Community Works Position Statement

Brighton & Hove City Council’s Parks and Open Spaces Consultation

(November 2016)

INTRODUCTION

Brighton and Hove’s 147 parks and open spaces represent a rich resource for residents and for visitors alike, enhancing the aesthetics of the city, while providing essential amenities and space for play, relaxation, social interaction, sports and recreation, as well as for wildlife habitat and opportunities for people to feel close to nature. As a city with an increasing population and housing density, the value of such spaces for health and wellbeing and for strengthening communities should not be underestimated.

Many of our members have been actively engaged in discussions during the past year, with over 50 member groups represented at seven meetings which we have organized or supported in partnership with City in Bloom and the University of Sussex Science Policy Research Unit’s ‘Collaborating for Sustainability’ workshop series.

This has enabled us to capture many of the concerns, the challenges and the solutions which have been identified in relation to the future of our city’s parks and green spaces. These are summarised in the section below.

FINDINGS

1. Our members share a widespread concern that our green spaces are in danger of neglect and decline as a result of anticipated reductions in funding as highlighted by this consultation.

2. The current £14 per capita spend per annum, as quoted by the City Council, represents, by any measure, excellent value for money for the services provided by such spaces and this level of investment should be rigorously defended.

3. There is particular concern that some playgrounds may be closed or diminished and that the Ranger service may be reduced. These are both highly valued, as is the general maintenance work carried out by the City Council.

4. Community groups interested in parks are numerous enabling many people across the city to be involved in looking after and being engaged in their local green spaces.

5. These ‘friends of’ and other groups have been effective, over many years, in bringing added value to our green spaces enabling communities to take initiative in running events and volunteer-run maintenance and improvements. This extends the quality of our parks as powerful expressions of
public ownership to one of local community ownership, bringing added support and resilience which is to be welcomed.

6. The activities of such groups exemplify a spirit of collaborative working between local government and local residents where the initiative, skills and enthusiasm of people can be exercised within a clear framework of ownership, guidance and investment of and by the City Council.

7. It is important that the City Council recognizes that many local green space groups:
   a) Have considerable skills, experience, commitment and local knowledge to offer
   b) Are able to mobilize additional support from their local communities in the form of volunteering, shared responsibility and other resources
   c) Are able to generate and access additional funding for investment in parks

8. The relationship between the council and local community groups has the potential to be developed further as a part of a solution to the current funding crisis.

9. We welcome the ongoing work, overseen by EquIP (the Equalities and Inclusion Partnership), on developing the ‘Collaboration Framework’ to drive a shift toward a stronger culture of collaborative working between public sector and voluntary and community sector providers, built on greater mutual trust, respect and transparency. Work around parks could provide some practical opportunities to test out and develop such a framework.

10. It is important however the City Council recognises that the capacity and the focus of parks and green space groups vary considerably:
   a) Their roles are not uniform across the city's green spaces.
   b) They vary in their capacity, their skills, resources and activities.
   c) Some are positive about extending their role to support more maintenance activity, while others struggle to recruit enough volunteers and would be reluctant to take on more than they currently do.
   d) Some parks have no such groups to provide support.

   Our members believe that a uniform approach across all green spaces is not possible because it will not recognise the diversity of capacity and provision.

11. Groups are often limited by or unsure about their legal and insurance status regarding conducting maintenance activities on local authority owned green spaces. This can inhibit initiative and constructive engagement. Clarifying the boundaries around this would be helpful and could unlock potential.

12. Most groups are unincorporated associations (not limited companies, charities or Community
Interest Companies (CiCs) so may not have an appropriate legal status or indeed any ambition to sign up to formal contractual arrangements with the City Council to take on responsibility for management or maintenance roles. Most prefer a more informal approach which is often facilitated by the Ranger Service.

13. There is a desire for more support from the City Council if groups were to take on greater responsibilities, this includes:
   a) easier access to information from the City Council about specific green spaces and who is responsible for what
   b) training opportunities to enable groups to lead their own activity sessions or support/undertake playground equipment inspections
   c) inclusion within the council’s insurance cover to run such sessions
   d) opportunities to input to or develop park management plans and the delivery of some works
   e) enabling and encouraging groups to exercise more initiative in a constructive way
   f) more clarity and information about what groups can do to help bring in and influence the use of extra funding such as through Section 106 for capital spending

14. Most groups said they would welcome opportunities to meet with each other and with City Parks colleagues on a yearly or twice-yearly basis.

15. There is widespread support for the idea of a ‘green spaces network’ which could facilitate such contact and the sharing of skills, knowledge, funding opportunities and practical resources, and provide a platform for expressing shared concerns and ideas.

16. The planned development of the City Council’s website provides an opportunity to make information about green spaces more accessible to all, including links to friends of groups and opportunities for volunteering, including links to the Community Works website.

17. The recruitment by City Parks of more volunteers to support maintenance activities is welcome and will present opportunities for joint activities with volunteers from ‘friends of’ and other community groups. Such groups, as well as the Community Works Volunteer Centre, may also be able to help with advertising volunteering opportunities with City Parks.

18. Businesses, schools and universities could also play a role in providing volunteers for maintenance sessions led by park rangers or ‘friends of’ groups.

19. Inequalities in resources, skills and experience between groups could be addressed by facilitating closer relationships between different groups e.g. ‘twinning’—type arrangements.

20. ‘Neighbourhood’ parks are different in their character, catchment area and their needs compared
to the bigger and generally more central ‘destination’, ‘Green Flag’ city parks. Consequently the council should explore different or separate processes/systems for managing them.

21. Income generation: while charging for the use of parks for commercial events, sporting activities or commercial activities like dog-walking is widely understood and supported by many groups as a useful source of extra revenue for parks, there is concern that this should have some flexibility and must not create a barrier for community-based events, sports and other physical activity sessions.

22. Business sponsorship for parks may bring in welcome additional funding but should be managed carefully so as to avoid the dangers of visual clutter and the commercialization associated with advertising which could undermine the value of parks and green spaces as oases free from commercial pressures.

23. The city’s parks, green spaces and the Downland Estate should be retained and not sold unless justified by exceptional circumstances and proper public consultation. Any revenues from rents and other income generated from the Downland Estate or the city’s parks and open spaces should be ring-fenced to invest in their ongoing maintenance, management and improvement.

24. In some parts of the UK, local authorities are looking at ‘asset transfer’ of parks to trusts and other structures. It is not clear in Brighton & Hove to what extent this is on the agenda, what the implications would be and to what extent communities would be consulted. We would welcome greater clarity about this and the other parameters of the ongoing parks debate.

CONCLUSION
Brighton and Hove’s parks and green spaces are used and loved by communities and this is evidenced by the dozens of ‘friends of’ and other small groups which exist to protect, nurture, use and celebrate them.

The prospect of these spaces suffering from neglect and decline, as a result of budget reductions, is of great concern to our members. Most would prefer to see continued support and investment from government particularly in light of the important role and good value that green spaces represent in enhancing health and wellbeing, strengthening communities and the environmental services they provide.

Local community groups and voluntary organizations have much to offer the resilience of our parks by engaging residents in their up-keep and drawing in additional funds and other resources. Most welcome the opportunity to work more collaboratively with the City Council, though their capacities vary considerably.

A closer relationship between community groups and City Parks to share maintenance and in some cases
management responsibilities has potential if based on a truly collaborative approach and recognition of
the diversity of the city’s green spaces and the varying capacities of the groups which support them.

Ideas for using parks to generate income are important to explore, though fraught with difficult issues
and will need to be developed carefully to prevent the over-commercialization of our public spaces.

As regards the potential transfer of green space assets from public to other forms of management and
ownership, this too is likely to be contentious.

Community Works and its members look forward to playing an active role in helping to develop a green
spaces network of groups, of strengthening the voice of such groups and being part of the ongoing
conversation about the future of our city’s parks.