

Historic England evidence to the COVID-19 Committee inquiry into the long-term impact of the pandemic on the UK's towns and cities.

Historic England is the Government's statutory adviser on all matters relating to the historic environment in England. We are a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). We champion and protect England's historic places, providing expert advice to local planning authorities, developers, owners and communities to help ensure our historic environment is properly understood, enjoyed and cared for.

Our evidence focuses on the impact of the pandemic on historic public parks and green spaces in our towns and cities.

Summary

The vast majority of our public parks and green spaces are the legacy of past generations planning and providing for growing populations. The public parks were considered essential infrastructure for towns and cities and were features of civic pride. The Covid-19 pandemic has further underlined that our public parks are vital to the health and well-being of communitiesⁱ. Parks and green spaces are important components of urban green infrastructure and key to the long-term liveability of urban areas as the climate changes. Yet the status of public parks is vague, and funding continues to be precarious.

In summary:

- The value of urban green space has rarely been so important for local communities as it was during the pandemic but there is inequity in access to green space and quality green spaces. Their value in areas with relatively high levels of deprivation is particularly acute and they have an important role to play in addressing spatial inequalities. **Public parks need to be protected as inalienable.**
- Our public parks have a vital role in creating vibrant and sustainable towns and cities. However, secure long-term core funding for their maintenance and management as well as national leadership is essential to maximise their potential. While there have been innovative approaches to funding and management of these places there is an underlying **need to recognise public parks and green spaces are critical infrastructure through statute, and Government policy and financing.**
- England's historic public park heritage is of national importance and we need to protect and safeguard these sites for the benefit of allⁱⁱ. Historic England will continue to champion the nation's public park and green space heritage to ensure it is better understood, enjoyed and looked after. We offer advice and research including our research on social prescribing and wellbeing outcomes which demonstrate the value of heritageⁱⁱⁱ. Developments on national Green Infrastructure (GI) policy are welcome, however **we need to accelerate action, support local green spaces strategies and embed GI thinking that recognises the value of existing green spaces including their cultural, as well as natural, heritage.**

Parks and gardens are essential infrastructure

The main early municipal public park developments (1800-1880) were largely in the North and the Midlands: Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Birmingham, and also Preston, Blackburn, Birkenhead, Altrincham, Macclesfield, Bradford, Halifax, Barnsley, Salford, Sheffield, Derby and Wolverhampton.

The 'People's Parks' concept pioneered in Britain was exported across the globe and the importance of historic parks is recognised internationally. ICOMOS emphasises the need that 'they be preserved as historic sites for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations'^{iv}.

Municipal public parks were part of Victorian reforms to improve the physical, moral and spiritual condition of people living in expanding industrial towns; and the enabling legislation was the 1848 Public Health Act. There is a large body of evidence about the value and benefits of public parks and tools to help make the case for investment. For example, this March we commissioned VividEconomics to analyse their 'Greenkeeper' tool (funded by Innovate UK) to evaluate the benefits of the 72 parks in core cities designated as being of special historic interest. In a non-pandemic year, there are 37 million visits to these parks. This small number of parks alone provide £543 million of value in mental health and wellbeing benefits plus over £303 million other annual benefits, including physical health, amenity value and carbon sequestration.

There are over 2,000 public parks of notable historic interest and all parks have a history at the heart of the local community. More than 300 public parks are included in the national Register of Historic Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England. As well as London and the core cities, there are many other important parks and green spaces in smaller cities and larger towns, and the designs range from very early municipal examples like Exeter's Northerhay Gardens (1612) to the newest park registration, the 1970s' Alexandra Road Park in Camden.

Spatial and quality inequalities

One in eight British households has no garden and the percentage of homes without a garden is higher among ethnic minorities, with Black people in England nearly four times as likely as White people to have no outdoor space at home^v. The Government's 25 Year Environment Plan acknowledges that 'The poorer you are, the more likely it is that your house, and your children's school and playground are close to highly-polluted roads, and the less likely you are to enjoy ready access to green spaces'^{vi}. For the most deprived, access to public parks and green spaces is even more important. The pandemic has shown how vitally important this access is and the unequal distribution of green spaces and inequities for users.

In April 2020, when some local authorities were struggling to maintain social distancing in parks, the Government issued a briefing about access, stating that those who didn't have a garden 'must be able to enjoy fresh air and green space'^{vii}. The inequalities issue is not new. In 2010 CABESpace published the evidence base 'Urban Green Nation'^{viii}. It showed that 'almost nine out of ten people use parks and green spaces, and they value them; if people are satisfied with local parks, they tend to be satisfied with their council; the provision of parks in deprived areas is worse than in affluent areas; people from minority ethnic groups tend to have less local green space and it is of a poorer quality; and the higher the quality of the green space, the more likely it is to be used'.

The 'People's Parks' were ingeniously designed as proven by their relevance for over 150 years. They were designed to be attractive and interesting places. The pioneers saw them as the 'lungs of the city' where everyone could be refreshed and revived by contact with nature, exercise and recreation. Planting displays, gardens, trees, children's play, leisure and sports facilities, and quality park maintenance, were important elements of the offer and still very much valued by park visitors today although sadly standards greatly vary as verified in the Urban Green Nation report (2010), The State of UK Parks reports, and APSE Surveys. Last year's APSE survey suggests that the number of parks in poor condition has increased fourfold and there is a north-south divide. Research shows that the

attractiveness of a park, good maintenance and the facilities on offer are important factors in people choosing to visit^{ix}. In turn, the attractiveness of a park encourages use. The current emphasis on green space as access to nature may understate and even put at risk the very attributes and features or facilities that attract people to parks, many of which relate to their heritage and cultural significance.

In May 2020, the Government rapidly issued much-needed advice^x on social distancing measures for green spaces. A typical historic public park layout is used in the guidance. The advice includes accessibility improvements such as road crossings which are needed, not just in the time of a pandemic. The advice does not fully reflect the significance of the design of historic public parks and features, and the potential long-term damage that may be caused by measures such as widening entrances and paths.



Figure 41: Social distancing interventions in areas around parks

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Widen footways on approach streets to main entrance | 8. Queue marking indicators at main entrance, popular park destinations and toilets |
| 2. Widen footways within park | 9. Signs on social distancing and circulation, particularly at conflict points such as junctions and crossings |
| 3. Provide movement guidance around park including consideration for one-way circulation | 10. Use existing street furniture for signs to avoid impacting on pedestrian flows |
| 4. Reduce traffic speeds | 11. Allow space where multiple queues meet |
| 5. Increase space for pedestrians and cycles beside park entrances | 12. Stewards to help manage queues and pedestrian flows |
| 6. Minimise pinch points, whilst taking into consideration security and the needs of disabled people and older people. | 13. Maximise access and introduce one-way entry and exit points |
| 7. Reduce unnecessary obstacles, for example planters and add markings/tape on seating to maintain social distancing | 14. Additional cleaning regime and maintenance |
| | 15. Safe level crossing points to access park |

Historic England supports Keep Britain Tidy's Green Flag Award scheme to promote standards and to celebrate the historic importance of local parks and **we recommend such quality benchmarks be integrated in the new Green Infrastructure standards**. Effective conservation is dependent on good stewardship and maintenance and sharing the heritage and cultural significances of these green spaces. With the right funding and skills, there are potentially great opportunities to restore and revive communities' public park heritage and ensure the contribution of these green spaces as green infrastructure and that their role in climate adaptation is maximised.

The need to socially distance has also highlighted the importance of large public parks and green spaces. We estimate that opportunities to create large parks may only occur once in a generation, so our inherited large green spaces are precious resources. We have had standards for accessible green space since the 1930s with the Field-in-Trust's 6 acres per 1,000 head of population standard^{xi}. London, Yorkshire and the North-east fall well below this minimum. The Office for National Statistics data shows that not only did public park use increase in 2020 but it continues to grow in 2021^{xii}.

Better management of our town and city parks and green spaces, including historic public parks, can help address spatial inequalities by improving access and quality of experience for local people and visitors.

Ongoing funding issues

Funding for the care and upkeep of public parks continues to decline. The National Lottery Heritage Fund's 2016 'State of Public Parks'^{xiii} report showed that there was a 'growing deficit between the rising use of parks and declining resources available to manage them'. APSE surveys^{xiv} of local authority managed public parks show the funding challenges deepening. The Charter for Parks estimates that the total budget for parks across the UK is down to around £1bn, yet parks need around £2-3billion per year to avoid them becoming run down^{xv}.

Over the last 10 years public parks teams have been actively and creatively addressing the decline in core funding through initiatives such as new income streams, involving the community as volunteers and even new management models like trusts. The Lottery funds have stimulated and supported innovation and change through their 'Rethinking Parks' programme.

Most public parks' providers have had a financially tough 2020/21 year with curtailed income sources and increased operational costs. The viability of many funding models will have been challenged. Indeed, some trusts may find it difficult to financially recover from the pandemic impacts. Experience shows us that the local authority model has proved the most sustainable over the last century^{xvi}.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic raises a challenge about the value we place on public parks and how we fund them, so that well-maintained and attractive public parks are available to all. Core funding needs to be assured.

Governance

The 150-year role of local government in managing public parks is key to their character and the right of free and all-year-round public access for recreation for all. In theory it should be inalienable, but it has been threatened by changes in management and the need to generate income such as chargeable events which not all places can achieve. **The status of public parks and the principles about what they offer and why we value and safeguard them as part of our heritage, culture and urban infrastructure needs to be recognised through statute like other services such as public libraries and museums, and designations such as National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.**

The sector has repeatedly called for a legal duty to ensure protection and management of public parks as essential green spaces. The Government acknowledges 'the importance of reinforcing the value of parks in planning for their future'^{xvii}. Whilst local governance is one of the important characteristics of public parks, we would welcome a full debate about a statutory status akin to other public services and what it could positively confer.

Initiatives such as the CABESpace programme (2003-2011) and more recently the Lottery funded 'Rethinking Parks' have been valuable in championing the design and management of public parks and urban green spaces and sharing good practice. A new Parks Action Group was set up after the 2017 Communities and Local Government Select Committee report on The Future of Public Parks and £500,000^{xviii} was pledged to kick start the work. Green Infrastructure standards are being developed as part of the Government's 25-Year Environment Plan, and the Government has made a 'commitment to protect our environmental assets and ensure more green spaces are provided

through the planning reforms’^{xix}. However national support is not matching the social importance of public parks and green spaces and their role in the long-term liveability of towns and cities. The Climate Change Committee has also advised on the need to reverse the decline in urban greenspace^{xx}.

We would welcome a radical rethink about the protection and governance of public parks. The municipal management is key to the character of the majority of public parks and this needs formalising in statute. Historic England can help to inform this work.

i

<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/attachments/Parks%20for%20People%20report.pdf>

ii <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/what-is-designation/registered-parks-and-gardens/>

iii Historic England 2020 report ‘Social Prescribing and the potential of Historic England’s local delivery’

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/social-prescribing-potential-historic-england-local-delivery/social-prescribing/>; What Works Wellbeing <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/heritage-and-wellbeing-2/> and Wellbeing and the Historic Environment <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/wellbeing-and-the-historic-environment/wellbeing-and-historic-environment/>

iv ICOMOS document https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Charters/GA2017_6-3-2_HistoricUrbanPublicParks_EN_adopted-15122017.pdf

v <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/accesstogardensandpublicgreenspaceingreatbritain> 14 May 2020

vi A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment 2018

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

vii <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52339266> 18 April 2020

viii Urban Green Nation 2010 https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/urban-green-nation_0_0.pdf

ix For example ‘The Future Prospects of Urban Public Parks’ 2017 report <https://futureofparks.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2017/07/Job-38853-Future-of-Parks-Findings-Report.pdf>

x

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fe1e1768fa8f56afaf406a7/201112_Safer_Urban_Centres_and_Green_Spaces_guidance_v7.10_for_publication_clean_pdf_version_1.pdf May 2020

xi

<http://www.fieldsintrust.org/guidance#:~:text=First%20published%20in%20the%201930%E2%80%99s%20the%20Guidance%20is,Fields%20in%20Trust%20%2F%20David%20Lock%20Associates%20Survey%29.>

xii

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/howhaslockdownchangedourrelationshipwithnature/2021-04-26> 26 April 2021

xiii National Lottery Heritage Fund report <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/publications/state-uk-public-parks-2016>

xiv APSE surveys <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/members-area/special-interest-portals/parks-portal/state-of-the-market-reports-parks-briefings-data-trends/>

xv The Charter for Parks www.parkscharter.org.uk

xvi Historic England research report ‘History of Public Park Funding and Management (1820 – 2010)’

<https://research.historicengland.org.uk/Report.aspx?i=15442>

xvii The Government acknowledged ‘the importance of reinforcing the value of parks in planning for their future’ September 2017

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/645570/Cm_Govt_Response_Future_of_Public_Parks_Accessible.pdf

xviii <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-pledges-500000-for-new-action-group-to-grow-future-of-public-parks> 19 September 2017

xix <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-06-08/12066>

xx <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/reducing-emissions-and-preparing-for-climate-change-2015-progress-report-to-parliament/>