



Shaping a New Future for Knowsley's Parks

Summary

For consideration of Knowsley Council



Knowsley Parks
and Green Spaces
Review Board



We all love our local park or green space. We value using it to play, take physical activity, socialise and bring us closer to nature. Our parks provide a unique part of the character and heritage of Knowsley's neighbourhoods; focal points that we share and commonly own. They are indeed assets that help us feel good about our lives.

We want this to continue for our families, neighbours and friends, and for the generations to come.

This expectation is very reasonable and probably something that many of us take for granted. Unfortunately this prospect is no longer the case. Our parks and green spaces face a very uncertain future with the reality being that many will have to close quite soon unless a completely new way is found to fund their upkeep.

The Challenge

We have been informed that this situation has arisen because Knowsley Council can no longer afford to pay for their maintenance and development, which costs the Council approximately £1.3 million per year. This is because Central Government decided to significantly cut the amount of money it was prepared to pay to allow local councils to deliver their public services. Over the last eight years Knowsley Council has been the hardest hit local authority by this policy and so has had to reduce its spend on our local services by £86 million. It now has to make a further saving of £15 million by 2020. It has tried to do this without impacting on the quality of the services that residents and businesses use through efficiencies, staff reductions, adopting new ways of providing services, building partnerships and co-operative working.

But now, as we understand, the Council has been forced to take the decision to use its available budget to ensure that statutory services to vulnerable children and adults, planning and waste collection are put first – the services it has a legal duty to provide. This means that other services the Council delivers that many of us expect, but for which there is no statutory requirement, have had their budgets significantly reduced or stopped altogether; Knowsley Council can simply no longer afford to pay for them.

Parks and green spaces fall into this second category. Despite having parks of high quality, with 18 Green Flags that recognise this standard and their positive use by communities, it is not a legal responsibility of Knowsley Council to provide any parks for public use.

Consequently Knowsley Council has had to make the very difficult decision to stop paying for the upkeep of parks and green spaces from April 2019. This means that the £1.3 million of funding currently used for this purpose will no longer be available. However, in recognition of the wide ranging value that our parks provide the Council has committed to exploring a new way of funding them. So all is not lost, but a new way must be found.



With 2019 only 18 months away, the Council cannot wait and hope that someone comes up with an answer or that central Government decides to provide new funding for parks (which is highly unlikely); staying as things are is unfortunately not an option. The Council needs to be positive and open minded, as do all of us who care about this matter, in finding a new way forward for Knowsley's parks and green spaces.

The Knowsley Parks and Green Spaces Review Board

Given this challenge and the variety of people wanting to find a new way forward, in February 2017 Knowsley Council asked us to do just that. We are the Knowsley Parks and Green Spaces Review Board. An independent group of 20 individuals who have come together over the course of the last eight months to understand the issues, research new ideas, speak to experts, see how new ways could be brought to Knowsley and then formulate our conclusions for Knowsley Council to consider.

We have prepared a Report on the research we have conducted and the findings, conclusions and recommendations we have reached. But for easy reading this pamphlet provides an overview of what we learnt and our proposed solution to the challenge ahead.

What were we asked to do?

To identify, for Knowsley Council's consideration in November 2017, a new way of paying for the maintenance, management and positive use of Knowsley's parks so that their unique qualities can be sustained in the short term and then for generations to come.

We are very pleased that we have been able to find a new way forward. Albeit more work is needed to deliver our proposals – which will be the job of Knowsley Council. It has certainly not been an easy task and we have had plenty of lively debate along the way. We have met on seven occasions, visited parks and green spaces in Knowsley and those across the country to see how they are being managed; we have asked lots of questions! A very interesting, thought provoking and rewarding endeavor.



What did we find?

In our visits and meetings we did not find a solution from anywhere else in the country that we could simply copy and recommend to Knowsley Council. Certainly, none that answered the question we were set satisfactorily.

We found out that there are 161 parks and green spaces in Knowsley covering 593 hectares, which have 8.1 million visits each year by those living and working in our neighbourhoods. This land has been the focus of our review, but we have noted that it forms part of the borough's wider Public Green Space Land of 890 hectares.

Knowsley Council spends around £1.3 million per year on the day to day management of the parks and green spaces. We discovered the Council performs above the national average in terms of value for money in managing parks and has secured 18 of the prestigious Green Flag awards.

We were very pleased to find that the vast majority of Knowsley residents highly value their local parks and green spaces.

In investigating new ways of funding parks we heard about how some parks in other parts of the country had "pay to use" systems, some focused on a key building to attract lots of people to spend money that could then be used to manage the parks, others charged concessions for use of the greenspaces e.g. events or activities, or for the use of car parks.

We learnt that Knowsley Council has been extremely successful at winning bids for external funds through its engagement with community groups to pay for improvements to parks and green spaces, but now these grants are not consistent and would not ever pay for the day to day work of managing and maintaining the parks. We also found out about the terrific contribution volunteers make to maintaining and using these sites – but

there are limits to what they can reasonably be expected to do.

We were informed that it was not possible to simply add extra charges to the Council Tax to pay for Parks.

Many successful parks or green spaces have charitable trusts involved in the ownership or leasing of the green spaces. This has taken these public parks out of the view of the local authority and so away from the year to year scramble for budget savings. The only really sustainable funding model that we could find was the use of an endowment invested for the long-term that brings a return that is used to fund parks in-perpetuity / forever. We found that the combination of a trust and an endowment provides a very strong way forward for governance and funding.

In our discussion we were concerned about suggesting the setting up of a trust to look after Knowsley's parks. Some trusts have been badly run and have made the news in recent years, more importantly they have not done what they said they would. There are however excellent examples of trusts that have managed public land in particular, very well and for a long time. The Woodland Trust for example now manages freely accessible woodland and the National Trust manages some of our finest landscapes. The Land Trust manages very difficult sites. The Wildlife Trust and Community Forest Trust again have many, beautiful sites, freely open to the public.

So, trusts can be successful at managing land if they have the right trustees on board from the start, have a good constitution, are open and transparent with the public and have a reliable method of funding. We believe that a Knowsley Parks Trust would be a success if set-up and managed in this way – importantly complementing and supporting friends of park community groups, and certainly not competing with them.

Whilst an endowment sounds great in principle, the funding of the endowment is the challenging issue. The endowment, if we are honest, is perhaps the area that gave us the most concern and discussion.

We learnt about how others, such as The Land Trust, use an endowment to fund their work to manage land. The Land Trust has an endowment of around £120 million. Possibly the most successful combination of trust and greenspaces is Milton Keynes. Here The Parks Trust was given a cash endowment and a portfolio of property when the new town was created; encouragingly both have grown in value over the last 50 years.

Without being too ambitious, an endowment of around £40 million is required to generate the £1.3 million of funding each year needed to keep Knowsley's parks and green spaces in good management.

Unlike Milton Keynes, there is no property portfolio that could be handed over to fund this endowment and in our debates it was clear that, without a windfall, a change of heart in national government or benefactor, or being given access to other land that could be sold, the only way to guarantee the £40 million would be to use the sale of land within Knowsley's parks and green spaces for alternative use. This could be for housing or social care homes – for which there is great demand. Such development could take place over a 15-year period; so resulting in a gradual sale.

The other sources of funding we considered, from grants, concessions, events etc. would not provide the £1.3 million per year every year, forever. The endowment however provides the scale and certainty of funding that is required.

That is not a conclusion that any of the Board reached lightly. As a group we can see no alternative apart from perhaps do nothing and hope that things get better or wait to see if someone else has a better idea. But we know in reality this will not happen – especially in the near term.

From the information that we have gathered, the sale of up to 10% of the parks and green spaces, would generate the £40 million endowment.

In so doing this would secure an on-going funding stream to replace that of Knowsley Council forever. This would protect the majority of our parks and green spaces to the standards we enjoy now for now and for generations to come. Under the Trust's stewardship and the endowment's income they would be protected from any new funding cuts that Knowsley Council may have to make. Any windfall or changes to funding in the future would mean that the amount of land needed to be sold would reduce. This is reflected in our findings and one of the challenges we have set for Knowsley Council. The 15-year window does provide that space to allow for changes in circumstances to mean that a proportion of sales may not be needed in the future.

We have given the Council our thoughts on which types of parks and green spaces should not be sold; the most well used, most attractive, closest to people, wildlife rich areas and more. We have not had any discussion about specific sites or areas. We have recommended that Knowsley Council use our criteria to come up with a list which they should share and discuss with Knowsley's parish and town councils, 'friends' groups and volunteers and the public at the appropriate time – but certainly as soon as possible.

Very importantly we have tested our ideas about a Trust for the Parks and the sale of land to fund an endowment along with the criteria for land sale we suggested to the Council.

Independent research including online surveys, face to face meetings and focus groups helped to gather over 2,500 responses. Overall around 60% of respondents agreed with our proposals.



What have we recommended?

Given our research we have identified the following proposals for the future funding and management of parks and green spaces in Knowsley.

Governance and Management Proposal

- a) The transfer of parks and green spaces into a new charitable trust with a trading subsidiary from April 2019; as demonstrated to be a successful way of managing public green spaces through public sector austerity e.g. The Parks Trust Milton Keynes. The parks and green spaces would be transferred only for permitted uses which would be regulated through a long-term lease and legal agreement between the Trust and Knowsley Council.
- b) The Knowsley Parks Trust, as it is proposed to be called, would be established as the independent governing body with its objectives set by Knowsley Council e.g. free public access and delivering Green Space Strategy outcomes. It would have a Chair and a Board of Trustees with local representation (voluntary roles) to govern its strategic direction and operational outcomes. There would be oversight by Knowsley Council and other potential Founding Members of the Trust.
- c) Knowsley Parks Services Ltd would be the Trust's trading arm with social enterprise credentials. It would deliver the Trust's operational parks management and maintenance activities plus additional services that generate income and profit; these would be re-invested to help meet the charitable, social and green space protection objectives of the Trust.

- d) The creation of the Knowsley Parks Trust offers the opportunity for continuation of employment for appropriate staff at Knowsley Council who currently develop, manage and maintain parks and green spaces. It also should offer the opportunity to create new job roles within the Knowsley Parks Trust and its Trading Subsidiary where new skills and experience are expected to be required.

Funding Proposal

- a) The creation of an endowment of £40 million (+/- 10%), invested wisely with the interest earned being circa £1.3 million per annum. This provides an amount of money that is invested for long-term income, effectively forever and the interest earned is used to prevent the need for annual Council funding. It represents the only way to secure the scale and permanence to meet the expenditure that Knowsley Council is seeking from an alternative source and should be regarded as the mainstay of the Knowsley Parks Trust funding strategy. There are good and long-standing practical examples of charities and trusts using endowments to fund their operations e.g. The National Trust and The Land Trust.
- b) However, other funding / income generation opportunities must also be fully utilised for site development and to support community projects:
 - Traded services e.g. via the open cemeteries or through concessions, events and activities
 - Corporate Social Responsibility Investment;
 - External grant funding; and
 - Community volunteering.

Proposal for Creating the Endowment

- a) In April 2019 the endowment could be funded by Knowsley Council using a prudential borrowing loan and other resources. The sum secured for the endowment would be recovered by the Council over a 15 year period from the sale of a limited number of parks and green spaces (either whole or part) for new development that is required in the borough e.g. commercial, social care or housing use.
- b) The Board has identified strategic criteria for the selection of parks and green space sites for sale (but has not applied these to identify actual sites for sale).
- c) From April 2019, based on the Review Board's assumptions, at least 90% of parks and green spaces will be maintained and protected as public green space assets forever. The Council will dispose of up to 10% parks and green spaces (either whole or part) over 15 years to recover its funding of the endowment.
- d) The return on the endowment's investment (circa £1.3 million) is ring-fenced to be used to maintain these sites, with the actual endowment pot (£40 million (+/- 10%)) not being used.
- e) Using this funding method and placing the parks / green spaces in an independent Trust as their custodian would protect them from any future Knowsley Council budget savings. This will give reassurance to the people of Knowsley that the vast majority of green spaces will be protected to a good standard forever by The Knowsley Parks Trust.
- f) The sale of a minority of land within the parks and green spaces estate (up to 10%), protects the majority (e.g. 90%) forever.
- g) This method of creating the endowment utilises only the parks and green space land within the scope of the Board's review. However, Knowsley Council should identify what land is available for sale for the same types of development from Public Green Space land that is not in the scope of the Board's review too (e.g. the grassed areas maintained by Knowsley Council's Streetscene Services) using the Board's Strategic Selection Criteria. This should be done before the sale of any parks and green spaces is considered. Furthermore no further sale of any Public Green Space land should take place until Knowsley Council has considered the Board's recommendations and identified its next steps.
- h) The parks and green spaces identified for sale / development will be retained by Knowsley Council. They will be maintained to appropriate functional standards (depending on the site) as directed by Knowsley Council via the Knowsley Parks Trust. This would be funded from a proportion of the return on the endowment's investment (circa £1.3 million total per annum) given this is the approximate level of funding that currently maintains 100% of parks and green spaces. The proportion required to cover such costs will decline in value over 15 years as these sites are developed and so no longer require such maintenance.

It is against these strategic proposals that we have made our recommendations to Knowsley Council. In so doing we have made it clear that further detailed work is needed by the Council to test their feasibility.



Next steps

Our Report recommendation goes to Knowsley Council's Cabinet meeting on **28 November 2017**. So our task is now complete.

But many of us wish to remain involved, to see what happens next. Moving forward we, like you, will want to see well managed, healthy and safe parks and green spaces for the people of Knowsley to use and cherish - forever.

The Members of the Knowsley Parks and Green Spaces Review Board

The following individuals formed the membership of the Review Board. They were invited to do so by Knowsley Council given their very relevant and complementary local, specialist and academic knowledge and expertise which they have brought to bear to ensure that the review has been undertaken in a comprehensive and robust manner through their intelligent questioning, appropriate challenge and scrutiny of the issues. They have given their time voluntarily and acted as Board Members in an individual capacity.

- Gideon Ben-Tovim OBE (Chair) - Chair of Nature Connected
- Paul Nolan OBE (Vice-Chair) - Project Director The Mersey Forest
- Joanne Burgess - Friends of Ten Acre Pits (Huyton)
- Jennifer Chadwick - Councillor Prescott Town Council

- Eddie Connor - Councillor Knowsley Council, Neighbourhoods Cabinet Member
- Ray Davis - Councillor Whiston Town Council
- John Fleming - Secretary, Millennium Green Trust (Kirkby)
- Racheal Jones - Chief Operating Officer, Knowsley Community and Voluntary Service
- Neil Joseph - Councillor Knowsley Town Council
- Zoe Knowles - Professor of Engagement & Learning and Practitioner Psychologist, Physical Activity Exchange, Liverpool John Moores University
- Ian Morris - Chair of Delaware Allotment Garden Committee (Kirkby)
- Peter Neal - Peter Neal Consulting Ltd
- Tony Newman - Councillor Knowsley Council, Cabinet Lead Member for Neighbourhoods
- Edward Perry - Chair of the Knowsley Place Board and Operations Director Knowsley Safari Park
- Dave Rostance - Councillor Cronton Parish Council
- Anne Selby - Chief Executive Officer The Lancashire Wildlife Trust and Deputy Chair of Nature Connected
- Bob Swann - Councillor Halewood Town Council
- Bob Taylor - Chief Executive First Ark Group
- Muhammad Hafiz Ullah - Stadt Moers Allotment Garden (Whiston)
- John Woollam - Friends of Court Farm Woods (Halewood)

Knowsley Council invited a representative from the Knowsley Liberal Democrat Party to be a member of the Review Board. Whilst this invitation was accepted, no representative attended any of the Board meetings or took part in its research.



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Spaces Review Board