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# **FUTURE OF PUBLIC PARKS:**

# POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Thursday 13 July 2017, 9.30am - 5pm
The British Academy, 10-11 Carlton House Terrace, Westminster, London

## **CONFERENCE REPORT**

WWW.FUTUREOFPARKS.LEEDS.AC.UK #MYPARKMATTERS https://doi.org/10.5518/100/5















#### INTRODUCTION

## **CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES**

The explicit aims of the conference were:

- To bring together researchers, policy-makers and practitioners interested in exploring the role and value of public parks in the twenty-first century.
- To showcase learning from new research and innovations in practice, across different sectors, on ways to support parks and maximise their diverse benefits.
- To discuss ways forward for the future of public parks in light of the findings and recommendations of the Select Committee Inquiry, and given current economic constraints.
- To build new and enhance existing relations between researchers, public policy-makers, practitioners and organisations working in the management and governance of public parks and green spaces.
- To develop a network of people and organisations that work with, or conduct research on, parks and green spaces in the UK that may lead to the generation of new research questions and research collaborations.

## **CONFERENCE SUMMARY**

Adam Crawford (Director of the Leeds Social Sciences Institute, University of Leeds) formally opened the conference stressing the importance of inter-disciplinary and cross-institutional dialogue and understanding to effect change. Research evidence alone in insufficient, he suggested, as research needs to be problem-oriented, policy-relevant, engaged with the needs of the sector and communicated in ways that connect with public values and political exigencies. Matthew Bradbury (Chair, The Parks Alliance) also welcomed delegates and provided a brief overview of the current state of parks. Matthew presented survey data showing that the biggest challenge facing parks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is funding.

## Session 1: The Role and Value of Parks in the 21st Century – Insights from research

<u>Katy Layton-Jones</u> (University of Leicester) called for closer and stronger collaboration across the parks sector. She questioned why the government keeps asking for more research that demonstrates the value of parks when this evidence exists and is widely available. She expressed the need to 'end the banality' by turning research into action, advocating a campaign to raise public appreciation that parks are at risk. She called upon individuals and organisations to speak boldly about general rules and reality rather than exceptions and aspirations for parks.

















Picture 1: Katy Layton-Jones discusses the state of research into public parks

Anna Barker and David Churchill presented findings from the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project, 'The Future Prospects of Urban Parks', which explored the past, present and future of parks in Leeds. A public survey showed people's main hopes and fears for their parks, as well as the top reasons for use and non-use in the past year; the latter being informed by poor health and disability, not enough time and problems of accessibility. Anna Barker explained that many people make decisions about the park they use most often—rather than simply using the park closest to where they live. As such, she argues that understanding the factors that influence the judgements, behaviours and patterns of park use will better enable park managers to develop their strategies in ways that inform public assessments. She also pointed to possible tensions between seeing and managing parks, on the one hand, as local assets which serve certain communities and, on the other hand, as city-wide, social assets. David Churchill stated that the Victorians conceived of parks as 'spaces apart' from the built city, with a differential value to other public spaces. He argued that some responses to funding challenges threaten the very status of the park as a beneficial space apart within the city and that the greening of the city (via green infrastructure initiatives) could, almost counter intuitively, lead to 'the greying of the park' as its differential value is negated. Anna Barker concluded by postulating a number of 'ideal type' possible park futures.



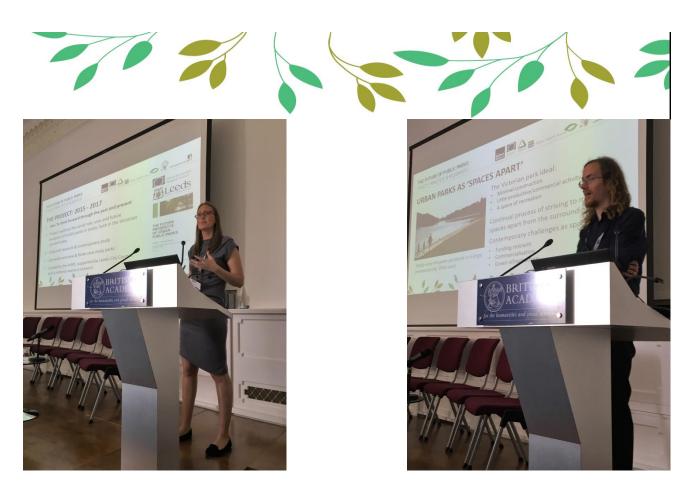












Picture 2: Anna Barker and David Churchill talking about the Leeds Parks Project

The panel questions focussed on how the sector should best go about securing government commitments to protect parks. Katy Layton-Jones responded that she was pessimistic and that we would lose parks (not all, but many); she believed there was not currently the infrastructure to secure government commitments. She argued that researchers and park professionals need to 'go into hazard mode', making sure that future research was tailored to helping specific parks and communities at risk. David Churchill suggested that research needs to look beyond the parks themselves to focus on the political processes and community engagement surrounding parks. An electronic copy of the project's initial findings can be found at http://futureofparks.leeds.ac.uk/news/report/

A member of the audience called for research to quantify the value of parks, but Katy-Layton Jones stated that this research had in fact already been done; the issue was that the economic values attributed to parks were savings rather than a generation of money, and thus the government had to choose to recognise this value (which they were not currently doing). A member of the audience claimed that the government had given up on parks, and no amount of research could change that. Tony Durcan (Newcastle City Council) noted that a statutory duty did not make a difference with securing the future of public libraries, and questioned its impact for park provision. He said statutory provision means the authorities have to provide quantity not quality.















In the second half of the morning session, chaired by Jenifer White from Historic England, Anna Jorgensen (University of Sheffield) discussed her IWUN (Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature) project and research into the valuation of parks. She reminded the audience that parks have 'been here before', in 2004; but that there was now a much better evidence base, thanks in large part to CABE Space's reorienting of the debate in 2006. She argued that many (and probably most) park benefits cannot be captured in market terms; and that the present institutional structure combined with austerity was undermining both the principle and the ability of the public sector to pay for parks. Anna showcased the ShMapped data mapping tool, which is an incremental step in a longer process of measuring the value of parks on their cities. It will act as an aid to decision making at local authority level; help authorities to spend their limited public health and parks budgets more effectively; and lead to better distribution of the costs and benefits of parks — or structural changes (for example, the devolution of the NHS budget to the mayor of Greater Manchester). She concluded by stating that there is an ongoing need for stronger evidence but also that evidence and valuation alone will not make a difference; the sector cannot afford to wait for a perfect evidence base — they need to act now, especially on infrastructure and leadership.



Picture 3: Anna Jorgensen talking about the IWUN project

<u>Andrew Smith</u> (University of Westminster) then presented his research on entrepreneurial parks, highlighting the potential for, and pitfalls of, commercialisation. He told the audience that commercialisation is a dirty word in academia; yet he felt the key question is not whether there















should be commercialisation, but what form commercialisation should take. There is qualified public support for commercial use of parks, as evidenced by public surveys (though Andrew recognised that leading questions in these surveys were often an issue). He argued for a progressive form of commercialisation, one not *just* about financial gains but one that also added other value to the park. For example, commercial installations which are staffed have a positive impact on people's perception of their safety in parks. Andrew discussed legitimate ideological concerns about commercialisation: exclusion; denigration of the park; and setting a precedent for future (excessive) commercialisation. There were other issues: where does the income go? Will commercialisation lead to a hierarchy of parks, or an excuse for grants to be further cut? Andrew's research looks in particular at commercial events, which can raise huge amounts of money while also attracting new users. However, they can also negatively impact other users, before, during and after the events. There are also environmental challenges, such as noise pollution and damage to parks. Andrew made several recommendations regarding commercial events:

- 1. Consider how events deliver on other objectives. They are not appropriate if they are just about money, but might be if they also provide, for example, educational opportunities...
- 2. Better management of events and more transparency about where the revenue earned goes.
- 3. Event organisers should maximise the amount of park space that is open to the public before, during and after large-scale events.
- 4. We need clearer / better legislation that regulates the amount of time and space that commercial events are allowed to occupy.

There is no point funding parks in a way that undermines their key qualities - free accessibility and environmental integrity – so Andrew suggested these should be the red lines in ongoing debates about commercialisation. Andrew concluded with a note of warning about the day's discourse of 'crisis' in parks; in the past, he argued, 'crises' have been moments when inappropriate changes are rolled out in haste, usually without due consideration or research.















Picture 4: Andrew Smith discusses the potential and pitfalls of commercialisation

Robin Smale (Vivid Economics) called for parks to be seen as part of the green infrastructure of the city. He stated that there is a very poor data available in the park sector, especially in comparison to the private sector. He suggested that parks strategies are often messy and not focused on consumers. He presented an amenity value per household map for London (to be published shortly). He argued that standard financial accounting only shows parks as a liability, and that this needs to change. He identified four key areas for improved evidence:

- 1. How does the composition of public greenspace affect usage and services?
- 2. How does patronage and how do outcomes vary with quality of greenspace?
- 3. How can use of greenspace contribute to social cohesion?
- 4. What services can streetscapes contribute and in what ways can they contribute to parks?

## **Lunchtime Networking**















Session 2: Maximising the Value of Parks: Innovations and Lessons from Practice

The afternoon session, chaired by <u>Matthew Bradbury</u> from The Parks Alliance, considered 'parks innovation' from cross-sectoral perspectives, explaining what we have learned from it and how we can maximise the value across the sector. This included suggestions on what the answer might be for parks that do not receive and attract much 'innovation'.

<u>Drew Bennellick</u> (Heritage Lottery Fund) found optimism in the promising number of new organisations involved in the parks sector and debate. He stated that taxation would and should always be the main way in which parks were funded. He presented some examples from the HLF's 'We Rethought Parks' series, including a treehouse park hack in Hoxton Square, London. Drew stated there was a need to reduce risks and make park projects more sustainable. In terms of commercialisation, there was a need to get businesses and community groups working together to develop projects. He also called for more data on parks to be made open access.

<u>Tony Durcan</u> (Newcastle City Council) and <u>Victoria Bradford-Keegan</u> (National Trust) discussed Newcastle's ongoing experiences in developing a <u>City Parks Trust</u>. The council have faced a 91%















budget reduction, but even before the cuts there was recognition that a new delivery model for parks was required. Tony and Victoria argued that a charitable trust brings multiple benefits. It removes constraints on local authorities; it legally protects parks for public use; it requires active community involvement (which helps spread civic/mutual values). However, it also required strong leadership and extensive, demanding preparatory work. Furthermore, setting up the scheme was very expensive – Newcastle had needed to spend upwards of £1m on the project.

Mark Walton (Shared Assets) spoke about emerging management structures in the parks sector, including Parks Improvement Districts and community led Resident Management Organisations. He argued that innovation was great but there was also a need to support the maintainers and explore not only the business (funding) model, but the governance structures. There were issues around communication, specifically how to ask businesses for money for something they did not already pay for, as well as how to convince them of the long-term benefits of doing so.

<u>Clare Olver</u> (Mersey Forest) then presented learnings from her community forest and natural health service initiative. She argued that it was difficult to deliver 'everything for everyone, everywhere' and advocated marketing 'products' differently according to different needs and audiences (often as promoting 'health by stealth'.) A detailed and rigorous evaluation process was fundamental to successfully developing such an initiative.

Sarah Hughes-Clark (idverde) called for a united voice for parks; she made the case that if everyone in the room joined The Parks Alliance, the Alliance would have a huge mandate for lobbying for change. She described Compulsory Competitive Tendering as probably worst thing to happen to parks in last century, reasoning that if you want to maximise the value of parks, you do not put a barrier between people working on ground and the community. She argued it was key to have a commercial manager in place with responsibility for marketing park assets and ensuring a 50/50 profit share with local authorities. This commercialisation did not have to entail new ventures, but instead improving the management of existing commercial assets; for example, an Environmental Education Centre at Bromley was previously losing £80k a year but now breaks even. Setting competitive pricing was also an important step; for example, in one of the parks idverde are responsible for, the previous tender paid annually by an ice cream vendor was just £2k; now that vendor is charged at a competitive market rate of £28k to use the space commercially. Sarah concluded that, in terms of whether parks are run by the public or private sector, there is no right or wrong approach. However, it is critical to avoid creating an artificial boundary between those doing the work and those using the parks; if you engage with and invest in your volunteers, they will pay you back many times over.

<u>Tony Stringwell</u> (Leeds City Council) discussed the successes of Leeds Parks and Countryside department in improving Tropical World, a key asset and visitor attraction at Roundhay Park. The















renovated centre now has a turnover of £2m, with £713k profit returned to the departmental budget for parks across the city – a figure that is equivalent to 10% of the net cost of the parks budget.

<u>Sue Morgan</u> (Wandle Valley Regional Park Trust) argued it was very significant to be part of a green grid/green corridor in London. She discussed the strategic challenges and key achievements of the Wandle Valley, and highlighted the need for funders to understand the need for development funding and for Local Authorities to see the advantages of partnerships, collaboration and the advantages of local commissioning of third sector organisations.



Picture 5: Innovations in practice outlined by speakers from different sectors















## Session 3: CLG Select Committee Inquiry into Public Parks

Paul Hamblin from National Parks England chaired the third session of the day on the Communities and Local Government Select Committee inquiry into Public Parks. The Committee's report was published in February 2017 and at the time of the conference the current government had not yet published their response to the Inquiry's findings and recommendations. Until the general election in June, Andrew Percy MP was the minister with responsibility for parks and he had planned to speak at the conference about his future plans for parks. Days before the conference, Marcus Jones MP, was revealed as the new parks minister, and parks and green spaces are listed among his responsibilities on the Government website. Marcus Jones MP was unable to attend the conference, given prior commitments, but confirmed to us that he plans to meet with people from the parks sector in due course.

Clive Betts MP (Chair of the CLG Parliamentary Select Committee) summarised the Inquiry procedure, report and conclusions. He argued that the Committee did not advocate statutory provision of parks because (a) as evidenced by libraries, they felt it did not guarantee preservation; and (b) there is the danger that if the government prescribes statutory duty in such detail, the policy may get too prescriptive (in contrast to a broader political ideological shift towards decentralisation). He recommended that every council should publish a parks and green space strategy, and that the government should consider legislation to make it happen. Clive did not expect a government response to the inquiry report until September (due to the Grenfell Tower disaster).

















Picture 6: Clive Betts MP, Chair of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee

<u>Peter Neal</u> (Landscape Consultant and author of the State of UK Public Parks report 2016) provided a response to Clive Betts' presentation. He reminded the audience that unlike 1999, the sector is no longer in a statistical vacuum; lots of evidence submitted to the Select Committee concerning the importance of parks is readily available and really valuable. He acknowledged that many people wanted the Select Committee's recommendations to go further, and identified a number of key points moving forward:

- 1. Ensuring equality of access but this needs regular collection of data on quality and provision
- 2. Using the planning system to formally set requirements for quantity, quality and accessibility of parks and green spaces because; without data it is impossible to measure equality of access
- 3. Integrate park strategies with health there should be more and stronger collaboration, especially with health and well-being boards
- 4. Benchmarking good practice needed to illustrate theory in specific projects
- 5. Valuing parks natural capital accounting can illustrate the importance of parks (and savings benefits) but it may not be enough to win the argument. We need to use the data to forge wider relationships.















Picture 7: Clive Betts, Peter Neal and Paul Hamblin

In the Q&A session, David Lambert (Parks Agency) asked the MP what the sector might do to challenge austerity, especially building on popularity of Jeremy Corbyn's election campaign. Clive Betts responded that 2017 was surprisingly the first time that many of his constituents had talked to him about being significantly affected by austerity. He suggested that maybe the problem had been that local authorities had been very good (perhaps too good?) at managing limited resources, and so it had taken longer for the cracks to show and pressures to be felt among the general public. He argued that a little bit of the (significantly larger) health budget redirected to parks (or CLG more broadly) would pay dividends for both sectors, but reminded the audience that health was being drastically squeezed too. Clive Betts concluded by imploring campaigners to 'keep shouting, keep pressing'; he said that most MPs have not (and will not) read the select committee report, but they all do read their constituent's letters.

## Session 4: Public Parks – Ways Forward

The closing panel of the day, chaired by <u>Julia Thrift</u> from the Town and Country Planning Association, considered contrasting perspectives on the ways forward for public parks from across sectors and professions.















Picture 8: Closing panel members respond to questions from the audience on the future of parks

**Eddie Curry** (Chair, Core Cities Parks and Greenspaces Group) argued for the development of regional and local fora to support parks. He claimed that health and well-being strategies that involve parks were a potential way forward and 'the next big step' in the sector.

<u>Nick Temple-Heald</u> (*i*dverde) stated that we cannot protect parks by being precious about them, and urged the sector to stop thinking of commercialism as a dirty word.

Graham Duxbury (Groundwork) affirmed the need to keep up the pressure on the government but also to work more effectively with the resources the sector has been given. His key priority was to consider a 'basket of provision' that can hold its own against the 'big hitters' of health, police, etc. He questioned whether parks are actually in crisis, as we know what the problem is and we know what needs doing. He made three concluding suggestions: (1) that in planning for the future of parks, there has to be a central focus on young people; (2) we need a better ('less patchy') support package/toolkit in order to look after parks; and (3) the sector needs consolidation not just















collaboration – there were, he argued, too many organisations running too many different campaigns, websites, twitter hashtags, etc.

**Sarah Royal** (National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces) argued that the private sector must recognise the value of green spaces. All work demonstrating natural capital must be central in policy and political context, rather than viewed as an 'add on'.

Ken Worpole (Cities Institute, London Metropolitan University) stated that the history of parks cannot be separated from history of social justice. He quoted Edward Thompson to show that London would have no parks today if commoners had not asserted their rights in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He expressed concern about the rise of the Trusts model; if everything goes into a trust, what political leverage and accountability is there? He cited examples where schools designed for working class black children to gain social skills had been captured by trusts and turned into schools for the middle classes. Ken concluded by criticising the 'awful' photos in the Select Committee report, very few of which capture heavy use by commoners 'en masse'. They perpetuate the dangerous notion that a park is just an open space that only requires the grass cutting to look pretty (and thus fulfil its purpose).



Picture 9: Ken Worpole on parks, social justice and democratic governance















**Ellie Robinson** (National Trust) believed the sector can work together effectively to protect parks long term. However, she argued that this cannot be achieved on 'thin air' – more money and strategic planning is required. She also stated local authorities and park managers need to consider which critical stakeholders currently benefit from their parks but do not make any investment.

Matthew Bradbury (The Parks Alliance) closed the conference with some final remarks on the day's proceedings. He was buoyed by the sense that while parks are in crisis, there is a will and clearly a way forward. He identified six key questions or comments: (1) had the conference made a small step to move the sector from tipping point to turning point? Matthew felt there had definitely been some consensus on key issues. (2) Remaining with the concept of 'crisis', he asked if that terminology might sometimes encourage inappropriate rather than rational, evidence-based change? (3) He paraphrased Katy Layton-Jones to ask if the desire to make progress on parks had led the sector to 'play the game', and whether this was the right approach (he felt it probably was, though it was a debate worth having). (4) He identified fragmentation in the sector as a key issue. (5) He queried whether parks have 'fallen between political stools', or if responsibility had been passed to even more layers of bureaucracy. (6) He spoke about the paradox of the flow of funds made available to new public spaces while there was a significant lack of funds diverted to established spaces.



Picture 10: Matthew Bradbury closing the conference















## PRESS ENGAGEMENT

The conference attracted media coverage leading up to, and shortly after, the event:

Public Sector Focus (July/August edition)
Horticulture Weekly, 8 August 2017
Shared Assets, 4 August 2017
Metro, 14 July 2017
The Conversation, 13 July 2017
Landscape and Amenity, 10 July 2017
Yorkshire Evening Post (2), 10 July 2017
Environmental Journal, 10 July 2017
Yorkshire Evening Post, 10 July 2017
Daily Express (p.3), 9 July 2017

## **SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY**

The conference was widely debated and talked about on twitter, such that the hastag #myparkmatters used for the conference was trending!

Please visit <a href="https://storify.com/leedsparksstudy/getting-started#publicize">https://storify.com/leedsparksstudy/getting-started#publicize</a> to view a storify of the day's tweets.

"Need to convert this momentum into something that will change the direction of parks for the better and for good #myparkmatters" @alistairbayford

## **CONFERENCE FEEDBACK**

In total 13 delegates completed and returned conference feedback forms. On average they rated the conference, as 8.5 on a scale of 0 = poor to 10 = excellent). In addition, delegates were asked for feedback on the main research priorities for public parks going forward. This is what people said:

- Future funding solutions; raising the value of parks across all disciplines
- Sounds like there is enough research just get it all in one place, even if only a list.
- Stop trying to *value* parks as this feeds too much into the very neoliberal framework that is at the source of austerity. Research instead with a critical view the solutions that park managers are currently adopting.
- Research into impacts of changes to management structures
- Questions to answer: what works where? How should parks be best designed to offer the greatest benefit to the widest population?















- Reducing costs without reducing quality (and supporting ecosystem services)
- Specific examples of good practice, with proper economic evaluation
- Research that will enable a case to be made for part of health, social care, education and other social care budgets to be allocated for the use of public parks as green spaces
- Perception of the need for funding and how to change this natural capital approach
- Bringing together the different strands of research into one encompassing piece of work which once and for all meets all the requirements to show the value of parks
- Mechanisms of management and funding
- Potential of devolution for integrated green infrastructure planning and joining up budgets at city-green scale. Also, evidence for health spending on parks.
- Establishing the economic value case for parks.

We also asked for feedback on what, if any, next steps they or their organisation will take as a result of the conference. This is what people said:

- Renew the existing data (that which is not already known); Look at local authority options
- Continue to support The Parks Alliance; continue to train our people and develop their careers we are a profession.
- Continue my research.
- Shape some of our public perception research differently.
- Ideas and focus for future research.
- Will stay in touch with some of the organisations.
- Consider research priorities and opportunities for collaboration on future research proposals.
- Management and maintenance models and the importance of innovation.
- Disseminate the speakers thoughts and comments and work with local authorities to try to promote best practice and innovation.
- The Royal Town Planning Institute is working on devolution and exploring what best practice exists for new models of greenspace planning/funding.
- London Parks and Gardens Trust will hold a London focused seminar/workshop for interested parties/stakeholders on the same theme in the New Year. We will also liaise with other organisations to publicise parks issues.

"I greatly enjoyed the conference, one of the best I have ever been to, well organised and extremely informative. I thought that the short presentation format was an excellent way of getting the maximum information across in the time available and all the contributors made valuable comments."

Delegate















## LIST OF DELEGATES

Jane Bardsley Stockport MBC
Anna Barker University of Leeds

Ernesto Barreto Universidad CAECE, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Charlotte Bates Cardiff University
Drew Bennellick Heritage Lottery Fund

Clive Betts Chair of the Select Committee Inquiry into Public Parks

Nathan Booth University of Leeds
Clare Bowen Royal Parks Foundation

Matthew Bradbury Nene Park Trust - The Park's Alliance

Victoria Bradford-Keegan National Trust

Nick **Broad Continental Landscapes** Paul-Anthony Campbell **Brighton & Hove Council** David Churchill University of Leeds **Leeds City Council** Lewis Cooper Horticulture Week Sarah Cosgrove Adam Crawford University of Leeds

LynnCroweSheffield Hallam UniversityEddieCurryNottingham City CouncilGemmaDandoBristol City CouncilJessicaDashRoyal Parks Foundation

Nicola Dempsey Department of Landscape, University of Sheffield

Clare Devine Design Council

Tony Durcan Newcastle City Council

Graham Duxbury Groundwork UK
Marion Ernwein University of Oxford
Yvette Etcell Gavin Jones Ltd

Chris Falconer Heritage Lottery Fund

Simon Farrow London Borough of Haringey

Tony Fox People's Park Friends

Polly Freeman London Parks and Gardens Trust

Simon Frosdick Leeds City Council

IanGoodmanGreenspace Scotland / MyParkScotlandWayneGrillsBritish Association of Landscape Industries

Paul Hamblin Natural Parks England

James Harris Royal Town Planning Institute

Clare Hickman University of Chester Vikki Houlden University of Warwick

Sarah Hughes-Clarke idverde UK Ltd

Anna Jorgensen The University of Sheffield Ian Judd Slough Borough Council

Lizzie Kenyon Keep Britain Tidy















The Parks Agency David Lambert University of Leicester Katy Layton-Jones Robert Lee University of Liverpool Kate Horticulture Week Lowe **Andrew** MacDermott Nene Park Trust Natural England Duncan Mackay

Peter Massini Greater London Authority
Nick Mawdsley East Sussex County Council

Alison McCann Fields in Trust Richard McKeever Fields in Trust

Helen Monger London Parks and Gardens Trust,
Sue Morgan Wandle Valley Regional Park Trust

Dave Morris National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces

Corinne Muir University of Warwick

Michael Ann Mullen London Parks and Garden's Trust

Peter Neal Peter Neal Consulting Ltd

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Paulette Romain Department for Communities and Local Government

Michael Rowland Bournemouth Borough Council

Sarah Royal National Federation of Parks & Green Spaces

Peter Sibley London Parks and Gardens Trust

Robin Smale Vivid Economics

Andrew Smith University of Westminster

Antony Stringwell Leeds City Council

Nick Temple-Heald /dverde

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Julia Thrift Town and Country Planning Association

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