

9th December

RESPONSE TO THE LONDON ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE INVESTIGATING GREEN SPACES

About the London Parks and Gardens Trust

The London Parks and Gardens Trust (LPGT) is a county Garden Trust affiliated to a national body, The Gardens Trust – the statutory consultee for planning applications relating to registered parks and gardens. As a result, volunteers respond on a regular basis to planning applications that will impact on the historic significance of green spaces across the capital.

LPGT was set up in 1994 and has over 400 members – amateurs and professionals – who provide and enjoy lectures walks, day trips, a newsletter and journal, research and an inventory of historic green spaces. LPGT aims to increase knowledge and appreciation of parks, squares, community gardens, cemeteries, churchyards – all those places that form London's open space network.

LPGT uses trained volunteer historic landscape researchers to assess the significance of green spaces in London and create an Inventory. This useful data resource has been made available through London Gardens Online (<http://www.londongardenonline.org.uk>) providing public access to a wealth of information on over 2,500 parks, gardens, squares, churchyards, cemeteries and other sites of historic interest across London. Criteria for inclusion on the Inventory are those sites whose history dates back at least 30 years and are of significance for their design, landscaping or social history. Many of London's parks and gardens, churchyards and squares are very well known but there are legions of hidden secrets only known to their local communities, and tracking these down has been part of the remit of the Inventory.

LPGT has also run for the last 19 years the Open Garden Squares Weekend. This is a ticketed event in June opening private, secret and little-known gardens in a single weekend for public enjoyment and discovery. Over the last 3 years, the event has attracted 60,000 visitors who have made over 150,000 individual garden visits over 6 days (3 weekends).

The Board is made up of a variety of leading professionals in the field of Landscape Architecture and Gardens. The joint Chairs of our Planning Panel who lead on responses to planning applications across London are practising Landscape Architects from LDA-Design. The Chair is Ed Ikin, Wakehurst Head of Landscape and Horticulture at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. LPGT is run on an entirely voluntary basis, reliant on income generation from sponsorship and membership contributions, with the support of 4 part-time employees (equating to approximately 2FTE).

Feedback

The Trust welcomes this opportunity to share the information it has gathered. The scoping report asks respondents a number of questions which LPGT has endeavoured to answer. The Trust does not own or directly run any specific green spaces, so has not commented

particularly on management models. However, there are more general observations in certain circumstances.

1. What models of governance and management of green space exist, and which of them represent good practice? Contributors could consider volunteers, community governance, charity and private management as well as public sector management.

The Trust does not have a particular view on this but would draw attention to the following reports:

- In the 2003 DCLG report 'Living Spaces: Cleaner Safer Greener' the conclusions of that select committee 'recommended that local authorities should be given a new statutory duty'.
- In 'Rethinking Parks' NESTA came up with a variety of suggestions for ways of raising income for parks.
- COMA have more recently published consideration of when Community Ownership and Management can work in Parks.

Volunteer Management: LPGT observes that whilst the scoping exercise notes the increasingly important role volunteers play in helping to maintain green space it does not take into account the full cost of managing volunteers which includes the need for horticultural expertise and requirements to access (often expensive to buy, operate and maintain) equipment (eg. Lawn-mowers, strimmers, leaf blowers etc.) to manage certain types of greenspace.

The duplication of effort encouraging and supporting volunteer-run Trusts rather than using existing parks services within Local Authorities is likely to be wasteful. An example of this is in Lambeth where the prioritisation of support for certain key green spaces such as the Streatham Rookery, although admirable, has led to the neglect of many of the other greenspaces in the borough including those in the north where there is considerable developmental pressure.

Private Management: LPGT are concerned at the over-commercialization of green space (see further comments later) and it is important to recognize that most public greenspace, if it is to deliver the other social, health and environmental benefits can not always be expected to generate sufficient income to offset the maintenance costs.

2. What could the GLA do to support the governance and management of green space?

The LPGT notes the scoping paper for this inquiry stated a 2016 UK-wide survey found that 78% of friends groups now help with maintenance activities, up from 73% the previous year. The Trust congratulates the scoping paper for commenting on the cost of volunteer management in public parks but believes this is underestimated.

LPGT in recognizing the value of volunteer labour also considers that greater emphasis is required in building-up horticultural skills. A good example of a community garden where volunteers have developed considerable skill is Phoenix Garden in central London which is the first community garden in Britain to be given a 'NaturimGarten' award in recognition of the environmental standards adopted by the volunteer growers. The GLA could introduce a similar scheme across London.

3. What could the GLA do to promote better 'green infrastructure' thinking across London and in individual boroughs?

As noted above, LPGT welcomes proper accounting for the true value of greenspace in the Capital and believes it is essential for this to be taken into account through Financial Viability assessments for new developments.

4. How would documenting the benefits of green spaces assist in making the most of them?

The Trust concurs with the scoping report that documenting and recording the value of parks and their historic significance is essential to redressing the balance and emphasis of policy. The Trust actively documents green space across London as noted above and uses this as the basis for founding assessments and responses on planning applications and to ensure that the best use is made of them.

LPGT notes that the scoping report from the GLA for this enquiry focusses on publicly owned land or land that is publicly accessible. London Gardens Online provides specific definitions for a variety of green spaces. Public Parks were the focus of the recent Parliamentary Inquiry but the lack of definition of what this meant, may have resulted in confusion in some responses. The Inventory defines Public Parks as: Publicly-accessible municipal parks and royal parks, includes public golf courses¹.

There are a further 8 categories provided by the Inventory for describing green space on London Gardens Online, of which the following may also be relevant:

- Garden Squares: Garden enclosure (usually private/communal) surrounded by housing on at least 3 sides; includes garden squares now publicly accessible.
- Institutional Grounds: Landscaped grounds of institutions including school, college, hospital, former asylum, prison etc.
- Public Gardens: Publicly-accessible gardens, includes former burial grounds/churchyards converted to public gardens, garden of public building e.g. town hall, library etc.; and
- Public Open Land: includes commons, greens, heaths, woodland, nature reserves, river or canalside landscaping, and some cycleways.

As noted in the scoping note Public Parks and green space are made up of a rich mix of different types of landscape and ownership. For the purposes of this response, LPGT has chosen to confine its comments to essentially the same areas that were also selected by Locality in its report on Community Ownership and Management of parks and greenspaces (COMA) <http://mycommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/COMA-parks-and-green-spaces.pdf>

COMA in its 2016 report reviewed options for community ownership and management of parks and greenspaces and noted that the contents related to “urban parks, country parks, playing fields, woodlands, green spaces between buildings, food growing areas, footpaths and orchards, as well as towpaths, and land on estates”.

“Public Parks” is therefore shorthand, in this response, for what could more accurately be termed both environmental and social assets that offer free opportunities for leisure time for all.

Public parks are open to all, in some cases all day, every day. We concur with the London Assembly’s scoping report that public parks play a vital role in people’s health and wellbeing, ecosystem services and biodiversity in our city. This is well documented and established. Parks contribute to our Capital city’s identity as one of the greenest and pleasant cities in the world and it contributes to London’s high ranking in the World City liveability indexes.

Evidence, through many park-user surveys for individual parks over the years has shown that most parks are visited frequently (at least once a week) by those living closest (5-10minute walking range). Depending on the type of park, its location and the facilities, the age range of the users will vary – parks are in particular a favoured outing for those with young children (pre-school, nursery and primary school age) for informal play whether with or without playgrounds.

¹The last London public golf course Beckenham Place Park has recently been threatened with closure by Lewisham Council in order to save money due to cuts.

The Trust welcomes the GLA Environment teams development of a Natural Capital Accounting framework in London, which allows benefits to be measured more accurately and held against the cost of maintenance.

The scoping report suggests that the values of parks and green spaces are indirect based on health, social and environment benefits. LPGT would like to draw attention to studies by 'Visit Britain' which recognised the value of public parks, for not only the social, and reputational benefits but also direct financial benefits that they bring to the country – the Royal Parks in central London are a key component to Tourist visits to the UK and hence a contributor to GDP.

As well as bringing in funding, there is also evidence of increasing the potential for tax through increased property values. LPGT in its' response to the Parliamentary Inquiry drew attention to studies in the early 2000's in the US which attempted to show that property values are increased by being close to well-maintained green spaces.

5. How would it help to put monetary values on these benefits?

The Trust agrees that developing a Natural Capital Accounting Framework will highlight the potential value in sites from seemingly unused space.

LPGT considers that it is not just local authority cuts that are having a devastating impact but also development pressures. There is insufficient protection of the significance of green open space within the planning system, which has resulted in developments that overshadow and impact on the amenity value of parks, with insufficient quality new green space being offered to compensate for increased population density.

In London there has been agreement by Local Authorities to surrender greenspace (mostly on a lengthy 'temporary basis') for major infrastructure projects such as Crossrail or the Northern Line Extension to enable infrastructure which supports the increased developmental demands. This shows that greenspace is considered 'cheap' and undervalued and can therefore serve as a repository for other services.

By putting a monetary value on the benefits parks offer, it could help to redress the balance when weighing up the expenditure needed for planning gain to compensate for new build. It would for the first time put parks on a parity with other public services such as health, and education.

6. What barriers do you face in trying to make better use of green space?

Clearly, Local Authority cuts and the lack of statutory recognition for parks and greenspaces means that many of the capital's parks are not maintained to an adequate standard to encourage the spaces to reach their full potential.

LPGT notes the Mayor's commitment to tree-planting but is concerned that this should not be pursued at the cost of other types of green landscape. LPGT is aware of certain Councils that require maintenance or increasing numbers of trees and tree girths which results in afforestation and this hampers proposals for historic landscape restoration. Whilst woodland is to be welcomed this should not be at the cost of other types of green space which can provide other forms of health and recreational functions.

Examples of where tree loss has delivered significant benefits include Wandle Park with the introduction of ponds which has resulted in some tree loss but significant increased biodiversity and improved nature conservation and interest.

In addition, the LPGT is concerned at the overdevelopment of buildings within parks and open spaces. An example of this is the proposal to redevelop the maintenance yards at Downhill Park which the Trust considers to be over-development resulting in loss of amenity value as the park is significantly overshadowed and overlooked and the entrances altered affecting the historic integrity of the landscape.

7. How could the GLA encourage multifunctional uses of green space in London?

LPGT welcomes proposals to encourage multi-functioning green space but cautions against over-commercialisation and loss of heritage integrity. A recent example is a proposal by Udderbelly to occupy a substantial proportion of Victoria Embankment Gardens in Westminster for 9 months of the year to run as a theatre. Other examples include the use of Hyde Park for concerts and Winter Wonderlans. Expecting too much from green space is likely to lead to a severe deterioration in the benefits that can be offered – an example of this is Mitcham Playing Fields where there was a proposal to put a walkway directly across football pitches.

By contrast, good examples of introducing multi-functional benefits include:

- West Hackney Recreation Ground: a recent sensitive redesign of a former burial ground linking the space with the church and other surrounding areas has provided space for community market helping to generate income and provide new uses.
- Sutcliff Park and Harrow Meadow: The site was previously known as Harrow Meadow, an area of boggy open land through which the River Quaggy ran. This was culverted by Woolwich Metropolitan Borough Council in the 1930s when the area was being developed for housing, and 35 acres were landscaped for a public park, largely as playing fields. Sutcliffe Park opened in 1937; an athletics ground was added in 1954. To alleviate problems of flooding in the area when the river burst its banks, a scheme was drawn up in 1995 to lower the ground level of part of the park to accommodate flood waters. These works were completed and also included re-landscaping the park, which re-opened in 2004.
- Penge Green Gym: Winsford Gardens were formerly part of the grounds of Winsford House, built as a private residence in c.1936. Over time the site was developed with a number of large houses, but from the 1960s many were cleared and replaced by flats such as Benwick Court and later Burmarsh Court. In 1977 the property was conveyed to Bromley Council. Winsford Gardens opened as a public park but later became neglected. In 2011 the environmental charity BTCV recruited local volunteers to restore and transform the gardens as a community space, establishing Penge Green Gym to undertake the task. Features remaining from the original garden include ornamental shrub beds, fruit trees, rose gardens, ponds and areas of lawn.

Ultimately, however, there is an open-space deficiency in the Capital that needs to be addressed – see note below on Green City Index and population growth.

8. How can currently un-utilised green spaces (scraps of land and quiet corners) be brought in to multi-functional use by communities?

LPGT encourages the creation of any new green space for public enjoyment, education and environmental benefits. As the London Infrastructure Plan 2050 section 7 page 25 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/business-and-economy/better-Infrastructure/london-infrastructure-plan-2050>) notes, with London's population growing at the rate it is, there is a need for "10% more green cover in central London and town centres" and that means "an extra 900 hectares of accessible greenspace is needed". At present London is considered 11th on the Green City Index (Section 7 p 12) with a note that a failure to invest will result in "diminished quality of life". LPGT supports this view.

LPGT considers that it is important not only to create new green space but also to make sure that it is of the highest quality. In creating new green space, where Development Opportunity Areas are concerned we would urge a rethink on the allocation of that space at the outset of any agreed masterplan, rather than leaving it to individual developers to agree small pocket park areas that are disjointed and have insufficient horticultural value, biodiversity, access to light and other consequently health benefits. New green space of high horticultural and

social value should be given a greater weight in terms of planning-gain offset in the financial viability assessment which accompanies planning applications. At present no differentiation is made between, hard landscaped public realm and green space that will provide full public access and health, environmental and other social benefits. Built into planning arrangements should be long-term ringfenced maintenance costs, with appropriate service level agreements, and fines for failing to deliver on those specifications. The concept of payment by accessibility rather than recouperating costs by exclusivity would be worth exploring as part of planning gain arrangements.

Conclusion

The Trust welcomes proposals for Natural Capital Accounting subject to the criteria that are adopted for calculating the benefits of the landscape. The Trust cautions against over-emphasis on tree-planting to the detriment of other kinds of greenspace. LPGT encourages quality new green space wherever possible and emphasises the importance of horticultural expertise and management.

LPGT is pleased to be able to submit this response and would welcome the opportunity to give oral evidence should this be considered helpful.

Helen Monger

Director

On behalf of the London Parks and Gardens Trust