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[news](#)

[back issues](#)

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[back page](#)

Another campaign for public parks

In the afterglow of the UK's Olympic summer Jonathan Ives reports on another campaign to protect public open spaces and takes the opportunity to consider the profile of parks and their position on the cultural podium.

A couple of days before the closing ceremony of the London Olympic Games, with the nation awash with medals and success, it was noticeable that the national debate had begun to shift, moving from the marvelling celebration of athleticism towards a discussion of causation. As the prime minister sought the elusive warmth of a good news story in which to bask, commentators could not help but note that the ministerial paeans to sport were somewhat undermined by the Treasury's funding cuts that were having such a deleterious effect on sport in schools; nor was the continuing sale of school playing fields helping. For a brief moment the discussion of sporting opportunity encompassed the contribution of parks and open spaces to sport and the legacy of physical activity that would come after the Olympic bandwagon had disappeared over the horizon heading for its next port of call. However, the issue of parks failed to find much traction before the news agenda had moved on to stamps, painted pillar boxes and the imminent Paralympics.

Had the sporting agenda not been quite so all-encompassing and were our parliamentarians not habitually in summer recess for quite such an indulgent period, news editors might have been encouraged to consider the profile of public parks with rather more interest. After all, a campaign on the behalf of parks and open spaces had been launched and an early day motion had been tabled lamenting cuts in funding to parks maintenance. This campaign, led by Horticulture Week, the weekly journal for parks and horticultural professionals, had been launched in mid-July, coinciding with the rising interest in recreational and sporting matters, and catching parliamentarians before they abandoned Westminster for their constituencies or their holiday homes. However, the significance of the campaign message was largely overlooked by the news media, their attention largely taken by football in the shape the European Championship and the continuing agonising over ticketing and security for the Games.

Early Day Motion 219 had been tabled a month earlier, on 18 June, with a motion that "this House is concerned about the damage being caused to Britain's urban parks and green spaces by disproportionate cuts to their maintenance in local government budget savings". The motion continues, mentioning the loss of skills, the lack of investment and the negative impact on health, social wellbeing and community cohesion that come with a decline in the quality of maintenance and care given to our public parks. Sponsored by Roger Williams MP, the motion has, at the time of *The Leisure Review* going to press, been supported by a total of 31 MPs. While members of the Conservative Party are noticeable by their absence from this list, Liberal Democrat MPs are present, along with representatives of Labour and other parties, although the LibDems also score in the list of withdrawn signatures in the form of Tom Brake, MP for Carshalton and Wallington.

The Horticulture Week campaign, titled Make Parks a Priority, opened with a parliamentary reception and led with a call for a parliamentary inquiry into urban parks. Campaign supporters included GreenSpace, the parks and open space charity, who offered a stark warning: "Disproportionate cuts to parks' maintenance budgets, many green space professionals fear, could lead to a return to the near-terminal spiral of decline in which parks found themselves in the 1970s and 1980s." GreenSpace also lamented "an absence at a national level of any [government] department with a watching brief for the UK's urban parks". Horticulture Week's editor, Kate Lowe, noted at the campaign launch, "CABE Space has gone, the Design Council has omitted parks for the remit that it inherited from CABE, the last civil servant with responsibility for any aspect of parks at [the department for] Communities and Local Government has left, the

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future of the Green Flag awards is unclear and the Green Infrastructure Partnership is focused on the creation of new landscape elements rather than the maintenance of existing urban parks.” Additional expressions of support for the campaign came from Groundwork UK, who directed parks observers to the 13 recommendations in their own report on open spaces, and from the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM) whose chief executive noted that a parliamentary inquiry was “never more necessary or more urgent”.

Many of these fears and predictions of decline had been prompted or illuminated by a raft of information regarding declining budgetary support for parks. A survey published by the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) in April noted that local authority budget cuts have hit urban parks services particularly hard. Green Space noted one third of all local authorities cutting front-line parks staff in the first year of public spending cuts, while parks budgets in London have fallen by 44% over the past four years, according to the London Parks and Green Spaces Forum. Eighty percent of parks managers told APSE that standards in their parks are likely to fall as a result of budget cuts.

For anyone involved with the sport, leisure and culture sector long enough to measure their career in decades rather than years these dire warnings and tales of declining budgets will be wearingly familiar. While a parliamentary inquiry may well be never more necessary, all the arguments on behalf of parks and the communities they serve so admirably have been well-rehearsed, most notably by the last campaign for parks, undertaken in the 1990s with the Institute for Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM) very much to the fore. Having served as ILAM president, the late Alan Barber worked tirelessly in concert with other organisations to drive parks on to and up the political agenda at a national level. This campaign brought numerous reports, papers and conference presentations to bear in an effort to promote an understanding of parks and green spaces as a crucial aspect of the public realm. It was in this respect largely successful, providing the Heritage Lottery Fund with a popular cause at a time when the national lottery was still receiving flak for its decision-making processes and resulting in its own select committee inquiry.

The Commons environment, transport and regional affairs committee report on town and country parks was published in 1999, having heard evidence from a broad selection of interests in the parks and open space sector. The committee’s recommendations included acknowledgement of parks as an essential element of the urban environment and a feature of community wellbeing that should be properly resourced by local and central government. Their report also stressed the need for accurate records of green space, a government-funded urban parks and green space agency, and a proper home for the Green Flag award. This report was widely welcomed and local authorities were provided with the arguments and the language to justify their continuing investment in their parks. Slowly much of the decline in the maintenance and investment in public was reversed and public open space was increasingly recognised as central, metaphorically and often figuratively, to effective urban design and properly functioning communities. In the first decade of a new century organisations with an interest in open spaces were able to point to increasingly active and numerous friends groups, Green Flags flying to celebrate the positive approach to parks management around the UK and new parks created as centrepieces for new urban development, not least in the plans for the London 2012 Olympic park.

Into the second decade of the new century these same organisations are having to contemplate another campaign for parks but this time in the face of a global depression not seen since the 1930s and a Tory-led administration that has embraced the opportunity to make drastic cuts to public spending in the name of fiscal probity. In some quarters the debate has moved from how local authorities can continue to maintain their parks and open spaces towards the question of whether councils will be able to maintain any aspect of sport, leisure and cultural services within their remit.

As sporting events the London Olympic and Paralympic Games were an undeniable success but, with the initial ambitious legacy programme largely abandoned by the time the Games arrived, much of the focus of the post-Games impact is likely to fall upon the Olympic park itself. The sports venues that are to remain will very quickly become well-used and popular facilities for their respective constituencies of participants, competitors and spectators but the park itself, this newly greened swathe of reclaimed and repurposed urban land, is already being spoken of as one of the jewels of legacy. In the context of the new pressure on the maintenance of parks around the UK, it is notable that the language being used to celebrate this Olympian environmental achievement

is exactly that of the current – and previous – campaigns for parks: the liveable city, accessible and equitable facilities, community engagement and cohesion, environmental sensitivities, wellbeing and health, opportunity and physical activity. How long this jewel will continue to shine is currently under review

Jonathan Ives is editor of *The Leisure Review* and used to work for ILAM many years ago.

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