. But along with the rest of the environmental agenda, as we enter what is likely to be a grueling election campaign there is a lack of political urgency around the crisis our green spaces face over the course of the next parliament.

This report has tried to show there are good political, economic and social reasons for the next government to prioritise the enhancement of our parks, woodland, and our green and natural spaces. They are multifunctional, their benefits legion. But too great an emphasis on their value to utilitarian public policy risks undermining the fact that they are intrinsically valuable in themselves as public institutions and community assets; for the wonder they inspire, the friendships they support and the memories they create.

In order for them to remain viable in the 21st century, we need to think anew: about how to support people to do more for the places they care about; for local councils to do things differently and find new and innovative ways of co-ordinating services; and for central government to give clearer leadership and organise better. This is an agenda that reforms the state, by necessity in line with current fiscal conditions, and by design in line with the growing recognition that previous governments have relied too heavily on state delivery and not always appreciated the power of community action.

There are many different solutions currently being trialed. But it is not simply a case of finding a way of managing land at the lowest public cost. The way we approach green space has huge consequences for the society we wish to create. We conclude this report with a checklist, a set of principles to guide reform that preserves their status as public assets, maximises democratic engagement and helps create a popular environmentalism that is about community, neighbourhood and fellowship.

PRINCIPLES FOR DEMOCRATIC GREEN SPACES

Local difference must be respected: outstanding examples of innovation respond to specific local circumstance and characteristics

But isolated examples of innovation need coordination: we need ways to scale up individual examples of good practice that are applicable elsewhere

The public character of green space must be preserved: this does not preclude private sector involvement, but means it must be consistent with a strong public ethos. New developments should increase the size of the public realm and access to green space, not diminish it

Equality of access: public space must not be the preserve of the affluent, and reform must prioritise the engagement of underrepresented groups

Developing a shared civic vision: we should seek to rekindle the civic identity that created the parks

Participation and citizen control: enabling people to take control of their own green spaces can build community spirit and respond to budget pressures

Prevention: the health benefits of access to green spaces are well established and should be promoted at a time when local government has public health responsibility

ENDNOTES

- 1 National Audit Office, *Enhancing Urban Green Space* (2006)
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- 4 Heritage Lottery Fund, *State of UK Parks* (2014)
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PLACES TO BE |

GREEN SPACES FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Ed Wallis

Our green spaces more than ever provide a crucial community ballast, where we can come together, build relationships and reverse society's long-term journey towards individualism and isolation. These are the places - be it a large park, a small play area, woodland or waterway - where people walk their dogs, greet their neighbours, play with their children; they are where we go to take exercise or take time to reflect.

But they are increasingly under threat. Central government funding for local authorities has fallen by around 40 per cent, leaving councils without the means to adequately maintain facilities or engage with local people. Spending on parks is predicted to be reduced by 60 per cent by 2020.

So the next government is going to have to find ways of keeping our green, outdoor spaces open to all during an extended period of austerity. But it's going to have to do more than this: it needs to make them accessible arenas for active citizenship. There is an opportunity to manage our green space in such way that empowers citizens, bolsters people's sense of place and encourages democratic engagement.

FABIAN RESEARCH REPORT

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