



# THE PARKS & GREEN SPACES ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP

## EGM and 5 Year Review of the Select Committee Inquiry into the Future of Public Parks

8<sup>th</sup> July 2021, 14:00-15:00

Zoom  
Minutes

### Speakers

Lilian Greenwood MP

Liz Twist MP

Clive Betts MP

Allison Ogden-Newton OBE, Chief Executive of Keep Britain Tidy

Paul Rabbitts, Head of Parks, Heritage & Culture at Watford Borough Council

Dave Morris, Chair of the National Federation of Parks and Green Space

Ian Baggott, Volunteer at Midlands Parks Forum

### Present

Lilian Greenwood MP (outgoing Chair)

Liz Twist MP (newly elected Chair)

Clive Betts MP

Seema Malhotra MP

Mark Tami MP

Alex Norris MP

Fleur Anderson MP (representative)

Darren Henry MP (representative)

Ian Byrne MP (representative)

### Apologies

Henry Smith MP

Lord Blencathra

Sarah Olney MP

Caroline Lucas MP

### 14.00: Welcome and Extraordinary General Meeting (Lilian Greenwood MP)

- **Lilian Greenwood MP** welcomed parliamentarians and parks sector representatives to the APPG's second meeting and outlined the purposes of the meeting.
- Lilian called an Extraordinary General Meeting, noting that she was stepping down as Chair due to her appointment as Opposition Deputy Chief Whip.
- **Liz Twist MP** was elected as Chair.
- **Seema Malhotra MP** was elected as Vice Chair.

#### 14.05: Introduction to the Objectives of the Meeting (Liz Twist MP)

- **Liz Twist MP** thanked members and said she was looking forward to raising the profile of parks on the Westminster agenda and in her constituency.
- Liz welcomed the speakers and stakeholders from local authorities, friends groups, parks forums and environmental charities in the audience. She noted that the meeting would be recorded.
- Liz gave an overview of objectives of the meeting, including to review progress since the Select Committee Inquiry into the Future of Public Parks, launched in 2016 by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

#### 14.10 Clive Betts MP, Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

- Liz welcomed Clive Betts MP, longstanding Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and invited him to offer his insight into progress made by the Government since the inquiry.
- Clive Betts MP gave an overview of the Select Committee inquiry into the Future of Public Parks launched in 2016. He noted that the inquiry was an interesting one because of the involvement from members of the public, resulting in over 30,000 survey responses and a staggering 388 written submissions. He welcomed the APPG following up on progress.
- Clive outlined why his Committee did not recommend that parks be a statutory duty. They did not think this would achieve anything. He gave the example of libraries closing despite being a statutory duty. He also noted that it would be almost impossible to find a measure the success of parks a statutory duty. He emphasised that raising the profile of parks and increasing funding for local authorities were more important. He noted that as social care funding goes up and overall council funding goes down, the amount spent on parks has been hugely cut back, and noted again that the key issue for parks is local authority funding.
- Clive outlined the huge benefits offered by parks. If there were no parks and no open greenspace, cities would be a very different place to live in. He noted that parks have wide public health benefits that ought to be taking into account of when evaluating their benefit, particularly from a local authority point of view. He noted that his Committee's recommendations were directed at government at one level but also were directed at councils, and encouraging them to look at the enormous benefits of parks when doing budgets.
- Clive noted that parks also help with climate change, flooding problems and community cohesion. He noted that in his constituency of Sheffield, some public health money had gone into parks and he supported this.
- Clive stated that his Committee had looked at charging for use of parks and exclusive use of parks but had concluded they should be free to use for everyone - although there may be some instances where charges are used and where there may be exclusive use, although community consultation was necessary.
- Clive noted the importance of friends groups. He noted they can be sounding boards for changes at a local authority level and also provide volunteers to help in hard financial times.
- Clive noted that the Committee had looked at the contentious issue of alternative forms of management. He gave the example of Newcastle, which has introduced a trust model. The Committee didn't come to a view that there was a right or wrong way forward, but instead recommended guidance – for example, there shouldn't be a sale of the freehold of parks, at most there should just be a long lease, and in cases with long leases, there are clearly objectives in any agreement to embed accountability to the wider public.
- Clive said the Committee recognised that local plans should embed a long term strategy for parks and open spaces. The Committee has recently been critical of government's focus on

housing, as while this is important but there are other things that the planning system needs to deal with.

- Clive noted that the Committee also looked at parks management, and recommended there is a need for skilling and better training, with coordination between local authorities.
- Clive noted the Committee recognised that deprived communities need access to parks. He outlined research which shows that people who are better off and have access to a car, are more likely to access the countryside, while those on low incomes and deprived areas often only have access to parks.
- Clive noted that as a result of the inquiry, Government established the parks action group. He asked for comments from Dave Morris about how effective that has been.
- Clive noted that the Committee didn't want to stifle innovation, which is why the inquiry didn't recommend a rigid mode of governance for parks. Clive noted that he had joined the board of Fields in Trusts, who are doing interesting work with Liverpool to safeguard parks legally and making sure that no Liverpool residents will live 10 min walk from a high quality green space. This is interesting innovation that fits in with the wider benefit of parks to the community, which was the main theme that came out of the inquiry.
- Liz thanked Clive for giving an overview of the inquiry and outlining the issues impacting upon parks.

#### **14:15 Paul Rabbitts, Head of Parks, Heritage & Culture at Watford Borough Council**

- Liz asked Paul Rabbitts, Head of Parks, Heritage & Culture at Watford Borough Council to update Clive and the rest of the APPG from a local authority perspective.
- On the question of whether parks had improved, Paul said that they had gotten worse. He outlined his 33 years' experience working in the parks, including in Watford, Middlesbrough and Carlisle local councils, and is Chair of the Parks Management Association. He noted that people who work in parks do it because it's their passion.
- Paul noted that he is a parks historian and gave an overview of the history of parks and their current state. In 1875, the Public Health Act allowed money to be borrowed to start laying out public parks. Crucially, parks were recognised under public health way back then. Paul noted that we have 27,000 parks which are managed primarily by just 300 local authorities. Between the 70s and 90s there was a decline in parks, with the loss of a lot of staff, including whole park departments. Paul emphasised that parks departments to be brought back into local authorities. In 1996, £1 billion was invested in parks from Heritage Lottery Fund, however this scratched the surface. Paul quoted Alan Barber in the 2005 Green Futures report as saying 'the condition of much of this land is poor and declining. Whilst quantity has grown, quality has declined with decreasing expenditure.' Paul explained the situation is still the same today. Local authorities have lost their revenue and support grants, so cuts have had to be made. Austerity measures have also hit parks hard and we are still mearing the full impact.
- Paul emphasised that Covid has recently shown the value of parks and greenspaces, however it has been hard for local authorities to manage them to the standard they should be, which is Green Flag Award standard.
- Paul outlined the evidence he's seen of the decline of the sector through working for local authorities such as Carlisle and Middlesbrough, including a loss of Green Flag Awards, stopping activities such as Britain in Bloom and losing whole teams of parks officers. He noted that there has also been a loss of skills with people managing parks who have never managed parks before.
- Paul emphasised that the number of visitors to parks is in the millions each year, while local authorities can barely afford two grounds maintenance staff at any one time

- Paul noted that in terms of green recovery, the Prime Minister's 10 point plan has no mention of parks, despite estimates that 92% of the population will be living in towns and cities by 2022.
- Paul emphasised that what is needed is significant, targeted, ring-fenced investment and capital funding, aimed primarily at local authorities. The amount needs to be much more substantial than the £19,000,000 which the government set aside for parks a few years ago, which only resulted in £15,000 for Watford which covered two sets of swings. He noted that short term funding and pocket parks funding is not the answer.
- Paul emphasised that we also need to focus on quality of parks, not quantity and accessibility. We also don't need any more research telling us parks are good for us.
- Paul said that crucially, need government to talk to people who manage parks, as we are passionate about it.
- Liz thanked Paul for outlining the problems facing parks, their benefits and the urgent need for funding.

#### 14.25 Dave Morris, Chair of the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces

- Liz asked Dave Morris, Chair of the National Federation of Parks and Green **Spaces** to update Clive and the rest of the APPG from a friends group perspective.
- Dave introduced the National Federation as the voice of the friends group movement which has around a million members. He referred to his briefing which was sent to the APPG members, summarising the Committee report, the subsequent activities of the Parks Action Group of which he was a member, and other sector initiatives to address the underfunding and understaffing crisis faced by parks and greenspaces.
- Dave noted that tens of millions of people regularly use and need this essential, unique, popular public service - our natural health service. He noted that the Committee report recognised that parks were at a tipping point and a failure to ensure the resources to sustain them could have severe consequences. Dave welcomed the APPG meeting to hold the government to account.
- Dave noted that since the Committee's important report, the situation has deteriorated even further, at a time when parks have never been more popular or valued. Despite the heroic efforts of those in the Parks Action Group and of parks staff and volunteers, the government has failed to back up its pledges of support with real resources that are desperately needed.
- He emphasised that parks must be properly recognised, funded and staffed to fulfil their vital role for the population.
- Dave outlined the amount of funding needed by the sector. The National Trust has estimated a £5.5billion green recovery fund and Friends of the Earth have estimated an annual capital and revenue investment of £4billion per year for the next 5 years, just to get parks back into the state they should be after years of underfunding. Dave noted that the whole parks service currently is surviving on less than £1 billion a year.
- Dave outlined why he believed parks should be a statutory duty. He noted that 322,000 people signed a petition and 24 national organisations signed the Charter for Parks backing parks as a statutory duty. Dave said parks are vulnerable as a non-statutory service. He noted the Select Committee inquiry in 2002 called on parks to be a statutory service. He noted that mechanisms which the 2016 Select Committee report pointed to instead of making parks a statutory service – such as greater recognition of the value of parks, which has never been greater, and appropriate prioritisation in local authority funding decisions, which is not possible due to local authority cuts - will not be a substitute for making parks a statutory service which is properly funded by federal government and ring fenced for local authorities.
- Dave noted that he presented the Charter to Parks to the then Parks Minister Rishi Sunak in 2018. The Minister said, in relation to the introduction of a legal duty that “government does not want to impose excessive central reporting burdens on local government and has sought

to reduce the pressure on local authorities through the new burdens doctrine.... This requires departments to justify why new statutory duties are being placed on local authorities and identify additional funding towards any additional costs". David noted that this leaves a door open for the APPG to call on parks to be a statutory duty as the proposal has not been rejected in principle.

- Liz thanked Dave for his contribution and noted the reference to the Charter.
- Liz asked Ian Baggott to update Clive and the rest of the APPG from the perspective from an active parks forum.

#### **14:30 Ian Baggott, Volunteer at the West Midlands Parks Forum**

- Ian outlined his 26 years' experience in urban green space, including a role as head of parks at a local authority, as a consultant, as a member of the urban green spaces task force in late 90s, as a co-author of the State of UK Parks report, helping establish the parks management association, and as a volunteer with the Midlands Parks Forum. He noted he is currently involved in research with Keep Britain Tidy looking at the state of UK parks.
- He noted that in 2013, when writing the State of UK Parks report, the sense within the sector was that we were at a tipping point. In 2021, we have now hit the bottom of that fall.
- Ian gave an overview of the Midlands Parks Forum, which grew out of the Westminster Parks Forum. It is a voluntary network that has existed for 30 years, funded by volunteer and local authority contributions, bringing together a network of local authority park professionals wanting to share good practice, with 70 members currently.
- Ian outlined the evidence that the Midlands Parks Forum presented to the Select Committee. In particular, it warned about the condition of our parks going into decline and the danger of the commercialisation agenda vs the need for social inclusion. The Forum also asserted that local authorities should play a central role in the future of parks.
- Ian outlined that the Midlands Parks was established as a charity as 2019 and outlined the funding challenges the group has had to overcome. It has secured grants and other funding to support a paid role, however it is estimated that volunteers alone have contributed over £27,000 of their time to the charity. He noted that the Forum has good standing and contributed to the government's guidance for managing public parks during Covid-19. He emphasised that outside London, it is the only green space forum that has such a track record and such resources.
- Ian outlined the value that regional greenspace forums can provide which is largely absent from the sector, including creating regional case studies and research, skills training and mentoring, and linking up to stakeholders to provide a much needed and coordinated view across the sector.
- Ian outlined the fact that green space and parks professionals are often overlooked, and said he appreciated the opportunity to speak to the APPG today.
- Ian outlined the challenges facing the sector, which have included austerity measures and large cuts. This has impacted development and managerial areas of our work and more recently, front line staffing. It has also left the sector with an aging workforce, with 48% of the workforce over 50, as well as issues with equality and deskilling.
- Ian emphasised that regional parks forums provide an immediately opportunity to begin to address these issues. They could be a vehicle for investment to help build back capacity, to help friends groups, run activities in parks, and to help develop projects and secure funding for the sector.
- Ian outlined that the Government response to the committee stated it would work with the Local Government Authority to develop and implement options for establishing national and regional parks management forums. However, the only positive increase since has been in the Midlands, thanks to volunteers and a charity.
- Ian said he was not clear about the need for another inquiry, but said what we do need is investment that is long term and revenue based, to rebuild skills and employment, to bring in

young people, and to focus on activities that address climate change, health and wellbeing and levelling up. That would be a real green recovery.

- Ian emphasised that the government's green recovery so far has been focused on rural areas, but should be focused on our urban green space. We need access to good quality green space, and as Professor John Newton said recently in a presentation for Public Health England, it needs to be in a targeted, researched, evidence based way.
- Liz thanked Ian and noted that the Zoom chat was going bad with enthusiastic and passionate views.

#### **14.35 Clive Betts MP, Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee**

- Liz invited Clive Betts to reflect on what had been said by stakeholders.
- Clive said that on the issue of parks being a statutory service, it isn't going to happen, and continuing to push for this is a waste of time that could be put into other things. He reiterated his point that even if parks were made a statutory service, it won't have any effect, giving example of libraries.
- Clive outlined why he disagreed with the suggestion of ring-fenced funding. He said he opposed ring-fencing for local authorities as they are there to serve their communities and make choices. Choices are constrained by funding, but we should be pressing to get more funding for local government, which is the bottom line. He noted that the concern is that social care takes up a bigger share than ever before, meaning people are paying more and getting less, as vitally important local authority such as parks are all being cut back in absolute terms as well as relatively. Clive noted that someone has argued for ring fencing in every inquiry he has had, be that for children's services, adult services, homelessness or street sweeping. The outcome would be that the same amount of funding is given but local authorities are restricted in how they spend it and not able to join it up properly. He emphasised that if public health monies were ring-fenced, they wouldn't be able to be used for parks.
- Clive agreed that we do need to have a look at where things are going wrong. He also took on the point that overall, things are not getting better because of funding constraints.
- In terms of next steps, Clive did not propose going to a full going to a full scale select committee inquiry as this would take a long time. Instead, he proposed quick hearing sessions where we ask all the organisations who gave evidence last time to come forward and tell us what has happened since the last inquiry, where things are still failing, where things are going backwards rather than forwards, then we can pick that up and go back to government and get answers from ministers on that. He noted that will build some momentum and would challenge ministers in a formal way about what hasn't happened since the last inquiry.
- Liz thanked Clive agreed that the suggestion to have an updated inquiry is an excellent one. She also noted that the inviting the Minister to respond is something the APPG could do.

#### **14.45 Allison Ogden Newton, Chief Executive of Keep Britain Tidy**

- Liz asked **Allison Ogden-Newton**, Chief Executive of the environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy, to discuss the immediate issues facing parks this summer and to introduce Love Parks Week.
- Allison stated that the review was very timely this is a critical situation.
- Allison welcomed the comments that had been made about areas of deprivation, noting that there is a link with unequal access to greenspace.
- Allison outlined the impact of Covid on our relationship with parks and green spaces. She noted that Keep Britain Tidy was overwhelmed during lockdown by people whose parks were lockdown lifesavers, which leaves us asking where we would be without access to greenspace, particularly for those people who are deprived. She said we need to protect those spaces and not just let them disintegrate.
- Allison noted that Keep Britain Tidy worked closely with local authorities during the pandemic and we saw some of the worst scenes of environmental vandalism we have ever seen. Local



authorities told Keep Britain Tidy they picked up an extra 60tonnes of rubbish during the first lockdown.

- Allison gave an introduction to Love Parks Week which is all about loving, protecting, and respecting parks.
- Allison outlined that parks are an urgent parliamentary issue. She noted what Clive said about not pursuing avenues that won't give a result, however more funding is critical and we have to find a way to work together to ensure parks and green spaces receive the funding they need. She emphasised that parks are not achievable on the cheap but they are far too costly to lose.
- Allison emphasised that quality parks are crucial which is why Keep Britain Tidy promotes the Green Flag Award. It is a high standard and it should be the minimum standard. Everyone should access to Green Flag Award space, very much like we all have access to the NHS, which we all rightly celebrate.
- Allison noted that the campaign runs from 23<sup>rd</sup> July to 1st of August. She noted it is a celebration of parks but also a call to get people to respect the space parks they enjoy using. It is also a call to parliamentarians, to fundamentally highlight how important they are to us all and how impossible they will be to replace if we lose them now.

#### 14:50 Q&A

- Liz Twist opened the Q&A.
- Question 1: "Picking up on Ian's point regarding an ageing workforce. This is something that we're seeing at a local level. On the operational side we've re-introduced an apprenticeship scheme, which has at least brought some younger people into the workforce, but it's a pale imitation of the apprenticeships even compared to 30 years ago."  
Question 2: "Question 3: But how can we make parks a career choice for university entrants, when we are unable to provide them with a career and progression, unless they want to be dealing with street cleansing, waste or any other non-related service?"
  - **Ian Baggott** said that we need to create career progression so we can attract people from a wide range of disciplines, such as geography, history, law, architecture and planning. Without career progression it is very difficult to attract applicants.
  - **Allison Ogden-Newton** emphasised that the lack of staff is exacerbating the limited funding. When money is available, you're only able access it if you have the staff to make the applications. For parks that have reached a situation of not having staff or resources, they're not able to apply for that money, and they are arguably most in need.
  - **Paul Rabbitts** also noted that we don't have the staff to write bids anymore in local authorities and the staff there don't have time to do it. He noted that there is a huge disparity between the number of staff running parks compared to other services such as leisure centres.
- Question 3: "Presume everyone knows that when Public Health responsibilities were transferred to local authorities they were not transferred with sufficient funding. There is not a pot of gold to be transferred to parks"
  - **Clive Betts** said that when public health responsibilities and money were transferred to local authorities, the protection that public health had in the NHS was removed (i.e. that it went up every year with inflation). He said that is a challenge. Clive also reiterated why he opposes ring fenced funding.
  - **Dave Morris** noted that parks are a relatively cheap service - £1 billion to run 27,000 parks servicing the whole country on a daily basis. To treble that would be so cost effective, particularly when you compare that to other essential infrastructure that the government has invested hundreds of billions of pounds in.

- **Paul Rabbits** said he agreed with Clive in relation to parks not being a statutory service.
- Question 4 “At a TCPA conference on Tuesday, Prof John Newton of Public Health England pointed out that every £1 spent on maintaining green spaces provides £34 of health benefits. That is an extraordinary return on investment. What can be done to ensure that HMTreasury acts on this, and provides some long-term revenue funding to help generate these health benefits?”
  - **Clive Betts** said that has to be down to local authority level. This information needs to be understood not just by central government but by councillors when doing their budgets. It would be a lot easier if local authorities had more funding. If councils had a 5% uplift, a lot would be a lot more willing to spend more on parks.
  - **Paul Rabbits** said that we have mountains of evidence about the public health benefits of parks, we need to use this evidence to start doing something.
- Question 5 “Will there be a call for the Parks Action Group to be revitalised, ensuring there is representation of parks practitioners. i.e. those who are endeavouring to manage our parks and green spaces with the ongoing reduction in resources?”
  - **Dave Morris** said that Select Committee report was crucial in setting up the Parks Action Group as a liaison group with government. Dave noted he was a part of it and they worked very hard, and MHCLG and Defra were also very interested, but it was difficult getting a cross government commitment across all departments. Dave said the Park Action Groups does need reviving as it hasn't met for 2 years. He also noted the Government in its 25 year plan did commit to working with the Parks Action Group throughout the life of that plan.
  - **Paul Rabbits** said he agrees with revitalising the Parks Action Group, but only if it was to benefit the sector. It also need to have the right people around the table with one agenda which should be improving parks and green spaces. Previously the group only had 1 local authority representative, despite local authorities running parks. He also noted that we need a dedicated parks minister whose responsibilities are not diluted with other responsibilities.
  - **Clive Betts** said the Committee would look at the Parks Action Group as part of any hearing we undertake. He agree with Dave that government departments who aren't at the forefront don't get engaged. Clive took Paul's point about the make-up of the group needing local authority representatives. Clive noted that when the inquiry started in 2017 the Government remembered they had forgotten to appoint someone as their parks minister. Clive noted that he wants the Committee to want to follow this up.

#### 15:10 Concluding Remarks (Liz Twist MP)

- Liz noted the lively Zoom chat and the enthusiasm for doing something positive and getting it right. She noted that there are lots of things for us to follow up and we can try to invite the Minister to a future meeting. She noted she was I'm encouraged and enthused, and glad she took on the Chair of this group.
- Clive asked for a formal request from the APPG to the Select Committee to pick these issues up.