

National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces

www.natfedparks.org.uk @natfedparks www.parkscommunity.org.uk @ParksCommUK

28.6.2022

Statement of evidence for the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee

‘Future of Public Parks’ Inquiry Report - Review of Progress 2017-2022

Introduction

As a background to the oral evidence the NFPGS have been asked to give at the forthcoming Select Committee review hearing, I provide reference to a handful of key documents (with extracts) detailing some of the challenges for the greenspace Friends Groups’ movement in particular over the last 5 years – that is, since the publication of the Select Committee’s ‘Future of Public Parks’ Inquiry Report and recommendations, and the Government’s responses.

I have been informed that the NFPGS Briefing for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Parks in May 2021 (attended by the Select Cttee Chair Clive Betts MP) and the NFPGS ‘State of the UK Friends Groups Movement’ 2021 Report are both already accepted by the Select Cttee as part of the NFPGS evidence. The APPG Parks Briefing, which contains some links to vital documents, can be viewed here: <https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NFPGS-APPG-Briefing-for-mtg-18.5.21-pdf.pdf> The NFPGS ‘Better Friends’ Report can be found here: <https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NFPGS-PCUK-Report.pdf>

In this additional document I focus – following an introduction - on the 4 questions posed by the Committee, whilst recognising there is much overlap ie much of my response to one question could be equally relevant to the other questions.

The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces

The NFPGS is the democratic umbrella organisation promoting, co-ordinating and representing the ever-growing movement of local Friends groups in all corners of the UK. We exist to champion their activities, issues and concerns, and to amplify their passionate and knowledgeable voices.

The Federation was set up to enable this movement to share learning, develop good practice, and strengthen our grassroots organisation, coordination and co-operation. We also speak out over the strategic issues impacting on the UK’s 27,000 public parks and green spaces. We want to see active and influential Friends Groups for every public green space, and such groups sharing good practice, supporting each other and working with Local Authorities through area Forums in every Local Authority area.

To this end in 2019 our Parks Community UK platform was developed – with Lottery funding as part of the ‘Rethinking Parks’ program - as a peer-to-peer ‘service arm’ to the greenspace grassroots: www.parkscommunity.org.uk

We support and work alongside other key ‘community-facing’ national greenspace organisations and their initiatives (such as Green Flag Awards, and Fields In Trust protective covenanting), and with sector-wide alliances to improve collaboration and lobbying over strategic issues. We were the only grassroots body on the Government/Sector liaison body, the Parks Action Group, coordinating its Empowering Communities workstream and its funded projects.

Q1. What has been the impact of the pandemic on parks and what should the priorities of central and local government be during the recovery?

Vital spaces under threat The Select Committee Inquiry Report recognises that our local green spaces are an essential and unique service for people of all ages, backgrounds and interests – but that for a number of years alarm has been growing about the serious long-term damage being caused by devastating cuts to green space budgets for staff and maintenance, and the lack of funding and investment by local and national government. If not reversed, this underfunding crisis will cause them to become neglected, go into serious decline and become problem spaces abandoned by park users and plagued by vandalism - with many sites or parts of sites threatened with being inappropriately privatised or commercialised, or even of being sold off.

The covid crisis over the last 2 years, whilst demonstrating the vital importance and popularity of greenspace, has served to underline the desperate need to ensure adequate staffing, resources and public engagement. This is a challenge all who care about greenspace must face and overcome together.

Those who value our green spaces need to work together, to speak out and defend them, and to call for the effective action urgently needed at Government level.

The Charter for Parks and the Government's response by Rishi Sunak MP

www.parkscharter.org.uk

The following 24 national organisations (including many in the PAG) have called on the Government to back a Charter for Parks, which calls for all tiers of Government to:

- Celebrate the central role well-run parks play in our neighbourhoods for all sections of our communities
- Recognise the right of every citizen to have access within walking distance to a good quality public green space
- Endorse a legal duty for all public green space to be managed to a good standard
- Embed effective protection from inappropriate development or use, or loss of any part of our parks
- Ensure adequate long-term resources for ongoing maintenance, management and improvements
- Encourage and enable community involvement and empowerment of local people and park users

Supporters include: The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, Friends of the Earth, Keep Britain Tidy, Unison, 38 Degrees, The Parks Agency, Fields In Trust, Llais y Goedwig (Wales), The Gardens Trust, The Parks Alliance, Greenspace Scotland, The Conservation Volunteers, The Open Spaces Society, Sport and Recreation Alliance, Urban Bee Keepers Association, Lantra, MyParkScotland, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Trees for Cities, Keep Scotland Beautiful, Soil Association, National Federation of Cemetery Friends, Countryside Management Association, Town & Country Planning Association, Paths For All [Scotland], Countryside Jobs Service.

Similar calls were made by the 322,000-strong '38 Degrees' petition to the Select Committee in 2016, and by the Daily Mail in 2018: <https://www.mymail.co.uk/pages/save-our-parks> Currently, the Wildlife and Countryside Link 'Nature for Everyone' campaign, backed by 80 organisations and 35,000 individuals, is promoting a similar set of calls for action.

The Government's initial response to the Charter was on 25.7.2018. Rishi Sunak MP, then Parks Minister stated:

[Regarding the call to 'Endorse a legal duty for all public green space to be managed to a good standard']
'... the Government does not want to impose central reporting burdens on local government and has sought to reduce the pressure on local authorities through the new burdens doctrine. **This requires departments to justify why new statutory duties are being placed on local authorities and identify additional funding towards any additional costs.**' [My emphasis] The full response can be read here: <https://parkscharter.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/NFPGS-ParksCharter-Minister-Response-7.2018.pdf>

Significantly the proposal of a legal duty is not ruled out or even criticised. We believe it is indeed exactly what still needs to be done (backed by adequate funding) - as recommended by the previous Select Committee report on the future of parks (2003). The 2017 Select Committee report (p57) states:

*'We appreciate that our decision not to recommend a statutory duty to provide and maintain parks **at this time** may be disappointing to many of those who have given evidence to our inquiry. However we believe that **other mechanisms are more likely to achieve the outcomes we all want to see** – greater recognition of the value and benefits of parks, and appropriate prioritisation in local authority planning and funding decisions.' ... 'We are not persuaded... that a statutory duty to provide and maintain parks is the **most effective way to achieve this objective**'. [My emphasis]*

We are not aware of other mechanisms which will be more effective. We ask the Select Committee to outline and explain which mechanisms they believe will be effective in achieving what everyone wants to see, and which will be systematically implemented by all Local Authorities - or we ask the Committee to revisit and adopt the position of their 2003 report.

Q2. What has been the impact on parks and green spaces, including in bolstering access for disadvantaged groups, of Government initiatives such as pocket parks and the Levelling Up Fund?

The amounts allocated so far are very small, are limited to a small number of sites, and do not include the essential annual revenue costs so desperately needed by all Local Authorities for the effective management and maintenance of the country's public greenspaces.

Regarding the funding needed to address the growing financial crisis faced by the sector, deteriorating standards, and need to improve access to greenspace, the following major reports set out the picture clearly:

- a. The PAG Funding Working Group did a lot of excellent work. They commissioned the New Policy Institute report: *Creating a True and Robust Picture of the Funding of Public Parks and Green Spaces Across England* (November 2018). This detailed baseline report is based on official Local Authority funding data, and demonstrates the low and ever-falling funding for the sector since 2010.
<https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/NFPGS-PAG-NPI-report-for-the-Parks-Action-Group-final-with-notes.pdf>
- b. The 2020 report for the National Trust, Sustrans, Create Streets, the Heritage Lottery Fund and others – including Andy Street and Marvin Rees, respectively the Mayors of the West Midlands and of Bristol – says that that the government should invest £5.5 billion of capital funding over 5 years to boost public access to green spaces, especially in areas lacking proper provision, together with £275 million in annual maintenance. The proposal includes the development of 10,000 km of streets planted with trees and the creation of 155 neighbourhood and 600 street parks in deprived areas, plus 9,200 upgraded parks and the creation of 7,500 km² of peri-urban parks across Great Britain. It is important to note that the £275 million annual maintenance cost does not include the additional expenditure needed to maintain existing green infrastructure, nor the funds to fully exploit the health and social benefits of community engagement in green space development, maintenance and use. <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/press-release/new-research-shows-55bn-fund-needed-to-level-up-access-to-urban-green-space-as-part-of-uks-green-recovery>
- c. In September 2020 Friends of the Earth estimated that what was needed was a capital funding programme of £2 billion per year for the following 5 years, together with an additional and ongoing £2 billion on annual maintenance and community engagement. <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/englands-green-space-gap>

Q3. How would you assess the effectiveness of the Parks Action Group and what should its future role be?

The 2017 Select Committee's report recommendations, and the Government's official response in September 2017, are set out here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/645570/Cm_Govt_Response_Future_of_Public_Parks_Accessible.pdf

In 2017 the Minister for Parks convened a sectoral Parks Action Group, set up, funded [£500,000 allocated] and tasked by the MHCLG to carry forward the Recommendations of the Report, and its wider objectives. This was to be linked to and supported by a Cross-Departmental Group of Government officials.

The PAG Terms of Reference state [4]: *The overall purpose of the Parks Action Group will be to take action to safeguard and enhance parks and green spaces for future generations and to inform and shape government's future policy-making on parks and green spaces. The terms of reference reflect the collective agreement of both the sectoral and cross-departmental groups. [Section 1] The recommendations accepted by government are 1, 2, 3,4,7,9, 10, 12, 13, 16 and 17. The Group will seek to action these recommendations as a priority. The Inquiry also made recommendations the government wanted to explore further before making a commitment on them. Those recommendations include - 5, 6,8,11 and 14. However, over the longer-term the group may decide to explore beyond the recommendations in the Government response. The group should devise timely and appropriate actions in response to these recommendations. The Parks Action Group will need to determine an appropriate and feasible timetable for delivering on each of the accepted recommendations. [S3]*

It is significant that the Government's '25 year Environment Plan' [January 2018] included a specific long term commitment to: *'Supporting the Parks Action Group in its work to help England's public parks and green spaces meet the needs of communities now and in the future'*

From late 2017 to 2019 the national greenspace organisations in the PAG worked hard to progress the agenda, including:

- The PAG 'Empowering Communities' Working Group I chaired oversaw 3 projects, including a series of community-level mini-conferences in 2019 in every region of England to advance Recommendations 3 and 4 of the Report [which had been backed by the Minister].
- The PAG 'Vision and Values' Working Group produced a persuasive Business Case for the much needed additional investment needed for parks, eventually published by The Parks Alliance.
- The PAG 'Funding' Working Group commissioned a detailed expert high-level analysis of the 'Funding of Public Parks' in November 2018, showing the alarming continued decline in the resources available for the maintenance and management of parks.

There were other PAG working groups and projects, for example ones focused on greenspace standards, on vision and values, and on staffing skills in the sector.

However, despite the PAG participants' continuing enthusiasm and commitment, and the continuing desperate need to advance the PAG work and Government backing for effective action for our parks, MHCLG hasn't convened any meetings since the middle of 2019. I believe the Cross Departmental Group only met in full once in 2018.

Progress on the Recommendations and Government responses

The Minister for Local Government, at that time Rishi Sunak MP, made a written statement delivered to Parliament on 4.4.2019 outlining Government thoughts on progress made against the Select Committee's recommendations. In May 2021, Luke Hall, the Minister of State for Regional Growth and Local Government, responded to a range of parliamentary questions about funding for the sector, standards, and the Parks Action Group.

All the indications in those statements, as well as in the Government's 25 year plan for the environment, was that this would need to be a long process and one of continuing Government and sector collaboration.

The NFPGS Survey of Friends Groups in 2019, carried out to get feedback about and for the PAG, was also very useful in gathering informed opinion from key grassroots stakeholders. The NFPGS reported back

to the PAG that: *'Whilst the PAG is recognised to be relatively young as an entity, groups responding to the survey had a clear focus that it needed to influence Government policy, particularly in relation to threats from lack of resources and inappropriate development. The PAG exists to "take action to safeguard and enhance parks and green spaces for future generations and to inform and shape Government's future policy-making" [PAG Terms of Reference]. The impact of austerity has been felt on both fronts, with many local authorities under pressure to dispose of land for development, plus widespread and severe reductions in parks services. In many cases volunteer groups feel under pressure to prop up parks' services, with very limited input in some places. This is detrimental in the long-run - volunteers mostly do not have the desire or capacity to maintain essential parks services but generally focus on adding value through their energy and commitment. There was also strong support for the PAG's commitment to raising the profile of parks and promoting partnership-working, alongside efforts to ensure parks are properly protected and funded.'* [See Appendix for more detailed extracts]

The PAG meetings and process should be picked up again (following the hiatus due to Government officers being re-directed to work on Brexit issues and then the pandemic). There is still much work to do, as seen by looking briefly at the Select Committee's recommendations:

- R1 LAs to better assess the true value of parks.** Supported by Government. X-Depts group needs to meet. Needs to be progressed?
- R2 Transparency and consultation over any proposed charging or exclusive use of a green space.** Supported by Government. Needs to be monitored, evaluated and progressed?
- R3 LAs to work collaboratively with community/friends groups over their potential to contribute to their site.** Supported by Government. Work in progress. PAG member NFPGS was leading on this and has created an online portal for Friends Groups (set up with Lottery funding but now run by volunteers). LAs need adequate funding to ensure adequate staffing and officers available.
- R4 LAs to encourage, support and work with Friends Groups Forums** Supported by Government. NFPGS promoting this. LAs need adequate funding to ensure officers available.
- R5 Data on health and safety / accidents to be collated by Govt to identify trends** Government says X-Depts group will collaborate with PAG member APSE. No action being taken? X-Dept group needs to meet.
- R6 Action needed to ensure access for all to high quality green spaces** Government said it will do an annual report to parliament on this – has this happened? PAG member Keep Britain Tidy was leading on the need to raise standards. LAs need adequate funding to ensure all sites reach Green Flag Award standards. PAG and X-Dept group need to meet.
- R7 LAs' Local Plans should value and protect public greenspace** Supported by Government. Needs to be monitored, evaluated and progressed.
- R8 Ensure Green Infrastructure Frameworks include parks** PAG member Fields In Trust was leading on this and can report.
- R9 Parks to be properly recognised in the 25 yr Environmental Plan.** Supported by Government who added they would ensure the environment was in a better state for the next generation. Work in progress? PAG needs to meet.
- R10 Government guidance needed for appropriate governance and accountability of sites not managed by LAs.** Partially supported by Government, which said also that the X-Depts group and 25 yr Environmental Plan will explore funding options. Work in progress?
- R11 Funding for transformative models** Govt said X-Depts to consider options, including 'match funding' from a range of Depts. Work in progress?
- R12 Active support for LAs piloting new ways of managing and funding parks** Work in progress?
- R13 Benchmarking of emerging models** Supported by Government, who want to ensure knowledge and good practice is shared. Work in progress?
- R14 and R15 Need for Governmental guidance calling for joint local health and wellbeing / greenspace strategies to raise profile and priority of greenspace. If not implemented voluntarily, should become a statutory duty** Government says planning (NPPF) and other guidance deals with this. Needs to be monitored and if not happening become a statutory duty.
- R16 X-Depts group should have an ongoing role of working with the sector and the Local Govt Association to ensure a sustainable future for parks.** Supported by Government. X-Dept group and PAG need to meet.
- R17 Minister to make annual reports to Parliament re PAG and progress on the recommendations.** Supported by Government. Work in progress?

Q4. How have local authorities engaged with their communities, including friends group forums, about the planning, effective resourcing, and managing of parks?

The Friends Groups' movement

Slowly but surely, especially over the last 20 years, a huge and inspirational UK grassroots movement has been arising everywhere - of people dedicated to improving, caring for, protecting, animating, appreciating and publicising, and taking some 'ownership' of their own local green spaces in all kinds of ways.

There are now over 7,000 independent local 'Friends of' groups, each collectively contributing and 'adding value' to their sites to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their capacity. Most are in urban areas, but some even span entire National Parks. Made up of around 60,000 local activists and 840,000 members, the volunteering efforts of these groups can include producing flyers, social media publicity and running noticeboards (with millions of park users reached through Friends Groups' local media efforts); planting flowers and trees, and maintaining landscape features; organising walks, talks, and events of all kinds; doing wildlife surveys and conducting public consultations; helping manage buildings; collecting litter, reporting maintenance issues and liaising with staff and management; developing ideas for improvements, and fundraising for projects; lobbying and campaigning for resources and against inappropriate development; being part of decision-making; and much, much more!

Whether called 'Friends', 'societies' or 'user groups'. and although every site and every group is different and unique, there's a common thread which knits this movement together – communities are essential to the present and future of our public spaces, and they are determined to show this by getting more and more engaged, involved, and empowered. And of course greenspace staff and Friends Groups need to work closely together. <https://parkscommunity.org.uk/park-green-space-management/partnership-working-with-landowners-and-managers/>

Most management and Councils have been increasingly embracing this movement. And most Friends Groups likewise are keen to support - rather than be used to supplant - the hard-working and under-resourced workers and rangers whose job it is to somehow make sure our public green spaces are properly managed and maintained. We must be partners, and work closely together.

The 2016 'State of UK Parks' Heritage Lottery Fund Report estimated the Friends Groups' movement (an estimated 5,900 groups at that time) contributed £120m pa to the sector through their members' volunteering hours (£70m) and their fundraising efforts (£50m). The 'follow-up' APSE 'State of UK Parks' Report, December 2021, noted that the Friends Groups movement was continuing to grow (with naturally a major dip in activity due to pandemic restrictions). The APSE report estimates there could have been as much as £44m pa dip due to volunteer hours lost.

The series of PAG-funded Friends Groups conferences in every region of England in 2019, coordinated by the NFPGS, with support from Locality and Groundwork, were extremely effective in sharing good practice, establishing better ongoing links, developing council/community partnerships, and providing feedback to the PAG and Government. [See full report here: https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NFPGS-PAGCE-2019-conferences-aggregated_report.pdf and a summary in Appendix 1 below]

We, the NFPGS, produced our own path-breaking and detailed 2021 report on this ever-growing movement: 'Better Friends – State of the Movement of Greenspace Friends Groups throughout the UK'. It is one of the most forensic analyses ever produced on a grassroots movement in this country. It can be found here: <https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NFPGS-PCUK-Report.pdf>

The Better Friends Report summarises the evidence, based on detailed self-audits by 211 local groups from September 2020 to July 2021. Here are some key extracts. [See Appendix 3 below for the full text]

Local community organising and activities, to have a real effect, take a great deal of effort, people power, thought, resources, skills, meetings, planning and commitment. Being determined and well organised enables the involvement of many people, a large range of activities to be carried out, and the development of good partnerships.

Activities The huge range of activities undertaken by Friends groups include practical volunteering (by 91% of groups), organising community events (90%) and reporting maintenance issues (82%). They manage projects (77%) and public noticeboards (59%), and meet regularly with those running the site (86%). As well as their traditional ways of communicating through flyers (68%) and email lists (73%) the groups create websites (69%) and employ social media like facebook (88%) and twitter (39%).

The total amount of volunteering is huge, with 30% of groups estimating their active members contribute 200-1000 hrs per year, 18% report 1000-5000 hrs per year, and 5% reckon over 5000 hrs. The weighted average is estimated to be around 1000hrs per group, - meaning around 7 million hrs per year throughout the UK.

Groups also try to ensure they work closely with other user / stakeholder groups at their site (42%), with those who own/manage the site (60%), and link up with other nearby Friends groups where possible (65%).

Membership The numbers of people involved varies greatly, but 26% report a membership of 50-250, 15% of groups report 250-1000 members, with 3% reporting over 1000 members. An average of 120 members per group is estimated, representing around 840,000 people throughout the UK. Groups' use of social media reaches millions of people. The core of each group can also vary greatly, but 41% of groups report 7-10 activists, and 21% report over 11 active members. This means a grassroots volunteer 'army' of around 60,000 greenspace volunteers in 7,000 groups.

Achievements Groups identified a hugely-impressive range of successes and improvements achieved over the last 5 years. [See The Better Friends Research Data Appendix 3 for the full details]. Such specific achievements not only improve green spaces for the benefit of all users, but also serve as examples of community action which can inspire people in the surrounding local communities.

The future 46% report that their group and its role is flagged up in a Management Plan for the site, although it was noted that 42% of responding sites don't have any Management Plan at all. A majority of groups (64%) indicated that they have created their own list of improvements they'd like to see at their site.

The Research Data report, Appendix 3 also contains the groups' notes on some of their plans and goals for the coming 12 months. These are highly interesting and encouraging, demonstrating that - despite the current chronic underfunding and lack of staffing of local parks services, and the effects of the covid pandemic - members of so many local Friends Groups remain committed to serving their communities by seeking further improvements to the green spaces they love and which are so vital to everyone.

Conclusions Based on the findings in this report we draw the following conclusions:

- 1 All those who care about the future of the UK's public green spaces should **actively support the involvement and empowerment of Friends groups**, and to encourage such groups to form for every local site currently without one. This commitment should be reflected in all greenspace policies, Management Plans, funding bodies' grant conditions, and discussions about the needs of greenspace.
- 2 NFPGS should look into producing more specialist tools for **calculating volunteering hours**, and also the level of 'external' income being raised for local sites.
- 3 NFPGS should look into developing **more resources and guidance** on how groups can strengthen and diversify their membership.
- 4 Friends groups should **continue to link up locally, regionally and nationally** to discuss their issues, support each other and share good practice.
5. To enable this process to take place effectively, the **NFPGS needs to be properly funded and resourced**. [Note: NFPGS has no staffing and relies entirely on volunteers except when one-off grants have become available].

We believe this Report demonstrates that community engagement, involvement and empowerment in greenspace is making a massive difference to these vital spaces for our communities, thanks to the

commitment and intelligent efforts of tens of thousands of local volunteers and activists.

Recognising, embracing and expanding on this is vital, and means going well beyond traditional 'tick box' exercises or occasional public consultations towards the development of real community/management collaboration and partnerships site by site, area by area, region by region, and nationally.

With substantial ongoing recognition, encouragement and support – from the NFPGS, from parks management, greenspace NGOs, and from all tiers of Government - this grassroots army of community volunteers can only grow and become ever more important in the future.

Friends Groups Forums

There are currently around 70 Forums, mainly based in large urban areas and so far involving around 3,000 of the country's local groups.

Such Forums vary in terms of their strength and influence, independence, capacity, partnerships with their Local Authority, length of existence, and issues addressed. Yet they are the crucial building blocks throughout the country for the development of good practice at the grassroots, and for good liaison and partnership-working with Local Authorities.

A snapshot of the development, role and activities of Friends Group Forums can be seen in this brief 2019 Report based on a survey of the Forums established around London. In London the movement is supported and co-ordinated through the London Friends of Green Spaces Network (where there are around 900 groups and 20 borough Forums):

<http://www.lfgn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/LFGN-Boroughs-Friends-of-Parks-Forums-Survey-Summary-2019.pdf>

An example of a well-established and active Forum is in my own London borough, Haringey. The minutes of a recent meeting can be viewed here:

https://haringeyfriendsofparks.org.uk/minutes/2022_04_02_fohp_minutes.pdf

The largest single Forum in the UK is the Birmingham Open Spaces Forum covering around 130 local groups throughout the city: www.bosf.org.uk

Developing good community/Council partnership-working is a key imperative for the NFPGS. Our guidance to local community groups on this can be read here:

https://parkscommunity.org.uk/how_to_guide/partnership-working-with-landowners-and-managers/

In 2019 the NFPGS conducted a UK-wide survey of Friends Groups in order to feedback to the PAG and thereby inform future PAG and related work. 380 groups took part. This is the full report:

<https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NFPGS-Greenspace-Community-Empowerment-Survey-Report-June-2020.pdf> {See Appendix 2 below for a more detailed summary}

The survey included the question: 'What are the key benefits of groups coming together, networking and coordinating?' This is the conclusion about this in the NFPGS Report:

Broadly, groups' experience is that by coordinating their efforts by working together in area forums, they are able to build better and more effective relationships with land managers, often local authorities. Groups also found that by working together, they are better able to share their experiences and resources, develop good practices, to raise their voices on behalf of communities, whilst influencing local policies and ambitions for green spaces. However, the spread, strength, degree of independence of such forums, along with the quality and effectiveness of the relationships with parks management, can vary dramatically across the country. Over 30% of those groups in areas where there was no forum called for help setting one up. This reinforces the views from the regional community conferences in 2019 that the NFPGS needs to be properly resourced to fulfil this need as part of its core work.

APPENDIX 1

PAG 'Parks and People: Stronger Together' Community Conferences around England, 2019

https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NFPGS-PAGCE-2019-conferences-aggregated_report.pdf

Summary

A series of nine 'Parks and People, Stronger Together' community conferences and mini-conferences for each region in England was held from April to November 2019. The aim was to promote and strengthen community peer-learning, empowerment, coordination, networking and partnerships with landowners and management. Seven of the nine events were organised by the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, Locality and Groundwork on behalf of the Parks Action Group. That programme was funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, guided by specific recommendations from the CLG Select Committee backed by the Minister for Parks. The other two events were under the same 'banner' but independently organised and funded by existing regional networks of Friends Groups.

Delegates from over 200 organisations from over 90 towns, villages and boroughs took part, around three quarters being from greenspace Friends and community groups, the others from Local Authorities and supportive third sector organisations. The events focused on enabling active and intense sharing of experiences and views, all of which were carefully captured and distilled.

The events themselves were enhanced by the MHCLG having also funded the improvement of the MyCommunity website resource and also an NFPGS networking post. Both were able to contribute to the events. Locality, for MyCommunity, were able to gather information about the needs of the groups present. The NFPGS did the publicity and gathered all the contact data in order to grow the movement and strengthen coordination throughout the Friends groups' networks, and also conducted its own online survey for Friends Groups. 380 groups took part in the survey with feedback on their strategic needs for improving their coordination and getting support from the PAG regarding wider policy issues. [See link above] Due to the importance of recognising and promoting community empowerment in the country's green spaces, the NFPGS and Groundwork are currently producing a special 'advocacy' document for widespread circulation throughout the sector. It will be based on the learning that came out of the Community Empowerment projects during 2019.

Key messages and calls for action

Some key messages have come out of these conferences and discussions.

An inspirational movement of parks champions

There is a large, vibrant, inspirational and influential grassroots movement of thousands of independent groups of park users who are the 'eyes and ears', champions and advocates for their spaces on behalf of the users and local communities. The depth and breadth of work being regularly undertaken by tens of thousands of environmental volunteers throughout the country is astounding. Such 'Friends of parks' groups help animate their local spaces, organise social events, deliver healthy activities, contribute to maintenance, monitor and report maintenance issues, spread information and awareness, encourage partnership-working, bring in significant amounts of funding

for their green spaces, and protect and enhance natural habitats. They generally want to work collaboratively with green space managers and other user groups, and want to encourage and support more volunteers to get involved.

Groups vary greatly in size, strength, diversity, membership (from dozens to thousands), range of activities, level of volunteering and influence. But, as the dozens of local group 'snapshot' presentations at the conferences showed, they all care passionately about greenspace and are prepared to do their best to promote, animate, protect and improve it.

Potential to grow

There's great potential for this community involvement to spread, grow, develop, diversify and become more effective and resilient through sharing good practice and improving their peer-to-peer communication and coordination through their own area forums and networks. 44 groups attending asked for help in the development of new Forums for their areas. Such Forums can be 'game changers' for the sector in an area.

Recognition and support

Friends and user groups are volunteers and often at the limit of their capacity. They need to be recognised, encouraged and supported by management and third sector organisations so they can grow in strength and influence, champion their site effectively, help to promote, animate and protect it and be real partners in discussions and decision-making over the running and future of their green spaces. This includes access to dedicated advice and information via national websites like mycommunity.org.uk and parkscommunity.org.uk

There is widespread anxiety about the state of local green spaces and their maintenance and management. Progress and optimism need to be nurtured in order to avoid isolation, demoralisation or burnout.

Collaboration between communities and management

Most landowners and managers are very willing in principle to support and work with communities and their greenspace community groups. In practice this can be complex and patchy, and requires time, commitment and expertise at a time when lack of resources is a serious and growing problem. Yet examples of great community/Council collaboration and partnership abound throughout the country and details of such good practice should be shared.

The community tends to want to 'add value' rather than be seen as a substitute for what should be a properly-run service. Underfunding and understaffing of local parks services are issues and challenges which need to be acknowledged, addressed and eventually overcome if community/Council partnership-working is to become the norm that all wish to see.

Strengthening community voices and coordination

The NFPGS plays a vital role in providing the strategic voice of the greenspace friends movement, infrastructural encouragement and support for peer learning and grassroots development, and advocacy at national level. Also in promoting effective partnership-working at every level. The PAG funding for a networking post for a year and for these conferences made a real difference. The conferences have identified a range of real and pressing needs which now require following up over the next months and years.

The NFPGS needs to be supported to be able to move from a reliance on over-pressed volunteers to a fully staffed operation (including regional officers) so that it can take forward the community involvement and empowerment objectives

articulated by the conferences - reflecting the recommendations of the Select Committee, Government and PAG - in particular the calls to promote and support the growth in the number of groups, their area Forums, and partnership-working within the sector.

The 'community-facing' national greenspace organisations should be recognised and supported in their provision of a range of highly-developed expertise, advocacy and support for greenspace generally and for active community groups in particular.

Vision and resources for parks

Our parks and green spaces need good long term vision and planning, community involvement and empowerment, as well as partnership-working and adequate resources if they are to properly fulfil their unique and essential role at the heart of our communities and neighbourhoods.

Calls for action

The greenspace sector and all supportive funding and policy-making bodies should:

1. Celebrate, fully embrace and actively support the work of the Friends groups' movement and the principle of community empowerment throughout the country's public green spaces.
2. Encourage and support the growing efforts of local authorities and parks services to embrace community involvement and empowerment.
3. Promote collaboration and partnership-working at every level.
4. Support the ongoing and further development of peer-to-peer learning, and of new groups, Forums and networks, over the coming months and years.
5. Support the NFPGS to enable it to continue to provide and improve the essential infrastructural support for growing levels of community self-organisation and involvement, peer-to-peer learning, empowerment and co-ordination - and effective partnership-working at the strategic level between the Friends Groups' movement and the rest of the sector.
6. Address the calls for adequate funding and protection for the country's public green spaces.

APPENDIX 2

'Greenspace Community Empowerment' survey 2019

<https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NFPGS-Greenspace-Community-Empowerment-Survey-Report-June-2020.pdf>

NFPGS undertook a special 'Greenspace Community Empowerment' survey alongside the series of PAG-supported 'Parks and People, Stronger Together' community empowerment conferences we organised in every region in England in 2019. The survey's main aim was to ensure groups who were unable to attend could also make their opinions and experiences heard on strategic matters.

380 groups and area forums responded to the survey, which asked three simple questions:
- What are the key benefits of groups coming together, networking and coordinating?

- What should the Parks Action Group (PAG) be doing to protect and enhance parks and how should they influence Government policy?
- What should the Government be doing to ensure parks and other green or blue spaces achieve their commitments from the 25-year Environment Plan?

Results and recommendations

Stronger and more effective together

Broadly, groups' experience is that by coordinating their efforts by working together in area forums, they are able to build better and more effective relationships with land managers, often local authorities. Groups also found that by working together, they are better able to share their experiences and resources, develop good practices, to raise their voices on behalf of communities, whilst influencing local policies and ambitions for green spaces. However, the spread, strength, degree of independence of such forums, along with the quality and effectiveness of the relationships with parks management, can vary dramatically across the country. Over 30% of those groups in areas where there was no forum called for help setting one up. This reinforces the views from the regional community conferences in 2019 that the NFPGS needs to be properly resourced to fulfil this need as part of its core work.

Calling for improved national policies and greater resources

Whilst the PAG is recognised to be relatively young as an entity, groups responding to the survey had a clear focus that it needed to influence Government policy, particularly in relation to threats from lack of resources and inappropriate development. The PAG exists to "take action to safeguard and enhance parks and green spaces for future generations and to inform and shape Government's future policy-making" [PAG Terms of Reference]. The impact of austerity has been felt on both fronts, with many local authorities under pressure to dispose of land for development, plus widespread and severe reductions in parks services. In many cases volunteer groups feel under pressure to prop up parks' services, with very limited input in some places. This is detrimental in the long-run - volunteers mostly do not have the desire or capacity to maintain essential parks services but generally focus on adding value through their energy and commitment.

There was also strong support for the PAG's commitment to raising the profile of parks and promoting partnership-working, alongside efforts to ensure parks are properly protected and funded.

The Government's vital role to protect and enhance the country's public green spaces

Proper resourcing for parks and their adequate protection were also the key messages directly for the Government. This included a call for all Government departments to recognise the importance of greenspace for the achievement of a wide range of strategic Government objectives. The Government needs to take action to achieve its commitment to "pass on to the next generation a natural environment protected and enhanced for the future" [The Government's '25 year Environment Plan']. The widespread neglect from lack of staffing and maintenance, and the loss of green space, can significantly undermine the efforts of volunteers or demoralise them. Friends groups often feel their sites are under perpetual threat from development in some places, regardless of the natural and social value that a site provides. Designations for nature do not protect sites enough and where trade-offs are assessed, for example by natural capital valuation, it is often that economic growth wins.

APPENDIX 3

‘Better Friends – State of the Movement of Greenspace Friends Groups throughout the UK’.

<https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NFPGS-PCUK-Report.pdf>

The Better Friends Report summarises the evidence, based on detailed self-audits by 211 local groups from September 2020 to July 2021. These are its conclusions:

Local community organising and activities, to have a real effect, take a great deal of effort, people power, thought, resources, skills, meetings, planning and commitment. Being determined and well organised enables the involvement of many people, a large range of activities to be carried out, and the development of good partnerships.

Activities The huge range of activities undertaken by Friends groups include practical volunteering (by 91% of groups), organising community events (90%) and reporting maintenance issues (82%). They manage projects (77%) and public noticeboards (59%), and meet regularly with those running the site (86%). As well as their traditional ways of communicating through flyers (68%) and email lists (73%) the groups create websites (69%) and employ social media like facebook (88%) and twitter (39%).

The total amount of volunteering is huge, with 30% of groups estimating their active members contribute 200-1000 hrs per year, 18% report 1000-5000 hrs per year, and 5% reckon over 5000 hrs. The weighted average is estimated to be around 1000hrs per group, - meaning around 7 million hrs per year throughout the UK.

Groups responding identified things they could do better with more active involvement and support, for example fundraising (36%), community engagement (35%) and use of IT/Tech (26%).

They also try to ensure they work closely with other user / stakeholder groups at their site (42%), with those who own/manage the site (60%), and link up with other nearby Friends groups where possible (65%).

Membership The numbers of people involved varies greatly, but 26% report a membership of 50-250, 15% of groups report 250-1000 members, with 3% reporting over 1000 members. An average of 120 members per group is estimated, representing around 840,000 people throughout the UK. Groups' use of social media reaches millions of people. The core of each group can also vary greatly, but 41% of groups report 7-10 activists, and 21% report over 11 active members. This means a grassroots volunteer 'army' of around 60,000 greenspace volunteers in 7,000 groups.

Of the make up of the membership it was reported that groups were most representative of their local site's users in terms of gender (44% 'very', 48% 'fairly'), social class (26% 'very', 59% 'fairly') and range of relevant interests (38% 'very', 53% 'fairly'). They were least representative in terms of ethnicity (20% 'very', 39% 'fairly', and 39% 'not very') and disability (12% 'very', 39% 'fairly' and 54% 'not very'). This also seems to be more pronounced regarding the profile of the actively involved membership (eg 48% reporting that their active membership was 'not very' representative regarding ethnicity). The survey results regarding age profile indicate a level of concern but may be under-reported due to a very general 'age' question, and under-18s not being factored in by many groups. Feedback from future priorities is that many groups would like to attract many more younger people.

Organisation Groups are well organised on the whole, with the vast majority of respondents having a chair (88%), secretary (82%) and treasurer (86%). 54% reported having a specific rep to do publicity and PR. 48% indicated they have sub-groups. The vast majority have a constitution (85%) and bank account (83%). Regarding committee/core group meetings, 80% report around 4-10 people attending. These meetings seem to be held regularly (62% reporting 5-12 times a year or more often). General meetings of the wider membership are held less often, although 19% report these are at least monthly, and 59% report 1-4 times a year. 51% of groups report at least double figures for these meetings, and 24% report turnouts of higher than 20 people.

Achievements Groups identified a hugely-impressive range of successes and improvements achieved over the last 5 years. [See The Research Data Appendix 3 for the full details]. Such specific achievements not only improve green spaces for the benefit of all users, but also serve as examples of community action which can inspire people in the surrounding local communities. They also act as a spur to the group itself and its members, demonstrating that all the effort is really worth it and its worth continuing through various challenges and difficult periods. By scaling this up the positive effect being achieved by a whole movement of 7,000 such groups can be imagined.

The future 46% report that their group and its role is flagged up in a Management Plan for the site, although it was noted that 42% of responding sites don't have any Management Plan at all. A majority of groups (64%) indicated that they have created their own list of improvements they'd like to see at their site.

The overwhelming majority of the responding groups feel that they are very effective (46%) or fairly effective (45%) and a similar percentage report they are very optimistic (49%) or fairly optimistic (42%) with only 7% 'not very' on both counts! Of course, the results are likely to be influenced by the fact that those taking part are probably the groups who are better organised and/or more connected (for example to local forums and the NFPGS). Such groups are likely to have ongoing access to advice and encouragement, and examples of good practice, and hence be more effective and optimistic that they can make a real difference.

The 'Better Friends' audit tool has a 'scoring' system. The overall aggregated average 'score' for all the groups was 61%. This indicates that the movement is generally well organised and effective at the local level, but that there is much potential for developing further.

The Research Data report, Appendix 3 also contains the groups' notes on some of their plans and goals for the coming 12 months. These are highly interesting and encouraging, demonstrating that - despite the current chronic underfunding and lack of staffing of local parks services, and the effects of the covid pandemic - members of so many local Friends Groups remain committed to serving their communities by seeking further improvements to the green spaces they love and which are so vital to everyone.

Conclusions Based on the findings in this report we draw the following conclusions:

- 1 All those who care about the future of the UK's public green spaces should **actively support the involvement and empowerment of Friends groups**, and to encourage such groups to form for every local site currently without one. This commitment should be reflected in all greenspace policies, Management Plans, funding bodies' grant conditions, and discussions about the needs of greenspace.
- 2 NFPGS/PCUK should look into producing more specialist tools for **calculating volunteering hours**, and also the level of 'external' income being raised for local sites.
- 3 NFPGS/PCUK should look into developing **more resources and guidance** on how groups can strengthen and diversify their membership.
- 4 Friends groups should **continue to link up locally, regionally and nationally** to discuss their issues, support each other and share good practice.
5. To enable this process to take place effectively, the **NFPGS needs to be properly funded and resourced**. [Note: NFPGS has no staffing and relies entirely on volunteers except when one-off grants have become available]

We believe this Report demonstrates that community engagement, involvement and empowerment in greenspace is making a massive difference to these vital spaces for our communities, thanks to the commitment and intelligent efforts of tens of thousands of local volunteers and activists.

Recognising, embracing and expanding on this is vital, and means going well beyond traditional 'tick box' exercises or occasional public consultations towards the development of real community/management collaboration and partnerships site by site, area by area, region by region, and nationally.

With substantial ongoing recognition, encouragement and support – from the NFPGS, from parks management, greenspace NGOs, and from all tiers of Government - this grassroots army of community volunteers can only grow and become ever more important in the future.