

**Public Parks Enquiry
Communities and Local Government Committee**

**Written submission from
The Friends of Victoria Park, Leicester**

Dr Douglas I Smith

Chair: The Friends of Victoria Park, Leicester

For the Management Committee:

Douglas Smith - Chair

Margaret Lewis - Secretary

Lawrence Whitaker - Treasurer

September 28th 2016

Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	1
2. People and Parks	1
3. Parks in a Changing World	3
4. Principles for the Management of Public Parks	5
5. Conclusions about the Management of Public Parks	7
6. The Funding of Public Parks	8
7. Principles for the Funding of Public Parks	12
8. Conclusions about the Funding and Future of Public Parks	13

A Guide to this Submission

This submission starts on the ground, with people in parks, and works upwards to the consideration of different issues and approaches through the establishment of a number of principles of provision, management and funding. The summary of conclusions is presented in the reverse of this order, to reflect the main concerns of the Committee. The principles are listed as part of the summary of conclusions. These principles define essential conditions which any model of provision will need to satisfy, to some degree. There will be no perfect model, but adequate provision will need to achieve a satisfactory level of response to all of them.

Summary of our Main Conclusions

Funding of Parks

- We cannot see any viable alternative to public funding as core funding for public parks.
- Funding for parks needs to be guaranteed, or protected, in some way. To achieve this we support the designation of public parks as a statutory service provided in accordance with some agreed standards. The Green Flag scheme could be an appropriate starting point for defining adequacy of local provision.
- Protection needs also to be applied to park land itself. We support action which will protect public parks, or parts of them, from disposal.
- There may be scope for further developing additional funding, through income generation or other means, but this can only be subsidiary to the main core funding.

- Efficiency savings, whether by rationalising existing models, or creating new ones, will not be a solution to the funding problem of parks.
- The use of volunteers to cut costs will undermine the current voluntary contribution, and will not be a solution to the funding problem of parks.

Different Models for Providing and Managing Parks

- The current arrangements for providing and managing parks through local authority ownership and control appear best suited to the characteristics, roles and functions of public parks, and the management demands that arise from them. There will need to be clear and compelling reasons for introducing alternative arrangements.
- A major strength of current provision are the existing arrangements for local accountability through local councillors and their extensive links within local authorities.
- Voluntary funding, voluntary management, and voluntary maintenance of parks will be neither adequate nor effective in maintaining parks provision.

Principles of Parks: Management and Funding

- Parks need to be accessible to all, free for public use, and should seek to meet the needs of local people.
- Park management need to be able to assess local need, be accessible to the local community, and have clear arrangements to ensure local accountability.
- Management arrangement for parks must be professionally competent, capable of managing the size and complexity of the tasks involved, able to relate effectively to a range of other local services, and must be adequately resourced.
- There needs to be visible staffing presence on parks.
- Management arrangements for parks, whether existing or new, need to be able to combine vision and flexibility to respond to the changing and growing demands on public parks
- Parks need significant and adequate core funding, whatever its source, to be able to function effectively as public parks, and meet the expectations local people place on them. This funding needs to encompass both capital and revenue funding.
- There needs to be a predictable stability to this core funding. One off grants, even substantial ones, cannot adequately support a park, and will not provide revenue funding for maintenance.

1. Introduction

1.1 We are a park Friends group established about two and a half years ago. We have neither the knowledge nor the resources to address all aspects of this review. However, we can write from our own experience of working to support and improve an established public park in the central area of the City of Leicester. This work has taken place in the context of rapid and far reaching changes in the funding regime for parks services within the city. In common with nearly all parks services, our own park has seen significant reductions in staffing and other resources over the time we have been established. In addition to our own direct experience of working to help develop a park, we also draw upon our wider knowledge and understanding of parks, the people who use them, the staff who run them, and the organisational arrangements which enable all this to happen. In this way we hope this submission will contribute to the work of the committee in securing a positive future for the great many public parks and open spaces which we are fortunate to have in this country.

2. People and Parks

2.1 A park might best be described as a hundred ring circus. Look one way and you see a game of football. Look another and there are people having picnics. Ahead of you are children playing on swings and roundabouts, their parents meeting other parents on nearby benches. Behind you a marathon is about to start. Over there a Brownie group is pond-dipping, learning about wildlife and having a good time in the outdoors as well – they will be on the play area next. Across on the other side the outdoor gym is busy, as usual, the tennis courts are full, so is the skate park, the university Quidditch society is playing on the next field, other students are taking a break on the park benches, and the joggers maintain a constant pace ringing the park like a moving necklace of people. Dog walkers are walking their dogs, kite flyers flying their kites, the older couple have found a nice place to sit along with their friends, and they are joined by a young woman with pram and a toddler. Could be their daughter and grandchildren. They'll be going across to the ice-cream van before long for the usual treat. Further along a group of school children are planting bulbs, the older one is the teacher. They do it each year. Some volunteers are clearing some weeds away in a flower bed, they plan to do the weed in the pond next. All this and you haven't moved an inch yet. But it's not quite the same when it's raining!

2.2 These are the people who use our public parks: just about everybody at one time or another, for one reason or another, sometimes every day, sometimes once a week, sometimes just for particular events or special occasions. *The people* use our public parks, just about all of them, and everyone benefits, if only by breathing the cleaner air which freshens our cities and to see the open green spaces in our urban environment. You don't have to go on a park to benefit from its presence.

2.3 We could introduce at this point the statistics on park use, the numbers who use them each year and how often and the reasons why, but others will be doing this and we wish to

avoid repetition. Many of the reasons why people use parks can be seen in our brief description above. We could also add a list of the positive functions of parks, like encouraging activity, promoting social cohesion, creating educational and recreational opportunities, encouraging volunteering, providing habitats for urban wildlife, boosting local business, but others will do that also, and they can be seen above too.

2.4 What can't be seen above in our brief description is a ring-master for this hundred ring circus. In one sense that's because there never was one – in a very real sense this is the people's circus, they are the performers, and they run their own show. But there is also a different meaning which is that parks staff are rarely seen these days. Our park has lost staff, and we had to fight to keep our one remaining person in an office on the park rather than being based at another park several miles away. This doesn't mean only one person ever works on the park for there are a multitude of different departments, sections, and contractors, all doing different jobs and all having different interests in the park.

2.5 The tractor to cut the grass arrives from time to time. The tree people appear at certain times of the year to do the trees. A landscape section come in to do any earth works, sort out drainage, and do installations. The play section will be checking play equipment for safety, and looking at where new equipment should be installed. The people who run events in the city will be looking at the best way of staging their next big event on the park. There are many more not mentioned here but the point is that a large city park is a major piece of infrastructure which makes extensive and complex demands on management and resources. It is the place where people meet and interact with a wide-ranging and diverse local service. Running a large city park is not for the faint-hearted, nor for the poorly resourced.

2.6 To return now to the absent ring master, the important point is that a continuing local presence of staff on a park is very important. Without them there is no oversight, nobody to see problems and get them fixed quickly, nobody to turn to if you lose your child, nobody to stop disposable barbecues burning holes in the grass, nobody to mediate between different groups wanting access to the same park facilities. Without visible local staff an important link between the provider and the people who use the park is lost.

2.7 From this all too brief description of people and parks it should be clear that parks serve local communities, both local to the park, and local to the city. They serve them in many different ways, and people use parks for many different reasons. In this sense they are a unique feature in the local service landscape. There is nothing else like them. The people who use parks bring with them different interests, of many different types, and this creates conflicts. Not overt conflicts, but conflicts nonetheless, over things like the use of space. Should more space go to sports, and so less to other community facilities? Should a big event take over a large part of the park for the best part of a week? Resolving these types of issues like demands that those who run parks have the capacity to mediate between

different interest groups, that they are accessible, and above all, that they are accountable. We shall again have more to say about this later.

2.8 Finally, for this section, there are two characteristics of public parks which are absolutely central in defining their unique contribution to the lives of large numbers of people. The first is that they are accessible to all. There are no barriers to park use. Anyone can walk on to a park and take part. Anyone can walk on to a park and meet other people who are the same as them, or different. Whether you are black, white, poor, rich, male, female, able bodied or disabled, young or old, you can go on to a park and do what you came to do. Where else can you do that?

2.9 The second characteristic which defines parks, and is inextricably linked to the one above, is that they are very largely free at the point of delivery, a term deliberately chosen to illustrate a characteristic shared with one other major service. And as with the other service, this defining feature of public parks is one deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of the nation, and with good reason. For it is the freedom from tariff that makes parks accessible to all, so they can offer an equal service beneficial to all, regardless of ability to pay. To exclude those unable to pay would turn upside down the original ethos of a public park. Our opening description of what was happening on the park would look very different if free access to parks was changed.

3. Parks in a Changing World

3.1 It is a commonplace to say the world is changing, but it is. It is changing in more ways than we can describe here, but we can identify, as examples, some of the changes taking place, and how they are affecting the place and role of parks. Although probably the majority of city parks were established during the Victoria era with the intention of providing recreation and rest for hard-pressed urban workers, it would be mistaken to think that they have now served their time and become outmoded. If anything, the demands on city parks are increasing and becoming more diverse, and their contribution to twenty first century living is becoming more important than ever.

3.2 Many changes taking place in parks are related to health. Recent changes have transferred responsibility for public health to local authorities. City parks, including our own, are one of the major resources local authorities can use as part of programmes to improve the health of local people. The park itself makes a significant contribution to health by helping reduce air pollution and by making available relatively unpolluted open spaces which are especially important for the young and the elderly. It is also a place where people can run, play sports, take part in exercise, or just walk. The positive contribution of activity to health, even just walking for 30 minutes a day a few times a week, is now well-established, and much of that activity in urban areas takes place on public parks. In our own case we are looking into the possibility of facilitating walking groups to improve health. These would be a resource for local GP practices, perhaps as an alternative to expensive

medication, and provided with the co-operation of the local authority public health department. Unfortunately, we are not sure whether Parks now have the staff resources to work with us which may impede progress.

3.3 Our own park is a hive of activity. A new outdoor gym was installed last year and is always busy, as are the various sports facilities, and a new programme of 5k and 10k running is just about to start. With obesity reaching crisis proportions, costing the NHS around £16 billion a year and rising, our public parks can be a fantastic resource in helping local authority public health bodies to respond in a positive way. Just 1 per cent of that current NHS cost could equip thousands of parks to provide alternative approaches to health.

3.4 It's not just physical health that is important. Parks also contribute to mental and emotional well-being. Exercise, trees and open spaces are known to be beneficial in treating depression for example. Another change is for young people, who prised out of their bedrooms and off their computers, tablets and phones, rediscover what it means to relate to each other directly, and to other people. The Brownie group pond dipping, the school children planting bulbs, and the sports facilities, are all examples of the type of contribution parks make for young people up and down the country, day after day.

3.5 Yet another change having an impact on parks is paradoxically, one of the main reasons why they were created in the first place. High density Victorian housing with at best a small backyard meant there was nowhere for people to go for recreation. More recent trends in housing are seeing a return to this pattern. Increasing city centre living, the growth of flat dwelling, the rise of single occupancy households many of which will be in houses converted into smaller units, and the rapid expansion of student flats, are all creating a new population of people with no garden access and no outdoor space to enjoy. Parks are increasingly important to them. On sunny days our own park sees large numbers of young people congregating in groups spread across the length and breadth of the park.

3.6 As urban living becomes more concentrated and intense, the casualties include different forms of wildlife. Many of their habitats have been lost as green spaces go and land is increasingly brought into use as housing, roads, or for industry. Parks are now increasingly important as a habitat for urban wildlife, and for giving children in particular access to a range of flora and fauna which they simply don't see anywhere else, and which are becoming endangered. Our own park now has bird boxes, bat boxes, homes for owls, bug hotels, and an area of the park designated as an ecological zone to encourage natural growth and wildlife. We have raised funds for a nature trail in this area for children, due shortly for installation, and we are encouraging local schools to take groups of children there to learn more about nature.

3.7 A final change to be mentioned here is a more general one which is the increase in organised group activities on parks. Organised group running is rapidly expanding, and in

some places placing strains on park infrastructure. On our own park charity runs of various kinds are a regular occurrence, various keep fit groups, formal and informal, are on the park daily. Outdoor music events are increasingly popular, religious events such as Eid are now on parks, along with carnivals, festivals and celebrations. We had half the city on our park earlier this year to celebrate the Premier League Championship of Leicester City FC. It was a homecoming in more ways than one as not many would have realised that they used to play on the park when they were simply Leicester Fosse FC. But that was a while back.

3.8 These are just some of the ways in which the world is changing, and parks are changing too. Far from parks declining in terms of role, functions and usage they are increasingly diverse and dynamic. Parks are taking on a new and expanding importance as they develop and respond to new needs as well as maintaining the more traditional roles.

4. Principles for the Management of Public Parks

4.1 We have deliberately tried to ground this submission in the day to day life of parks, and in our own experience of working to support one. In doing this we have tried also to use our knowledge and experience to identify some of the key issues which need to be kept in mind in thinking about the future of parks. In this section we will take this further by setting out some principles in relation to which proposals for new arrangements for funding and managing parks can be examined.

4.2 We have already identified two defining characteristics of public parks which can be restated as principles of provision. The first is that parks are accessible *to all*. *The second is that they are free at the point of delivery*. If either of these is significantly compromised then the nature of parks will change to the point that they will no longer be public parks as we know them. Any proposals for new models or approaches must, in our view, be able to maintain these two characteristics without major change. We have no difficulty with charges for particular specialist facilities, such as the use of prepared football pitches, or to use tennis courts. Nor do we see any objection to a fee being applied to activities on the park which are run by third parties for profit, such as vendors or private fitness schemes. But the main offerings of the park need to be available to all and free at the point of delivery.

4.3 Our third principle again derives from the nature of public parks, what they mean to local people, and how they are used. *The third principle is that parks should seek to meet the needs of local people*. This is not straightforward, though. There are conflicts between different needs of a park, illustrated earlier with sports pitches and other community facilities, and there will be many more. There are also conflicts between, for example, the staging of large events, and the availability of the park for more traditional park uses. This is especially the case where the park is used for income generation but which prevents the park, or large sections of it, being used as a park. Large scale pay to enter music concerts would be one example. There can be no hard and fast rules about these conflicts and any

model of management or decision-making needs to be able to arrive at satisfactory resolutions, with the condition attached that the guiding principle must remain as meeting the needs of local people. If it fails to do that, it isn't a public park any more, it's something else.

4.4 It follows from this that any system of management for parks must be capable of assessing local needs, endeavour to meet them, and be equipped to resolve conflicts over the use of space in a satisfactory way. If it cannot do these things, it cannot manage a public park. Therefore the *fourth principle is that park management will need to be able to assess local need, be accessible to the local community, and there will need to be clear arrangements to ensure accountability.*

4.5 This is a complex and challenging area of park management. Few organisations are practised at engaging effectively with local communities and populations. In our case there is a park user group which meets quarterly which gives some local engagement, and our own work has also contributed to creating a closer link with the local community. Local ward meetings provide a further channel of engagement but probably the most important link currently is through the work of the local councillors. Effective and active local councillors are a vital link between the community and the park. The interfaces between people, councillors, and officers, are key ways in which this principle is currently satisfied, and a highly important part of developing the responsiveness of the park to local needs and the local population. Moreover, these linkage connect park issues directly into the higher management structures of both parks and wider city services. They simultaneously contribute to knowledge of local needs, create accessibility and accountability, and achieve change and development. They are not perfect, of course, and more could be done to link the park more effectively to the local community. However, these are established and robust arrangements and they are highly valued. Any proposal to create new arrangement which takes parks out of local authority control would need to consider very carefully whether these existing structures could still function in this way, and if not, what would replace them.

4.6 We said earlier that a large city park is a major piece of infrastructure which needs to draw upon a vast range of knowledge, skills and expertise to maintain it and keep it running. It is unlikely that any individual park will be large enough to use purely in-house single park based services. Any park will need to exist within a network of different services with arrangements with each, including additional things such as event organisers, potential vendors, and groups which may need licensing to use the park. In addition, parks are subject to a very wide range of legislation, health and safety issues, needs for risk assessments, insurances, and other administrative concerns. All of these will make extensive and complex demands on management and resources.

4.7 It follows from this that *the fifth principle needs to be that any management arrangement for parks must be professionally competent, capable of managing the size and*

complexity of the tasks it will face, it will need to be able to relate effectively to a range of other local services, and it must be adequately resourced. We also said earlier that running a large city park is not for the faint-hearted, nor for the poorly resourced. We would add, in case it is not clear, that it is also not for traditional voluntary groups. Small voluntary groups are simply not equipped to take on the demands of running city parks. They can contribute, as we do, but we couldn't do what we do if there wasn't already an effective management structure in place to which we can relate.

4.8 Moreover, whatever model of management is considered, it will need to maintain a close and extensive relationship with the local authority because many of the duties and responsibilities which relate to parks and their users will legally have to remain with the authority. They cannot be transferred to another body.

4.9 The earlier discussion identified the importance of a visible local staff presence on the park. Without visible local staff an important link between the provider and the people who use the park is lost. Indeed, we would see this as one of the essential ways in which the management of parks remains accessible, able to assess local needs, resolve conflicts, and maintain accountability. We consider this sufficiently important for it to be *the sixth principle which is the maintenance of a visible staffing presence on parks.*

4.10 The demands on parks are increasing. Some of the ways in which this is happening have been outlined above, and there will be others according to local circumstances. Whether the new demands are arising from population initiatives, such as the organised running groups, or from changing institutional arrangements, such as the new public health responsibilities for local authorities, parks need to be able to respond and adapt, and become increasingly diverse in their offering. This in turn, demands more in terms of the management of parks, and leads to the next principle. The seventh principle is that any *management arrangements for parks, whether existing or new, need to be able to combine vision and flexibility in their approach to the management of public parks.*

5. Conclusions about the Management of Public Parks

5.1 The purpose of setting out the principles above is to enable them to be used as tests of the adequacy and likely effectiveness of different approaches to the management of public parks. To what extent, for example, can a trust make a park accessible to all, free at the point of delivery, and successfully work with the network of other services on which a park relies, and how does that compare with the abilities under the other models? And looking ahead to a later section, what type of funding arrangement will be necessary to enable this to happen?

5.2 These are not questions to which we can provide answers from our experience, for our knowledge of public parks is limited to one model. However, we do believe that the use of a testing protocol of this type, or something similar, would greatly aid the Committee in its

exploration of the implications and likely consequences of any model of management it may wish to consider. In this way 'the advantages and disadvantages are of other management models, such as privatisation, outsourcing or mutualisation' will become clearer.

5.3 Our current perspective, which arises from the experience we have with the traditional model in which the local authority owns the park, funds it, and directly manages it, is that there would need to be clear and compelling reasons for moving significantly away from this approach. Local Authorities are not like most businesses. They provide services to whole populations which are themselves complex and diverse. There is a degree of synergy between public parks serving whole populations and the roles and duties of the Authorities. There is something of a natural fit between the two.

5.4 This is not to say the model is perfect. At park level it can seem complex and confusing with many different people in the hierarchy having an interest in a particular aspect of the park, and it can be unclear where final decisions are made. We have wondered whether this could be simplified by vesting more powers in the local park officer, perhaps similar to the traditional hospital matron, but have not yet arrived at a clear conclusion on this matter.

5.5 Notwithstanding any imperfections, we find it difficult to envisage an alternative approach being able to satisfy the seven tests, or principles, more fully than is possible under the current arrangements, and this is particularly so when we turn to the question of park funding.

6. The Funding of Public Parks

6.1 Up to this point we have not touched directly on the question of funding for public parks, which is central to this enquiry and the main reason it is taking place. We are aware of different views of how public parks might be funded, and of the differing ways in which those responsible for parks have tried to increase income. We are not in a position to offer a comprehensive overview or critique of funding arrangements, and how they might change. What we can do is speak from our own experience.

6.2 Our own experience tells us that the first and most important point we need to make is that the current funding crisis, as some are calling it, has not arisen because of deficiencies in existing management arrangements for public parks, nor has it arisen from the existing model of provision seen in the public ownership of parks. There is just one explanation for the current problem and this is the reduction in public funding available to local authorities, which is current policy. At the local level this inevitably leads to disproportionate reductions in funding for non-statutory services, of which parks and open spaces is just one, in order to meet the obligations of funding statutory services such as child protection and adult care.

6.3 It follows, therefore, that as the existing management arrangements and models of provision of parks are not the cause of the problem, looking for new management arrangements and models is not in itself going to provide a solution to it. This is not to say

that new approaches should not be considered, and it may be that some innovative models might work well, even better, in certain circumstances. But new management models on their own, even if they can achieve efficiencies, will not be able to remedy a funding deficiency of the current scale. The funding deficiency needs to be remedied first, otherwise no management model, existing or new, can succeed. Moreover, it is our view that any management model should be assessed first and foremost in terms of its ability to deliver high quality park services, not whether it might make it a bit cheaper. There is a currently considerable tension between the funding being made available for parks and the expanding expectations we have of them.

6.4 One suggestion for increasing funding of parks has been to increase revenue raising activities on parks. On our own park additional revenue is generated in a number of different ways. Commercial circuses, funfairs, and similar events are a regular feature on the park. They are popular with the public and generate additional income. Large music events are held on the park, sometimes free for all, at other times pay to enter. Income is also generated in other ways, from vendors, from other facilities, and from car parking charges. There is probably some scope for increasing revenue from the park, but any approach to income generation needs to be set against a number of constraints.

6.5 The first and main constrain is that if income generation from a park goes beyond a certain point it ceases to be a public park. A balance will always need to be maintained between income generating activities, and the role of a park in meeting the needs of the local population. Exactly where that balance lies is a matter for local determination.

6.6 A second constraint is that public parks, usually exist in urban settings, and income generating activities can often be in conflict with the needs of the local population. Probably the most frequent problem is noise disturbance to local residents, but there are others to do with additional traffic, access to homes, and problems which arise from large numbers of people attending. In our own case some large events require parking suspensions, extensive traffic management arrangements, and local road closures. There are limits to the burden which can be placed on local people.

6.7 Income generation also increases costs. Substantial parks staff time can be needed to manage and oversee all these different activities on the park, but currently staff numbers are being reduced. A final point to note about income generation is that additional revenue doesn't necessarily go back into the park, or even any park. It can be used in others ways to support other services.

6.8 We have direct experience of raising funding ourselves for the park. We have made two successful bids to charitable sources to fund specific but small projects on the park. This is a valuable way of bringing addition resources into the park for specific developments which otherwise would not have been supported financially. However, the Committee needs to be aware of the limitations of this type of approach. Competition for this type of funding is

now intense, and funding bodies are changing their criteria to limit demand. A great many hours of work need to go into even small bids, and to meet all the conditions laid down for funding applications demands time, perseverance, and many different skills. The process is slow with funding bodies taking months to arrive at decisions, and when approved the funding is very specific and cannot be varied, even in small ways, without obtaining consent. A final but major limitation, of growing significance in the current climate, is that this type of funding is limited to capital funding. Maintenance costs, revenue funding, cannot be raised in this way, yet parks funding overall is now so constrained that additional maintenance demands cannot be met. There is a small project we wish to undertake and we are fairly confident of raising the capital funding but we have been advised that we also need to cover maintenance costs as well. We cannot apply for those from any known grant giving source, and finding some form of sponsorship is the only way we can hope to meet these costs. Public body sponsorship, for example from a nearby school or college, is unlikely to happen as they are also dealing with their own income limitations. Private sector sponsorship appears the only alternative, but this is not easy to find in provincial cities. The maintenance cost problem also applies to some national programmes. Our park has some five-a-side football pitches provided under a Football Association scheme. Capital costs were met in full, maintenance has to be found from within existing park budgets and that is becoming more and more difficult.

6.9 Our conclusion about this type of funding is that it is a valuable supplementary form of income for parks which can make a difference and create some usually small but important projects for local people. However, it can only be supplementary to a much larger and stable form of core funding. We cannot see how any public park could be financially self-sustaining from its own income generating activities, except in very unusual circumstances. Income generation will always need to exist alongside other major forms of funding. It will not alone be a solution to the funding problem.

6.10 An alternative approach to income generation is cost-cutting through efficiency savings. This should mean delivering the same service at less cost making the system more efficient without reducing effectiveness. We accept that there may be scope for improving efficiency, and this will apply across all models of provision, but there are also limits to what can be achieved through this approach. It is simply not possible to continue increasing efficiency allowing significant cost savings to be made over an indefinite period of time, and this will apply regardless of the model of provision adopted. It is now almost certain that any efficiency savings which can be made have already been made. The extent of the decline in funding for parks is beyond any capacity for efficiency saving in any model of provision.

6.11 In our own park the cost saving measures we have seen have not made the park more efficient. They have made it cheaper, but at the cost of reductions in services. Fewer gardeners means less gardening, and the quality of the park declines. Fewer staff on the

park doesn't make it more efficient, it just makes it impossible to find any when they are needed. Fewer managers make for considerable inefficiencies in trying to work with them to achieve shared goals, or new developments such as our health walking group ideas. One of the consequences of efficiency savings is the transfer of costs elsewhere, in terms of our time, and also that of others trying to work with the park; or even just use it.

6.12 It can be argued that efficiency savings can be achieved by the use of a different model of provision which is inherently more efficient than the current one. We cannot say that this is not possible, but we can say that it needs to be argued and explained in detail how this would be achieved before any such model is proposed or adopted. Above all, it would need to be shown how it satisfies the tests set out above to assess adequacy and effectiveness in terms of management, and the funding arrangement will need to satisfy the tests set out below which are specific to funding.

6.13 We have no direct experience of other forms of potential funding for parks. We find it hard to believe that the private sector, particularly in provincial cities and other areas, would be able offer sponsorship funding of the size and stability needed to support parks. Care would also have to be taken over the nature of commercial sponsorship. Would public health welcome sponsorship from the fast-food industry, for example. Would it go hand-in-hand with the commercialisation of parks, and would that be wanted?

6.14 We also have great difficulty with any proposals which see voluntarism as the key to solving the problems of parks by cutting costs, whether that is by voluntary funding, voluntary management, or voluntary activity maintaining the parks. Any form of voluntary levy would be highly unlikely to be successful. People have an expectation of public parks, which is that they are public, and the public pay for them collectively. We would expect the reaction to this type of request to be that we have already paid for the park, through national and local taxation, so why should we have to pay for it again? Similarly, whilst voluntary fund-raising can contribute to specific developments on parks, like a nature trail, or a growing area for children, it can never be a sufficient source of funding in terms of magnitude or reliability for core funding.

6.15 In terms of voluntary management we have already stated above that the size and complexity of the management tasks of public parks make them unsuitable for voluntary management roles. The community, or voluntary groups within it, cannot simply take on these tasks with any hope of success. Even voluntary groups dedicated to supporting parks lack the personnel, the skills, the authority, the time, and the desire in most cases, to take on managing the park they are supporting. Park management is a full time professional role, and needs to remain so.

6.16 Finally, voluntary activity maintaining parks cannot be seen as a viable long term model for achieving cost savings. A volunteer contribution can only work if there is a stable management structure to support it, if that management structure understands and

supports the needs and motivations of the volunteers, and if the work is ancillary to the main work of maintaining a park. Volunteers are not a cheap labour force, and will not willingly fulfil that role. It may be possible to keep a village pond maintained with a couple of visits a year by local residents to clear weed away and collect rubbish, but you can't maintain a public park on the same basis. Voluntarism has an important role on parks. It is a way of involving the local community in the park, especially young people, and for that reason alone it should be encouraged. But to attempt to convert that voluntary ethos into a park maintenance force will rapidly spell the end of volunteer involvement in parks. Volunteering in any form will not solve the funding problems of parks.

6.17 A final consideration for funding touches on much wider concerns. Parks do not operate in isolation, as we have shown above. The funding for any particular park cannot be fully separated from funding for other services with which the parks interact. It is very likely that many overhead costs of parks never appear in park budgets but are subsumed under different budget headings. For example, legal service costs are likely to be accounted elsewhere, so are licensing costs, and probably many others. If an entirely different funding model for parks is introduced it may find the costs are much higher than the apparent current costs because of these hidden overheads. A new model could well find it has much higher administrative costs from both buying in these hidden services, and others, and from all the additional transaction costs.

7. Principles for the Funding of Public Parks

7.1 In considering different ways of funding parks we can identify certain principles of funding, similar to the principles set out above for parks and their management arrangements. For any proposed scheme of funding for public parks to be successful it would need to satisfy the standards identified in these principles.

7.2 *The first funding principle is that parks need significant and adequate core funding, whatever its source, to be able to function effectively as public parks, and meet the expectations local people place on them.* This funding, which needs to encompass both capital and revenue funding, may come from more than one source, but the different sources added together need to be adequate for the park on an annual basis. For the situation to be otherwise will see a decline in the quality and adequacy of parks over time. Central Park in New York is a prime example of where this happened, and it took many years and huge amounts of expenditure to restore it to a useable and popular public park free of crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour.

7.3 *The second funding principle is that there needs to be a predictable stability to this core funding.* One off grants, even substantial ones, cannot adequately support a park, and will not provide revenue funding for maintenance. Long term decisions need to be made in the knowledge that the funding will be there to support them. This stability is particularly important for a park because you can't turn it off for a year if funding is tight. Grass grows,

so do trees, and as anyone with a garden knows, weeds are always waiting for their opportunity to dominate. Parks are a constant presence, and they need constant attention, which means constant funding.

7.4 Our current view is that we find it difficult to envisage public parks being sustainable as public parks within a radically different funding regime. There will certainly be scope for bringing in additional income from other sources, but these are unlikely to be other than valuable supplements to a stable core income already in place.

8. Conclusions about the Funding and Future of Public Parks

8.1 In arriving at our conclusions about the funding and future of public parks we are guided by the essential characteristics of parks, their role in local communities and people's lives, their management requirements, and their financial needs as major and complex resources. We are also guided by two very simple understandings: 'the money has got to come from somewhere', and 'you get what you pay for'.

8.2 In order to satisfy the two funding principles outlined above we cannot see any viable alternative to public funding as core funding for public parks. There may be scope for further developing additional forms of funding, but none of the likely sources appear sufficient to be other than subsidiary to the main core funds from public sources.

8.3 This is the main existing arrangement for funding public parks, but if it was currently working effectively, and satisfying the two funding principles set out above, there would be no need for this review. This tells us that the retention of public funding for public parks is not sufficient, in itself, to resolve the funding problem. The funding also needs to be guaranteed, or protected, in some way. We do not claim great knowledge of public finance, and there may be different ways of doing this of which we are unaware. The one way of which we are aware is by statute, establishing public parks as a statutory service, or creating a statutory duty of care on local providers. In the absence of other ways of protecting funding for public parks we would support the designation of public parks as a statutory service with a requirement that they be provided in accordance with some agreed standards. The only existing standard which we know of is the current Green Flag scheme, and this could be an appropriate starting point for defining adequacy of local provision.

8.4 We would add to the protection of funding the need for a further protection applying to the land itself. We understand that there are cases of public parks, or parts of them, being sold for development. This is largely thought to be a response to funding problems at a local level. Although protected funding for parks may alleviate this to some extent, the continuing pressures on funding at a local level may still lead to further disposals. Many thousands of school playing fields have been sold over recent years and the same threat may develop for our parks. For this reason we would support action which protected public parks, or parts of them, from disposal. We are not recommending a total ban on all disposals in perpetuity,

but some action which raises the bar, sets out essential conditions which have to be met, and defines an open and accountable public process which must be followed. We don't know what form this would need to take, but we urge the Committee to consider this and make appropriate recommendations.

8.5 We have also considered above the question of different models of provision and management arrangements for public parks. Currently public parks are integrated into a range of other local services through local authority ownership and control. Public parks do not exist as individual entities, each one forms part of a wider parks service, and is linked in many different ways to other wider services. We can see many advantages in retaining this model, and the case for moving away from it would need to be compelling.

8.6 This is not to say that current arrangements cannot be improved. Nor is it to say that exploration of other models and approaches should not be carried out. It is quite possible that there may be cases where an alternative approach is more suitable, and there are already some differences in models of provision in different parts of the country, or for different types of parks. However, in exploring different models and approaches we consider it imperative that they be fully and exhaustively tested against a protocol which defines what is needed for a park, or a parks service, to provide a high quality service to local communities. To assess models of provision simply in terms of cost savings will take us in a very different direction.

8.7 We believe that this country deserves and needs excellence in parks provision, and it is what people want. The Committee has a crucial role in setting the direction for the future of our parks and open spaces and we hope our submission will help them in that task.

Dr Douglas I Smith
Chair: The Friends of Victoria Park, Leicester

September 28th 2016

For the Management Committee:
Douglas Smith – Chair
Margaret Lewis – Secretary
Lawrence Whitaker - Treasurer