

Communities and Local Government Committee

Future of Public Parks Inquiry

Written evidence submitted by the Dorset Local Nature Partnership

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Contact: Dr Simon Cripps, Chairman – Dorset LNP
Maria Clarke, Manager – Dorset LNP
info@dorsetlnp.org.uk

Dorset Local Nature Partnership
Brooklands Farm
Forston, Dorchester
Dorset, DT2 7AA
Tel: 01305 264620
www.dorsetlnp.org.uk

Future of Public Parks Inquiry – Draft submission from Dorset LNP

Executive Summary & Recommendations

- Public Parks and open spaces offer wide health and wellbeing benefits to local communities and as such are a huge resource to local communities.
- These spaces also offer key benefits for biodiversity and economic value for business and economic development.
- Dorset LNP believes that parks and open spaces should be free at the point of access to ensure there is widespread use and access for all without prejudice especially to under-privileged groups.
- There are options for income generation but this may not be suitable for all parks.
- There should not be a one-size-fits-all approach and solutions need to be appropriate for the local circumstances.
- There needs to be joined up thinking and cross department working, for example between the health, environment and recreation sectors.

1. Background

1.1 The Dorset Local Nature Partnership (DLNP) was recognised by government in 2012. It brings together a wide range of partners in public, private and voluntary sectors across Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole. The Dorset LNP exists to maximise the benefits to be gained from protecting and enhancing the unique natural assets of the area for people, wildlife and businesses, aiming to:

- Provide leadership for those working to protect and enhance the environment in Dorset.
- Advocate the good management of Dorset's natural environment for its own sake and the many benefits it offers.
- Articulate the importance of Dorset's natural environment to economic and social wellbeing in a manner appropriate to diverse audiences.
- Ensure that the natural environment is taken into account in policy and decision-making.

1.2 We are submitting evidence to the Inquiry because we believe that public parks and open spaces play an important role in supporting the delivery of our *Strategy and Vision*¹ which sets out six priority areas, in particular aims 1 – 4 below:

1. Natural capital - investing in Dorset's natural assets
2. Natural value - adding value to the local economy
3. Natural health - developing Dorset's 'natural health service'
4. Natural resilience - improving environmental and community resilience
5. Natural understanding – improving understanding of, and engagement in, Dorset's environment

¹ www.dorsetlnp.org.uk/Dorset_LNP_Vision_and_Strategy

6. Natural influence - integrating natural value in policy and decision-making, locally and beyond

2. Who uses parks and open spaces, how often and for what

- 2.1 DLNP is particularly interested in activities which have a link to the natural environment. In Dorset, as in many areas, users of parks and open spaces include: walking (inc. dog walking), parkrun (and other running), cycling, children's play, skateboarding, outdoor gym, specific sports (e.g. boules, tennis, cricket, golf, boating), wildlife watching, festivals and concerts, socialising, sunbathing, quiet contemplation (reading, mindfulness etc.) or commuting to work or school.
- 2.2 While some of the activities above may not seem related to the natural environment by their 'nature' they are outdoors and therefore offer many of the health benefits of being in the fresh air and surrounded by the natural environment (as set out below), and they may encourage a further visit which may involve closer links to nature.
- 2.3 Users of parks and open spaces vary but tend to be local residents (with people further afield coming for specific events and activities). Access to parks is important and in 2013 Bournemouth Borough Council undertook a survey of parks and open spaces which showed that 40% of users lived within a 5 minute walk of the parks they used, 27% lived 5-10 minutes away and 1 in 5 lived more than a 15 minute walk away.
- 2.4 Many parks and open spaces in Dorset have 'Friends of' groups who value the local spaces and offer help and support in their maintenance (both in terms of fundraising for specific activities or hands-on activities such as gardening or conservation work) above those delivered by the operating organisation.
- 2.5 In many urban areas, and in the more deprived areas, access to the countryside may be limited due to cost and/or transport, so for many people local parks and open spaces offer the most accessible opportunity to get outside and in nature. But not all communities have access to good quality greenspaces close by.

3. The contribution of parks to the health and well-being of communities

- 3.1 There is ever-growing evidence about how accessing nature contributes to health and wellbeing. Exercising in nature gets us fitter than equivalent exercise in a gym² and offers improved mental wellbeing. DLNP adopted a position paper on Natural

² Coon JT, Boddy K, Stein K, Whear R, Barton J, Depledge MH. Does Participating in Physical Activity in Outdoor Natural Environments Have a Greater Effect on Physical and Mental Wellbeing than Physical Activity Indoors? A Systematic Review. *Environmental Science & Technology*. 2011;45(5):1761-72.

Health³ in September 2016 which brings together evidence about how the natural environment contributes to health and wellbeing.

- 3.2 In summary accessing greenspace and the natural world offers opportunities for a) physical activity, from walking to taking part in sports, helping to increase fitness levels and improving health outcomes such as reducing coronary heart disease and diabetes and b) improved mental wellbeing in terms of being spaces to socialise, relax, to focus the mind and/or to volunteer. Physical activity may be incidental (e.g. through gardening or conservation tasks) so those who may not be interested in more formal sport may be able to get physically active in different ways as well as supporting mental wellbeing.
- 3.3 The University of Essex and The Wildlife Trusts published a report *Wellbeing benefits from natural environment rich in wildlife*⁴ which include the benefits of how nature contributes to New Economics Foundation's (NEF) Five Ways to Wellbeing, all of which can be linked to accessing parks and open spaces – in summary:
- Connect – greenspaces give places for people to interact both with other people and also with nature
 - Be active – natural spaces have a key role in getting people active.
 - Take Notice – focusing on nature can still the mind and stop us worrying about other things, keeping us mindful which can reduce stress and anxiety
 - Keep Learning – nature provides opportunities for learning about wildlife and develop new skills which can improve confidence and self-esteem
 - Give – volunteering in environmental activities can be both sociable and rewarding.
- 3.4 Public Health England published the *Improving access to green spaces*⁵ report in September 2014. The report highlights the importance of access to green spaces to health and wellbeing, highlighting that poor access to quality green spaces increased health inequalities.
- 3.5 The Land Trust's report *The Value of Our Greenspaces*⁶ January 2016 which included results from a perceptions survey of their users which highlighted:
- 25% use green spaces to relieve stress
 - 9 in 10 feel that green spaces play a positive part in their happiness and wellbeing
 - Over 50% of people use green spaces for exercise, leisure and recreation
 - More than a third use green spaces to engage with wildlife and nature
 - 8 in 10 think green spaces provide opportunities to learn new things
 - Over 75% think green spaces bring communities closer together

³ www.dorsetlnp.org.uk/Dorset_LNP_Position_Papers

⁴ www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/wellbeing-benefits-fr-nat-env-report-290915-final-lo.pdf

⁵ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/357411/Review8_Green_spaces_health_inequalities.pdf

⁶ <http://thelandtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/The-Value-of-our-Green-Spaces-January-2016.pdf>

- 3.6 Humans have spent 99.98% of their existence in the natural world. It is only recently that we have spent so much time indoors and away from nature. Advances in technology have resulted in us becoming less active and less engaged with the natural world and with less time to relax our minds. A Rest Test Survey⁷ recently reported 'being in the natural environment' as the second most restful activity (below reading). Parks offer spaces to re-engage with the natural world.
- 3.7 Local authorities have a duty under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to take appropriate steps to improve the health of their population. This duty complements much of the local authority's existing core business, and its strategic responsibility for stewardship of place. Local parks have a key role to play in exercising this duty.
- 3.8 Natural England developed the *Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard*⁸ (ANGSt) setting out that accessible greenspace, particularly in urban areas, is becoming recognised as providing some of the fundamental needs of society. The National Planning Policy Framework⁹ sets out the need for green infrastructure to be included within develop for the benefit for both the environment and people. Our environment is a key determinant of good health.

4. The contribution to biodiversity

- 4.1 Within Dorset there are many country parks and open spaces which have nature conservation designations including Sites of Special Scientist Interest, Special Protection Areas, Special Areas for Conservation and/or Ramsar Convention Sites which require obligations to manage these sites to agreed standards, at national or international levels.
- 4.2 Within the urban areas parks and open spaces offer vital green corridors and stepping stones to enable wildlife to move around within their territory. The recent *State of Nature Report*¹⁰ highlights that increased urbanisation has reduced greenspace and resulted in smaller gardens so public greenspace is important in supporting local wildlife.
- 4.3 Some urban parks could do more to increase biodiversity for example planting hardy, native and ornamental, pollinator friendly perennials to replace more traditional municipal planting. This can reduce labour costs while providing all year round interest. Within Dorset there are a number of examples of grass free lawns¹¹ which have been led by Dorset Wildlife Trust for example in Dorchester and Lytchett Matravers.

⁷ www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-37444982

⁸ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140605090108/http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/40004?category=47004>

⁹ www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6077/2116950.pdf

¹⁰ www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/state_of_nature_uk_report_pages_1_sept.pdf

¹¹ <http://grassfreelawns.co.uk/>

- 4.4 Dorset is home to internationally designated heathland and planning policies require the development of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANGs) to alleviate human pressure of these sensitive spaces. SANGs may be overseen by voluntary sector organisations so are not always within local authority administration.
- 4.5 SANGs provide both opportunities for improving biodiversity and offer health benefits for people through walking / cycling routes and possibly outdoor gym equipment etc. encouraging outdoor exercise away from sensitive areas.

5. The contribution to the local economy

- 5.1 The many health and wellbeing benefits from using parks and open spaces can support economic benefits in terms of reduced sickness and loss of work days of employees.
- 5.2 Events and festivals taking place within parks and open spaces may also increase visitors to the area which can bring money into the area.
- 5.3 There are business opportunities, both commercial and social enterprises, to be had within local parks. These include cafes and shops as well as those who may use the parks for activities such as fitness trainers. Within the Borough Gardens in Dorchester there is a refreshment kiosk¹² operated as a community training enterprise by a consortium of local charities headed by Rethink.
- 5.4 Public parks add greatly to the attractiveness of an area which is an important element in the attraction and retention of quality staff, and also the attraction to an area of businesses, increasing prosperity and employment. This is known to be an important consideration for Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole.

6. The impact of reductions in local authority budgets on parks

- 6.1 DLNP recognise that local authorities have reduced budgets but we believe there needs to be greater joined up thinking and a recognition that parks and open spaces have both societal and economic value which may be hidden.
- 6.2 Greater recognition needs to be given to the health benefits parks and open spaces make with stronger links being made between park departments and with public health and the NHS. Investments can, and do, have a big impact on the preventative agenda as well as targeting specific health needs.
- 6.3 The *State of UK Public Parks 2014*¹³ by the Heritage Lottery Fund highlighted the impact of reductions in funding:

¹² www.rethink.org/services-groups/services/oasis-the-borough-gardens-kiosk

¹³ www.hlf.org.uk/state-uk-public-parks-2014

“There have been considerable cuts to park funding over the last three years and this is expected to continue at the same or at an even higher level over the next three years. 86% of park managers have had their revenue cut with 32% of managers having faced cuts of over 20%. Over the next three years 87% of managers expect revenue to be cut further. For capital funding, 54% of managers have had their funding cut, with 29% facing cuts of over 20%. Over the next three years 63% of managers expect capital to be cut further.

Taking a benchmark from the Audit Commission that calculates government funding to local authorities has reduced by an average of almost 20% in real terms between 2010- 11 and 2013-14, many park departments have faced a higher percentage of cuts than this national average. It has been reported that the poorest councils in the ten most deprived areas of England have experienced cumulative cuts that will average 25% by 2016 and council budgets are expected to continue to fall for the rest of the decade. The decline in spending on public parks is potentially greater and more rapid than that faced during the late 1970s to early 1990s.”

- 6.4 Funding invested in public parks is good value for money – the Land Trust report *The Value of Our Greenspaces*¹⁴ set out that every pound invested in their parks and nature reserves contributes £30 towards health and wellbeing benefits and £23 towards crime reduction and community safety. And a recent study¹⁵ by Exeter University highlighted that green spaces are worth an average of £2.2bn each year for health benefits.
- 6.5 Maintenance of local parks is crucial and is proving more difficult to fund in the current climate. Failing equipment needs to be maintained but there is limited capital funding available. Within Dorset local authority budgets for parks is reducing for example Bournemouth Borough Council has seen a 43% reduction in revenue costs since 2010/11.

7. How new and existing parks can best be supported and alternative funding / income generation

- 7.1 DLNP believes that local authorities have a key role in the provision of parks and open spaces and should play a strong leadership role in supporting these spaces. We believe that parks should be free at the point of access, to enable access for all, with income be generated where possible.
- 7.2 Dorset County Council has set its country parks a target of recovering their costs through income generation which is proving successful – Durlston Country Park achieved a cost recovery rate of 108% in 2014-15 and Avon Heath County Park achieved 99% in the same period. Income has been generated in a variety of ways including: artists in residence / sales from exhibitions; car parking charges; catering –

¹⁴<http://thelandtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/The-Value-of-our-Green-Spaces-January-2016.pdf>

¹⁵www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-37403915

café and restaurant, ice cream sales; communications mast lease; Countryside Stewardship Scheme and Basic Payment Scheme; donations; events; guided walks for schools and visitors; house rent / holiday lets; Nature Nursery lease; shop sales and wedding venue rental.

- 7.3 To support parks in Bournemouth area the Bournemouth Parks Foundation¹⁶ was set up as a charity in December 2014. The foundation works alongside Bournemouth Borough Council to raise funding for improvement and enhancements in addition to what the council provides. The charity has five key areas of work:
- Wildlife and Conservation: Britain's wildlife needs our help, and parks are a great place to start! Get closer to nature and preserve and enhance the wildlife that's on our doorstep.
 - Play: Help us get children into the great outdoors, so that they can once again make a daisy chain, climb trees, cook up mud pies and build dens!
 - Education: Teaching young and old about our natural environment is the biggest step towards a greener future.
 - Art and Culture: We want to enhance Bournemouth's green spaces with evocative and exciting art and cultural exhibitions, tempting a wide variety of people into many parks.
 - Sport: We like to think of our parks as a great big outdoor gym. Help us get more people off the treadmill and into nature.
 - Gardens and Growing: Getting your hands dirty and your heart in nature is incredibly therapeutic and rewarding.
 - Health and Wellbeing: Spending time with nature significantly improves our physical and mental health. What can be better than clean air, birdsong and the feel of grass beneath your feet?
- 7.4 Grant funding is a key source of funding for parks and open spaces for example Heritage Lottery Funding, Parks for People, Pocket Parks which have been successful in Dorset.
- 7.5 There is potential for funding from developers both through the Community Infrastructure Levy and through the development of SANGs. Maintenance costs need to be included within these agreements to ensure ongoing revenue costs. While it is understood this inquiry is focusing on the public sector parks and open spaces it should be noted that access to CIL funding needs to be available to voluntary sector organisations operating SANGs and nature reserves because they are providing alternative open spaces with the same contribution to health and wellbeing benefits as parks run by the public sector.
- 7.6 There is a view that provision of services can be addressed through alternative funding mechanisms such as endowments and trusts, but the reality is that in some instances it is not possible to raise sufficient income/capital to pursue these (e.g. needing a large asset to form the basis of an endowment).

¹⁶ www.bournemouthparksfoundation.org.uk

7.7 While there is potential for income generation within parks there should be a general principle that as many activities as possible are free to enable access for all to these spaces. The Public Health Act 1875 enabled local authorities to buy land and lay it out as pleasure gardens and parks as it was recognised that open spaces offered health and wellbeing benefits. These benefits should not be lost or we will be adding to future health inequalities.

8. Administrative status and other management models

8.1 DLNP believe that there should not be a one-size-fits all model and that local circumstances need to develop the most appropriate solution to meet the needs of the local community. Examples of good practice could be shared to enable local authorities to determine future delivery.