

Now sign petition

Go online and tell MPs how you feel to secure a debate in the Commons

By Michael Powell
and Valerie Elliott

THE Mail on Sunday today launches a petition as part of our crusade to save the nation's parks.

We urge readers to go online and sign the petition – and if we secure 100,000 signatures, the issue will be debated in the Commons. Senior Ministers will be forced to answer tough questions about the plight of our treasured open spaces, many of which are being sold off by cash-strapped councils or being allowed to fall into a state of disrepair.

More than 1,000 readers and celebrities are already backing the Save Our Parks campaign – and last week the matter was raised in the Commons by former Cabinet Office Minister John Hayes. He warned MPs: 'Parks and green spaces are being lost, eaten up by greedy developers and unprotected by careless councils.'

Mr Hayes, a former aide to David Cameron, also demanded an initial debate at Westminster Hall, during which MPs sit in a semi-circle in a room in the oldest part of the Palace of Westminster and challenge a Minister for a response to the issue raised. That debate is likely to be held in the coming weeks – but the MoS also wants to increase pressure on politicians to meet our demands by forcing a further session in the main Commons chamber.

In an eloquent speech to the Commons on Thursday, Mr Hayes quoted poet John Keats as he held up a copy of the MoS. 'Keats said, "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever: its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness,"' the MP said, in reference to the role parks play in communities.

He added: 'Future generations deserve their taste, their touch of earthly paradise, not to be confronted with concrete jungles where once trees grew and birds sang.'

Last night, Mr Hayes said: 'Save Our Parks is a brilliant campaign and I want to do everything I can to support it.' His intervention came as readers continued to inundate this newspaper with letters of sup-



port, and more MPs and celebrities backed our call for new laws to safeguard parks.

Tory MP and green campaigner Zac Goldsmith said: 'Parks are vital oases. It would be an irreversible tragedy if we lose more and they clearly need the further protection asked for by this campaign.'

TV presenter and explorer Ben Fogle, who met his wife Marina in Hyde Park, London, said: 'Urban parks in particular give us a form of escape and solitude. They are good for the mind, body and soul.'

'They are a place to reconnect with nature and to escape the stresses of modern life. I have walked thousands of miles through London's parks over the years: walking the dogs, teaching the children to ride bikes and to collect conkers. I trained for expeditions there. If it weren't for our parks I would never have met my wife.'

'But all is not green and rosy. Councils are selling off parks and even National Parks are under pressure from new town developments.'

Musician Rick Wakeman described parks as essential and said their loss was the latest blow to communities following the closure of shops, pubs and post offices.

'Parks create a sense of belonging. They bring people together. It's where people meet, walk, talk and make new friends. It's not rocket science to understand this.'

BBC Countryfile presenter Steve Brown added: 'These spaces let kids feel like kings.'

Letters special: Pages 106, 107

HOW TO SIGN OUR PETITION

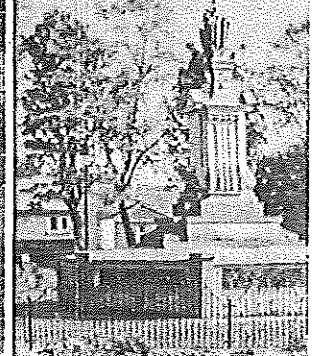
1 Go to petition.parliament.uk/petitions/229894 on your computer or smartphone. If you haven't got one, you can use a computer at your local library or an internet cafe.

2 You will be asked to confirm that you are a UK resident or citizen, and to enter your name, postcode and email address. Don't worry – any personal information is for verification, not for passing on or for publication.

3 You will receive an email from the petitions website asking you to confirm you wish to sign. Click on the link in the email to confirm.

4 You can tell friends, family or colleagues to join in with the campaign – and you can keep an eye on the magic number on the petition page, where a tally will be shown.

2010



MY LIFE'S WORK AS PARK KEEPER DESTROYED BY HEARTLESS COUNCIL

FOR 32 years, award-winning gardener Peter Fawcett lovingly maintained the parks in his home town. Every day he would spruce up the gardens in Cleckheaton, West Yorkshire, keeping the colourful flowerbeds free of weeds and the shrubs looking shipshape for everyone to enjoy.

At night he would return home to his wife Aine, tired but swelling with pride at a job well done.

'Gardening is my life and the parks were my life's work,' says Mr Fawcett. 'But when I look at them now, I feel sick – it has all been destroyed.'

His heartbreak is clear to see as he shows us around Cleckheaton Memorial Park. Swinging cuts by the local council have left the park and surrounding green spaces completely unrecognisable from the photographs Mr Fawcett proudly took when he retired in 2010.

The park is now a grim, unwelcoming place. Almost all of the pretty flowerbeds have been grassed over, and there are hardly any plants or shrubs to admire these days. Meanwhile, the pungent smell of a cannabis joint being shared by three youths sitting on one of the park benches only adds to the feeling of decline.

However, the worst sight of all for Mr Fawcett is that of the town's First World War memorial – bedding plants have been ripped out

By Michael Powell

and replaced with bark chippings.

Mr Fawcett, a seven-time winner of the National Chrysanthemum Society championships, says: 'That is a big insult to the soldiers who died. This year marks the centenary of the end of the First World War and it is the first time that the memorial has not been planted.'

'The gardener has been told to put wood chips down instead to stop the weeds coming up.'

'It's a disgrace. When people come to pay their respects on Remem-

brance Sunday they always used to plant their little red crosses in the flowerbed but this year they will have to plant them in bark.'

All the more galling for Mr Fawcett is the fact that the memorial contains the names of his great uncles – Samuel Fawcett, who was killed at Ypres in 1917, aged 29, and Frank Brown, who was killed at the Somme in 1918, aged 21.

He says: 'This year the council should be pulling out the stops to make it look extra special but they have done the opposite. I feel so sad.'

Kirklees Council has slashed its

WHAT WE'RE DEMANDING

- A statutory requirement for councils to ring-fence funding for parks at £30 per household, per year.
- A legal duty for all green space to be managed to a good standard.

- Rules banning development on, or the inappropriate use of, parks.
- A new central Government fund to provide emergency help for the parks most at risk and ensure the long-term future of Britain's green spaces.

IS YOUR PARK UNDER THREAT?

Email your story to: parks@mailonsunday.co.uk
or write to: Save Our Parks Campaign, The Mail on Sunday,
Northcliffe House, 2 Derry Street, London W8 5TT

to save our parks



SPEAKING OUT: Peter Fawcett at Cleckheaton Memorial Park. Inset: His picture of the site before he retired showing colourful flowerbeds

War poet's memorial field turned into houses

A MEMORIAL park that was dedicated to the celebrated Great War poet Wilfred Owen is now a housing estate. Ingleborough Road Memorial Playing Fields in Birkenhead, Merseyside, were set aside by the council in the aftermath of the First World War to commemorate the 88 old boys of the Birkenhead Institute Grammar School who died in battle.

Among them was Lieutenant Owen, who was killed at Ors a week before Armistice Day in November 1918.

His works, including Dulce Et Decorum Est and Anthem For Doomed Youth, led him to be posthumously recognised as one of the greatest war poets.

Sports pitches at the site were used by the local community until they were sold by Wirral Council to Tranmere Rovers Football Club in 1995. The club used the pitches as its training ground until

BIRKENHEAD, MERSEYSIDE



'A HUGE SHAME': A total of 90 homes were built on the controversial site

it lodged a highly controversial bid to sell the land in a deal worth around £5million.

Despite strong opposition, Wirral Council rubber-stamped the move and the Government

did not contest it. Now an estate with 90 homes each worth £200,000 has been built on the site by construction firm Bellway.

Dean Johnson, curator at the Wilfred Owen Story museum in Birkenhead, said: 'There was an awful lot of money involved and we couldn't stop it. The football club needed the cash to survive. The council was persuaded to remove the covenant that protected the land from development, which was a huge shame.'

Site dedicated to
88
ex-pupils killed
in battle...

...is estate with
90
homes worth
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TUNBRIDGE WELLS, KENT



TAKING A STAND: Campaigners in Calverley Grounds don't want their town centre park replaced with a new town hall complex, right

'They're taking away a slice of countryside'

A ROW has broken out over a council's £90million project to build new town hall offices, a theatre and an underground car park on a much-loved green space in Royal Tunbridge Wells.

Protesters say the council's plans will change Calverley Grounds for the worse by 'replacing trees with concrete and grass'.

Nicholas Pope, chairman of the Friends of Calverley Grounds, said: 'This is nothing more than an expensive vanity project that will take away a slice of the countryside in the centre of our

town and replace it with a drab city park. We will spend years paying for this via our council tax.'

Nearly 5,000 people have signed a petition on Change.org opposing the council's plan.

Protesters claim that renovating the council's existing offices just

half a mile away would cost a fraction of the proposed scheme – and would preserve Calverley Grounds, which date from the 1830s and also have free tennis courts, croquet lawns and a cafe.

Council leader David Jukes hit back last night, accusing Mr Pope – who became a councillor to oppose the plan – and other campaigners of waging a 'Donald Trump fake news job'.

He said: 'They are Nimbys who don't care about the park, they just care about the view from their houses.'

Council plans
£90m
town hall
'vanity project'

Nearly
5,000
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parks and open spaces budget by £1.7million in the past six years. The Labour-run authority insists cuts had to be made because the Government slashed its funding.

However, the council intends to provide a £9million loan to developers building a four-star hotel and an indoor ski slope next to the football stadium of Premier League side Huddersfield Town.

Mr Fawcett says: 'This council has the money for pet projects but not for folks to enjoy their parks.'

'What they are doing to the parks is a scandal. They don't care – they can't, otherwise why would they be doing this? They have got rid of 40 gardeners and closed five bowling greens in the last five years.'

Mr Fawcett has become a thorn in the side of Kirklees Council in recent years with his complaints about the shocking decline of his beloved parks.

He says: 'No one in senior management at the council has a clue about horticulture. They don't seem to know the difference between a dandelion and a daisy. But such a big difference can be made with so little money. Great parks lift the spirits and give people something to feel good about. They are vital for our health and our wellbeing. British

gardeners and gardens used to be the envy of the world but no longer. Now we are in danger of losing vital skills.

'It is disgusting that these days it is always about the bottom line. They are aiming for lower standards, not higher. For the trained gardeners who are left it's exasperating to be told to pave or grass over flowerbeds. Morale is very low among the council's gardeners but they dare not speak up because they will get sacked. I am speaking up and they can't stop me.'

'The gardeners around here have been told to stop talking to me. They told my former colleagues that if they are seen talking to me they will face disciplinary action, which is ridiculous.'

Kirklees Council leader Shabir Pandor said: 'In the case of Cleckheaton Memorial Park, we worked with local councillors and groups who wanted the flowers removed as they had died in the summer heat, spoiling the appearance of the memorial.'

'The loan for a hotel is a way that we can lend, at a commercial rate, to promote investment in the town and I am confident that the scheme will have a massive impact on tourism and leisure in our town.'

Council cuts
£1.7m
from parks
budget

But it lends
£9m
to ski slope
developers

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The Mail
 on Sunday

SAVE OUR PARKS

CAMPAIGN

Thank you for setting up the Save Our Parks campaign.

Parks play a huge part in our wellbeing. They give us freedom to walk, fill our lungs with fresh air, and provide us with places to run. They fill our world with colour – the greens of grass and trees, and the many hues of flowers and birds.

Walking in parks also helps to combat depression, as well as isolation and loneliness. We must fight to preserve them.

Daphne James, Truro

Congratulations on your first victory by forcing officials in Westward Ho! to rethink plans to build homes on a park there. Let's hope it is the first of many triumphs.

J. Barnes, West Sussex

I live in the country and our villages are constantly being threatened with plans to build more and more homes. There should be a statutory requirement for all councils to ring-fence money for parks and open spaces. These are the lungs of our overcrowded towns. And they should be maintained to a high standard.

A new fund from the Government should also be put in place to save those parks at risk.

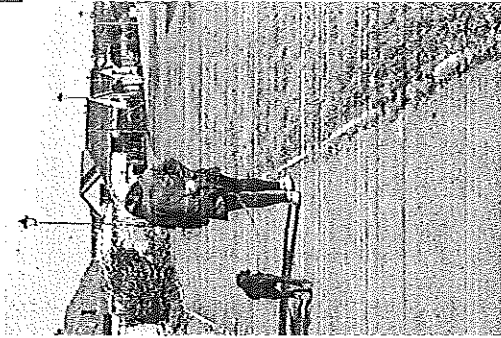
Gillian Ellen,
 High Halstow, Kent

I am nearly 80 and walk my Labrador twice a day in parks near my home. I am incensed that councils all over the country feel they can take our green spaces away from us. Thank you for fighting to keep them open.

W. Freedman, Cheltenham

Parks are an important part of daily life for millions of people,

Huge



TRUMP: The park in Westward Ho! and young protester Beth with the placard she took to a council meeting

LETTER OF THE

Look to

Why must we build on our precious green spaces?

In this age of technology – in which many young people live their lives through artificial means, with virtual friends and creating virtual worlds – surely the need for parks and open land is more important than ever.

Much of the area where I live used to be coal mines but now there is parkland. And that means that people can walk their dogs and have family days out. There's even a festival at one of these areas. Parks bring us fresh air, as

well as spaces for children to play. These are places where we can all experience the varying seasons. Councils must not be allowed to take these from us.

A lot of council money seems to go on junkets – what the politicians want for themselves, not for the people.

And when they sell off land it's never clear what that money is going to go towards. More than ten years ago, in Sunderland, an estate was demolished and has never been built on since.

I have to wonder why, if new

properties are in such high demand, has this area been forgotten about by the council? They don't seem to be interested in protecting the environment for future generations.

Before the politicians ruin this green and pleasant land, surely they should look to sites like this, where buildings have been pulled down, as locations to build much-needed homes.

After all, how would they like it if the parks near their homes were to disappear?

T. Byron,
 Sunderland

derelict land for new estates

PRIZE LETTER

Letter of the Week wins a two-night stay for two at Jurys Inn, Chocoma from any of its 25 Exceptional Everyday City Hotels across the UK (two nights' B&B, terms and conditions apply).

Located in the heart of the city, ideal for sightseeing, shopping and nightlife, Jurys Inn hotels offer spacious bedrooms as well as a stylish bar and restaurant. For the lowest rates, book online at www.jurysinn.com.

JURYS
 INN

victory for common sense

whether they are early-morning joggers, evening dog-walkers, amateur footballers or workers just relaxing at lunchtime.

Young and old alike benefit from parks and exciting playgrounds give children their first taste of adventure. They are venues for summer picnics and open-air concerts and, in winter, their hills can be used for sledding.

So let's all throw our weight behind The Mail on Sunday's excellent campaign.

D. Courtney, Weston-super-Mare

I remember that the theme of the 2012 London Olympics was 'legacy'. Reading now about the decimation of our parks and open spaces, the whole thing seems like a sham.

If we want the nation to be healthy and we want children to get out in the fresh air and exercise more then we must fight for crime-free, litter-free and safe parks everywhere, particularly in our big cities.

If you want legacy, you have to work for it.

Mick Forrie,
 Mawman Smith, Cornwall

Your campaign to save our parks is a brilliant one. The more outside space people can access the better. But one thing that really needs highlighting is the lack of maintenance to our parks and open spaces: grass not being cut, litter not being picked up, paths and facilities falling into disrepair.

These lead people to give these places a wide berth, and that results in gangs and yobs using the parks and causing anti-social behaviour. Yes, we must save our parks but we also have to maintain them too.

Owen Hollifield, Caerphilly

I really admire the 'thin grey line' of pensioners patrolling a park in

Southend, Essex, and stop it being taken over by drug-dealers and prostitutes.

And it doesn't take a genius to work out why anti-social behaviour at the park rocketed by more than 60 per cent in just three years – the parks budget was cut by £2.6million over the same period.

We all know that council budgets are under severe strain at the moment but our parks really need protecting.

If some councils can find the money to pay for fancy new offices or spend thousands on lavish parties then they can certainly give our parks the attention they deserve.

E. Adams, Surrey

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council wants to build a new civic centre and theatre in Calverley Grounds, a very lovely park in the centre of Tunbridge Wells.

The plan necessitates the cutting down of many trees and the intrusion of a high building in the corner of a park, at a cost of more than £90million. This comes at a time of council cuts and ignoring the possibilities of improving or altering the present town hall and assembly hall.

There has been a campaign to prevent this happening by Tunbridge Wells Alliance but it has been pushed aside by the council.

Irma McDonnell,
 Tunbridge Wells

Councillors need to be reminded that they are our elected representatives working for us, and all council employees are paid to work for us. All of them are charged with safeguarding our country.

Terry Lyden,
 Laleham, Middlesex

IS YOUR PARK UNDER THREAT?

Email your story to: write-to-save-our-parks@nps.org.uk or write to: Save Our Parks Campaign, Mail on Sunday, Northcliffe House, 2 Derry Street, London W8 5TS

Dolly's greatest hits?

MoD's drug U-turn

Fashion's