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Parks funding: the next generation

Sid Sullivan considers the potential of the Heritage Lottery Fund report and explains why it signals a need to change attitudes to parks funding and leadership within the parks sector.

A tipping point has been identified in the recent Heritage Lottery Fund report (HLF, July 2014) [see note 1 below]: parks may look good now but the landslide into poor standards has begun. What we face is a 'leadership moment'. It is time for the sector and the industry to act in unison to provide a representative voice to counter the very real deterioration of the essential fabric of urban living – parks – and to ensure that government recognises and acts to ensure that the benefits created by investing in parks is properly funded.

It was the realisation that these issues were getting progressively worse that set in action first the Horticulture Week leadership round table meetings, which in turn created the momentum for the formation of the Parks Alliance and some of the impetus for the HLF report. The seriousness of the situation has now become apparent and well recorded in the HLF report. The report and the comments within (eg "Floral features removed, no budget for infrastructure maintenance") are a snapshot of the situation facing the majority of the country's parks, leisure, sport, landscape and environment managers. Even more profound is the realisation that HLF funding is available for a relatively small – although important – number of parks, perhaps as few as 10% of the estimated 27,000 parks in the UK.

The HLF report provides much needed data and, in a data-driven political decision-making system such as we have in the UK, this is a crucial innovation. With stakeholders and friends groups now providing an increasingly influential voice within the political infrastructure of local government, data to support parks funding and investment decisions is crucial.

But let's first be clear about the term 'parks'. It is a term of inclusiveness limited only by our collective imagination. Whatever the topography, parks can and does embrace all of the landscapes that are part of the ensemble that forms the green infrastructure that sustains and nurtures inclusiveness and healthy lifestyles within an increasingly urban society.

However, budget reductions continue apace, with many parks managers experiencing reductions of between 15% and 40% in their budgets; and there are more to come later this year. With these land masses at risk of a continuing decline, their landscape maintenance and management requires positive and sustained investment before their deterioration eclipses that caused by the compulsory competitive tendering revolution of the 1980s and 90s.

One obvious source of funding is the community infrastructure levy (CIL). In the face of an unremitting fiscal onslaught, our only defence is to cite the well-documented benefits that investment in parks and infrastructure generate and sustain. Evidence to support bids for CIL funding can be found in the IFPRA scientific report [note 2], which provides strong evidence that parks have an important role in providing places for exercise and thereby reducing obesity levels. This is an important finding because we are faced with unprecedented demands

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from users for a wider range of facilities – eg cafes, toilets, play areas, sport pitches, amenity wildlife and conservation areas – and as funds diminish these investments will become far more difficult. Exacerbating this difficulty is the aspiration of amateur sport users for facilities similar to those created by staff at Premier League grounds and other similar venues.

The benefit that parks presage for a healthy community and the fight against the epidemic caused by obesity has never been more important. Similarly, the language we use to describe those benefits has never been so important. Complementary to description is the need to consider alternative funding models. No one approach will meet all the conditions imposed by local context; no one size fits all situations.

It is in this regard that the Parks Alliance is an important emerging voice for the sector and the wider industry, a voice that can represent the evidence and voice of ‘parks’ to government and funding agencies. There have been some early successes too. The Parks Alliance organised its inaugural conference in May of 2014 and was able to generate further contributions to increase its funds and resources, adding to the personal donations made by all members of the transitional board. There is a developing website at <http://theparksalliance.org> and they are working towards incorporation as a company limited by guarantee.

Furthermore they have secured a definitive agreement from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) that CIL funds are available for use in both revenue and capital investments for parks schemes and projects. In the process of clarifying this point the Parks Alliance has also secured a meeting with Steven Williams, the minister responsible for parks at DCLG.

There are still challenges. The skills shortage identified by the Royal Horticultural Society reports [note 3] will not be addressed by university education. Slowly the realisation is dawning that vocational training is the solution to the problem of this dearth of skills, along with the realisation that vocational education comes with a time lag. Apprenticeships and vocational training take time to produce the skilled staff that ensure lasting benefits.

Hence we are at a leadership moment and, to quote the HLF report, we require local authorities’ “ongoing and renewed commitment to fund, staff and manage parks”. One suggested approach is the possibility of adapting the London plan funding model for elsewhere, ie leveraging money out of the private sector through development. This approach, along with the general funding and investment crisis, is an issue that the Parks Alliance will be discussing with the minister and influential organisations within local government. Another possibility is the creation of a new lottery fund to be open to all of the 26,000 parks that are not currently within the HLF’s funding scheme.

We must also continue to develop and extend the HLF’s report and data set. This data could bring realism to leveraging savings in health costs to fund parks and justify health boards funding their local parks. In this respect, health and parks align with water and power as 21st-century must haves.

Finally, we have to make sure that the Parks Alliance is given the support and resources to ensure that the rising tide of CIL raises all parks’ standards and not just the few. We must remember that none of us is as smart, or as influential, as all of us.

Dr Sid Sullivan is a member of the transitional board of the Parks Alliance. The Parks Alliance welcome views and comments to theboard@theparksalliance.org

Notes and references:

1 HLF (2014) State of UK Public Parks – Renaissance to Risk

2 IFPRA (2013) Benefits of Urban Parks – a Systematic Review, available via www.ifpra.org

3 The Royal Horticultural Society reports (2013 & 2014) available via www.rhs.org.uk

The Leisure Review, October 2014

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