



Some thoughts on the way forward for the Friends Movement in 2014

How can we all defend standards, staffing and good management?

What are the issues?

There is a growing crisis for the management of the UK's 30,000 urban green spaces, as the Government continues to cut funding to local authorities for their vital public services. If this policy is not reversed, public sector funding for discretionary and 'non-statutory' services like parks is projected to fall by 60 per cent or more over the next decade.

This underfunding crisis is hitting all the fundamental pillars of effective green space management - the need for adequate front line staffing levels with experienced and dedicated staffing, enough 'back office' support (for additional funding bids, coordination, for liaising with Friends Groups and volunteers, policy development, enforcement etc), effective ongoing maintenance, effective management, adequate capital investment for infrastructure and buildings etc etc.

Similar policies and cuts were seen in the late 1970s and 1980s and most urban green spaces gradually but inexorably slid into decline over the next 10-20 years. The Friends movement mushroomed in the 2000s (from maybe a few hundred local groups to now around 5,000 of such groups) mainly to try to address this neglect, and to rescue their treasured local spaces.

In addition there were national crisis reports calling for adequate funding and management, the Green Flag Awards were launched in 1997, CABESpace was set up in 2003 to raise standards (but since abolished by the Government), GreenSpace was set up to champion parks (but last year closed down due to lack of funding), the Government put in more resources, the Lottery began its Parks For People program (which has seen additional capital investment in 1%-2% of urban green spaces so they can be held up as an example for what all spaces could achieve), and so on.

As a result of 15-20 years of increased public concern, lobbying, campaigning, outspoken expert opinion, greater public profile and investment for green spaces, a large percentage (but not all) of the neglected spaces had by 2010 gradually seen a recovery in terms of some of the necessary investment, management, standards and community involvement required. Indeed we need to remember that there are still only around 1,500 green spaces which have so far been recognised as achieving the minimum Green Flag Award standard that all 30,000 spaces should be reaching.

This unfinished recovery process has now largely been thrown into reverse in the last few years.

What's our strength?

The main difference between now and the 1980s is:

- we have a **vibrant and dedicated Friends Groups movement**, with increasing levels of local, regional and national strategic networking and organisation
- the **importance of green spaces is now publicly acknowledged** and their profile is high
- no-one who cares about green spaces, or who has any experience of the last 15 years of hard-work and investment required to turn things around, **would ever want to allow a repeat of the fiasco of under-resourced and mismanaged green spaces**

What funding and management do our parks need?

It is unacceptable that the Government is so far refusing to acknowledge let alone address the above issues. Furthermore their strategy seems to be to abandon their public responsibilities and to apply continuous pressure on the sector to 'rethink' the tried and tested model for the successful management of local public green spaces - Local Authorities adequately-funded by local and national taxation. This model, whilst of course not perfect, has largely worked for the whole country for as much as 100 years. Indeed, mainly due to the influence of the Friends Groups movement and expert opinion on the vital importance of well-run green spaces, most Parks Departments were improving their transparency, accountability, innovation and standards. But the increasing under-resourcing, fragmentation, privatisation, and loss of experienced and dedicated staff is causing increasing demoralisation within Local Authorities.

New and fanciful ideas are being promoted. These ideas, whilst they may work for a few spaces, or as 'add ons' to the existing core funding for some spaces, seem to be wholly inadequate and inappropriate for the ongoing and long-term, secure and effective management of most of our 30,000 urban green spaces. These ideas often boil down to increasing commercialisation of public space, and/or a hope that community volunteers will somehow commit to life-long voluntary work and management responsibilities. In reality, if adequate and long-term resources for all our green spaces are not fought for and guaranteed, thousands of spaces will fall into disuse or even close, many will be 'developed' on, or partly or completely sold off, or they will be transformed into commercialised sites for those who can afford access and sponsorship. There is also a very real threat of Friends Groups being pressured to compete with each other for ever-scarce resources instead of working together for everyone's benefit - this would be a disaster for the country's green spaces.

What can we do together to defend our green spaces?

Its going to be a long and challenging few years, but we know that positive thinking and common sense, backed up by the necessary Government action, must and will prevail, as the alternative is too shocking to contemplate.

Each individual green space has to somehow try to survive the underfunding pressures, but there are some key strategic things already being done or which we could & should do together for the good of all

1. Continue to speak out locally for the needs of each local green space, in terms of the resources and management required for each site.
2. Let's promote the need for 30,000 Friends Groups, a Friends Forum for every town and area, and an active and effective National Federation
3. Continue to speak out together - locally, regionally and nationally - for the local and national planning and management policies required to address the crisis (including calling for effective protection from inappropriate development)
4. Continue to speak out together - locally, regionally and nationally - for the resources required to address the crisis - including calling for a statutory duty on local authorities and landowners to manage all public green spaces to Green Flag Award standard
5. Support and promote the Green Flag Award Standard as the quality standard all the UK's green spaces should aspire to and reach (including enabling Friends Groups to do their own evaluations)
6. Support and promote Love Parks Week (and the Love Parks idea) as a way of keeping and extending the profile of our parks and their needs
7. Support Horticulture Week's 'Make Parks A Priority' campaign, calling for an official National Inquiry into the green space funding crisis
8. Support the development of the new Parks Alliance as an effective national lobbying and campaigning organisation. Encourage them to take up the national petition agreed by the GreenLink national coordination body last year. *[Note: GeenLink dissolved in spring 2013 when the national GreenSpace charity closed due to lack of funding - its role is widely expected to be replaced by the new Parks Alliance].*

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To download a 2010 NFPGS leaflet on this issue:

http://www.natfedparks.org.uk/mediapool/118/1181937/data/NFPGS_standing_up_for_our_green_spaces.pdf