

Recreating parks: Securing the future of our urban green spaces

BRIEFING PAPER

May 2020

SMF

Social Market
Foundation

By Linus Pardoe, Impact Officer

Parks have been a vital public service throughout the UK's lockdown. But their financial plight and health benefits have not been fully recognised. With parks taking on a new place in the national conversation, now is the time to secure their future.

KEY POINTS

- Parks have suffered funding cuts under austerity, whilst recent government policies have been ad hoc. Parks are kept afloat by volunteer labour, lottery funding, and controversial commercialisation projects.
- “Natural capital valuations” can demonstrate the myriad benefits of parks, far beyond the value of their maintenance budgets. One estimate puts the wellbeing value of UK parks and green spaces at £32.4bn.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Park Districts** – mirroring practices in some US cities, homeowners with properties in close proximity to parks could pay a small tax to directly fund local authority parks. In Seattle's King County, this rate is \$7.20 per month for the owner of a home worth \$500,000.
- **Transferring control to non-profits** – communities often plug the gap when local authorities cannot fully maintain parks. In light of a pilot in Newcastle, policymakers should explore whether charitable foundations and communities are better placed to provide urban green spaces.
- **Involving business** – taxpayer funds have been a vital lifeline for businesses during the COVID-19 crisis. Businesses can return the favour by investing locally in shared green spaces once the crisis recedes.
- **A new role for the NHS** – international evidence and NHS pilots have shown that using parks as a healthcare resource can improve outcomes for patients. Green prescribing could save NHS resources and see NHS England play a contributory role in urban green space provision.

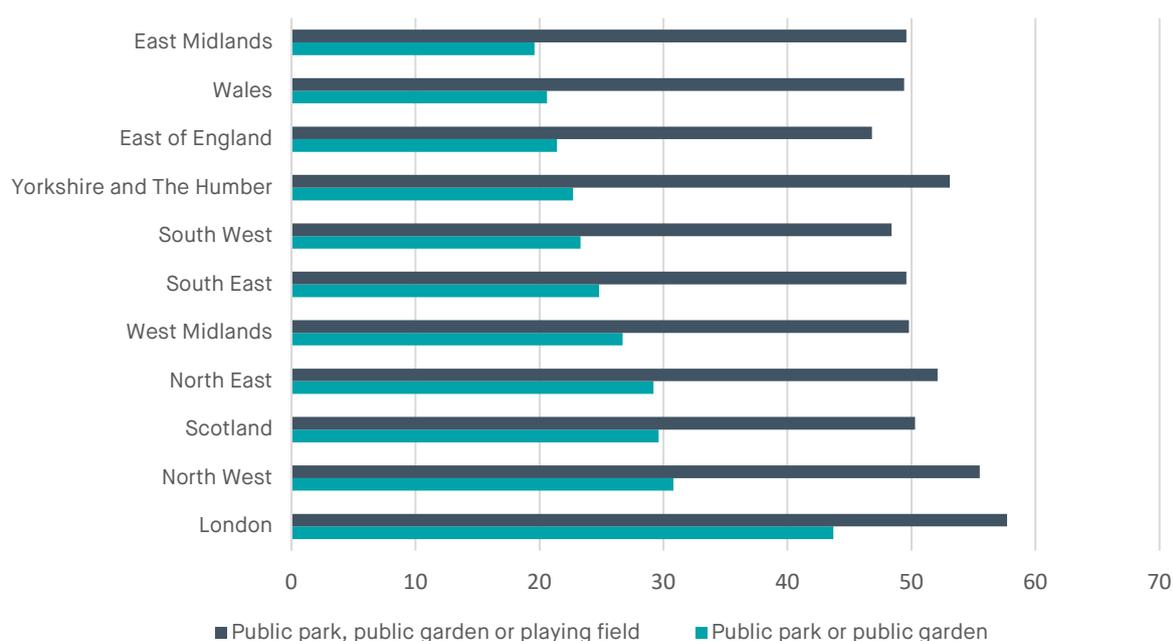
Context

With coronavirus lockdown rules now easing, “going to the park” has become a central topic of national conversation. In England, people are permitted to go to parks and sit down, and to meet another individual. For some, this will be a pleasant novelty. For others, who have had little access to green outside spaces during lockdown, it will be a welcome change in their quality of life.

COVID-19 has refocused our attention on the role that parks play in our society. There are over 27,000 urban green spaces in the UK,¹ with more than half the UK population regularly making use of them.² Parks today continue to serve their primary historical purpose – to provide urban residents, particularly those with little private green space, a shared site for recreation in a natural environment. It was concern about health inequalities and poor housing conditions in booming industrial towns which led to the creation of parks in the late-Nineteenth Century. Lockdown has reignited some of this historical sentiment and the debate over the public/private green space divide. Commentators have argued that confinement without access to a park during lockdown would have had a devastating impact on the mental and physical health of those living in high-density urban areas without a garden.³

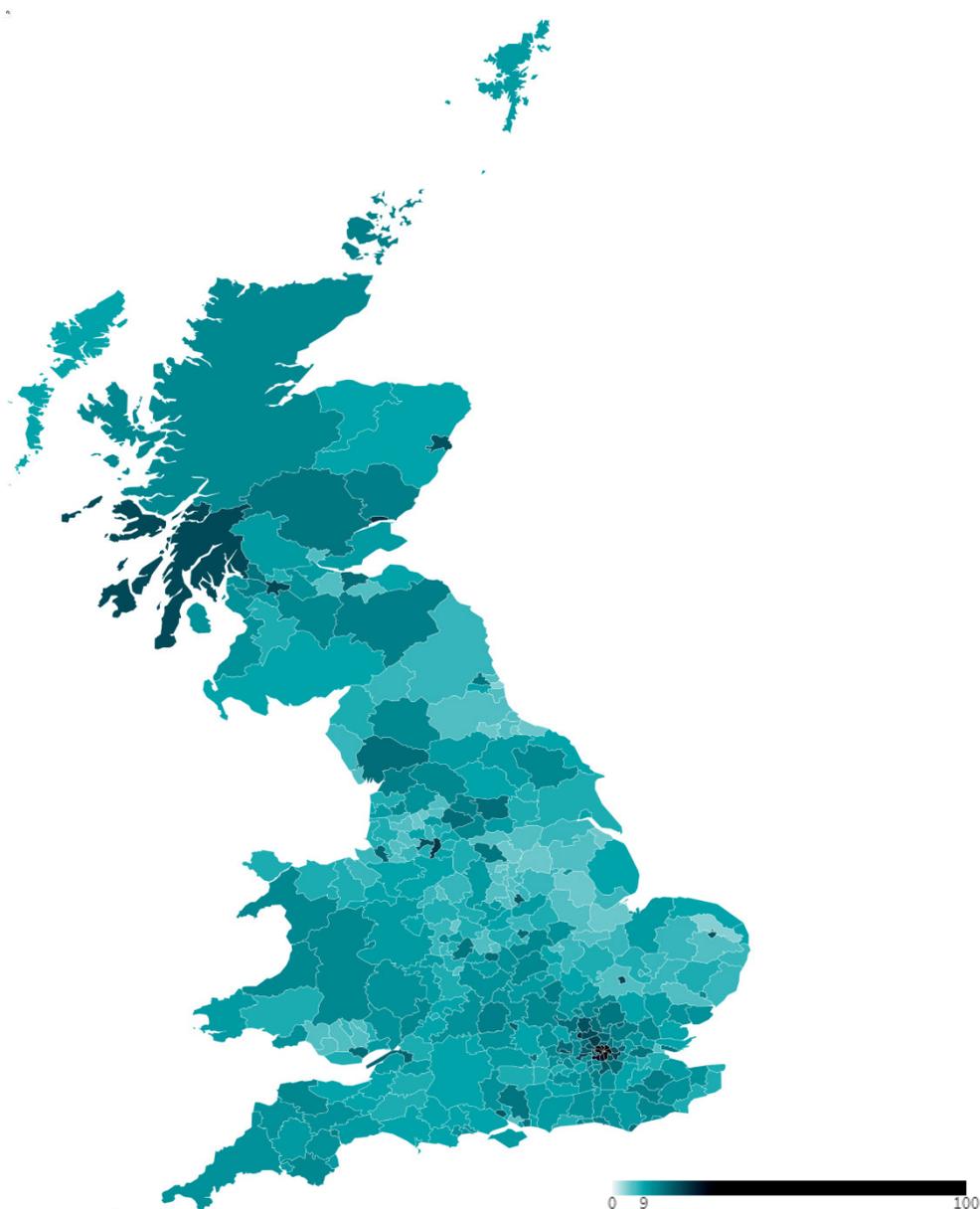
Recent ONS data shows that one in eight households in the UK do not have access to a garden, whilst Black people in England are nearly four times as likely as White people to not have their own outdoor space. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one in five young people have no access to a garden. Those in semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, as well as the unemployed, are over three times as likely to not have a garden as those in top jobs. Londoners in general are least likely to have a garden, with 21% of homes having no shared or private green space. But as Figure 1 indicates, Londoners do benefit from the best access to parks in the country.⁴

Figure 1: Percentage of population within five minutes walking distance of a park or playing field, by region and country of Great Britain



Source: ONS/Ordinance Survey

Figure 2: Percentage of households by Local Authority District without access to private green space – [Interactive map available here](#)



Source: ONS/Ordinance Survey

The green lungs of our towns and cities have suffered from over a decade of austerity. In 2016, it was reported that 92% of park managers had seen their budgets reduced⁵ and more than £15 million was cut from parks and green space funding between 2016/17 to 2018/19.⁶ The financial reality is bleak: in Leeds, parks funding has fallen by 50% over the last decade;⁷ Warwickshire County Council cut its budget by 87% in one year;⁸ and Newcastle City Council saw its parks management budget slashed by 97% between 2012-2017.⁹

A critical report by the Communities and Local Government Select Committee in 2016-17 led to the creation of a short-lived Minister for Parks, a post last held by the now Chancellor Rishi Sunak. The Government's response totalled £13 million and based on its flagship "pocket parks" scheme. This consists of up to £15,000 of funding per application for a new park of 0.4 hectares or less; up to £25,000 is also available for renovating existing parks of this size.

There may be good intention here – pocket parks are community-led and can help build social capital. But clearly there are shortcomings with the Government's current approach. For one, it does little to address the long-term financial security of parks which, it is worth remembering, have no statutory protection and can be sold off by local authorities, who retain 100% of the sale revenue. Cut adrift from stable funding, parks continue to be kept afloat by volunteers, community organisations, and 'Friends' groups. Birmingham City Council told the parliamentary inquiry that these groups performed 60,000 hours of work, worth approximately £550,000 per annum.¹⁰ The most comprehensive report on the state of urban green spaces, carried out by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in 2016, estimated that Friends groups raised £50 million per annum to support parks. It is widely recognised that community support is both desirable and vital for sustaining parks, but it has the unfortunate consequence of loosening the responsibilities of the state to provide a vital public service.

The picture is, then, one of under-funded parks propped up by community and lottery funding. What is available from government grants is not only insufficient, but forces communities to compete against each other – a process which the Government said would "transform the nation".¹¹ More concerningly, most parks have no direct revenue stream other than controversial commercialisation projects such as holding festivals and coronavirus has of course complicated the funding picture further. Councils have recently warned that they could issue Section 114 notices *en masse* this year as a result of lost revenue and sudden increases in expenditure.¹²

Understanding the benefits of parks

If we are to push the reset button and commit to revitalising our civic commons, a starting point is to recognise that parks have a range of benefits far beyond the value of their maintenance budgets. Having experienced nearly two months in lockdown, more people are beginning to appreciate first-hand what advocates have been saying for years: parks are good for our health and wellbeing.

A Fields in Trust study has demonstrated that the Wellbeing Value – the estimated monetary equivalent required to replace a non-market good – of parks and green spaces in the UK is £32.4 billion per year.¹³ GPs alone save £111 million annually thanks to our parks. In London, it has been estimated that £950 million is saved in healthcare costs because of the city's green spaces.¹⁴ More broadly, a 2016 study suggested that outdoor exercise in green spaces delivers £2.2bn worth of health benefits annually.¹⁵

In recent years, medical practice in the UK has readily acknowledged the benefits, both to individual and public health, of outdoor physical activity. Public Health England has long recognised the role of parks in its work.¹⁶ But at an individual level, "social prescribing" – in this instance, a nature-based health intervention – has been shown to benefit physical and mental health, as well as delivering more efficient use of NHS resources. These interventions can include prescribing an allocated amount of weekly exercise in a green space or involvement in a community gardening project. In New Zealand, where Green Prescriptions (GRx) have existed since 1998, a 2018 survey of 3,000 recipients found that

six in ten were more active since receiving their GRx.¹⁷ NHS England has collected its own case-studies of successful examples of socially prescribing parks to reduce anxiety and thus demands on NHS resources. One scheme in Liverpool involved setting up a park walking club for patients who made frequent use of GP services for non-clinical needs.¹⁸ The result was a significant reduction in the group's use of GP services, freeing up resources for others. In a similar vein, NHS hospital gardens have become a recent high profile example of how green space can support patient recovery and welfare; though it should be noted that hospital gardens are typically private funded ventures.¹⁹ From a policy perspective, The King's Fund have argued that gardens and green space should be better integrated into health strategies.²⁰

Parks, then, could form part of a suite of non-medical interventions which could save NHS funds and resources. But social prescribing is contingent on parks being both available and accessible, and local authorities having an improved evidence base of the value of their green assets. Thankfully, policymakers can address this through "natural capital valuations". This form of holistic cost-benefit analysis takes into account the non-market value of a good, such as a health or environmental benefit. In Edinburgh, for example, the council estimates that for every £1 invested in a park, there is a £12 benefit;²¹ in London that figure is £27.²² Based on these numbers it seems incoherent for local authorities to be selling off green public assets as a stop-gap measure, yet that is what is happening. Local authorities have raised £9 billion from selling off public assets like parks, playgrounds and libraries since 2014/15.²³

To prevent this from escalating further, we can look at the impact of other natural capital valuations elsewhere. Take peat bog restoration, a costly but vitally important component of the transition to net-zero. Restoring the UK's peatlands to natural condition has an £8.4 billion price tag, but the total climate change benefits are estimated to be £109 billion.²⁴ Clearly this type of thinking is reaching the Treasury – earlier this year the Chancellor announced a £640 million Nature for Climate fund, part of which will go towards restoring peatland.

Just as peat bogs contribute towards tackling climate change, parks maintain and improve the public's mental and physical health. In future, parks could move from being a public health asset to a tool of the NHS, just as medicines are. NHS England under the leadership of Sir Simon Stevens has been willing to look far beyond primary care in pursuit of better health outcomes, recognising the importance of parks and other public spaces in its "Healthy Towns" programme.²⁵ Whitehill and Bordon, one of the participating towns in the scheme, has the stated aim of improving the appeal of its green spaces to encourage physical activity.²⁶ In other cases, NHS bodies have "prescribed" such things as new boilers, because warmer homes improve health.²⁷

If we acknowledge parks and green space as another means of delivering better health outcomes, should we not look to equip the NHS with the means to ensure the availability, accessibility and maintenance of parks? Given the ever-more important role the NHS and health policy are set to play in national life in the years to come, might we see Sir Simon's remit extended ever further? DEFRA's ambitious 25 Year Plan strikes a similar tone, stating that it would consider "how environmental therapies could be delivered through mental health services".²⁸ Of course, linking up clinical services ultimately raises the difficult question of whether health budgets should be directed towards managing green spaces. That would require a significant cross-departmental effort but mark a decisive shift away from the current stop-gap strategy.

Parks fit for purpose in a post-COVID society

As the country faces up to a potentially decade-defining economic crisis, is there much of a case for parks to be considered a high priority issue? The answer is, of course, not at this moment. But, in time, it will be incumbent on policymakers to establish what a fair and inclusive post-virus society looks like. A substantial commitment to revitalising and securing the future of our green public spaces and unleashing their full potential should be part of that.

Below are four ideas which should be explored with renewed energy to stop the withering of our parks.

1. Parks Districts

Long a feature of American cities, park districts allow a Board of Commissioners to levy a small tax on homeowners (in Illinois, it cannot be more than 0.12% of the equalised assessed value of a property) which fall within its administrative boundaries. In Seattle, this levy is set at \$7.20 per month for the owner of a home worth \$500,000.²⁹ The levy must be approved by a public vote and in Seattle will raise \$810 million over a six year period. Funds are allocated for parks and trail maintenance, recreational accessibility and educational and environmental programmes.

It's worth pointing out that in the UK, properties located within 100 metres of public green spaces are on average £2,500 more expensive than if they were located 500 metres away, a premium of 1.1%.³⁰ Taxing homes in close proximity to parks would be a highly localised version of current practices in the US, more akin to metro-park districts. But a levy of this nature would not be dissimilar to UK Business Improvement Districts and such a system currently exists in South West London and could be adopted elsewhere.

2. Transferring control of parks to not-for-profit organisations

In a bid to save its parks following seismic budget cuts, Newcastle City Council, the National Trust and HLF partnered to transfer the city's parks over to a charitable body now branded as Urban Green Newcastle. This allows the park's management to access new funding sources and also provides public leadership and accountability in the form of a park CEO. Perhaps most importantly, this model can codify the role of Friends groups and bring them into conversations about how parks are run, using their opinions to guide strategic direction.

Again, evidence from the US has shown how community and non-profit leadership – rather than local government – can play a significant role in reimagining the civic commons.³¹ Similarly, HLF-backed Parks Foundations, such as the one in Bournemouth, offer communities an opportunity to take over management of parks, without transferring land or associated assets out of local authority ownership.

3. Involving business

In a recent paper, the SMF has made the case for a new social contract for business in the wake of unprecedented levels of taxpayer support during the coronavirus crisis.³² As and when stability emerges, it seems right that new impetus is placed on asking businesses to invest locally. Could we see a modern day version of Titus Salt's mill town Saltaire where, among factories, parks and green spaces were constructed for his workers? In practice, this could mean a levy on larger employers in close proximity to parks (as occurs in the US) or involving Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) who have a place-based mandate to share around the benefits of business.

In a similar vein, the National Planning Policy Framework should place more onus on housing developers creating adequate green space. A recent report from University College London stated that some new builds are "not meeting the basic requirements for civilised living".³³ With pressure on councils to approve more housing, the Government should mandate that developers factor in the creation of a proportional amount of blue/green space or face penalties for failing to do so.

4. A new role for the NHS

In the first instance, NHS bodies should be able to take part in bidding for any additional parks funding offered by central government, perhaps in partnership with local authorities. When the current phase of the COVID-19 crisis is over, government should investigate the overall national potential for better patient outcomes and better use of NHS resources arising from greater use of socially-prescribed public parks and other green spaces. If there is convincing evidence that more use of parks would yield significant benefits, NHS England should be resourced to support the improvement and expansion of park provision directly. Ideally this would involve increased overall spending on parks. But if it is necessary to shift funding from local authorities, then putting public funds for parks under the partial control of health agencies rather than local authorities might reduce the scope for those resources to be allocated elsewhere.

ENDNOTES

-
- ¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmcomloc/45/45.pdf>
- ² https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/attachments/state_of_uk_public_parks_2016_final_for_web%281%29.pdf
- ³ https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/06/coronavirus-crisis-garden-housing-tower-block-home?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other
- ⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/datasets/accesstogardensandpublicgreenspaceingreatbritain>
- ⁵ https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/attachments/state_of_uk_public_parks_2016_final_for_web%281%29.pdf
- ⁶ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/members-area/briefings/2019/19-22-state-of-the-market-in-parks/>
- ⁷ <https://futureofparks.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2019/07/Final-report-Charitable-Giving-to-Parks-and-Green-Spaces.pdf>
- ⁸ <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/2018/06/budget-cuts-put-parks-need-urgent-attention/>
- ⁹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmcomloc/45/4502.htm>
- ¹⁰ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/communities-and-local-government-committee/public-parks/written/39896.html>
- ¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pocket-parks-helping-communities-transform-unloved-neglected-or-derelict-areas-into-new-green-spaces>
- ¹² <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/politics/yorkshire-councils-could-declare-themselves-bankrupt-months-due-pandemic-2846622>
- ¹³ <http://www.fieldsintrust.org/Upload/file/research/Revaluing-Parks-and-Green-Spaces-Report.pdf>
- ¹⁴ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/11015viv_natural_capital_account_for_london_v7_full_vis.pdf
- ¹⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0091743516302298>
- ¹⁶ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/housing-communities-and-local-government-committee/public-parks/written/39406.html>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/green-prescription-patient-survey-2018-report.pdf>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/gp/case-studies/social-prescribing-reducing-non-medical-gp-appointments-and-delivering-a-better-service-for-patients-brownlow-health-princes-park-health-centre-north-west/>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.bmj.com/content/359/bmj.j5627>
- ²⁰ https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/field_publication_file/Gardens_and_health.pdf
- ²¹ http://www.socialvalueuk.org/app/uploads/2017/09/CEC_SROI_Technical_report___final.pdf
- ²² https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/11015viv_natural_capital_account_for_london_v7_full_vis.pdf
- ²³ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2019-03-04/sold-from-under-you>
- ²⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/uknaturalcapitalforpeatlands/naturalcapitalaccounts#methodology>

²⁵ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/putting-health-into-place-v4.pdf>

²⁶ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/putting-health-into-place-v4.pdf>

²⁷ <https://www.bjfm.co.uk/boilers-on-prescription-reduces-gp-appointments-by-60>

²⁸ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693158/25-year-environment-plan.pdf

²⁹ <https://www.kingcounty.gov/services/parks-recreation/parks/about/levy.aspx>

³⁰ <https://www.wpcc.org.uk/>

³¹ <https://medium.com/reimagining-the-civic-commons/collaboration-strengthens-civic-life-c4835fb43ca>

³² <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Returning-the-favour-a-new-social-contract-for-business-final.pdf>

³³ https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jan/19/housing-giants-put-profit-before-peoples-needs-report-reveals?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other