

# Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

Website [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)

Rishi Sunak MP  
Minister for Local Government  
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

11 March 2019

Dear Rishi,

Thank you for your letter of 28 February pursuant to our previous correspondence on the subject of public parks.

The additional £9.7 million of funding you recently announced for remedial work and renovation is of course welcome, as is the fact that funds will be transferred before the end of March to local authorities. The Committee would welcome further information on those individual local authority allocations, and the basis on which they have been calculated. The other recent individual investment and funding programmes that you reference in your letter are also welcome. I hope these various actions and funding that you outline are indicative of renewed efforts to ensure the momentum created by the Committee's 2017 inquiry to ensure the long-term future of our public parks is not lost; it is particularly pleasing that you relate those investments to the Committee's various recommendations.

Thank you also for the additional information you provide on the operation and governance of both the Parks Action Group and the cross-departmental working group. However, the Committee has a number of follow-up questions on these issues. From your response it remains unclear whether the cross-departmental group, that the Government agreed to establish in its response to our report, has met since its establishment or when it next plans to meet (in the new form that you outline). Please could you now provide that information?

Equally, while you explain the reasons that the Parks Action Group (PAG) has not met in full since May 2018, it is somewhat surprising that it has not met with you as Chair, not least because this would ensure ministerial oversight of the various priority groups and that their work is joined-up. Could you therefore advise when you next plan to convene a meeting of the PAG? You also note a new Strategy Group will now be established. I understand from your letter that this will incorporate the six priority groups, although presumably the overall membership will be smaller. Can you indicate whether the Ministry has assessed the impact this change will have on sectoral and stakeholder engagement on these topics. In this context, we have received representations (enclosed) from two of the Chairs of the six priority groups and from the LGA's representative on the PAG, Councillor Gerald Vernon-Jackson, all of which raise a number of questions and concerns regarding the Ministry's work in this area. While two of the letters welcome the additional funding recently announced, it is somewhat concerning that the Chairs of two of the six priority groups and a key member of the PAG itself have raised such a range of concerns with us, and I would therefore be grateful if you could respond to the specific points raised. With regards to the new Strategy Group it would also be helpful if you could advise (a) what its membership will be, (b) whether it will replace the overarching PAG, and (c) what ministerial involvement there will be on it?

Finally, regarding the laying of a written ministerial statement it is welcome that you intend to lay it in early Spring. However, it is now more than two years since we published our report and made this recommendation and I would therefore reiterate the point I have already made in correspondence that the nature of such written ministerial statement should mean that it can be brought forward now without further delay.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Clive Betts', with a large flourish above the first name.

**Clive Betts MP**  
**Chair, Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee**

Clive Betts MP,  
Chair of Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

28 February 2019,

Dear Clive,

**Parks Action Group (PAG)**

I am writing to you about the progress of Parks Action Group (PAG) and the Government's work on implementing the Committee's recommendations.

We wrote to the Minister last month and in our letter, we expressed disappointment with the pace of progress and loss of reputation for the PAG.

In our letter to the Minister, we welcomed the appointment of a new team and the fact that we wanted to see some immediate progress particularly with regard to ensuring the system was sustainably funded. We are therefore pleased that the government has responded with much-needed investment of £9.7 million for local authorities to improve their parks and green spaces. This cash injection will boost councils' efforts to keep our parks and green spaces open and in good condition, despite councils continuing to face significant funding pressures of £8 billion by 2025. It vital that the Government uses the forthcoming Spending Review to put local government on a sustainable footing into the next decade and beyond.

Beyond the financial investment, it will be important that we see progress to address the sector's concerns and the frustrations felt by PAG members. We are pleased with the Communities Secretary, commitment to continue working with the PAG, however, we would also like to see greater cross government working. We urge the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (HCLG) to keep up their engagement work with other government departments and galvanise them to deliver on their initial enthusiasm for this cross-cutting work. There seems to be a particular opportunity to engage with the Department of Health and Social Care following the Secretary of State's welcome speech about the importance of social prescribing and the need to invest in it and the publication of the long term plan for the NHS and its emphasis on prevention.

I hope this note his helpful, I have enclosed a copy of the letter to the Minister with this note. I would also welcome a meeting to discuss this further. I would be grateful if your office could get in touch with Ian Leete via ([ian.leete@local.gov.uk](mailto:ian.leete@local.gov.uk) or 0207 664 3143) to establish a suitable time.

Sincerely,



Councillor Gerald Vernon-Jackson  
Chair, LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

Rishi Sunak MP,  
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

25 January 2019,

Dear Rishi,

**Parks Action Group (PAG)**

I am writing to you about the progress of Parks Action Group. Our public parks are one of our most visible and valued public services, so I welcomed last year's launch of the parks action group (PAG), and the personal commitment that you made to supporting them at our parks conference in May. We think there is a real opportunity for the PAG to make a tangible difference to the sustainability and profile of our public parks.

The appointment of a new team to bring some consistency and a faster pace to the PAG after a slow start is a positive step. Unfortunately, the time that it has taken to put the team in place has caused some concerns within the sector and a loss of reputation for the PAG.

It will be important that we see quick progress to address the sector's concerns and the frustrations felt by PAG members, including significant delays in considering their proposals for supporting the sector. We urge you to address a number of issues that our members have raised and consider our recommendations on how this could be done:

- The PAG has lacked visibility and therefore been unable to effectively communicate to the sector, despite various members accepting speaking opportunities at events whenever possible. Putting the PAG's terms of reference and minutes of meetings on GOV.UK are simple actions that should be taken, as well as the development of a communications plan.
- While funding can always be used, any interventions on parks must be made strategically if they are to contribute to their sustainability. It was for this reason that the PAG advised against a Pocket Parks fund and it was disappointing to see MHCLG proceed with that investment. The Future Parks Accelerator led by the Heritage Lottery Fund and National Trust takes a far more promising strategic approach, yet has been heavily oversubscribed. We believe any future funding for parks should be allocated to supporting the reach and impact of this programme.
- The PAG needs leadership from across government. The PAG was originally set up to support the cross-government civil service group recommended by the HCLG select committee, but departments have been notable only by their absence in meetings. This needs to be resolved.

We hope you can galvanise other departments to deliver on their initial enthusiasm for this cross-cutting work. There seems to be a particular opportunity to engage with the Department of Health and Social Care following the Secretary of State's welcome speech about the importance of social prescribing and the need to invest in it. Our public parks should be central to this offer, and we would be delighted to support you and the Secretary of State in ensuring they can contribute to this work.

I look forward to working with you to ensure the sustainability of our public parks.

Sincerely,



Councillor Gerald Vernon-Jackson  
Chair, LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board



Please ask for **Chris Worman**

Clive Betts MP  
Chair, Housing Communities and Local  
Government Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

[Redacted]  
Our ref  
Your ref  
Date 11<sup>th</sup> February 2019

Dear Clive,

**Select Committee on the future of Parks and Green Spaces.**

I write further to your request for any updates on information in relation to the select committee on parks and green spaces following a recent meeting with the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces.

As the only industry practitioner on the Parks Action Group and chair of the funding workstream I think it is important to update you on the very real crisis that is unfolding across the parks sector.

The funding work stream commissioned a piece of research on behalf of government to identify the "true and robust picture of funding of public parks and green spaces across England". Whilst the content of this report is the property of government and therefore not in the public domain, I can say that funding for parks in England has reduced from £972 million in 2014/15 to £630 million in 2016/17. The significant downward trend continues with a recent survey from the Mail on Sunday suggesting that 95% of Councils looking to make further cuts in this area. The work of the Parks Action Group is having little, if any, impact on this. Moreover anecdotally my sector colleagues across the country are getting increasing frustrated at the lack of any meaningful action.

The LGA have recently reported that within 5 years services that make a real difference to people's lives could be lost, including the management and improvement of parks and green spaces. We are in real danger of a point of no return, and the loss of valuable local spaces that can never be replaced. Ironic that research from Fields in Trust suggests that parks provide over £34 billion of health and wellbeing benefits alone, yet as a nation we seem unable to pay towards their management and maintenance. The reality is that the total annual cost is less than 2 miles of HS2!

Whilst the funding workstream has identified some complementary areas of funding, it is pure fantasy to suggest that any "alternative methods" are any more sustainable than the current model that has survived for 150 years and is a model that is replicated across the world.

Regardless, all still require basic core funding from local or central government to realise the wider gains that can be made to ensure all our communities can live healthy, safe and sustainable lifestyles.

Additionally there is becoming a large disconnect between what services the public expect and want from local council tax and what they are actually getting. If this is not fundamentally changed soon there is a serious risk of a public backlash against all those in authority.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Worman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Chris Worman MBE  
**Parks & Grounds Manager**  
**Chair of the PAG Funding Workstream**



Clive Betts MP  
Chair, Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee  
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Patron  
HM The Queen  
President  
HRH The Duke of Cambridge KG KT

21<sup>st</sup> February 2019

Dear Clive

Having read your recent correspondence to Rishi Sunak MP on the subject of public parks, I thought it would be helpful, as a member of the Parks Action Group and more specifically as Chair of the Standards workstream, to provide you with an update.

I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement at the weekend of £13mn of new investment in parks and green spaces – which in the immediate term will go some way to maintaining and improving the parks most in need of renovation and repair. Whilst the direction of travel is positive, there is still a concern that parks without legal protection remain vulnerable to disposal for development and the risk to public parks is ever growing. If we are to create strong and resilient communities and prevent increasing burdens on the NHS then, in a time of restricted local authority budgets, funding vital services will have to be balanced with sufficient and effective future investment.

Our view at Field in Trust is that the longer-term future of parks has to be aligned in policy and practice to cross departmental priorities such as preventative health, a better environment, a more active nation, more cohesive communities and to help combat loneliness. Parks and Green Spaces are referenced across multiple government policies and strategies and yet not funded by those departments – it is that 'disconnect' that needs to be addressed and to seek to do something different ahead of the comprehensive spending review this year. Our 2018 research study 'Revaluing Parks and Green Spaces' was compiled using HM Treasury approved Green Book methodology and demonstrates that, as well as £34bn of direct benefits to individuals per year, access to local parks and green spaces provide considerable secondary benefits to society more widely. The announcement from Matt Hancock MP at the end of last year detailing the preventative health vision was therefore welcome, in particular the reference to a healthier nation, getting people active and the role that parks and playgrounds play in helping to achieve that. And yet disappointingly, since the Parks Action Group's inception there has been very little action or collaboration cross-departmentally, other than perhaps with DEFRA.

I'm pleased to see a portion of funding allocated to the work of the Parks Action Group has been allocated to develop a set of national standards on the quality, quantity and long-term protection of parks and green spaces as part of the wider Green Infrastructure Standards project being led by Natural England and DEFRA. The 25-year Environmental Plan is one of the key high-level policy documents that sets the context for how Green Infrastructure (including parks and green spaces) can contribute to meeting UK Government environmental commitments, and in addition contribute to delivering other Government policies and outcomes such as health, wellbeing. The intention is for the Green Infrastructure Standards to be embedded into a National Planning Policy Framework and Guidance in 2020. As an Organisation that has been setting out guidance on the quantity of provision of outdoor sport and play since the 1930's and legally protecting parks and green spaces since 1925 we very much welcome that intention. I look forward to taking this project forward with MHCLG and sector colleagues over the next year or so.

You may be interested to read a recent policy statement "play builds children" from the Children's Play Policy Forum (CPPF), of which Fields in Trust are members (copy attached), which calls for more play opportunities that we know contribute to the prevention agenda and also links to the current campaigns running via the office of Anne Longfield, The Children's Commissioner for England. The CPPF presented this policy statement to Dr Sarah Wollaston MP in December in her capacity as chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. Given the cross-departmental nature of public parks and the various connected policy issues might there be benefit from a liaison committee review or at least consideration by respective scrutiny committee chairs?

Our own plans for this summer include Have a Field Day on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2019 - our annual, UK-wide celebration of parks and green spaces - this year we are encouraging all park users to plan a picnic at their local park or green space which reflects how the spaces serve their local communities. In Spring, we will be launching the UK's Best Park Award with an invitation to park users to nominate and vote for their favourite green spaces.

I am keen to understand the plans for getting local authorities and Health and Wellbeing Boards to be part of the conversation around transforming the future of public parks and it is not clear what is happening through MHCLG or cross departmentally in that regard. There is a huge amount of work to take forward and we remain supportive and willing to work collaboratively to help ensure a better future for our public parks and green spaces.

Yours sincerely



Alison McCann  
Policy Manager

