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Representing and amplifying the voices of the movement of over 6,000 local Friends of Parks groups throughout the UK

The Government, green spaces & the Friends Groups movement

On 19th September the Government announced its response to the growing chorus of alarm over the underfunding crisis facing the UK's public green spaces. It at last acknowledges the need for action to safeguard parks, but has not committed any additional funding so desperately required for park management and maintenance throughout the country. So, what kind of action is being mooted, and is it the start of a genuine debate over what's really needed to address the seriousness of the deteriorating situation?

The Government has also committed to work with the greenspace sector. It has invited the NFPGS and 8 other key greenspace national organisations to form a Parks Action Group to liaise with them over a range of issues flagged up by the Select Committee of MPs 'Public Parks' report in February 2017. The NFPGS will be participating to ensure the voices of the Friends Groups movement will be heard loud & clear on behalf of the UK's green spaces.

The Government's announcement On Tuesday 19th September the Minister for Parks Marcus Jones announced the Government's response to the recommendations of the MPs' Select Committee 'Future of Public Parks' National Inquiry Report published in February 2017. Basically it accepts or welcomes some, notes others, and kicks the rest into the long grass! [1]

The NFPGS and the Parks Action Group The Minister has invited the NFPGS and 8 other key greenspace sector bodies [The Parks Alliance, Heritage Lottery Fund, Groundwork, Fields In Trust, Local Govt Assoc, Association of Public Service Excellence, National Trust, and Natural England] to develop a sectorial Parks Action Group (PAG) to help ensure the agreed recommendations are discussed and implemented. The Minister stated: *'We recognise the value of parks and green spaces to local communities... but we need to do more to make sure future generations are continuing to enjoy their benefits. That's why we have announced a new expert-led Parks Action Group to work closely with the sector to find the right solutions.'*

The PAG's first meeting will be chaired by the Minister. The PAG will be a *'consultative and collaborative process'*, and one with a remit to include *'skills, networking, knowledge and good practice sharing, resources and delivery models, valuing green space, data evidence and collection, and equality of access to open space.'* It will be expected to make proposals to a soon-to-be-formed cross-government group of 7 Government depts.

The NFPGS is the only community-level organisation in the PAG. This recognition is a testament to the hard work of tens of thousands of grassroots activists in local Friends Groups throughout the UK, and our growing coordination and influence at local, regional and national levels. As the umbrella organisation for what is now a dynamic movement of over 6,000 local groups, we welcome any opportunities to work in partnership with others and the Government to safeguard and improve all our public parks and green spaces. Such spaces, around 27,000 across the UK, are vital to every community and need to be properly resourced, managed and protected for current and future generations. We are determined to ensure the voices of our communities are heard loud and clear at Government level.

The Select Committee's Recommendations, and the Government's response The 'Future of Public Parks' Select Committee MPs' Inquiry, which the NFPGS and others had lobbied and campaigned for, took place at the end of last year. It resulted in a shocking Report in January which demonstrated that public green spaces are essential facilities that all sections of every community treasure and depend on, but that these vital but vulnerable spaces are being plunged into crisis by savage government cuts to public services.

The NFPGS, like many other local and national bodies and 322,000 petitioners, had called for the Inquiry to insist parks be made a statutory service - as the previous Committee Inquiry had done in 2003 (although

unfortunately not implemented). [2] The 2017 Report had quoted our views at length, and our explanation that such a duty would oblige Local Authorities to monitor local parks and ensure nationally-accepted standards (ie Green Flag award standard) - and that this would need to be backed up by adequate public funding. The Inquiry had recognised this was a major proposed solution to the growing underfunding crisis, but disappointingly had concluded: *'we believe that other mechanisms are more likely to achieve the outcomes we all want to see'*. These *'other mechanisms'* had included Local Authorities nominating senior elected members and officers to be parks champions, and *'very clear guidance to Local Authorities that they should work collaboratively with Health and Wellbeing Boards, and other relevant bodies where appropriate, to prepare and publish joint parks and green space strategies.... If the guidance does not prove effective in raising the profile and priority afforded to parks the Minister should consider legislating to place a statutory duty on Local Authorities'* to do this. However, without the status of being a properly-funded statutory service, we think these *'other mechanisms'* will be ineffective. The Minister's response is to support but unfortunately water down the above recommendation even further.

Among its other responses, the Government:

- recognised that parks should remain free for public use and stay in public ownership.
- failed to commit any of the extra funding urgently needed throughout the country to ameliorate the budget crisis. But it welcomed the Select Committee's recommendation that *'parks, and green infrastructure more widely, are properly recognised in the Government's forthcoming 25year Environment Plan.'* The Minister expects planning inspectors to reject draft Local Plans (LAs' strategic planning documents) if they *'havent appropriately assessed and planned for green infrastructure to meet health and well-being needs (alongside other functions).'* The Government said it *'is committed to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it.'* No details yet on how this will be ensured regarding the funding and protection of the UK's public green space.
- will fund the PAG (£500k) and the cross-governmental group *'to support the delivery of the recommendations of the Select Committee'*, and are *'exploring opportunities for match-funding from other government departments... to deliver the best possible outcomes for the sector.'*
- supported moves towards *'innovation'*, *'service transformation'*, *'best practice'* and *'varied and diverse models'* of management and funding. These can be used as code words for the promotion of alternatives to Local Authority direct management and Government funding responsibilities.
- welcomed the enthusiasm of volunteers and *'the range of ways in which they can contribute to their parks.'*

We note the Select Committee MPs had concluded last February that they should *'return to the issue of parks before the end of this Parliament to assess the progress which has been made.'* We don't believe the actions agreed so far will result in the greater funding levels needed, and so to reverse the ever-worsening crisis there will be no alternative but for the Government to eventually make the management of parks a statutory service. If not, things will continue to spiral out of control until the Government takes seriously its responsibility for causing and solving the current situation.

The Friends Groups movement The Select Committee MPs had praised the work of the Friends Groups movement and we welcomed their calls for all to help the movement grow including a call for Local Authorities to *'encourage and support... and work with'* local Friends of Parks Forums covering every LA area - a key aim of the NFPGS. The Minister *'welcomes this recommendation.. We will explore how local authorities can work with groups such as Friends Forums, and look at what more can be done to mobilise local people to form Friends Forums and actively support the sustainability of local parks'*. We pledge to continue to help achieve that.

We also pledge to continue to speak out, and to strengthen the grassroots efforts to defend and improve the UK's green spaces.

Dave Morris - Chair, National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces [21st September 2017]

[1] The Government's press release, 19th September (with link at end to the the full Government Response) can be accessed here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-pledges-500000-for-new-action-group-to-grow-future-of-public-parks>

[2] The NFPGS call for action, as submitted to the National Inquiry: <https://www.natfedparks.org.uk/resources/> [10th bullet point]