

Newcastle upon Tyne Parks & Allotments Consultation: Response from Newcastle Green Party

Newcastle Green Party shares the widespread recognition that the city's parks and allotments greatly contribute to the quality of life of the whole community. We also recognise that the funding crisis affecting many councils, including Newcastle City Council, means that the 'status quo' cannot continue and that positive solutions must be found to not just maintain but also enhance the roles performed by the city's parks, recreation grounds, allotments and the Town Moor (hereafter: green spaces¹). We believe a comprehensive strategy that might also cover areas such as school playing fields and golf courses is needed to deliver a coherent approach to maximise the benefits of all the city's green spaces.

Since the 19th century, parks and other urban green spaces offered so much to city dwellers. However, across the country, there has been a decline in both the quantity and quality of such provision.² It is not just a crisis of funding but also of vision about the potential represented by urban green spaces and their place in a holistic plan for a genuinely sustainable city. This problem extends to the shrinkage of the Green Belt, a loss of green space in which Newcastle City Council has by one measure been the worst perpetrator in England.³ Hopefully, the current consultation might be the start of a process to improve the city's 'green credentials'.⁴

Newcastle Green Party recognises that a charitable trust is certainly one solution to the current problems facing the city's parks, at least in the short term. However, we would stress several issues that need to be properly resolved *before* its creation if such a body is to deliver something genuinely worthwhile and sustainable.

- ◆ First and foremost, decisions must be made in a proper order. Thus:
 1. Establishment of appropriate goals and overall vision;
 2. Identification of activities compatible with (1), including 'management regimes' (planting, weeding, pruning etc);
 3. A constitution for a Charitable Trust that serves the above aims and is genuinely inclusive, avoiding what could be seen as the elitist, top-down and somewhat secretive character of the Freemen of the City; Funding mechanisms that are compatible with the above

In other words, funding arrangements must not dictate how the city's green spaces are used and managed.

¹ We would note that the consultation ignores the existence of 'micro' green spaces and the potential for more of them within the city's boundaries. These should be part of a broader vision. There are several exemplars of what can be done with even small spaces eg <http://www.wildlondon.org.uk/reserves/camley-street-natural-park>. More generally, see: http://leaf.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/LEAF_benefits_of_urban_green_space_2015_upd.pdf

² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/sep/07/uks-public-parks-face-decline-and-neglect-heritage-lottery-fund-report> Indeed it is part of a wider crisis: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n24/tom-crewe/the-strange-death-of-municipal-england>

³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3256926/5-000-acres-green-belt-land-just-one-year.html>

⁴ For some yardsticks and exemplars, see:
http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/index_en.htm

◆ The Green Party sees the key roles of the city's green spaces as:

1. 'Greenery' with plentiful trees: a "green lung";
2. Space to protect and enhance wildlife, not least now severely threatened populations such as bees, butterflies, hedgehogs, and many bird species. In a few areas there are still populations of red squirrels that deserve all out effort to protect. This role has become even more important given the disastrous impact on many species of industrial style, chemical-intensive and monocultural farming in the 'countryside'.⁵

This is a really important concern. If a proper ecological dimension is not built in at the start, then the door could be left open to subsequent environmental despoliation across the city's green spaces, including roadsides, with the cutting down of otherwise healthy trees and other vegetation in the name of cost-cutting, crime prevention and even anti-terrorism.⁶

In Newcastle, the record of the council is not encouraging, as evidenced by the amount of land removed from Green Belt protection, the current threat to Havannah nature reserve and the developments at Woolsington Woods (a story that was featured in 'Private Eye').⁷ This record makes it all the more imperative that any Charitable Trust is sound up with sound ecological foundations.

3. 'Peace and quiet', away from the noise and bustle of urban living;
4. Opportunities for healthy exercise;⁸

It is also well established that health and access to nearby 'nature' (green spaces and biodiversity are closely connected).⁹

5. Opportunities to reduce social isolation eg meeting places for parents with young children or older citizens living alone.
6. Scope for urban food production, not least in the context of signs about risks to future 'food security'.¹⁰

Allotment gardening also serves 'healthy city' objectives and the building of more cohesive neighbourhood. The quality of food produced there can be greater than equivalents from heavily mechanised and chemically saturated

⁵ http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/footprint/agriculture/impacts/

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-38589036> ;

<http://sheffieldgreenparty.org.uk/issues/streets-ahead-the-battle-for-our-street-trees/> ; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/7497162/Council-cuts-down-6000-trees-to-act-as-deterrant-at-dogging-site.html>

The presumption must always be one of retention, followed by replacement by native species (eg <http://www.4dld.com/BST/>)

⁷ <https://www.change.org/p/newcastle-city-council-save-woolsington-woods-2>

⁸ There are now regular reports on the personal costs of insufficient exercise as well as the costs to the NHS, another organisation under severe financial pressures eg <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/lack-of-exercise-responsible-for-twice-as-many-deaths-as-obesity> and <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/11345448/Lack-of-exercise-is-twice-as-deadly-as-obesity-Cambridge-University-finds.html>

⁹ http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/wellbeing-benefits-fr-nat-env-report-290915-final-lo_0.pdf

¹⁰ <file:///%20Documents/%20%20Sandy/%20%20Eco%20files/%20%20%20%20Green%20files/Farming%20-%20UK%20farmland%20and%20food/UK%20faces%20significant%20shortage%20of%20farmland%20by%202030.webarchive> ; <http://www.foodsecurity.ac.uk/assets/pdfs/gfs-and-uk-food-imports.pdf>

farms while ‘food miles’ can be reduced.¹¹ The management of some allotments may, however, frustrate such goals.

7. Positive role in water retention and corresponding reduction in flooding risks (a problem likely to grow far worse and far more frequent under climate change¹²)

We would stress that many of these benefits are likely to be realised if close by.¹³ Obviously, the goal should be to make parks and other green spaces as accessible as possible on foot or by bus, metro or bicycle so people need not drive to get some fresh air and exercise.

◆ These roles imply:

1. Diverse and abundant vegetation, not least tree cover;
2. Avoidance of management regimes dependent on toxic chemicals, planting of ‘alien species’, species-poor grass areas, ecologically damaging fertilising, pruning and mowing as well as general monoculture;¹⁴
3. A due degree of cleanliness, unlike areas degraded by noise, litter, graffiti and so forth;
4. Physical safety, with no areas that are perceived to be ‘no-go’ because of fears about violence and harassment;
5. A strong degree of *local* community control of and pride in local green spaces. The involvement of local schools and youth clubs could be a vital means of delivering many of the goals discussed here.
6. Screening of commercial activities (eg due scrutiny of funding from firms associated with, for example unhealthy foodstuffs) and rejection of proposals such as extended car parking spaces as a revenue source.
7. Activities in parks and other green spaces not only ‘environmentally-friendly’ but also broad-ranging, offering something for all citizens, from the very young to the very old. Thus local ‘Summer Festivals’ that only feature, say, music of narrow appeal to only a section of teenagers necessarily exclude a wide spectrum of other members of the local community. Frequent noisy events contradict the desired goals of ‘peace and quiet’ while events leading to uncollected litter negate the goal of cleanliness.
8. No further loss of green space land, especially in parks and allotments, to car parking.
9. A presumption against activities based on ‘motorised’ technology, with noise and air pollution.

A Charitable Trust should have plans in place to deliver such goals.

¹¹ There are some encouraging projects which a Charitable Trust should embrace eg
<http://www.forthenvironmentlink.org/projects/grow-forth/community-food-projects> ;
<http://www.incredibleblenetwork.org.uk> ; <https://www.demain-lefilm.com/en/film>

¹² <http://www.opengreenspace.com/opportunities-and-challenges/climate-change/flood-management/>

¹³ eg http://www.ukmaburbanforum.co.uk/documents/other/nature_nearby.pdf ,
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2534967/Why-living-near-park-help-blues-bay-Study-finds-people-live-near-green-spaces-better-mental-health.html> and <https://www.fastcompany.com/3029115/if-you-live-near-a-park-you're-more-likely-to-be-happy>

¹⁴ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/Green-Infrastructure-Guide-TCPA-TheWildlifeTrusts.pdf>

We would note that the above ideas mesh with a number of ‘agendas’ put forward by both national and local government as well as international bodies. Such agendas are based on well-established research findings. They include:

- “age-friendly cities”;¹⁵
- “biodiversity action plans”,¹⁶
- “healthy cities”.¹⁷
- ‘tranquil places’.¹⁸

We would comment on a number of other issues

1. There is a case for including **allotments** with recreation grounds and parks as one system of green spaces, in turn part of an umbrella sustainable city programme¹⁹. However it is better that, in the short term, those who use allotments choose how they want to mesh with what is happening to parks and recreation grounds. Voluntary integration is the better option.
2. The **structure of a Charitable Trust** must be transparent and democratic. However, it is important not to indulge in rhetoric about ‘community engagement’. In many fields, large sections of the public choose not to be come involved. Thus, participation in, say, local ward committees normally involves only an absolutely tiny fraction of the population in localities. The same goes for many other organisations in the community, not least planning consultations.
It would be more realistic to opt for an ‘active’ democracy model, focusing on those who actively contribute eg voluntary workers in a local park. It would be important to have a scrutiny committee to vet fund-raising schemes. There could be a cause for co-opting individuals with fund-raising and accounting expertise.
Some ‘Friends’ groups can, of course, become small, self-selecting cliques. It is important, then, that opportunities for wider public participation (not unlike the current consultation) are preserved in any future Charitable Trust constitution.
3. To encourage local participation and ‘identification’, volunteering must be *primarily* based on locals helping in neighbourhood green spaces. This is particularly more likely to be the case with older citizens, especially ones long resident in an area.
However there is also a case for a central, mobile pool of ‘experts’, ie individuals with the experience and knowledge of, say, successful tree planting and maintenance or planting with biodiversity in mind. The same might apply to event organisation, publicity strategies and successful fund-raising techniques.

¹⁵ http://www.qualityoflife.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=61&Itemid=69

¹⁶ <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5155> See also: <http://downloads.gigl.org.uk/website/making-contracts-work-for-wildlife.pdf>; <http://biophiliccities.org> and <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1094552/wild-kingdom/>. With regarding to individual species, see, for example: http://www.ecowatch.com/cedar-rapids-save-honey-bees-2274264467.html?utm_source=EcoWatch+List&utm_campaign=99f2258dcd-MailChimp+Email+Blast&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_49c7d43dc9-99f2258dcd-86026097

¹⁷ eg <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/13/warning-living-city-seriously-damage-health>; <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/urban-health/activities/healthy-cities/who-european-healthy-cities-network/what-is-a-healthy-city>; <http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org/ehs/news/2017/april/trees-science-and-the-goodness-of-green-space>

¹⁸ eg http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/silence-brain-benefits_us_56d83967e4b0000de4037004 and <https://tranquilcity.wordpress.com>; <http://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article4826-manifesto-for-the-green-mind.html>

¹⁹ eg <http://www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org>; <https://www.ecocitybuilders.org>; <http://thegreencity.com>; <http://www.earthday.org/campaigns/green-cities/> and <http://fab.city>

4. The issue of safety and security is a difficult one. As far as possible the focus should be on ‘soft policing’, where the sheer presence of plenty people using the park throughout the day helps to deter vandalism and other crime. Dependence on ‘locked gates’ and other such measures somewhat contradicts what should be the inclusive and welcoming nature of parks.
5. A Charitable Trust must be set up on a **sound financial basis**. One modest source of that money might come from a ‘ring-fencing’ of the proceeds from the sale of some council site eg the likely and profitable sale of the Jesmond Nurseries site. A sound and sustainable financial operation will of course need far more steady income. Perhaps local employers might be approached to sponsor equipment or second staff to work in the parks. They could also loan expertise or in some circumstances use the parks etc for staff to develop skills. Existing expertise and skills of the council support staff eg HR, Finance, Technical Services etc should be still available. Some non-intrusive advertising, charges for some uses, sponsorship, fees for events, hiring out parts of the parks... these might all have to be considered as well as grant applications and exploration of other funding sources. All this underlines the need for a clear overall vision and proper scrutiny of possible income streams.
6. **Active links with local schools** would be critical both to encourage participation (including educational aims) and to reduce problems such as vandalism.
7. Any plan for Newcastle’s parks and other green spaces should be **city wide** and ‘generalisable’ to all parts of the city. Some suburbs have more ‘social capital’ than others and it would be quite unsustainable to advocate a plan that could only work in one part of the city but not in others. That would be a recipe for division and, in some areas, decay.

It would, for example, be wrong to generalise from, say, Exhibition Park. The site is such that it is able to generate income from a number of activities (brewery, big café, regular festivals), ones that could not and indeed should not be replicated in other parks and other green spaces across the city.

The Green Party would also be against fund-raising initiatives that undermine established local businesses.

The Town Moor is a special case and is, of course, not part of the current consultation. Yet, as argued above, it ought to be part of a general Green Space strategy, one that looks beyond just parks, recreational grounds and allotments. The Green Party believes that the Town Moor’s potential, both for recreation and biodiversity as well as general scenic value, is squandered by the current ownership structure and land use. It compares badly with similar areas in many other cities, especially in continental Europe and the USA. There are, for examples, of better land uses in and around London, Berlin and Paris (Victoria Park, Parc Monceau, parts of the Bois de Boulogne, Tiergarten...). Wildlife in particular could be better served.²⁰ So the Green Party believe that there ought to be an extended review to look at the Town Moor and other green spaces not covered by this consultation. Obviously other cities may be richer than Newcastle but perhaps, deep down, the real issue is one of vision.

In summary, The Green Party believes it to be critical that a number of elements are put in place first before the nitty-gritty work of setting up a Charitable Trust commences.

²⁰ eg <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/urban-wildlife>