

30TH September 2016

RESPONSE TO THE COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE INQUIRY ON PUBLIC PARKS

FROM THE LONDON PARKS AND GARDENS TRUST (LPGT)

1. About LPGT

The London Parks and Gardens Trust is a county Garden Trust affiliated to a national body, The Gardens Trust – the statutory consultee for planning applications relating to registered parks and gardens.

LPGT was set up in 1994 and has 400 members – amateurs and professionals – who provide and enjoy lectures walks, day trips, children's programmes, a newsletter and journal, research and an inventory of historic green spaces. LPGT aims to increase knowledge and appreciation of parks, squares, community gardens, cemeteries, churchyards – all those places that form London's open space network.

LPGT undertakes research, assessing the significance of green spaces in London and creating an Inventory. It has made this resource available through London Gardens Online (<http://www.londongardenonline.org.uk>) providing public access to a wealth of information on over 2,500 parks, gardens, squares, churchyards, cemeteries and other sites of historic interest across London. Criteria for inclusion on the Inventory are those sites whose history dates back at least 30 years and are of significance for their design, landscaping or social history. Many of London's parks and gardens, churchyards and squares are very well known but there are legions of hidden secrets only known to their local communities, and tracking these down has been part of the remit of the Inventory

LPGT has run for the last 19 years the Open Garden Squares Weekend. This is a ticketed event in June opening private, secret and little-known gardens in a single weekend for public enjoyment and discovery. Over the last 3 years, the event has attracted 60,000 visitors who have made over 150,000 individual garden visits over 6 days (3 weekends).

The Board is made up of a variety of leading professionals in the field of Landscape Architecture and Gardens. The joint Chairs of our Planning Panel who lead on responses to planning applications across London are practising Landscape Architects from LDA-Design. The Chair is Ed Ikin, Wakehurst Head of Landscape and Horticulture at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. LPGT is run on an entirely voluntary basis, reliant on income generation from sponsorship and membership contributions, with the support of 4 part-time employees (equating to approximately 2FTE).

2. Feedback to the Inquiry

The short timescale for sourcing evidence has restricted the amount of research LPGT can commission and deliver, nonetheless the Trust welcomes this opportunity to share the information it has gathered. Focusing on the questions raised by the Inquiry LPGT notes the following:

1. Who uses parks and open spaces, how often and for what?

The instructions for the Inquiry do not define public parks. London Gardens Online defines Public Parks as: Publicly-accessible municipal parks and royal parks, includes public golf courses. There are a further 8 categories for describing green space on London Gardens Online, of which the following may also be relevant:

- Garden Squares: Garden enclosure (usually private/communal) surrounded by housing on at least 3 sides; includes garden squares now publicly accessible.

- Institutional Grounds: Landscaped grounds of institutions including school, college, hospital, former asylum, prison etc.
- Public Gardens: Publicly-accessible gardens, includes former burial grounds/churchyards converted to public gardens, garden of public building e.g. town hall, library etc.; and
- Public Open Land: includes commons, greens, heaths, woodland, nature reserves, river or canalside landscaping, and some cycleways.

In other words, Public Parks are made up of a rich mix of different types of landscape and ownership. For the purposes of this response, LPGT has chosen to confine its comments to essentially the same areas that were also selected by Locality in its report on Community Ownership and Management of parks and greenspaces (COMA) <http://mycommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/COMA-parks-and-green-spaces.pdf>

COMA in its 2016 report reviewed options for community ownership and management of parks and greenspaces and noted that the contents related to “urban parks, country parks, playing fields, woodlands, green spaces between buildings, food growing areas, footpaths and orchards, as well as towpaths, and land on estates”.

“Public Parks” is therefore shorthand, in this response, for what could more accurately be termed both environmental and social assets that offer free opportunities for leisure time for all.

Public parks are open to all, in some cases all day, every day. Parks play a vital role in people’s health and wellbeing, ecosystem services and biodiversity in our city. This is well documented and established. Parks contribute to our Capital city’s identity as one of the greenest and pleasant cities in the world and it contributes to London’s high ranking in the World City liveability indexes.

Evidence, through many park-user surveys for individual parks over the years has shown that most parks are visited frequently (at least once a week) by those living closest (5-10 minute walking range). Depending on the type of park, its location and the facilities, the age range of the users will vary – parks are in particular a favoured outing for those with young children (pre-school, nursery and primary school age) for informal play whether with or without playgrounds.

2. The contribution of parks to the health and well-being of communities

The contribution made to health and well being is well documented and accepted, so references given in other submissions are not repeated here. Obesity is on the increase, and in London with increasing density of population, and those on low income, parks are an essential ingredient to encourage healthy and active lifestyles.

Parks are also contributors to many other factors, as outlined previously, including biodiversity, flood mitigation, as well as economic and social (including providing educational opportunities).

Direct Economic Impacts

‘Visit Britain’ recognises the value of public parks, for the social, reputational and financial benefit that they bring to the country – the Royal Parks in central London are a key component to Tourist visits to the UK and hence a contributor to GDP.

As well as bringing in funding, there is also evidence of increasing the potential for tax through increased values. Studies in the early 2000’s in the US attempted to show that property values are increased by being close to well-maintained green spaces. In a paper by Sarah Nicholls (2001) (<http://www.massland.org/files/MeasuringImpactParksonPropertyValues.pdf>) she states:

“analyses suggest that [parks and] open spaces may have substantial positive impacts on surrounding property values and hence, the property tax base, providing open space advocates with convincing arguments in favor of open space designation and preservation that can be backed up with actual, dollar impacts.”

She goes on to say:

“In no case ... has an open space [or park] been found to have a negative impact on surrounding property values, though evidence does suggest that factors including topography, visual attractiveness, recreational opportunities provided, and the availability of other open spaces in the area, may reduce the positive impact of individual amenities in some cases.”

Educational opportunities

Parks, allotments and other publicly accessible spaces frequently provide children from deprived backgrounds in London with their earliest (and frequently only) contact with nature and it is worth comparing this with other publically accessible education and amenity 'services' as to their inclusivity, popularity, and value for money. Of course you cannot compare such things exactly, but it gives a small indication of what good value for money parks are, considering the numbers that use them.

Visit numbers for the South Bank Centre are 5.1 million per year, a freely accessible public building, while the British Museum as the top visitor 'attraction' in the UK 6.8 attracts million visits. Of course both these places rely heavily on tourists for their visitor numbers. Victoria Park in the east end, has more than double the visitors, and they are mainly local based on park-user surveys. These figures show the importance of parks to people, and how their visitor numbers in London stack up against some of the nations other most popular 'free' at the point of access, amenities and educational institutions.

3. The impact of reductions in local authority budgets on parks are many and varied.

Others including the HLF's 'State of Parks' and the National Federation of Parks and Greenspaces have already commented on this. We concur with their conclusions that cuts in Local Authority budgets are having a devastating effect on Public Parks. Many parks are looking for ways to generate income but this will come at a price.

We are aware of the following ideas that have been contemplated as a means to generate funding:

- One local park in Lambeth is considering amongst other revenue generating strategies whether to knock down the current one-storey café and rebuild it on the same footprint to 4 stories with either residential or office units either to let or sell – this would be the first time the park had a multi-storey building developed since its inception in the 1890's, in area of significant open space deficiency and adjacent a major development opportunity area which has seen the population increase substantially over the last decade.
- Battersea Park has offered paid for play services to replace the once free adventure playground – this has met with fierce opposition as it has excluded locally deprived families.
- The pressure on parks to create income means that we have seen sites permanently or temporarily compartmentalised to facilitate events and other income generation facilities. ('temporary' can mean for 9+ months a year, in the recent case in an application for use of WCC's Victoria Embankment Gardens). Battersea Park and Kennington Park have used their premises for large paid for events – examples include Oktoberfest; and Formula E. Although most are only for a short period of time, they still take away vital amenity space for quiet relaxation for free. Commercialisation also often results in initially 'unseen' damage – eg compaction to trees, vehicle wear and tear on park drives, paths and damage to soil structure, and drainage. These are all long term effects often not easy to quantify therefore difficult to cover by bonds.
- With increased pressure on budgets and outsourcing of park maintenance, there has been a 'downskilling' of expertise. As a result parks are reporting losses of biodiversity interest. This combined with the compartmentalisation of parks for ease of management results in the quality of the landscape being lost. Designed views, or use of crucial features, (lakes, bandstands, large designed expanses of grass, vistas to heritage assets, statues) are interrupted by a clutter of railings, designed to enforce the pay barrier. Whether you can afford to attend the temporary event or not, the quality of the landscape is spoilt for all.
- In 2015 Bexley put forward a list of green space sites for potential sale (<http://www.bexley.gov.uk/article/18839/Possible-sale-of-open-spaces-and-green-highway-sites>). In 2016 they agreed to sell Bexley's Old Farm Park.

LPGT considers that it is not just local authority cuts that are having a devastating impact but also development pressures. There is insufficient protection of the significance of green open space within the planning system, which has resulted in developments that overshadow and impact on the amenity value of parks, with insufficient quality new green space being offered to compensate for increased population density. In London there has also been an agreement by Local Authorities to surrender greenspace (mostly on a lengthy 'temporary basis') for major infrastructure projects such as Crossrail or the Northern Line Extension to enable infrastructure which supports the increased developmental demands.

4. What the administrative status of parks should be in light of declining local authority resources for non-statutory services

The Trust does not have a particular view on this but would draw attention to the following reports:

- In the 2003 DCLG report 'Living Spaces: Cleaner Safer Greener' the conclusions of that select committee 'recommended that local authorities should be given a new statutory duty'.
- In 'Rethinking Parks' NESTA came up with a variety of suggestions for ways of raising income for parks.
- COMA have more recently published consideration of when Community Ownership and Management can work in Parks.

Parks and open green spaces can be managed and owned by a variety of different mechanisms, as identified in our opening statement about the different categories of parks and gardens in London. LPGT believes that Local Authority management can be very effective, (and has been so for a long time for many parks).

What is clear is that the current assessment of the 'value' of parks both in planning legislation and also in considerations about the need for public expenditure do not take sufficient account of the (currently invisible) contribution public parks provide to health and wellbeing, and the consequent savings that are delivered for other budgets. Despite increased research in this field over the last 20 years, to monetize the value of this invisible contribution (some of which is referred to in this response), there is a reluctance of governmental organizations to accept the true worth of public parks.

5. How new and existing parks can best be supported.

New Space

We encourage the creation of any new green space for public enjoyment, education and environmental benefits. As the London Infrastructure Plan 2050 section 7 page 25 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/business-and-economy/better-Infrastructure/london-infrastructure-plan-2050>) notes, with London's population growing at the rate it is, there is a need for "10% more green cover in central London and town centres" and that means "an extra 900 hectares of accessible greenspace is needed". At present London is considered 11th on the Green City Index (Section 7 p 12) with a note that a failure to invest will result in "diminished quality of life". LPGT supports this view.

LPGT considers that it is important not only to create new green space but also to make sure that it is of the highest quality. In creating new green space, where Development Opportunity Areas are concerned we would urge a rethink on the allocation of that space at the outset of any agreed masterplan, rather than leaving it to individual developers to agree small pocket park areas that are disjointed and have insufficient horticultural value, biodiversity, access to light and other consequently health benefits. New green space of high horticultural and social value should be given a greater weight in terms of planning-gain offset in the financial viability assessment which accompanies planning applications. At present no differentiation is made between, hard landscaped public realm and green space that will provide full public access and health, environmental and other social benefits. Built into planning arrangements should be long-term ringfenced maintenance costs, with appropriate service level agreements, and fines for failing to deliver on those specifications. The concept of payment by accessibility rather than recouperating costs by exclusivity would be worth exploring as part of planning gain arrangements.

Existing Space

Possible models that have been suggested to LPGT which merit further consideration include:

- Voluntary / or mandatory local tax increases for residents within (say) 300m radius of a park, to be implemented when Council tax reviews are undertaken.
- where parks are at the edge of one authority (and paid for solely by them) but adjacent to others they should receive a mandatory contribution from the other boroughs adjacent. Eg Crystal Palace Park; Grade 2* registered, which has 5 boroughs bordering it, but is only funded by one. Understandably, it is not a high funding priority for them, as it doesn't serve a high proportion of its residents.
- An additional private property developer 'park tax' when private developers will benefit from higher profits where their developments are in easy reach/overlooking an existing park that they have not created or contribute to the making of.
- a certain % of stamp duty for all properties within 500m of an existing park could be ringfenced for statutory funding of parks, paid to all LAs via central govt.
- A '% for parks' increase in taxes. Voluntary or mandatory. This model was put to tax payers in Seattle, USA during the last decade, and voters voted in favour of this tax increase at the ballot box.

- Enable S106 money which goes into funding capital works to be put into a LA 'Parks Maintenance Trust or fund, instead of being required to be solely spent on capital projects which often cannot be maintained due to the subsequent lack of revenue funding.

6. What additional or alternative funding is available and what scope is there for local authorities to generate revenue from park users

See responses to previous questions. Others such as NESTA and HLF have better evidence of what can work.

7. What the advantages and disadvantages are of other management models, such as privatisation, outsourcing or mutualisation

The Trust does not directly manage parks and green spaces and therefore can not contribute evidence to this question.

LPGT would welcome a further opportunity to respond to any of the contents and provide oral evidence as needed, should this be helpful to the Committee.

Helen Monger, Director

On behalf of the Board for the London Parks and Gardens Trust