

The Future of Public Parks – Submission from London Borough of Haringey

1. Introduction

Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and other leading parks groups are in agreement that parks and open spaces across the UK are under threat. A recent report from the HLF suggests that ongoing budget cuts are having a drastic impact on resources and Parks Services across the country are struggling to maintain, let alone improve their sites.

In submitting this response Haringey Council wishes to:

- Demonstrate how its Parks Service has and is continuing to proactively address these budget;
- Highlight how it is securing long term funding for parks and open spaces;
- Encourage the Inquiry to recognise the important role parks play in creating healthy, happy, inclusive societies; and
- Reinforce the financial benefit of well maintained parks in reducing spending on Public Health and other essential services.

Haringey is a relatively green borough with over 940 acres of parks and open spaces. Haringey Council manages and provides grounds maintenance for the vast majority of the borough's public open space; notable exceptions include Alexandra Park, Highgate Woods and Tottenham Marshes.

Twenty two sites managed by the council have achieved Green Flag Award status (4th highest borough in London) and annual visitor numbers across Haringey total over 13.5 million. The types of parks and open spaces in the borough are varied and include historic woodland such as Coldfall Wood and Queens Wood. Large 'destination' sites like Finsbury Park borders three London boroughs, attracting visitors from across the capital and smaller local parks such as Fairland Park provide open space and play facilities for young families in one of the more densely populated parts of Haringey.

The borough's Parks Service has continued to provide spaces which are well used and much loved by Haringey's residents. The borough's Open Space Strategy makes a commitment to 'enrich the quality of life for everyone in Haringey by working in partnership to provide safe, attractively designed, well used, well maintained open spaces for the benefit and enjoyment of the whole community.' A 2015 customer satisfaction survey conducted by the Council found that 84% of respondents were 'very satisfied or satisfied' with the borough's parks, suggesting that currently the service is achieving those aims.

However, as the recently updated Heritage Lottery Fund's *The State of UK Parks* report confirms, further financial challenges are predicted by almost all local authorities. Park managers along with the entire spectrum of park users are concerned that we are about to reach breaking point with regard to financial cutbacks and that the terminal decline of our parks and open spaces will inevitably follow.

Recent history shows us that if this proves to be the case the knock on effect will be felt throughout society. If parks and open spaces remain underfunded they gradually change from being the most socially inclusive, democratic places in our towns and cities to becoming magnets for anti social behaviour, where large sections of our communities, particularly the very young and the very old, feel unsafe and excluded. If this happens it will undoubtedly lead to additional demand being placed on other areas of our social infrastructure; public health, the police, social services, education to name just a few.

It is for these reasons that Haringey Council welcomes the DCLG inquiry. The comments below are based on conversations with Cabinet Members, Council Officers, Haringey Parks Friends Groups and residents, all of whom were consulted in order to produce a response that reflects the views of both the Council and parks users.

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

Parks are perhaps the only truly democratic spaces found within our towns and cities. In their 1994 report *Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal*, urban theorists Comedia found that park users represented a wider cross section of population in terms of age, ethnicity and income than almost any other public leisure facility. This is certainly still the case in a borough with as diverse a population as Haringey where two thirds of residents are from non white British Ethnic Groups. Haringey Council has committed to building strong communities where all residents can live healthy, independent and fulfilling lives. The provision of well maintained and safe local parks is seen as essential to promoting this kind of community cohesion.

It is the somewhat contradictory nature of parks, public spaces that provide a place to find privacy and tranquillity, which makes them so important in today's increasingly populous cities. In an area like Haringey with large numbers of properties on estates and an increasing number in multiple occupancy results in a significant number of residents who do not have access to a garden and therefore are reliant on our parks.

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

One of Haringey Council's key priorities as highlighted in its Corporate Plan is to ensure residents live 'healthy, long and fulfilling lives'. The condition of Britain's health regularly makes headlines with issues such as childhood obesity and rising rates of heart disease often featuring on the front pages of our newspapers. Health professionals are increasingly recognising access to open space as playing a crucial role in enabling people to adopt healthier lifestyles.

In recent weeks The British Medical Journal has published evidence that 'Green Prescriptions' can 'improve a patient's quality of life over 12 months and help people live longer, healthier lives.' In New Zealand, where Green Prescribing began in 1998, 72% of respondents noticed positive changes to their health and 51% felt stronger and fitter.

Haringey's parks make a huge contribution to the health and well being of the borough. Five of our sites have free to use outdoor gyms which are extremely popular with residents of all ages. There are an array of sports clubs and teams based in our parks, from tennis to Gaelic football. Finsbury Park is home to the London Mets baseball team who play on the capital's only purpose built baseball diamond and provide free youth coaching to children from Haringey as well as neighbouring Islington and Hackney.

However, Haringey residents are on average less physically active than comparator London boroughs and the Council is working hard to address this issue. Initiatives such as 'Haringey Walks', led jointly by the Council's Parks and Public Health services, promote the benefits of regular exercise, identifying walking in this case as the 'simplest form of free exercise'. 'If more residents become regularly active there will be less demand placed on other local authority services such as Public Health and Adult Services.

3. The impact of reductions in local authority budgets on parks

In common with almost all local authority Parks Services, Haringey has been subjected to budget reductions in recent years, which has resulted in the loss of half of our full time parks maintenance staff since 2011. The service has the third lowest net spend in London. As a consequence the operating model has had to change with a greater focus on raising revenue through our events in parks, being more efficient and effective, working more closely with the Friends of Parks and by successfully working with partners to secure over the past 12 years £33m of third party funding. As a consequence of this approach since 2011 the Council has increased its number of Green Flag parks from 16 to 22.

Alternative models

Haringey's Parks Service is acutely aware of the need to adapt in order to safeguard the future of our parks in the current financial climate. There is no current desire, however, to shift to alternative operating models. Instead, the Council is working to address the challenges by amongst other things:

- Increasing income generation
- Pursuing efficiency savings
- Trialling a landscape strategy based on less maintenance heavy horticultural approaches
- Working with the Community Payback service to carry out tasks that our own team are unable to do.

As previously noted as well as saving money we are also generating income through our parks which is then spent on maintenance and improving existing infrastructure. One way of achieving this is by hosting events in parks. By allowing the music festivals to be held in Finsbury Park for the last three years the Parks Service has generated funds to reinvest in the park. This year has seen over £200,000 spent on upgrading the ball court area, park users now have free access to eight basketball courts, three volleyball courts a badminton court and outdoor table tennis facilities. In addition more than £105,000 has been invested improving the lighting at the athletics track and gym areas, allowing users to feel safer after dark. The money that has been received from the events hosted in parks across the council has been essential in helping the Council achieve one of its main priorities to enable people to feel safe and proud of where they live and work.

The additional income streams have been welcomed to support the parks infrastructure and will need to be maintained to prevent regular park users experiencing a decline in standards. The Friends of Queens Wood, one of three historic woodland areas in Haringey, shared their opinions regarding the key issues looked at by this enquiry. In doing so they commented on the 'deterioration in the standards of maintenance' in the wood, particularly the state of the paths. If reduced budgets result in delayed maintenance work, some parks may be perceived as inaccessible to certain users, particularly older or less mobile residents. This in turn could have a negative impact on the Council's healthy lifestyle initiatives and in the long term place a greater strain on our Public Health teams.

We also received feedback from the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces who suggested that the lack of investment in Parks Services experienced in recent years, also

occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. They expressed concern that the resultant decline in standards, whilst gradual at first, eventually led to many parks becoming hot spots for anti social behaviour, vandalism and crime. If this process is allowed to happen the problematic behaviour experienced within the park inevitably spills out into the surrounding streets meaning whole areas are perceived as no go zones by large parts of the community.

Despite all the financial pressures that parks services across the country have been forced to endure, Haringey's experience is that by seeking further efficiencies and targeting income generation Parks can still be improved.

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

In Haringey there is a shared belief not just amongst Parks officers but also the Council and its Cabinet that the Parks service has the right plans in place to continue to maintain its parks and open spaces to a standard that enhances the lives of all of our residents. The inquiry will undoubtedly receive large numbers of submissions recommending that Parks departments should become a statutory service and whilst we recognise that this would be beneficial in some areas where parks are underfunded and underperforming, in Haringey the ability to deliver our plans unencumbered by a 'one size fits all' template is the preferred way forward.

If parks became a statutory service it would be up to central government to set a benchmark standard to be provided by local authorities. If that benchmark is set too low and budgets continue to be squeezed then Parks Services may be forced to deliver the bare minimum, which could result in the deterioration of sites in currently well maintained areas, rather than improvement across the board as is hoped. There is also concern that a statutory service could make it more difficult for local authorities to enter into partnerships with third parties that can result in better management of parks and improved facilities for users. Specific examples of such partnerships that have worked in Haringey will be discussed in the sections below.

5. How new and existing parks can best be supported

A more efficient Parks service

As already mentioned Haringey's Parks service is taking a proactive approach to addressing the challenges created by continuing budget pressures. The combination of working more efficiently whilst pursuing greater levels of income generation has enabled the

service to absorb the impact of the cuts it has faced and continue to maintain its sites to the standard our parks users have come to expect. In order to take this approach a step further the service has undertaken a project called 'More Than Parks' which intends to make the Parks department a more effective service by 2020.

In order to achieve this further efficiencies and increased income opportunities will be sought. The Landscape Strategy referred to earlier is being trialled in Downhills Park which if successful will reduce maintenance costs but simultaneously create a more attractive site for park users. By replacing the traditional seasonal bedding plants which are found in most of our parks with hardier perennials, not only will savings be achieved due to reduced maintenance requirements but the borders and beds in which they are planted will look more colourful all year round.

Local collaboration

In addition the Landscape Strategy also provides opportunities to engage with Friends Groups and volunteers. Certain areas of the park have been earmarked for specific projects such as the creation of food growing areas and an orchard. Voluntary organisations such as The Conservation Trust (TCV) and GroundWork will be approached with a view to contributing both in terms of fund raising, volunteer hours and ultimately to oversee the successful implementation of the project.

In addition to the approach outlined above, the Parks Service have developed partnerships with a number of third party stakeholders that have led to significant improvements to parks facilities and encouraged more residents to engage with those sites. In Albert Road Recreation Ground a formally disused pavilion building has been turned into a thriving cafe and focal point of what is now one of the borough's best loved parks. In 2003 the pavilion was leased to a local resident, initially for a peppercorn rent. Having made improvements to the building to make it a suitable site for a cafe the lessee approached the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) and secured funding to refurbish the park's tennis courts, adding new junior courts and eventually brand new lighting to allow for evening coaching sessions all year round. The park, which once had a reputation as a crime hotspot and was seen as off limits by many locals, is now one of the busiest in the borough.

The role of volunteering

Transforming parks in this way often instils a sense of pride among the local community and the increasing number of Parks Friends Groups reflects this. Haringey has an active network of nearly 40 Friends Groups. Most of them focus on specific parks and carry out a

range of activities including litter picking, small maintenance projects, tree planting, fund raising and events. Haringey Council recognises the value of maintaining good relationships with our local Friends groups and is committed to supporting and growing our Friends network.

Corporate Volunteering offers another option for supporting parks. Between 2011 and 2014 the Parks Service has worked with a variety of businesses including Veolia, Lloyds, Bank of America & Mitsubishi resulting in over 760 volunteer days spent carrying out maintenance and improvement work in the borough's parks. Corporate volunteering not only benefits the Council's parks but also the volunteers, many of whom are in sedentary, desk bound jobs, who get to spend an active day in the fresh air.

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

The increasing importance of parks and open spaces in our expanding borough is reflected in the levels of funding the Parks service has secured to invest over the next decade. The Council has allocated £7m of Capital Programme monies to be spent on parks infrastructure over the next ten years. In addition, the extensive regeneration programmes in the borough, particularly in Tottenham and Wood Green, will generate between £7m and £10m for parks through Section 106 and CIL funding. The service is also forecasting a further £8m to £10m of investment via external grants which means a total of between £22m and £27m will be spent on park projects.

The figure attributed to external grants is based on similar agreements of recent years which have seen the service successfully source funds from third party organisations such as HLF, The Football Association, London Marathon Charitable Trust and Veolia Environmental Fund amongst others. Between 2001 and 2006 Finsbury Park underwent a major restoration project which was largely funded by a £4.9m HLF grant. The success of the project which aimed to design out crime, whilst retaining references to the Victorian origins of the park, is evident in the increased use of the park by young families, lone women and the elderly.

Lordship Recreation Ground has also benefited greatly from third party investment. The site had suffered from long term underinvestment and was considered by most local residents as somewhere to be avoided. In the early 2000s the Council formed a strong partnership with a community group who were concerned with the continual decline of the site. A regeneration plan was developed taking into account the opinions of the community group

and funds were secured from HLF and The Big Lottery with match funding from the Council, GLA and Environment Agency. In total over £8m was spent on the site during 2011/12 and its transformation has been a resounding success. Since completing the project the park has won numerous awards including:

- Green Flag Award (Received in 2013 and retained each year subsequently)
- London In Bloom (Gold Award 2013)
- Fields in Trust national runner-up award for 'Most Improved FiT site' (2012)
- Fields in Trust national runner-up award for 'Getting Active on a Fields in Trust Field' (2014) in recognition of the scale and range of physical activities and events now taking place in the park.

In total, during the last 12 years Haringey's Parks Service has generated £33m in third party funding. It is unclear what impact a switch to statutory status would have on this type of funding in the future.

Revenue generation

As referred to earlier in this document, Haringey's Parks Service is concentrating on generating its own revenue as well as sourcing monies from regeneration projects and third party funding. Allowing commercial events such as music festivals to take place in parks not only generates revenue to be spent on maintaining parks across the borough, it also enhances Haringey's cultural offer and benefits local businesses due to increased visitor numbers spending money on their way to and from the event.

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

Haringey's Parks Service has always been delivered as an in-house service. During the last 12 months we have spoken to numerous local authorities in London about their approaches to parks provision. Haringey Council is committed to securing the best outcomes for our residents

There is evidence that in some cases trusts can take over the management of individual sites. In Haringey for example a co-operative trust was created led by the Friends Group at Lordship Rec to run and maintain 'The Eco Hub'. Built as part of the HLF funded restoration project referred to earlier, The Eco Hub contains a café, community room, multipurpose activities space, toilets, and office space for Hub staff and park user groups. It hosts

activities aimed at all sectors of the community and has been instrumental in the increased popularity and use of the park as a whole.

8. Conclusion

The recently updated HLF *The State of UK Parks* report makes it very clear that a continuation of the current level of underfunding will leave the future of Britain's public parks in a very precarious state. In submitting this document it is hoped that we have demonstrated how a proactive approach to budget cuts can limit their impact. However with the population of London predicted to reach 13 million by 2050 the demand placed on our parks is set to rapidly increase. Over the next decade up to 10,000 new homes are expected to be built in Tottenham alone. Over 90% of them will not have their own gardens. It is therefore essential that the parks and open spaces of Haringey are maintained and improved so that new residents have the same opportunities to socialise and exercise as current residents do today.

Research conducted by Edinburgh City Council has revealed that for every £1 they spend on parks they generate £12 in social, environmental and economic benefit. As this document has tried to make clear, the provision of safe, welcoming, well maintained parks is essential to enable Local Authorities to promote and encourage healthy lifestyles and social inclusion. It is hoped therefore that the Inquiry will recognise the importance of parks not just in and of themselves but as places that are as essential to the infrastructure of society as schools, hospitals and transport. If the inquiry is able to raise the profile of parks and push them further up the Government's list of priorities it will, in the long term, also lessen the demand in other areas such as health, adult care and children's services.

Towards the end of the last century parks were allowed to fall into long term decline. This led to issues of social exclusion, crime, vandalism and antisocial behaviour which were felt not just in parks themselves but in the surrounding areas, placing greater strain on the police, judicial and social services. The primary aim of this enquiry should be to ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past and instead explore new ways of working in partnership to secure the future of our parks. Haringey's thriving parks are testament to the strength of relationship between the Council's Parks Service, our business partners and the ongoing commitment from our local residents and Friends Groups.