

General Election 2015: Parks Campaigning Update

Responding to the UK's green spaces underfunding crisis - 8 reasons to be cheerful

1. Government is at last forced to recognise growing calls for action to address the UK parks underfunding crisis

Following lobbying from the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, The Parks Alliance and the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Government has finally been forced to acknowledge that something must be done by the incoming Government to address the growing underfunding crisis for UK parks. A Green Space Seminar in Westminster attended by activists has led to Government recognition on need for national action, followed by backing from the Communities and Local Government Select Committee. [Details below]

2. The 'Save Our Parks' UK petition sums up what needs to be done

Please promote this petition link to all your contacts between now and the General Election on May 7th:

<http://chn.ge/TXdqhi> The petition's influence is already being felt, being the clearest expression of the need for urgent, effective strategic action to save our green spaces under threat. [Details below]

3. Manifestos for parks launched

Why not sign up to support a new Parks and Health manifesto calling on Central Government 'to provide greater support for parks - for our health, for our communities' health, and for our parks health'. It urges all political parties to pledge in their election manifestos to provide the funds for parks to play their part in combating the growing problems of obesity and inactivity that are putting such a burden on the NHS. <http://www.parks2015.uk/> [Details below] In addition, Act for Nature is a wildlife alliance calling for a Nature and Wellbeing Act in England. They recognise that nature is under great pressure and seek the right laws now to bring about the recovery of nature for future generations.

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/joinandhelp/campaignwithus/act-for-nature/index.aspx> [Details below]

4. The General Election - help make parks an issue!

How local activists can help make adequate funding and protection of parks an election issue. [Details below]

5. Local campaigning - communities mobilise to speak up for their local green spaces

Whether campaigning to prevent further Local Authority budget cuts to green spaces, or to protect such spaces that are under threat of being sold off, local Friends Groups are mobilising to speak out. [Details below]

6. The Parks Alliance steps up its lobbying efforts

The Parks Alliance aims to represent the organisations that create, maintain, invest in and use public green spaces in the UK. They believe that everyone has the right to access quality green spaces, and are calling for urgent action at Government level to protect these valuable community assets. [Details below]

7. 2015's Love Parks Week is from Friday 24 July to Sunday 2 August.

All park lovers are encouraged to hold an event in our local green spaces that week. There may be a number of regional events held too. www.loveparks.org.uk [Details below]

8. New Friends Groups and Friends Forums continue to spread throughout the UK

All around the UK we hear of new Friends Groups being set up. And also new Friends Forums, such as in Glasgow and Sheffield. The movement is growing! [Details below]

1. Government forced to recognise growing calls for action to address underfunding crisis

25 February 2015 - a real turning point in the long campaign for Government recognition? The Campaigns Officer from the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces attended 2 major green space events on 25th February attended by the Government Minister for Parks, Stephen Williams MP. As the key representative present from the Friends Groups movement Dave Morris was able to address both events, leading calls for Statutory Recognition for

parks, adequate public funding, and a National Inquiry into the growing crisis. At the first event, arranged following lobbying from The Parks Alliance, over 60 reps mainly from Local Authorities and national green space organisations met up with reps from the Department of Communities and Local Government for a 'roundtable' discussion on the current crisis and what needs to be done about it. [Report below]. The second event was a launch at the Olympic Park of the Love Parks partnership with DS Smith, and Dave was able to directly put the Minister on the spot over his responsibility to take action on the above issues.

Green Space Seminar in Westminster leads to Government recognition on need for national action John Connell from the Department of Communities and Local Government summed up the national seminar: *Please find [below] a summary of the key actions that were suggested, together with notes of the table top discussions exploring barriers and potential solutions. Our planned next steps will be to identify actions where relatively immediate action may be possible, or to explore the potential for them to be taken forward after the General Election in May. I hope that [attendees] will consider being involved further in the work streams which we are putting in place to take forward this work. We envisage there being three work streams in total, along the lines of the key themes identified: Financial/Funding; Policy and Governance; and Skills/Capacity Building. We hope that the work streams will involve discussions with other policy colleagues across government to explain to them the barriers that currently exist as well as creating a framework for how the suggested actions might feasibly and practicably be taken forward.*

Green Spaces: Executive Summary *Well maintained green spaces from urban and country parks through to woodland are highly valued by local residents, giving them a greater sense of pride in their area, and are an invaluable resource for peoples physical and mental health and well-being. This was demonstrated by the vibrant discussion at the Round table, the key points from which are summarised here according to three main emerging themes - Financial/Funding, Policy and Governance; and Skills/Capacity. A comprehensive summary of the discussions is [available]. To move the debate forward we have placed the key points into a table, grouped under the above main themes and setting out the actions/issues that the department might consider exploring or initiating now and what might be achievable in the longer term under a new government. Although there is no guarantee that any of these issues could be successfully pursued we intend to explore the capacity/willingness of incoming ministers to do so.*

Financial/Funding [Short/medium term] a. Current tax system could be reviewed including corporate gift aid, tax breaks for philanthropists and community interest companies to have same tax status as registered charities. b. Make available in one place all government funding streams. c. Explore potential for Green Investment Bank to provide new resources. d. Common Agriculture Policy funding should be permissible for all food growing sites. e. Explore scope for HLF and BIG funding to be extended to benefit more green spaces. [Longer Term] a. Statutory duty for parks including ring-fencing on income generation but with flexibility to pursue different governance models. b. Create new freedoms around ability to raise funds for parks. c. Use stamp duty or other taxes to benefit green spaces including tax on sugary food/drinks and tax on oil/gas. d. Government funding to support endowment approaches. e. Funding to support feasibility work.

Policy & Governance [Short/medium term] Need for greater evidence base on green spaces (benefits, including financial impacts, and costs of delivery). [Longer Term] a. Government support for new models of governance and management of green spaces to overcome short-term financial planning constraints. b. Amend S106 or CIL to give more leverage to LAs (including negotiation at regional level or introduce minimum level of investment).

Skills/Capacity [Short/medium term] Make advice to local authorities and community groups on marketing/exploiting parks. [Longer Term] a. Share learning/advice on tried and tested approaches both successful and unsuccessful. b. Create Parks Commission or Inquiry to explore solutions to barriers in innovation.

Communities and Local Government Select Committee backs the calls for action In March the Communities and Local Government Select Committee published an 'end of term' report on itself. Under Major developments that the new committee may wish to consider - a sort of manifesto for the Committee after the General Election - there is a section [S123] on Parks. It says: *As financial pressures on local authorities increase, they are likely to place their focus on statutory services, with discretionary services, such as parks, being increasingly squeezed. We received written evidence from the Parks Alliance suggesting that there was: 'now a case for scrutinising the value of Parks, and their role in an increasingly urban nation, alongside the challenges they face, and the role of Government.'* It referred to the findings of a recent report into parks by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which warned that the recent renaissance in parks was under threat. This view was echoed in correspondence we received from the National Trust. We agree that there might be merit in our successors conducting an inquiry into parks. Amongst other matters, such an inquiry could consider how to secure future funding for parks at a time when local authorities find themselves under increasing financial pressure. The full report is linked here: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/communities-and-local-government-committee/news/work-of-the-committee-publication/>

2. The 'Save Our Parks' UK petition sums up what needs to be done

Please forward the Petition link to all your contacts between now and the General Election, urging them to sign up before May 7th. <http://chn.ge/TXdqhi> Its influence is already being felt, being the clearest expression of the need for effective strategic action to save our green spaces under threat.

The Government's cuts to Local Authorities for our local public services, combined with the lack of statutory protection for open spaces, are causing the most of the problems we are facing. So please sign and promote the UK 'Save Our Parks' petition to step up the pressure on the Government and all political parties to take seriously the future funding and protection of our vital green spaces.

1. Sign the petition: <http://chn.ge/TXdqhi>
 2. Spread the news via Twitter: @LoveParks_Week #LoveParks
 3. Spread the news via Facebook: www.facebook.com/ukparkspetition - and: www.facebook.com/LoveParksWeek
 4. See Parks Petition webpage: www.natfedparks.org.uk/parks-petition.html - includes Sign Up Sheet and leaflet
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3. Manifestos for parks launched

Parks and Health Why not sign up to support this timely parks and health manifesto? <http://www.parks2015.uk/> It calls on Central Government 'to provide greater support for parks - for our health, for our communities' health, and for our parks health'. It is urging all political parties to *pledge in their election manifestos to provide the funds for parks to play their part in combating the growing problems of obesity and inactivity that are putting such a burden on the NHS.* Parks 2015 have costed out a plan that would see a major investment in parks and park staff to create Active Parks and Health Rangers as a way of helping citizens to get back to healthy weights and levels of activity, with savings to the NHS budget greater than the cost. To be effective 'Parks 2015' believe that local communities need to be involved to their parks management. On their web site they have a short survey to find out how much people value their local park.

Act for Nature - wildlife alliance calling for a Nature and Wellbeing Act in England

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and The Wildlife Trusts are calling on all political parties to commit to a Nature and Wellbeing Act in England. The call is backed by many other organisations including The Conservation Volunteers, the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Ramblers Association, Woodland Trust and Open Spaces Society. The Green Paper details the ambitious package of measures to turn around the decline in our natural environment, calling for an Act which puts our need for nature at the heart of decision-making, for our own mental and physical health, and the health of our economy. They recognise that nature is under great pressure and seek the right laws now to bring about the recovery of nature for future generations. More info:

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/joinandhelp/campaignwithus/act-for-nature/index.aspx>

4. The General Election - how local community activists can help make adequate funding and protection of parks an election issue

Now is the time to speak out for local parks and green spaces! We urge all park lovers to take this opportunity to contact local candidates and parties standing for election, to lobby for issues that are important to local green space. Please remind candidates that parks and green spaces are an essential resource for all our communities, providing numerous benefits and services: health, sports, leisure, education, play, social cohesion, local economy and biodiversity, to name just a few. They are used by virtually everyone and as such they should receive the resources they need to ensure they can fulfil their vital functions. In spite of the essential role London's parks and green spaces play we are entering a local and national greenspace crisis, due to continued cuts to parks budgets mainly a result of central government cuts to Local Authorities overall budgets. Past experience of revenue cuts has shown that if local spaces are poorly resourced they are very likely to become problem spaces with negative effects on our communities. Furthermore, on top of cuts there is a growing pressure on greenspace in many areas of the UK, which could lead to inappropriate urban development and commercialism.

With over 5,000 local Friends Groups now active around the UK, this is a growing and powerful force and we encourage you to publicly raise the profile of your local parks and the benefits that they afford your local communities. Please consider writing to your local newspaper too. This is your opportunity to make our local parks a priority.

5. Local campaigning - communities mobilise to speak up for their local green spaces

Over the winter Local Authorities have been setting their budgets for the coming year(s). Friends Groups and Forums in many areas have been opposing further cuts, calling for adequate funding. BBC News reported this '*battle to save parks amid local government cuts*': www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31793685 It concludes that funding for more than 27,000 parks and open spaces across the UK has been cut for the past five years, and it is a trend that looks set to continue.

In addition to responding to these funding threats, in many areas there is a pressing need to fight to protect specific green spaces. For example, there are local campaigns to prevent inappropriate leasing or even sell-off of areas of public green space by cash-strapped Councils. Many tactics are being employed, including petitions, lobbying, getting covenants from 'Fields In Trust' and so on. In London, where property developers are rampant, a major campaign is underway to raise the profile and support for green space by having the whole city declared a 'Greater London National Park City'. The fast-growing campaign is backed by scores of community organisations including the London Green Spaces Friends Groups Network.

6. The Parks Alliance steps up its lobbying efforts

The Parks Alliance believe everyone has the right to access quality green spaces. They aim to be '*the voice of UK parks, representing the people and organisations that create, maintain, invest in and use the public green spaces that we are proud to have at the heart of British life.*' They '*campaign at local, regional, UK and EU levels to ensure that parks are properly funded, their roles recognised and developed, and that the benefits that they provide are clearly understood and recognised.*' The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces is an active member. Info: www.theparksalliance.org

Mark Camley, Chair of The Parks Alliance, welcomed the Communities and Local Government Select Committees recent recognition of the need for an inquiry into parks. *There is a need for greater recognition of the value of parks, and the role they play in an increasingly urban nation, the challenges they face and the role of the Government" he said. "Parks are facing budget cuts, park management teams are facing staffing declines and 45% of local authorities are considering disposing of some green spaces. Parks are highly used and valued across the nation it is estimated that more than half of the UK population visits their local park once a month or more. Parks are on the brink of crisis and urgent action is needed to protect these valuable community assets. The Parks Alliance welcomes the Committees recognition of the serious challenges facing Parks and calls on the Committee to pick up its own recommendation, and hold an inquiry into parks in the next Parliament.*

7. 2015's Love Parks Week is from Friday 24 July to Sunday 2 August

Green space lovers throughout the UK are being encouraged to hold an event in your local green space in Love Parks Week. There are usually over 1,000 such events each year during the week. Please look out for, and support, regional events held too. For example in London on the last day there will be Friends Groups' Picnic by Parliament, Sunday August 2nd, 12-2pm, Victoria Tower Gardens, SW1. The Love Parks campaign is seeking to Protect, Improve and Promote Green Spaces. For more information, and to register your local group, visit: <http://www.loveparks.org>

8. New Friends Groups and Friends Forums continue to spread throughout the UK

The Friends Groups' movement of 5,000+ groups continues to grow. Around the UK new Friends Groups are being set up by park users who want their local green spaces to be appreciated and enjoyed, and properly maintained, managed and protected. But with 27,000 urban green spaces there is huge need and potential for our movement to spread further - we want to see a group for every space! And also new Friends Forums, such as in Glasgow, Sutton, Bath and Sheffield, are being formed to ensure solidarity and mutual aid between groups, and to take up strategic local and national issues. There are now 55 Area Forums and Networks representing over 2,500 of the local groups - we'd like to see a Forum set up for every area. The National Federation regular meetings for these Forums provide a platform for communication, cooperation, strategic discussions and country-wide campaigning. In this way we are working together across the UK to create a large, coordinated and effective popular movement to defend and improve the UK's vital parks and public green spaces. Please support your local green space Friends Group or help set up one for any green space without one!