

Policy Review - The future of Public Parks in England: policy tensions in funding, management and governance

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges for effective public parks management caused by increasing pressures on local authority funding due to the UK government's austerity measures. Current policy discourse calls for innovative and entrepreneurial approaches to resolving these challenges. This can bring real benefits and creative approaches to parks management, not least in terms of community engagement and the recognition of the wider public services provided by parks. But tensions can also develop due to increasing dependency on volunteers and third sector organisations, the commodification of spaces and the commercialisation of services, even privatisation. Such conflicts may potentially undermine democratic accountability and a sense of community ownership, and potentially threaten the effective management of parks generally. The paper concludes that current UK government policy is moving away from a social welfare model of public parks provision, and that we need to fully understand the impacts of these changes in order to avoid inadvertently reinforcing this approach to public service provision.

Keywords: Parks management, local authority services, natural capital, austerity politics.

Introduction

We know that the provision of local, high quality urban green space improves the health and wellbeing of all sections of the community, as well as a wide range of other, so-called `ecosystem services` such as climate and flood resilience, biodiversity, and local economic benefits (see, for example, Gomez-Baggethun and Barton, 2013). Yet across England, many of our most treasured urban green spaces - our public parks - are in decline. This paper describes the developing policy agenda around public parks, and the consequent responses from the professional parks management sector. The professional responses are examined alongside relevant academic discourse to explore whether the industry's pragmatic desire to deal with cuts in public funding through innovation and good practice obscures more fundamental changes in the ideological and conceptual principles underpinning the management and governance of these public goods. The paper concludes by suggesting that the drive to develop new ways of

working and external income generation is leading to conflicts with the effective and equitable management and governance of our public parks.

In November 2008, Professor Sir Michael Marmot was asked by the Secretary of State for Health to chair an independent review to propose the most effective evidence-based strategies for reducing health inequalities in England from 2010. The final report (Marmot et al., 2010) includes policies and interventions that address the social determinants of health inequalities, and specifically recommends that improving the availability of high quality green spaces across the social gradient would help reduce health inequalities. Yet despite wide recognition of their value there has been a significant decline in the quality of local parks in England in the intervening period, and increasing concern that their recognised benefits are not shared equitably across society. Two significant reports from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in 2014 and 2016 describe the growing deficit between the rising use of public parks and the declining resources that are available to manage them. Their findings show that while parks are highly valued by the public and usage is increasing, park maintenance budgets and staffing levels are being cut. Their research calls for collaborative action to deliver new ways of funding and managing public parks to avert a crisis. The HLF conclude that *"Without urgent action the continuing downward trend in the condition of many of our most treasured parks and green spaces is set to continue"* (HLF, 2016).

Despite widespread agreement on the challenges, and a plethora of reports from government, professional bodies and others suggesting possible ways of addressing these challenges, there remain concerns that some proposed solutions will not fully address the funding challenges, and may even lead to a further decline in these essential public services. This paper explores those proposed solutions and not only examines whether such solutions can achieve the desired results, but also whether in pursuing these alternative ways of managing public parks, there is a danger that some fundamental principles underpinning the provision of these public goods will be lost without fully understanding the consequences.

Context

Green spaces have been an integral part of urban design and living since ancient civilisations such as the Greeks and Romans integrated public parks into their cities. McLean et al. (2005) describe how the Greeks first reflected on the mental health benefits relating to interactions between their bodies and nature. This thinking changed approaches to sport, recreation and play, whilst also being one of the foundations of urban planning and design. Reeves (2000) describes how parks provided an escape from overcrowded towns and appalling living conditions during the industrial revolution in the UK. Various Public Health Acts throughout the 19th century encouraged local authorities to provide open spaces for public enjoyment, in an effort to increase public mental, physical and social wellbeing. This legislation arose out of social concern over public health and happiness and as a reaction to the squalid conditions endured by the masses (Harding, 1999) - values we are re-discovering today. Civic pride determined that these newly public green spaces were maintained to a very high standard as symbols of municipal power and excellence. Local authorities thus became the main provider of public parks and their associated services, and their creation and management part of the growing social welfare approach to providing public services.

But despite the recognised public benefits of parks and urban green space, these local authority services have always faced considerable challenges. English local authorities have never had a statutory duty to fund and maintain public parks, and their

resourcing must compete with other public service priorities. This is not a new phenomenon. In 1999, Harding traced the decline of parks back to the removal of railings for the Second World War effort and a consequent loss of sense of place. But the real damage occurred in the mid-1970s. Local government reorganisation, political struggle between local and central government, privatisation of local services, and year-on-year cuts in capital and revenue budgets all contributed to the decline of urban parks into the often dismal and neglected landscapes familiar at the end of the 20th century (Harding, 1999). Responding to the concerns of voluntary and professional bodies, the HLF launched the Urban Parks Programme in 1996 to begin to address these issues, highlighting how seriously underfunded parks were at that time. The HLF committed far more money than intended to tackle the massive backlog of repairs to essential park infrastructure. It also tried to address the causes of decline in partnership with local authorities and other bodies in the field, including loss of management structure and skills, lack of political support and understanding, and the dearth of relevant data concerning parks.

Harding's (1999) review documents the stirring of a potential renaissance as the then Labour government showed its concern with quality of life issues, with social exclusion, with multiple deprivation, and with regeneration of the economic vitality and social coherence of urban areas at the end of the 20th century. The HLF contributed to this resurgence in pride and interest in urban green spaces, often restoring a Victorian heritage but also addressing new needs and demands on urban green space. However, new restrictions on public spending are once again beginning to undermine this provision.

Current challenges

Many organisations have highlighted the current predicament facing local authorities over funding for public parks. The Association of Public Service Excellence (2018) provides a stark overview of local authorities' declining resources, confirming that they face a funding gap of £5.8 billion by 2020 due to government austerity measures (a loss of 75p in every £1 of core funding). This creates huge challenges for local government, with a wide range of competing priorities, including many social services with a much greater public profile and expectations than green space and parks services. The HLF's 'State of UK Public Parks' publications of 2014 and 2016 emphasise the specific funding and resource challenges - 86 per cent of parks managers across the UK have seen cuts to their budgets since 2010. Maintenance budgets are being reduced; capital is less available for improvements; facilities are becoming more costly to use; some parks may simply be sold; and in some cases, governance transferred to the care of others, such as local community groups, trusts or the private sector.

There are many examples of the impacts of these local government budget requirements across England. Sheffield City Council has had to make savings over the last four years of £238m, due to central government cuts. Of the £36m spent on leisure and culture services in 2014/15, only £7m was spent on the Parks, Woodlands and Countryside Service (this in itself is a significant reduction from around £9m several years previously). City councillors have confirmed that their Parks and Woodlands budget declined further from around £5m in 2016/17, to around £4m in 2017/18 (Sheffield City Council, 2017). The confirmed budget for leisure and culture services in 2018/19 is now £32 (Sheffield City Council, 2018). The City Council continues to face real challenges and competing priorities for its declining budgets. Elsewhere, Newcastle City Council has had a 97 per cent reduction in its budget for

green space provision and management in the three years prior to 2016 (CLG, 2017), and recently announced its plans to transfer the operation, delivery and maintenance of a large proportion of the city's parks and allotments to a new Charitable Trust (Newcastle City Council, 2018; see also Mell, 2018). Knowsley Council Parks and Green Spaces Review Board (2017) has also recommended the creation of an independent trust, partly funded by the disposal of 10 per cent of its existing parks and green spaces for development (this decision, although accepted by the council's Cabinet in early 2018, may be currently under review due to significant public concern and very recent changes in Council leadership following the May 2018 local authority elections (Tyrell, 2018)).

Central Government responses

In the face of very public concerns about these growing challenges (particularly following the publication of the 2016 HLF report), the UK Parliamentary Communities and Local Government (CLG) Select Committee undertook an inquiry in 2016 into public parks to examine the impact of reduced local authority budgets on these open spaces. The consultation responses to this inquiry were significant, including: nearly 400 formal written evidence submissions; over 13,000 survey responses; four formal oral evidence sessions involving 27 witnesses; a petition signed by more than 322,000 people calling for the maintenance of parks to be a statutory duty for local authorities; and more than 4,000 emails campaigning against any privatisation of parks. This level of response was seen as reinforcing the HLF findings concerning the public's significant interest in local parks in their 2014 and 2016 reports.

The CLG Committee's final report (2017) concluded with sixteen recommendations, many of which cover well-trodden ground. The recommendations include a wide range of actions encouraging local authorities to look beyond public funding to initiatives such as independent trusts, private sector investment models, and funds from the health sector. They recommend further volunteer involvement and community engagement, and working in partnership with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and others. They specifically resisted the call to create a new statutory duty requiring local authorities to maintain public parks, citing evidence that such a requirement would be "*burdensome and complex*", particularly if the duty could not be "*accompanied by sufficient funding to support the service*" (CLG, 2017: 57). This in itself is a telling conclusion from the CLG Select Committee.

The CLG Committee did recommend the creation of a new Parks Action Group, whose role would be to provide leadership and share good practice within the parks sector. The Parks Action Group was created in September 2017, with members from the Association of Public Sector Excellence (APSE), Fields in Trust, the Local Government Association, the Parks Alliance, Natural England, National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, Heritage Lottery Fund, Groundwork, National Trust, and Keep Britain Tidy. The work of the Parks Action Group is currently on-going and a progress report is anticipated in late 2018.

The government's (DCLG, 2017a) response to the CLG Committee report welcomed the Committee's main findings and also announced the creation of a cross-departmental group (involving seven government departments) to "*drive activity across all these recommendations*", with a new Minister for Parks and Green Spaces. In what could be read as a ringing endorsement for expanding the activities of local authority parks services, the government encouraged local authorities to undertake more work engaging with communities and volunteers; consulting local people on any proposed changes to management and governance; producing parks and green space strategies;

and investigating whether new parks should be created in areas with currently poor provision. However, no new public funding was made available. Instead, their response also provided further encouragement to local authorities to explore alternative models of funding. They confirmed that the proposed cross-departmental group will provide guidance on such funding models, as well as new ways of valuing parks' services.

Whilst the lack of any additional public funding from central government is clearly part of the government's current austerity measures, the comment regarding new ways of valuing parks' services is directly related to their interest in funding and financing environmental improvements through `natural capital` approaches. Their recent 25 Year Environment Plan (Defra, 2018) is almost entirely predicated on the notion that ecosystem services can be financially costed as `natural capital` and that this will somehow identify and provide new sources of funding for such services.

Ecosystem services are the wide range of benefits, for individuals and for society more generally, which can be derived from a healthy, functioning natural environment (Defra, 2014). These include provisioning services such as food and water; regulating services such as flood and disease control; cultural services such as spiritual, recreational, and cultural benefits; and the supporting services, such as nutrient cycling, that maintain the conditions for life on Earth. This approach to assessing and categorising the multiple benefits of nature and green space has been discussed for many decades, but the financial valuation - the `pricing` - of these benefits is a more recent phenomenon. Led internationally by The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) group, natural capital is defined by them as "*the stock of natural assets that provide society with renewable and non-renewable resources and a flow of ecosystem services*" (Russett and ten Brink, 2013). TEEB go on to suggest that natural capital accounting offers "*a systematic tool... (and) an important evidence base for decision makers, which can be useful to define priorities, design and evaluate policies, and discuss synergies and trade-offs between policy objectives and tools*". The UK government has embraced this approach wholeheartedly, claiming in the opening chapters of the 25 Year Environment Plan (Defra, 2018) that "*We will also set gold standards in protecting and growing natural capital - leading the world in using this approach as a tool in decision-making.*" The government's independent advisory body, the Natural Capital Committee (2017) concludes that "*economic valuations can provide crucial estimates of the net benefits of alternative investments, guiding decisions and spending*", thus enabling better decisions about investment and the protection of our natural environment against competing priorities. Arguably, if value for money can be demonstrated using natural capital accounting measures, we should be able to see greater investment, potentially from both the public and private sectors, in our public parks.

Natural capital valuations of parks and green spaces are therefore proceeding apace, and will undoubtedly be encouraged by the government's response to the CLG Select Committee report. A recent valuation study undertaken in London on behalf of the Greater London Authority (2017) and others has established that for every £1 spent on green spaces, Londoners benefit by £27; that Londoners avoid £950 million per year in health costs because of parks; and that the value of parks' recreational activities is estimated at £926m per year. A similar valuation has been undertaken in Sheffield (Vivid Economics, 2016) which suggests that for every pound spent currently by the City Council, on average £36 of services are supplied to the local community.

A report by Fields in Trust (2018) provides more evidence based on this approach. Compiled using HM Treasury-approved methods, they suggest that parks and green spaces across the United Kingdom provide people with over £34 billion of health and wellbeing benefits. The wellbeing benefits are a result of people enjoying greater life satisfaction including both improved physical and mental health, directly as a result of

regularly using parks and green spaces. This results in National Health Service savings of at least £111 million per year. The report also calculates that parks provide a total economic value to each person in the UK of over £30 per year. The value of parks and green spaces is also higher for individuals from lower socio-economic groups and from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. This means that any loss of parks and green spaces will disproportionately impact upon disadvantaged and under-represented communities, emphasising the increasing inequity of the decline in park funding.

These reports provide compelling evidence about the importance and value of parks and green space to individuals and to society, yet appear to be making little difference to public investment in the resource. They are clearly examples of what Wells (2018: 179) describes in his paper on `evidence based decision making in an age of austerity`, as attempts to measure value for money systematically, and "seek evaluation evidence to identify areas where.... a new model of service delivery can achieve the same or better social outcomes for a lower cost."

However, in an urban green space context, it remains unclear if this evidence results in any re-prioritisation of resources by local authorities. In fact there appears to be a significant disconnect between the government's advocacy of the natural capital approach and any meaningful contribution to the debate around the funding of parks. It has long been a criticism of the natural capital approach that there is no recognisable market mechanism for ways of investing in these communally enjoyed and communally provided services. Neither has it been straightforward to identify the means whereby the monetary value identified can be extracted as any sort of financial return. Even if this mechanism was apparent, local authorities are not in a position to divert resources from other priority areas, even if they accept some sort of `value for money` or `opportunity cost` rationale. The resources are simply not available. How these types of valuations can be turned into increasing private investment in basic public infrastructure and associated services has also not yet been answered by the policy-makers, although there are several on-going research projects exploring these issues (see, for example, NESTA, 2018).

Other commentators (see for example, James, 2015) have gone further and questioned the philosophical basis of pricing natural capital in this way, as opposed to protecting the intrinsic value of nature. Some commentators suggest that it is yet another concept designed to hide the creeping neo-liberalisation of nature itself (Monbiot, 2018). Norgaard (2010) has suggested that what began as a "humble metaphor" designed to help us think about our relationship with nature more clearly has become the dominant environmental policy around the globe, and yet many researchers (see for example Sullivan, 2017, and Martin et al., 2013) remain unconvinced that the approach can really help us to tackle increasingly difficult and complex decisions.

Creeping Neo-liberalisation?

In the review mentioned above, Wells (2018) explains how increased pressure to find public expenditure savings, forces local government to seek market based solutions. In the urban green space policy environment, local authority parks staff are responding pragmatically and working hard to meet the challenges set out by the CLG Committee report. Services have been streamlined, staff numbers reduced, and all parks managers find themselves required to exhibit new skills as contract managers and entrepreneurs. The HLF studies (2014 and 2016) document the changes - 81 per cent of local authority parks departments have lost skilled management staff since 2010, and 77 per cent have lost front-line staff. Forty-five per cent of local authorities are

considering either selling parks or green spaces or transferring their management to others. If a natural capital approach cannot deliver new investment or a re-prioritisation of existing resources, then other avenues must be explored. But to what extent do these new ways of working and income generation enable effective parks management and governance, and are there unforeseen consequences?

The calls to develop new approaches to the management and funding of public parks are often portrayed as positive and worthwhile in themselves, particularly by those advocating reduction in traditional public funding more generally. The current `austerity` discourse around the funding of public services in the UK, frames the discussion around finding new ways of funding public park provision as `creative` and `innovative` management. The recent NESTA project `Re-thinking Public Parks` demonstrates this direction, with a conclusion that states:

*Many parks and park services have already **risen to meet** these challenges - The good practice from around the UK and abroad...can be replicated, adapted, scaled up and adopted. But it also provides **inspiration** for the next generation of parks **innovators**. (emphasis added) (Neal, 2013: 33)*

The UK Government (DCLG, 2017a) encourages innovative thinking around parks management and new funding models throughout its published response to the CLG Select Committee (2017) report.

Clearly, public services need to demonstrate both effectiveness and efficiency. But some scholars have suggested that the move towards replacing traditional state funding models for community facilities with more `innovative` models of funding and governance is essentially a form of creeping neo-liberalisation. The concept of neoliberalism is complex, diverse and contested, and works on a number of levels. A useful overview of the concept in the context of urban policy is provided by Fuller and Geddes (2008). They describe a range of definitions from a simple "*taken-for-granted belief in neoclassical economics*", to a set of policies implemented to essentially promote a lean welfare state, low taxation and flexible labour markets, in order to resolve national economic problems. However, Fuller and Geddes also cite Harvey (2005), who argues that neoliberalism should not be understood just as a bundle of vaguely related policies which attempt to address austerity, but rather as a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites, and specifically "*to disembed capital from the constraints of the embedded liberalism of social democracy and the Keynesian welfare state*" (p.11). By placing the often pragmatic responses to cuts in local authority parks services funding within this frame, it becomes clear that changes in management and governance are not just about dealing with declining funding, but are inevitably supporting changes in the underpinning and fundamental principles of the original provision of public parks as a social welfare good.

Other authors have reported similar "creeping neo-liberalisation" in the public realm. Hickman (2013) refers to facilities similar to public parks as "third places" - that neighbourhood infrastructure of shops, cafés, community centres, libraries, and recreational areas. He goes on to suggest that these areas have reduced in numbers and/or deteriorated in quality over the last twenty years (citing Speak and Graham, 2000), and this trend has been exacerbated by the recent economic downturn (Flint, 2012; cited in Hickman, 2013). He concludes that many of our previously publicly held and publicly managed spaces and places are being changed to alternative management models, often predicated on either private or charitable funding. Much of this critique is echoed in parallel research focusing on the concept of urban commons and the potential threat of the conversion of commonly held resources such as public parks into private property (see Németh, 2012; Blackmar, 2006).

A recent conference paper by Abram and Blandy (2015) suggests that a new form of `urban commoning` is displacing the state's traditional role as the only reliable owner and steward of urban greenspace in public use. They explore some of the challenges around governance and local democracy as green space management systems change, and they conclude that more research is needed around the notion of `urban commoning` as a way of managing these spaces in the future. Particular questions arise around whether such new approaches can be sustained in the long term, and whether collective governance or any other legal form of management and ownership matters in terms of the relationship with park users and their sense of ownership of that space. Abram and Blandy (2015) conclude that even where so-called innovative approaches are apparently successful, generating new investment as needed, there may still be wider implications around democratic accountability, and a potential loss in a sense of public ownership and equitable use. Their analysis essentially reinforces the argument that these changes to parks management should be considered as part of a more fundamental erosion of previous social welfare models of public parks provision.

The following sections consider some of the new ways of working encouraged by current central government policy, in the light of these concerns.

New ways of working

As described above, many local authorities are now exploring new ways of working to address their resource challenges in effectively managing public parks. The HLF studies ended with a call to action and suggested five key challenges for the future: a re-affirmation of local authority leadership; establishing new partnerships with NGOs and the private sector; getting (and keeping) local communities more involved; developing new funding models; and collecting and sharing data across the sector. These challenges were echoed by the 2017 CLG Committee recommendations and the government's subsequent response. But more research is needed to determine if these proposed changes in funding, management and governance arrangements reinforce the concerns expressed by researchers such as Hickman (2013), and Abram and Blandy (2015). The challenges summarised by the HLF are examined in greater detail below.

There is a long history of positive community engagement in urban parks and greenspace management in England (Jones, 2002). The benefits of empowering people and involving them in the care and governance of their local spaces have been well documented (for example, Mathers et al., 2015). The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces (NFPGS, n.d.) list over 6,000 local Friends of Parks groups across the UK, and they are a powerful advocate for this way of working. However, the NFPGS has itself highlighted the impact of austerity measures on parks management, and expressed concern that voluntary action cannot replace professional support and effective investment (NFPGS, n.d.). Lowndes and Pratchett (2012) emphasise that the capacity of local authorities to continue to support even these community initiatives, particularly the maintenance of voluntary engagement over the longer term, is also under threat. It is now generally recognised that volunteer involvement and community engagement, whilst a good thing in and of itself, may be incapable of providing any long-term panacea to the current funding challenges (Mathers et al., 2015).

New partnerships with bodies such as the Wildlife Trusts, social enterprises, and other environmental NGOs, are also increasingly common. A recent Westminster Briefing (Crowe, 2018) event explored some of the excellent work undertaken by organisations such as the Land Trust and Fields in Trust. Their representatives felt they

might be able to work more effectively both with local community groups and with the private sector, than hard-pressed local authorities. Often, such bodies can also apply for specific grant aid schemes or undertake commercial activities not available to the public sector. Many of these schemes are pursued in close partnership with local authorities, with ownership essentially remaining in the public domain, and sites leased under long term arrangements to NGOs.

Undoubtedly, both community engagement and new partnerships can bring great rewards. However, with the increasing involvement of local citizens and community organisations in carrying out service delivery functions formerly handled by public bodies, questions have emerged about unforeseen consequences. Some scholars have warned that these new roles in urban governance risk grassroots organisations becoming engaged in reproducing neoliberal priorities and a loss in democratic accountability (Elwood, 2002). During the aforementioned Westminster Briefing workshop, community engagement activities were widely applauded during the formal workshop sessions, but discussion in the margins of the meeting uncovered concerns about local decision-making by groups with particular interests and particular anxieties, at the expense of the wider community. These often related to issues around use by certain groups, such as teenagers, and conflicts between different recreational interests. Equally strong fears were expressed by many NGOs present concerning the low level of resources to share around new Friends groups and other community enterprises, and that, as with other public services, there is still *no magic money tree*¹.

The development of new funding models is another challenge promoted in the HLF 2016 report. Such models can mean increasing commercialisation - of parks services or of the actual space - whether sites remain in public ownership or not. Commercial ticketed events, franchised refreshment and other leisure facilities, and increased parking charges, are all a growing feature of the new parks sector. Smith (2014) has explored how the staging of temporary festivals and events in public spaces can be viewed as a way to animate and enliven cities, but it can also be socially divisive and contribute to the *creeping commercialisation* of public spaces. Such events can often create many practical, environmental impact issues, on the resource itself as well as on the local community. Smith also highlights the danger that staging exceptional events becomes the norm for public parks, and this can set precedents for more permanent changes, potentially reinforcing exclusivity and social inequities in access to spaces.

Ironically, the government's response (DCLG, 2017a) to the increasing commercialisation of events in public parks advocated by the CLG Committee report was somewhat contrary. On the one hand, the government response accepted the need for increasing the number of ticketed events and other commercial activities, but then included a caveat which re-affirmed the principle that the use of public parks by the public for reasonable everyday use should remain free. This has largely been seen as a specific commitment to the Parkrun organisation, following attempts by some authorities to charge that body for use of their local parks (DCLG, 2017b). For many park users, this is a welcome commitment by the government to the continuing public use of our parks. However it has also focused the decision making process around new commercial events and activities back on to local authorities. Local authorities will increasingly be in the invidious position of having to consult with communities on these changes and then attempt to balance their needs with the continuing financial challenges faced across their services.

New funding models can also mean wholesale changes in the management and governance of local authority parks services. Newcastle City Council's (2018) intention to transfer the operation, delivery and maintenance of a large proportion of the city's parks and allotments to a new Charitable Trust has raised concerns amongst many

groups in the city, as shown in the results of their consultation exercise on this proposal (summarised in Newcastle City Council, 2018). Their plans will be monitored very carefully by other local authorities who are also exploring this avenue for the future management and governance of their local green spaces. Newcastle City Council is working with the National Trust to demonstrate that it can stay committed to improving the management of all of its parks and allotments, whilst "*keeping them in public ownership, safe, free to use, and making sure that local people, community groups and partners are fully involved in the future delivery of the service*" (Newcastle City Council, 2018). The National Trust has recently expressed a wish to become more involved in urban areas, with their new Director General, Hilary McGrady, highlighting their involvement in Newcastle and outlining their hopes to achieve more of this type of work (Starkey, 2018). They have established a website (<http://www.futureparks.org>) which pro-actively encourages `People's Parks Trusts` as a solution to the current problems faced by public parks. However, even the National Trust - one of the UK's largest and most respected environmental NGOs - has not been without criticism of several of its policy agendas, and the process by which its own members reach their decisions. It will be interesting to monitor how the new Newcastle Parks Trust develops, and if it can achieve the income sources set out in its business plan whilst avoiding the pitfalls in governance and accountability discussed above.

Of course, it is an oft-quoted maxim that in a democracy, we get the government we deserve. It is therefore also important to investigate public perceptions of these issues and whether people are concerned about how local parks are funded, managed and governed, or just the practical outcomes arising from any changes. Some research (NESTA, 2016) suggests the public are entirely ambivalent about who actually owns or manages their local green space, until specific changes are proposed - whether this be the introduction of charges, or declining access due to exclusive events or other proposed closures (Smith, 2014). But the public can, at the same time, both highly value such places as well as `*take them for granted*` (Freeman and Akhurst, 2015). More research is needed to explore how green spaces are experienced by people and how changes in governance and ownership might affect this experience. Furthermore, recent experiences in Knowsley, where a significant decline in votes for the ruling Labour party in the recent May 2018 election has been framed by the local media as a "*public backlash against proposed parks sell-off*" (Tyrrell, 2018), may suggest that there are thresholds for public acceptance beyond which local authorities will meet significant resistance to changes in ownership. Further evaluation of these new ways of working, particularly the extent to which the public perceive any such changes as detrimental, is certainly warranted. How this might translate into a change in the overall political direction from central government is another matter.

Conclusion

This paper has described the development of public parks policy as it has evolved under the challenges of central government austerity measures and local government funding cuts in the last decade. The strategic approach of demonstrating the natural capital which our public parks can deliver has rightly emphasised the importance and value of these spaces to society. However, the approach has yet to deliver real financial benefits on the ground and still seems disconnected from the challenges faced by local authority park services. Natural capital accounting may even undermine the evident non-monetary values which people place in their local parks and access to nature. At best, it may just be a useful distraction whilst alternative mechanisms for managing and funding urban green spaces are identified.

Such new approaches to parks management and governance as a result of declining public expenditure may herald new ways of engaging local communities with their local green spaces and more efficient local services, but may also have unforeseen impacts on public access and accountability. As the roles and relationships between local state and non-state actors change and evolve, we need to better understand the impacts on management and public accountability. Otherwise we risk drifting into solutions which result in the loss of access to these important and special public places and a further decline in their associated services. At the heart of these solutions may lie deeper changes to the underpinning social welfare model of public parks provision, to a model predicated on the more neoliberal principles of consumerism and commodification.

Current policy and professional practice advice - whether from government agencies or research `think tanks` - tends to focus on innovation, `good practice` and inevitably the success stories. We also need research which explores and highlights the challenges and even problems arising from proposed new ways of working. The government's `austerity measures` and its emphasis on local government reducing public expenditure at all costs, is a political position based on a particular ideology. We must address both the positive results of these pressures, and the continuing challenges to local service delivery, both philosophically and pragmatically. Our public parks were created at a time when social welfare models of developing public goods and services for the benefit of everyone in society were to the fore. The current UK government's policy towards public parks is moving in a different direction. We need to fully understand the impacts of these changes, or we are in danger of reinforcing this approach to service provision without appreciating the challenging consequences.

Notes

¹ "No magic money tree" - A phrase used by Prime Minister Theresa May on 2 June 2017 on a BBC Question Time programme, in response to a query concerning the need for greater public expenditure by central government.

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