

Alternative Models for Parks and Open Spaces

Adam Wheeler

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Abstract

This note provides a brief overview of alternative arrangements that are being considered and developed across the UK to maintain and develop open spaces in the face of their growing popularity and the reduction of public resources being devoted to them in this time of austerity. It briefly sketches the range of ideas that might be useful in relation to the future of Southampton Common.

1. Background

1.1 Southampton Common

The Common is a remarkable and precious resource for the citizens of Southampton that is well used by them. However, it has greater potential to provide a place for the community that imaginatively supports citizens' education, health, wellbeing and leisure and is a source of inspiration, solace and pride. Despite the City Council's best efforts it has struggled to provide sufficient resources to maintain and develop the Common.

1.2 National Picture

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) recently published its second study "State of UK Public Parks 2016". It builds on the previous study in 2014. It summarises the current situation thus:

"Many of the results follow trends established by the last study and this adds confidence and continuity to our conclusions. We know people use their local parks frequently and this appears to be on the rise. Households with children, people living in urban areas and those from black and minority ethnic communities use their parks the most. At the same time, an increasing proportion of park managers report their maintenance budgets are continuing to fall. The number of park staff continues to be cut and fewer park managers report that their parks have been improving in the past three years. It is clear that there is a growing deficit between the rising use of parks and the declining resources that are available to manage them. This gap does not bode well for the future condition and health of the nation's public parks."

There are concerns [3] that the ultimate result of the large budget cuts since 2010 will result in the privatisation and sell off of public parkland.

On the positive side this situation has spurred a wealth of innovation in the role, management, resourcing and development of parks that the Forum should consider and draw upon. This is captured in the Rethinking Parks Programme [2] run by the innovation foundation NESTA, HLF and Big Lottery Fund England on which much of this paper is based.

2. Alternative Operating and Funding Models

This section briefly surveys the range of models. They are not mutually exclusive but provide an indication of ideas that might be useful.

2.1 Local Community Groups

The most common example of these are Friends groups. These comprise bodies that bring together citizens to develop a local park in close conjunction with the local Council. Their activities commonly involve fund raising (through membership subscriptions, HLF bids), volunteering, profile raising and development and coordination of activities within the park, e.g. fairs, concerts, public lectures, clubs, seminars, cafes. In most cases the local Council is responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the park as these organisations do not have the skills, capacity and resources to undertake this on their own account. St James' Park Friends Group in Southampton is an excellent example of how effective this model can be.

2.2 Trusts/Cooperatives

Park trusts are a growing new model. The HLF [1] report concluded *“that park trusts had performed in terms of funding, staffing and quality than many of their local authority counterparts”* but recognised that more research was needed to understand this model better.

Park trusts are often established as charities and/or companies limited by guarantee. They are usually responsible for all aspects of the park in their care, including its funding, development maintenance and upkeep. The management of the Trust is overseen by a Board of Trustees, representing the local community through local councillors as well as representatives of regional and national organisations. Some trusts own the land (e.g., Bradgate Park Trust) or own other assets, such as buildings (e.g. Finsbury Park Trust), from which they derive an income.

2.3 Working with Partners

Partnership with external organisations provides the opportunity to bring in new ideas, resources and capabilities to the management of parks. Everton Park Community Hub has explored this with the Land Trust and The National Trust's Endowing Parks for the 21st Century and Sheffield City Council. The Rethinking Parks Programme [2] concludes that it is important that buy in is secured from key stakeholders, that current and future costs are fully understood and capacity is built to secure a smooth transition.

The business community provide another route to bring new resources and skills to develop parks, ranging from asking businesses to volunteer regularly in local parks (e.g. Darlington Rethinking Parks in which the local social responsibility umbrella group Darlington Cares made introductions with local businesses), drawing ideas and expertise from local creative businesses through Hackney's business development team, in tandem with deep community engagement, or the appetite for businesses for a compulsory levy for parks. Key success factors include being clear about commitments between the parties, good fit with local businesses, active involvement by the local community, clarity and rigour in the cost of running this model.

2.4 Voluntary Giving

Different attempts have been made at this. Bournemouth Borough Council established an independent parks foundation; Heeley Development Trust set up an online donations platform and subscription scheme for a park in Sheffield, Greenspace Scotland developed a

website aimed at crowdfunding parks projects. Using tried and tested brands for fundraising is key along with specialist branding and communication to keep people interested over time as well as communicating the benefits of donations.

2.5 Diversifying the role of parks

Thinking beyond the immediate benefits has seen projects that have acted to provide a wider social and environmental benefit to the community as well as facilitate the management of parks through reducing costs or making parks more attractive to funding agencies. Examples include training programmes to develop people's employability skills and experience (Bristol ParkWork programme) free legal advice clinics (St James' Park Southampton), introducing less expensive planting techniques or promoting wider biodiversity through, for example, the introduction of wildflower meadows or bee cages (Burley Go to the Park).

3.0 References

[1] State of UK Public Parks 2016, Heritage Lottery Fund. <https://www.hlf.org.uk/state-uk-public-parks-2016>

[2] Learning to Rethink Parks. <http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/learning-rethink-parks>

[3] <http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/our-key-themes/environment/local-environmental-quality/future-london-parks>