

CLG Committee Public Parks Inquiry

Written submission by the Sport and Recreation Alliance

September 2016

Sport and Recreation Alliance

1. The Sport and Recreation Alliance is the umbrella body for governing and representative bodies of sport and recreation in the UK. We represent 320 members covering a wide range of activities from football, rugby and cricket to walking, mind games and dance. Our response focuses on public parks as valuable places to get the nation moving.

Key messages

2. Public parks are valuable assets where people of all ages can be active whether through play, traditional sports or recreational activities. We believe parks have a central role in delivering the outcomes of the Government's cross-departmental *Sporting Future* strategy and Sport England's *Towards an Active Nation*.
3. Being active in parks and green spaces can benefit individuals physically and mentally. It can also bring communities together helping to tackle issues such as social isolation and anti-social behaviour.
4. Green spaces should be protected and developed to ensure that they are safe places that everyone has the opportunity to enjoy. This should be supported by national policy-making and local decision-making including the production of a local physical activity strategy.
5. Sport, recreation and leisure budgets must not be seen as the easy option to cut in times of limited resources. Decision-makers should recognise the long-term savings that getting people active can have.
6. Local areas should work with the community to develop and protect public parks. At the most basic level, effective marketing should ensure that people know about the opportunities parks offer and local infrastructure should make it easy for people to reach green spaces. There are a range of other options for local authorities - including asset protections and transfer - to further work with communities to safeguard the future of parks.

Who uses parks, how often and what for?

7. Our *Reconomics* report (2014¹) highlights that outdoor recreation is the UK's favourite pastime – 3 in 4 adults regularly get outdoors – and last year 42.4 million adults in England visited the natural environment. Public parks are ideal places to engage people with the outdoors as research has found that people are more likely to be active within one mile of home.² Other research found that people who live within 500m of accessible green space are 24% more likely to meet recommended levels of physical activity.³
8. *State of UK Public Parks 2016*⁴ found that 57% of the UK population visit their local parks at least once a month or more often. The findings also show how people of all ages engage with parks but highlights that parks are 'clearly important for families' with 54% of households with children under the age of five using their local parks at least once a week and 90% once a month or more. Other research suggests that 48% of all children in England visit local urban parks in an average month.⁵
9. The use of parks by families with children emphasises that they are places to have fun. Families can access free space and play opportunities that help children develop their physical literacy in the early years which means that they are more likely to remain active during their life course.
10. The Monitoring Engagement with the Natural Environment study (2015⁶) found that parks in towns and cities were the most frequently visited destination type, accounting for 778 million visits.
11. *State of UK Public Parks 2016* highlights that 'initiatives to encourage greater participation in sport and promote more regular and active use of parks are on the increase'. Some of our members use parks to run traditional sporting opportunities such as tennis and basketball, but also great places for other physical activities such as Orienteering.
12. Approximately a third of all Orienteering events and activities in 2015 took place in parks; delivering around 90,000 participant runs. There are 565 registered Permanent Orienteering Courses in parks across the UK allowing people to orienteer at any time and place that suits them. These are well used by schools and uniformed groups. In addition, over 700 fun, family-friendly Xplorer navigation challenge events took place in parks in England in 2015 involving over 60,000 participant runs with the number of events and participation set to grow in 2016.

¹ Sport and Recreation Alliance and Liverpool John Moores University (2014) *Reconomics: The Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation*. Available via: <http://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/sites/sportandrecreation.org.uk/files/web/Reconomics%20FINAL.pdf>

² Sport England (2015) *Getting Active Outdoors*. Available via: <https://www.sportengland.org/media/3275/outdoors-participation-report-v2-lr-spreads.pdf>

³ Burns (2015) *The EU Referendum and the Environment*. Available via: <https://www.foe.co.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/eu-referendum-environment-81600.pdf>

⁴ Heritage Lottery Fund (2016) *State of UK Public Parks 2016*. Available via: <https://www.hlf.org.uk/state-uk-public-parks-2016>

⁵ The Parks Alliance (2016) *The natural playground: Growing the next generation*. Available via: <http://theparksalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/The-Parks-Alliance-National-playground-growing-the-next-generation-15-April-2016.pdf>

⁶ Natural England (2015) *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: Annual report from the 2014-14 survey*. Available via: <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6579788732956672?category=47018>

13. Over 7 million people have been for a run in the last 12 months and England Athletics' research indicates that the potential size of the running market is close to 21 million adults. The athletics and running community have a long-established relationship with green open spaces. For example, some athletics clubs are based in facilities operating in parks and running groups use public parks for meeting points and routes. Clubs also use public open spaces for cross country events and many individuals choose to run in parks as they provide welcoming and accessible environments.

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

14. The benefits of being active to physical and mental wellbeing are well known. White et al (2016⁷) found that:

- Approximately 8.23 million adults (19.5% of the population) made at least one 'active visit' to natural environments in the previous week, resulting in 1.23 billion 'active visits' annually
- An estimated 3.20 million of these also reported meeting recommended physical activity guidelines fully, or in part
- Active visits by this group were associated with an estimated 109,164 Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALYs) annually
- Assuming the social value of a QALY to be £20,000, the annual value of these visits was approximately £2.18 billion

15. The research concluded that 'natural environments provide the context for a large proportion of England's recreational physical activity and highlight the need to protect and manage such environments for health purposes'.

16. Public Health England's (PHE) *Everybody Active, Every Day*⁸ focuses on 'active environments' and states that 'land use has a big impact on health'. PHE emphasises that it is 'the quality and not just the quantity of public parks and spaces that encourages people to be active, evidence shows that just having ease of access to open space makes a crucial difference [to the public's health]'. PHE also highlights that:

- Those with close access to green space live longer than those without it
- The health of older people increased where there is more space for walking near home, with parks...nearby

17. The Heritage Lottery Fund *State of UK Public Parks 2014*⁹ report summarises research which found that:

- The 'healthiest' cities with the highest levels of activity and lower levels of obesity had a far higher proportion of green space concluding that 'the most healthy areas have 20% more green space than 'the least healthy areas'
- Parks can have a positive effect on individuals' wellbeing and their wider neighbourhoods. Over 9 out of 10 people believe that parks and public spaces improve their quality of life

⁷ White et al. (2016) *Recreational physical activity in natural environments and implications for health: A population based cross-sectional study in England*. Further information available via: <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/23047>

⁸ Public Health England (2014) *Everybody active, every day: An evidence-based approach to physical activity*. Available via: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/374914/Framework_13.pdf

⁹ Heritage Lottery Fund (2014) *State of UK Public Parks 2014*. Available via: <https://www.hlf.org.uk/state-uk-public-parks-2014>

18. *State of UK Public Parks 2014* also highlights that parks, gardens and any accessible green areas can be seen to provide 'vital health resources' that play a key role in supporting healthy populations - 'urban parks have the potential to contribute greatly to the improvement of the public's health through improving the physical, mental and social well-being of park users'.
19. The UCL Institute for Health Equity¹⁰ stated that 'increasing the amount and quality of green space can be part of a low cost package to address health inequalities, improve health outcomes and deliver other benefits.' Other research noted that 'those people who visited urban green spaces more frequently reported fewer stress related illnesses'. Another concluded that the health benefits for the wider community should be an important consideration in strategic policies aimed at protecting and promoting urban green spaces for wellbeing.¹¹
20. The Conservation Volunteers Green Gym programme is one example of how parks can be used as sites for activity that benefits individuals and local communities. Penge Green Gym was founded in a neglected park in south east London. It brings together local community volunteers and people from a range of referral partners including people with learning disabilities, stroke victims and mental health problems. During 2011-13, 131 Green Gym participants contributed over 4,900 hours to create a vibrant community and wildlife garden. This has created an engaging space and also helped people to be less socially isolated, be more active and have improved self-esteem.
21. Another example is Ramblers and Macmillan's Walking for Health programme which delivers free, regular short group walks. Approximately 81,000 people attended a Walking for Health walk at least once in 2015/16. Most of these walks were in parks and green spaces as they provide a safe, easy and accessible environment. Independent evaluation found that Walking for Health participants reported improvements in activity levels and mental wellbeing, as well as reduced loneliness and increased social interactions including intergenerational communication.
22. The volunteer leader of Gildersome Health Walks in Leeds said that parks 'provide (mostly) level, well-maintained paths that are suitable for any walker.... There is often the provision of somewhere to sit in a park – not just seats but perhaps a wall to rest on, and sometimes toilets. Furthermore, they provide pleasant areas to walk with the trees and flowers, some also provide history and other items of interest'.

The impact of reductions in local authority budgets on parks

23. We know that local areas are under financial pressure and budget cuts are highly likely to continue. *State of UK Public Parks 2014* found that the average annual net costs of parks services in 2010/11 were £4.97m, falling to £4.19m in 2011/12. These figures suggest average budgets have fallen up to £1m or around 25% over the past two to three years.
24. *State of UK Public Parks 2016*¹² found that 95% of park managers expect their revenue budget to be cut over the next three years. With 55% of those expecting cuts of 10-20%. Furthermore, 92% of park managers report their maintenance budgets have reduced in the past three years and 95% expect their funding will continue to reduce.

¹⁰ Allen & Balfour UCL Institute of Health Equity (2014) *Natural solutions for tackling health inequalities*. Available via: <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/natural-solutions-to-tackling-health-inequalities>

¹¹ See 9

¹² See 4

25. The research also found that staff and skills are being lost with no local authorities expecting to increase the size of their parks' workforce in the next three years. The quality of parks is also expected to decline.
26. One example of an activity that has seen a negative impact of reductions in local authority budgets is crown green bowls. This is a low impact, non-contact sport suitable for all ages. The national governing body, the British Crown Green Bowling Association (BCGBA) has seen the following changes:
- Decrease in condition of surface of bowling greens
 - Clubs having to maintain green due to no council support (cost of this differs by area but £1000+ per season)
 - Parks greens affected by increased vandalism due to lack of park staff in the evenings
 - Parks greens not fit for purpose and used for other ball games or in some cases the complete loss of the green as the area is used for other income streams

Further detail is provided in the BCGBA's response.

27. We are concerned that on-going pressures on local budgets will result in sport, leisure and recreation facilities and opportunities being reduced. We urge decision makers to consider the savings that being active and healthy can have in the long term.

How new and existing parks can best be supported

28. Recent Government strategies and frameworks, such as the cross-departmental sport strategy *Sporting Future*, make a positive shift from a traditional view of sport to wider physical activity. This includes outdoor recreation and the need for all spaces, not just facilities, to be invested in. It's encouraging that Sport England's new strategy *Towards an Active Nation* recognises the importance of public parks in delivering its aims and we hope that this will lead to increased investment in this area.
29. Public Health England's *Everybody Active, Every Day*, clearly prioritise ensuring everyone has the opportunity to be active. Parks and green spaces in urban and rural areas are valuable assets to getting people moving and being healthy.
30. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' planned 25-year strategy is another opportunity for a Government department to take a leadership role and set out clear measures to protect and improve access to parks and green space.
31. The Localism Act 2011 includes a number of measures that aim to support communities to expand the provision of green spaces and be more involved in local planning, designing and management decisions around green spaces that are used for recreational and leisure purposes. Further support from the Department for Communities and Local Government to communities on their rights under this Act would be helpful along with examples of how local areas have successfully created and maintained opportunities for people to be active outdoors.
32. We want every local authority to produce a robust and comprehensive strategy for physical activity opportunities in response to local need. This should include how areas can create, protect and utilise accessible places where people can be active, such as parks. People need to be made to feel safe in their local areas, including parks, so practicalities like street lights and ramps as well as stairs need to be considered.

33. Guidance and standards such as Natural England's Accessible Natural Green Space Standard (ANGST¹³) should be considered in local planning and infrastructure. It recommends that everyone, wherever they live, should have accessible natural greenspace including:
- of at least 2 hectares in size, no more than 300 metres (5 minutes walk) from home
 - at least 1 accessible 20 hectare site within two kilometre of home
 - 1 accessible 100 hectare site within five kilometres of home
34. People need to know about the parks and green spaces in their local areas, how to get there and what they can do there. Local marketing should promote physical activity opportunities in the natural environment and health professionals have a particular role to play in signposting people to these activities.
35. Joined-up working at a local level can also make a positive difference. PHE states that 'local authorities can work across policy areas and bring together experts to deliver real change that has an impact for generations'. It is also encouraged by NESTA which recommends that parks teams and local authorities involve people in designing and delivering new ideas.
36. We know from anecdotal evidence that joined-up working can be a challenge with competing priorities and budgets but a positive example comes from the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) which is working with grassroots charity Tennis For Free and local authorities to improve park courts and roll out schemes such as free 'walk on and play' sessions, fun sessions, bespoke groups, and sessions for schools, community centres and local clubs. Thirty-four sites are already being renovated with more to follow.¹⁴
37. Encouraging sustainability is also a key focus of the partnerships. The LTA provides bespoke advice and guidance to local authorities on how they can ensure investment in park sites can be maintained offering a number of different operational models to support and ultimately protect sporting facilities in community settings for the long term.

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

38. We want to see public parks remain a site for free, accessible opportunities so that everyone has the opportunity to be active in an outside environment close to their home. Parkrun is now a well-known and popular model of free activity that takes place in parks. Opportunities for generating additional or alternative funding should be sought through developing the infrastructure, for example parking and cafes.
39. The Fields In Trust protects 2,608 open spaces across the UK. Its own response to this inquiry rightly suggests that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to funding and making parks a success. Local authorities may choose to invest in the infrastructure around and in parks to make it easier for people to get to them, whereas community-led, commercial and social enterprise models can also support parks.

¹³ Natural England (2010) *Nature nearby – Accessible Natural Greenspace Guidance*. Available via: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140605090108/http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/40004?category=47004>

¹⁴ <http://www.sportsmanagement.co.uk/Sports-news/latest/LTA-Andy-Murray-Wimbledon-facilities-local-authorities/325647>

40. One example provided by the Fields In Trust is Barn Elms Playing Fields in Richmond, London. In 2005, there was a public consultation about a proposal to sell or long lease part of Barn Elms Playing Fields to fund much needed improvements. The community responded with an alternative non-commercial proposal for improving the site. They gained £2million from large donors such as The London Marathon Charitable Trust, Sport Governing Bodies and the local Council. As part of the redevelopment plans, the Council entered into a legally binding contract with Fields in Trust in 2012 to protect the site for public use in perpetuity. Now managing the site on behalf of the Council, Barn Elms Sports Trust¹⁵ continues to fundraise to enhance and maintain this much valued community hub.
41. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

¹⁵ More information on Barn Elms Sports Trust is available via: www.bestfields.co.uk