Call for evidence: London Green Spaces Commission

About the Commission

The London Green Spaces Commission has been formed to support London boroughs in transforming their parks services. In the context of substantial and ongoing constraints imposed on public sector funding, the Commission is exploring what can be done to help boroughs maintain or increase investment in their parks and public green spaces by aligning the management of parks with a borough’s statutory duties and obligations.

The Commission is a commitment in the London Environment Strategy and supports the Mayor’s vision to make London a National Park City.

Text version of online response submitted 31st May 2019

How could public parks meet future challenges including increasing population, changing demographics and concerns over health and a changing climate?

Public parks offer many public goods. Their much-needed greenspace and opportunities to connect to nature are known to have multiple benefits for health, wellbeing, learning, social cohesion and local environmental quality. Campaigning to have these public goods recognised in the same way in which public goods are to be recognised and rewarded in farming could be part of a funding mechanism that truly reflects the preventative role of parks both in terms of human health and environmental protection. It would also send a clear message of the important cost saving opportunities to the overall public purse that parks can provide, rather than parks being seen as costly assets that have to be maintained.

How should boroughs organise their parks service to meet these challenges and the needs of everyone within local communities? Are there examples of best practice in service transformation in London, other UK cities or globally?

With challenges to public sector funding the Field Studies Council (FSC) has been contracted to provide the education service in some of London’s parks. FSC is an environmental education charity which provides outdoor learning courses and experiences via our network of centres across the UK, and in London’s parks. In 2018/19 over 8,600 learners studied with us in Bushy, Greenwich and Regent’s parks where FSC delivered 25,000 learner hours. The local authority maintains the buildings, but the educational elements are run at zero cost to the parks thus allowing savings to be put towards the management of the parks or into other areas. These collaborations mean that specialist educational organisations can focus on bringing greater environmental understanding and local place-based learning to people of all ages. The more that people both understand and enjoy the natural world, the more likely they are to want to protect and value it.

Can natural capital accounting or other methods for revealing the economic value of parks influence the future structure and governance of a parks service?

As with the comment under question 1, an ability to put a financial value on the public goods that parks provide to their local community would help underline their role in reducing cost in other areas of public finance.
Are there successful examples of where third sector, community-based organisations, private sector or other partnerships have taken on a significant share of the responsibility for the management and maintenance of parks and green spaces? Or examples where local authorities have decided not to cut park expenditure?

See comments under question 2 relating to the provision of outdoor learning by the Field Studies Council.

Are there any other issues you would like to mention that are relevant to the scope of the investigation?

FSC cautiously welcomes the capital accounting approach as a way of capturing and recognising the multiple benefits of parks both for nature and for people are recognised. However, there is one notable benefit that is often overlooked: education. Public parks and green spaces play and essential role in formal and informal education and the value of this needs to be recognised and if possible, captured. Access to these places is increasingly important for schools as places to study the natural world. With growing urbanisation, homes with small or no gardens and school playing fields being sold, interesting, biodiverse and habitat rich public spaces that are still close to a school are increasingly important. With schools under increasing financial pressure, hiring a coach for travel to a study site is not always an option, so having places within easy and low-cost reach is of growing importance.

Learning outside the classroom has numerous benefits in addition to the well understood health and wellbeing benefits of being in a green space. There is no substitute for real world learning via first hand experiences. It engages children early on in STEM subjects and can re-engage those that struggle in a classroom environment. Experiencing the natural world can also be used to successfully improve both numeracy and literacy. Outdoor maths can be used to demonstrate abstract concepts and stimulating environments provide opportunities to write and describe new experiences.

Outdoor learning is also fun. As part of the 2015 Inspiring Learning through Outdoor Science and Geography project, students experienced lessons outdoors in London’s parks. Afterwards, feedback from the students themselves found that the percentage stating that they wanted more outdoor lessons increased from an already high figure of 71% to 77%.1

A trip to the local park is often the start of what FSC hopes will be a progression of nature based learning experiences that lead on to exploring a range landscapes. Developing confidence in outdoor environments at an early age is important – particularly for those children that have few opportunities in their family life to develop “countryside capital”.

Emerging research is suggesting that it is the combination of both learning about and being connected to nature that develops environmentally friendly behaviours. Therefore in order to ensure that the upcoming generation is both passionate and knowledgeable enough about the natural world and local green spaces to want to protect them, providing opportunities to connect with nature early on as part of their education experience is essential. London’s parks play a pivotal role in this process. This has been recognised in the London Environment Strategy that aims for a city that is rich with wildlife, where every child benefits from exploring, playing and learning outdoors. Therefore, the educational role of parks as well as the recreational benefits should be included within the scope of this investigation.

1 London Schools Excellence Fund: Inspiring Learning through Outdoor Science and Geography Final Report