



The Gardens Trust
70 Cowcross Street, London EC1M 6EJ
Phone: (+44/0) 207 608 2409
Email: enquiries@thegardenstrust.org

Please reply to:

Louise Cooper, Administrator,
Head office,

administrator@thegardenstrust.org

contact@appg.info

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Conservation, Places & People

Inaugural inquiry - 21st century places: values and benefits, The value of the historic environment and how it can help to promote growth and regeneration

WRITTEN SUBMISSION BY THE GARDENS TRUST

'How can the conservation and restoration of historic parks and other important green spaces contribute to efforts to encourage exercise and thereby promote health and well-being?'

1. The Gardens Trust is the national amenity society for the conservation of historic parks and gardens. It is a statutory consultee on planning applications affecting sites on the national Register of parks and gardens of special historic interest, and it is the umbrella group for the network of county gardens trusts (<http://thegardenstrust.org>).
2. We are grateful to the APPG for holding this inquiry on the value of the historic environment, and for the opportunity the inquiry gives to address some aspects at least of the value of parks and gardens.
3. We preface our comments by noting that the terms of reference with regard to our subject are limited. Parks and gardens are not merely spaces; they are cultural artefacts, and their value goes far beyond the role, important though it be, of providing for exercise. From the landscape parks of the eighteenth century, to the legacy of Victorian public parks, to the pioneering artistry of Gertrude Jekyll in the early twentieth century, parks and gardens have been among the greatest of the UK's contributions to global culture.
4. Historic parks can only contribute to well-being if they are being managed appropriately. In many instances, this is no longer the case. The vast majority of public parks are managed by local authorities and, despite a prolonged search for alternatives led by the HLF/NESTA funded Rethinking Parks programme, for that majority there is no alternative to local authority ownership and funding.
5. Parks maintenance is not a statutory requirement of local authorities and as they have been forced under austerity to find up to 60% savings on annual budgets over the last ten years, it has been inevitable that parks maintenance budgets have been reduced disproportionately. The result is that many parks are now in a condition where they are either unsafe, unsanitary or unwelcoming and thus no longer contributing to health and well-being.
6. In answer to the committee's question, historic parks and green spaces can only contribute to health and well-being if they are decently maintained, which means properly funded. We have seen that unprecedented year-on-year decline in maintenance budgets as a result of austerity come to a

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climax last year with a double-whammy as a result of covid. First, councils had to add significantly to *expenditure* to pay for additional staff to keep parks safe and clean – extra litter-picking, extra play-marshalls or wardens to make playgrounds safe, extra patrols to deal with unprecedented crowds and antisocial behaviour. And second, all the activities and events which generated income designed to offset the reductions of austerity were cancelled, leaving a black hole in the *income* column.

7. There is an urgent need for government to recognise the special needs of public parks and gardens. In April 2020 as parks managers struggled with the challenge of keeping parks open and some opted to close them as a response to over-crowding, the Secretary of State Robert Jenrick insisted, 'People need parks. That's why I have made it clear to councils that all parks must remain open.'¹ If they are an essential service they must be funded as an essential service: at present they are funded as an optional (non-statutory) service.
8. Conservation and restoration of historic parks, especially public urban parks, has been one of the great success stories of the National Lottery. Between 1996 and 2018, when its specific programme of grants for public parks ended, the Lottery disbursed over £900m to about a thousand different parks. Every major town and city benefited from the restoration of at least one of its parks. This was the Lottery's most popular funding programme. The programme demonstrated that despite changes in recreational habits and opportunities, access to a good-quality public park remains a major contribution to quality of life in urban areas.
9. The spike in park-use during lockdown in 2020 was further proof if it were needed that parks provide for a fundamental need. We need space to socialise and to be alone, to relax and to exercise; and not just space. A park is not just a space like a prison yard, it is above all a place of beauty and greenery, of trees and flowers, lawns and water, park buildings and views and vistas. Many people have this year discovered the pleasures of a public park for the first time. Parks have been on the front pages, with numerous testimonies to the vital role they play in our physical and emotional well being; , to parks being nothing short of a 'lifeline' to people during lockdown.²
10. There is an urgent need for emergency funding to help parks recover from the impact of covid. Other cultural or amenity resources have been given such funding; nothing has come the way of local authority parks departments. If our own lungs have been under attack, then so to have the lungs of our towns and cities.
11. Parks are robust in many ways, but once maintenance is perceived to decline then usage will fall away, antisocial behaviour is a) encouraged and b) becomes harder to counter. A spiral of decline then sets in which is hard to reverse. It is shocking to recognise that 25 years on from the Lottery's first parks grants, inspired by a determination to stop a spiral of decline that had lasted from the seventies to the mid-nineties, another spiral is now starting.



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Sarah Dickinson, Trustee, Chair of Conservation Committee

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/communities-secretary-robert-jenrick-oncovid-19-response-18-april-2020>

² The word was used repeatedly in news coverage and official advice and comment, eg https://www.sutton.gov.uk/info/200588/health_and_wellbeing/2108/covid-19_parks