



Ministry of Housing,
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Clive Betts MP
Chair
Housing, Communities and Local Government
Committee
House of Commons
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Dear Clive,

Thank you for your further letter of 11 March about public parks.

Your letter is very timely as I am pleased to confirm that on Monday 18 March all local authorities across England received their share of the £9.7m announced by the Secretary of State on 17 February. Allocations have been calculated on a population-based formula, with a minimum funding limit to ensure every authority receives enough funding to undertake meaningful parks maintenance activity. In addition, on 18 March, all those local authorities supporting applicants for the Pocket Parks Plus scheme received this funding to pass on to their local successful applicants.

I welcome the Committee's further enquiries on the cross-departmental group. This met on 23 November 2017 then again, as part of a joint meeting with the sectoral members, on 22 January 2018. They met on 23 May 2018, 10 September 2018 and most recently on 21 January 2019. We have had varying levels of engagement with other government Departments but have received significant involvement from colleagues in the Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Department for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs.

As I explained in my letter of 28 February my officials are in the process of undertaking a series of cross-departmental bilateral meetings to complement the new direction of the Parks Action Group (PAG). Through these meetings we will be able to ensure that the work of the PAG is fully aligned with the policy direction in other Departments. I note that this was one of the points raised in the letter you attached from Councillor Vernon-Jackson. There will, of course, be cross-departmental representation on the task and finish groups which will enable better joined-up working.

As I set out in my previous letter we are at the beginning of a very exciting period for the parks sector and the work of my Department. We have invested £9.7m in direct funding via local authorities to help fund local parks improvements and new parks. We are also supporting the work of the National Trust and Heritage Lottery Fund's Future Parks Accelerator with £1.2 million, as well as supporting Newcastle's trust model, developing our community empowerment work and investing in a new professional development programme for parks' managers. Chris Worman's letter, attached to your own, raises concerns about levels and types of funding. I can reassure Mr Worman that, through the actions above, we are not only directly funding local authorities but also working with sectoral partners to consider new and innovative ways of ensuring that parks and green spaces get the support and help they deserve.

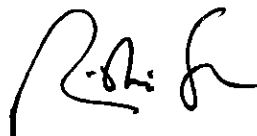
With regard to the new strategy group, let me reassure you that this is not replacing the PAG. PAG has developed into an umbrella for a wide range of activity which will continue, including the sectoral group and cross-departmental group, and the work of PAG will continue to be sector-led. The purpose of the strategy group is to ensure clear direction of the PAG's work through 6 focussed task and finish groups. Given the large-scale investment just delivered it is essential that the streamlined task and finish groups ensure this is monitored in order to achieve the aims of the group and address the issues raised through the 17 recommendations of your Committee.

My officials, together with the newly appointed PAG Co-ordinator, are currently undertaking a series of meetings with existing PAG members to discuss their roles within the new PAG structure, including the strategy group, so that all members are contributing in a way that best meets their level of time commitment and their areas of interest and expertise. I am very clear that we need to ensure that we have the right mix of people in order to achieve the best possible outcome, and that PAG, and any PAG working groups, continue to be sector-led. We aim to convene the first meeting of the new strategy group in May, following which if diaries allow I will meet with the PAG sectoral group to discuss the work of PAG and the aspirations of the sector. In any event I will of course have full oversight of the agenda and will receive feedback from officials after each meeting.

I note the points raised by Alison McCann in the letter you attached from Fields in Trust and I have addressed some of the points she raises above. I recognise that some of these issues are not necessarily quickly resolved but are ones which the PAG will be able to consider. In terms of children's play areas, the new Pocket Parks Plus scheme has attracted many applications from local areas to refurbish children's play areas – and as a result around one third of applications have received funding to support play activities for young people. I fully recognise the need to ensure effective cross Departmental engagement and, as I have said above, this is an area we are working very hard to achieve.

Finally, regarding the written ministerial statement my officials are liaising with parliamentary officials to ensure that a written update can be laid before the House prior to Recess on 4 April.

I trust that this response answers the questions you raised and I look forward to the publication of the written ministerial statement in the next few weeks.



RISHI SUNAK MP