



Living Streets' written evidence to the Communities and Local Government Committee's inquiry into the future of Public Parks.

1. Living Streets is the UK charity for everyday walking. We want to create a walking nation, free from congested roads and pollution, reducing the risk of preventable illness and social isolation and making walking the natural choice. We believe that a walking nation means progress for everyone.

2. Our ambition is to get people of all generations to enjoy the benefits that this simple act brings and to ensure all our streets are fit for walking. For more than 85 years we've been a beacon for walking. In our early days our campaigning led to the UK's first zebra crossings and speed limits. Now, our campaigns and local projects deliver real change to overcome barriers to walking and our ground breaking initiatives such as the world's biggest Walk to School campaign encourage millions of people to walk.

Summary

3. We welcome the Committee's inquiry into the future of public parks. Living Streets does not have substantive addition to make in response to the Committee's call for evidence on use, administration and funding of local parks. We do however wish to express our support for calls to safeguard local authority funding and ownership of public parks. In our view:

- Public parks are indispensable to the 'liveability' and 'walkability' of urban areas.
- Local Authority maintenance funding cuts and the threatened sale of public parks for development results risks unacceptable loss of amenity and sense community, reducing the likelihood that people will travel actively in their neighbourhoods.
- The current state of Local Government funding means that it is essential for park managers to diversify their income streams, but this cannot replace the need for local authority grant funding.

Public parks make urban spaces better places to live

4. Approximately 80 per cent of the UK population lives in urban areas¹. With a UK population of 65.1 million people² this means a staggering 52.1 million people share Britain's

¹ 81.5 per cent in England and Wales (2011 Census) and 81 per cent in Scotland (The National Archives, 2012)

estimated 27,000 public parks – and the quality of these public spaces and the built environment has a direct impact on people’s lives and the way they feel³.

5. At the simplest level, public parks provide connecting routes between places for walking and cycling, for recreation and utility purposes (e.g. the walk to school). Parks are social spaces providing communal educational, recreational and sporting facilities, quiet areas, and the opportunity to connect with the natural world. Children, in particular, need the opportunities they provide to take part in communal games (not just fixed equipment playgrounds) which helps to create a sense of belonging and attachment to local places⁴.

6. Parks, gardens, verges, planters and street trees all enhance and add to the enjoyment of public places. Street trees help to define spaces, they are good for wildlife, keep us cool in summer and absorb air pollution. This ‘green infrastructure’ is proving to be more and more important. In addition to removing carbon dioxide from the air (combating climate change) and improving air quality by capturing airborne particulate matter, sustainable urban drainage systems can be also used to reduce the risk of flooding.

The closure or loss of public parks is not acceptable

7. Local authorities have no statutory duty to fund and maintain public parks, but they do have statutory responsibility for public health. Parks are good for walking and can help to address social and health inequalities. The Programme Development Group preparing NICE⁵ guidelines on Walking and Cycling found that ‘the variation in levels of walking among groups in terms of gender, race or socioeconomic status is probably the smallest for any type of physical activity’⁶.

8. Providing more people with the opportunity to walk (e.g. in public parks) could help to reduce the risk of several major health conditions by between 20% and 60%, including heart disease, stroke, type2 diabetes, colon and breast cancer and Alzheimer’s disease⁷. The 2012 Health Survey for England reported 45 per cent of adult women (>16 years) and 33 per cent of men do not meet national physical activity guidelines⁸. There is also a growing body of evidence on the benefit of quality green spaces for mental health and wellbeing⁹.

² Office for National Statistics (2015)

³ CABE (2002). ‘Streets of Shame’. Summary of findings from ‘Public Attitudes to Architecture and the Built Environment’, London, CABE.

⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007). ‘The Social Value of Public Spaces’.

⁵ The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.

⁶ NICE guidelines (PH41; 2012). ‘Physical activity: walking and cycling’, paragraph 3.35.

⁷ Walking Works (2013). A report by Ramblers and Macmillan Cancer Support.

⁸ The Health and Social Care Information Centre (2013) Health Survey for England 2012.

⁹ Public Health England (2014). ‘Improving access to green spaces’. Health equity briefing 8: September 2014.

9. The Committee notes that 86 per cent of parks managers have seen cuts to their budgets since 2010 and that funding cuts of 60 per cent and more are projected. This together with the pressure on local authorities to provide land for house building increases the risk that public parks may be closed or lost permanently to new development. Living Streets believes this loss of amenity space would result in unacceptable public health consequences (and costs to our national health service) and reduce connectivity and quality of urban walking environments conducive for active travel.

Diverse income streams are required, but cannot replace local government grant funding

10. It takes time to develop and diversify alternate sources of funding. We therefore agree with and support the findings of the 'Learning to Rethink Parks' report which championed the need to find new ways to support public parks, but cautioned that "no one model is likely to completely replace the need for local authority grant funding"¹⁰.

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¹⁰ Nesta (2016). 'Learning to Rethink Local Parks'