

# Urban Greenspace in the UK — Future Governance in Austere Financial Times?

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**Abstract:** The benefits that can accrue to a city from having a comprehensive system of urban public green space have been the subject of a considerable amount of research over recent years. These benefits can now be accurately quantified, and are increasingly acknowledged in official documents and policy statements to be a critical component of a viable, successful city. That said, in some countries, delivering such policies on the ground is proving to be difficult in an age of financial austerity.

In the UK for example, where the majority of urban green space is owned and managed by Local Authorities, the funds available to plan, design, create and manage such space have been steadily declining. Some cities have seen their budgets for the management of urban green space slashed by over 90%. A recent UK Government Report has suggested that, due to these cuts, it is currently unlikely that the UK will meet the UN Sustainable Development Goal 11.7 in respect of safe and inclusive access to parks and green spaces by 2030.

On the assumption that the current austere times will continue for some while, this paper will consider alternative ways of providing and managing urban green space, such as making the provision and management of urban green space a statutory duty for Local Authorities, utilizing “Friends Groups” and volunteers to manage urban green space or setting up Charitable Trusts to carry out such tasks on behalf of Local Authorities and local communities.

The paper will conclude by considering a case study of a successful Charitable Trust — the Milton Keynes Charitable Parks Trust. This was set up in 1992, and has been responsible for not only nurturing and managing the urban green space of the city of Milton Keynes for some 15 years, but also creating new green space and promoting urban forestry as being the most cost-effective approach to the design and subsequent management of urban greenspace.

**Key words:** urban greenspace, urban forestry, funding, future governance

## 1. Introduction

The 21st century has ushered in an urban existence for the majority of the human species. In 2014 in the UK for example, the Government’s Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) estimated that over 45 million people in England lived in urban areas, some 83% of the population [1]. The population of the UK is rising fast as well. Between 1970 and 2005 (35 years), it grew by just over 5 million people; between 2005 and 2016 (11 years), the population grew by the same amount. Significantly, the

majority of this growing population is urban-based, which greatly increases the demand for public services, housing and other associated infrastructures and places more pressure on urban environments, including the urban forest.

The benefits that can accrue to a city from having a comprehensive urban forest and urban public green space have been the subject of a considerable amount of research over recent years. These benefits can now be accurately quantified, and are increasingly acknowledged in official documents and policy statements to be a critical component of a viable, successful city [2-4]. Although the words “forest” and “forestry” are now generally understood to be connected with trees, this was not originally deemed to

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be the case. It has been suggested that the words are drawn from the Latin word “*foris*”, which meant “*out of doors*” [8]. Thus the urban forest is really the “urban out of doors”, which encompasses all urban greenspace, whether articulated by trees or not. In spite of the general agreement on the benefits that can be experienced by urban people from a viable urban forest, delivering such benefits on the ground in the UK is proving to be difficult in an age of financial austerity.

Traditionally, the majority of the urban forest in the UK is owned and managed by the Local Authorities, but the funds available for them to plan, design, create and manage their urban forests have been steadily declining over recent years. Some cities have seen their budgets for the management of their urban green space slashed by over 90%, and in a recent article in the press, the City of Bristol — a former recipient of a European Green Capital Award — has announced that its budget for the management of their urban forest in 2019 will be zero [5]. A recent UK Government Report has suggested that, due to these cuts, it is currently unlikely that the UK will meet the UN Sustainable Development goal 11.7 in respect of safe and inclusive access to parks and green spaces by 2030 [4]

On the assumption that the current austere times will continue for some time, this paper will consider possible alternative ways of providing and managing the urban forest, such as making this provision a statutory duty for Local Authorities for example, or utilizing “Friends Groups” and volunteers to manage these assets or setting up Charitable Trusts to carry out such tasks on behalf of the Local Authorities and local communities.

In conclusion, a case study of one such successful approach will be considered — the Milton Keynes Charitable Parks Trust. This was set up in 1992, and has been responsible not only for nurturing, managing and creating new areas of urban green space in the city of Milton Keynes for the past 15 years, but also promotes urban forestry as being the most cost-effective approach to urban greenspace design and

management [11].

## 2. The Benefits of A Viable Urban Forest

It was W. Edwards Deming, an American data analyst, who said “Without data, you’re just another person with an opinion”. As far as the urban forest is concerned, that data is now freely available [10]. Whilst there is always more specific research work that needs to be carried out, there is now a significant canon of research that proves without doubt the benefits that human beings and their urban habitat can gain from having a viable urban forest in and around their town or city. These benefits include:

**Human Health and Wellbeing:** Access to the urban forest improves our health and wellbeing, often reducing the need for treatment for anxiety and mental health conditions. Depressive disorders are now the foremost cause of disability in countries such as the UK, and can be precursors for more chronic physical health problems. Spending time in the urban forest has been shown to produce levels and patterns of chemicals in the brain associated with low stress and positive impacts on blood pressure. Positive links have also been demonstrated between how well people perform at attention-demanding tasks and the benefits of time spent in the urban forest either beforehand or during the task.

**Temperature and Climate Change:** In the UK, urban temperatures are typically at least 2°C higher than the surrounding rural areas. This Urban Heat Island effect (UHI) occurs because the materials used to build the towns and cities absorb more of the sun’s energy than the natural surfaces they replace. This UHI effect makes people living in urban areas particularly vulnerable to heat waves. In London for example, during the heat wave that engulfed Europe in August 2003, there was an estimated 42% increase in mortality. The urban forest reduces the UHI effect by providing shade and by cooling the air through the process of evapotranspiration. During evapotranspiration, the energy of the sun is used to transfer moisture from the

leaves of plants — particularly trees — into the atmosphere. The urban forest is usually at least 2°C cooler than the adjacent built-up areas, during both the day time and the night time. This cooling effect can extend well into adjacent built-up areas, which in summer can reduce the need for air conditioning and associated energy use.

**Air Quality:** Poor air quality is a serious threat to human health, causing problems for the respiratory system and cardiovascular diseases. The UK is in breach of nitrogen dioxide (NO<sup>2</sup>) limits in 38 out of its 43 areas, and it is expected that these areas will exceed EU air quality thresholds up to or beyond 2030. London exceeded its air pollution limit for 2017 by the beginning of the second week of January. Trees can have multiple impacts upon air quality. They can significantly improve the quality of the air by removing both particles and gases from the air. Particles stick to the surface of the leaves, and gases are taken up through the pores on the leaf surface. Trees under stress however can also emit gases in the form of volatile organic compounds, and that can, under certain circumstances, exacerbate the quality of urban air. Thus maximum benefits can be achieved by designing the right tree in the right place for the right reasons.

**Reducing surface water flooding:** Due to the high rate of car ownership in many towns and cities in the UK, there has been a significant increase in the deployment of impermeable surfaces to accommodate car parking, etc. This has reduced surface water infiltration, and leads to rapid surface flows into pipes, culverts and channelized urban waterways, increasing peak flood flows. Accommodating the increasing volume of surface water that is expected with climate change in piped drainage systems is likely to be prohibitively expensive, but the urban forest can assist in reducing urban runoff by enabling rainfall to soak into the underlying soil or into sustainable drainage systems (SuDS).

**Wildlife and habitats:** Our towns and cities are typically considered to host a less diverse range of

plants, animals and birds than nearby rural areas. The urban forest can however be home to many of the same species that are more commonly associated with rural settings, including those that are rare or threatened. For some species, the urban forest can provide a more favourable habitat than intensively farmed countryside, suggesting that the urban forest could make an important contribution to national conservation efforts. Large parks and woodlands are able to support the widest range of species, but even the smaller parts of the urban forest — roadside verges, roundabouts, green roofs, etc. can support a wide range of wildlife. For many city dwellers, spending time in the urban forest is their only regular opportunity to be surrounded by nature. Research suggests that people get more enjoyment from spending time in the urban forest when they perceive there to be a high level of biodiversity.

**Economic Impacts:** The presence of a viable urban forest in and around a town or city has a beneficial economic impact upon that urban area. In terms of a direct economic impact, case studies from around the UK have suggested that proximity to the urban forest positively links higher values to both commercial and residential property prices by a minimum of 5-7%. It can also positively influence commercial and industrial investment and retention. The location of aspects of the urban forest are crucial however, and to maximize the benefits, the urban forest must be easily accessible both physically and visually from residential areas and from commuter routes into and out of urban areas. That said, it is still not very clear whether the assignment of monetary values can fully capture the importance of the non-monetary benefits, such as biodiversity or the cultural significance of the urban forest, the latter being an increasingly significant factor in selling the concept of “the urban forest” to both decision-makers and to local communities.

Although very many of these benefits that the urban forest and urban green space bring to our towns and cities in the UK can be quantified, communicating such benefits and selling the idea that the urban forest is an

asset and not a liability is, at present, not an easy task. As Posner et al reported, “scientific knowledge about ecosystem services continues to have limited impact upon policy and decisions” [9].

A more poetic and down-to-earth plea to Members of the UK Parliament to support the benefits that trees and urban forestry can deliver to local authorities, even in hard financial times, was made recently by John Parker, Chair of the London Tree Officers Association and a member of the International Committee of the European Forum of Urban Forestry. He said:

“Imagine someone were to invent an item of street furniture which improved air quality, reduced the costs of stormwater management, reduced crime, slowed traffic speeds and improved physical and mental health, to name but a few. From the day of installation, this equipment would deliver more and more benefits, increasing rather than decreasing in value for a lifespan of decades or even centuries. And then imagine that this street furniture could be purchased and installed for just a few hundred pounds per unit, required relatively little maintenance and looked beautiful. The person who patented such a thing would be a wealthy one indeed.” [7].

### 3. Future Governance of the Urban Forest

Urban forestry makes a significant contribution to the social and physical fabric of the towns and cities across the UK. From the farsighted Victorian parks movement that successfully breathed life into industrialized and polluted cities, to the subsequent Garden Cities and the residential suburbs and the post-war New Towns, designed urban green space has shaped the cultural heritage of countless communities, and continues to enrich countless personal lives and the experiences of both young and old. Today, urban forestry continues to add character, identity and value to neighbourhoods, making them more attractive, healthy and resilient places to live. These qualities are under attack however. Much of this space is owned and managed by Local Authorities, and the considerable pressure on public finances is making it increasingly harder for them to properly manage, maintain and

safeguard this great cultural and environmental resource.

A number of key issues have been established recently by research carried out in the UK by the Heritage Lottery Fund [2]. These were:

- People are using their urban forest regularly, and visitor numbers are increasing. More than half the population, some 60%, visit their local green space at least once a month, if not more often. In addition, some 71% of black and minority ethnic residents frequently use their urban green space.
- Park maintenance budgets continue to fall. 92% of park managers report that their maintenance budgets have reduced in the past three years, and 95% expect them to reduce further.
- Staff and skills are being lost, as 75% of local authorities have reduced their workforce.
- As a result, the quality of much of the urban forest is beginning to decline.
- Budget cuts are not consistent across the country; Local Authorities in the north of the country seem to be experiencing higher cuts.
- The governance of the urban forest is anticipated to be much more varied in the future; 45% of Local Authorities were considering alternative ways of managing their urban forest. This is expected to increase to 59% over the next three years.
- The quest to locate sources of external income are on the rise.
- The number of ‘Friends Groups’ set up to manage green space has increased.
- Parks Trusts appear to be coping better with austerity. Although there are only a few Trusts in existence, most expect to increase their funding to carry out their duties, and whereas no local authorities expect to increase their staff numbers over the next few years, over 25% of Trusts expect to increase their teams.

In spite of the acceptance by the UK Government of the benefits to viable urbanism provided by the urban

forest, it does not insist on such benefits being provided for all the members of the UK population. For example, only 48% of Local Authorities currently have Urban Green Space Strategies — down from 76% in 2014. The UK is also a signatory to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These include SDG 11.7, which requires universal access by 2030 to safe, inclusive and accessible urban green space, particularly for women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities. Estimates of the amount of urban green space in the UK vary, but in England, Natural England's Accessible Natural Green Space Standard (ANGSt, 2011) projected that only half of the urban population live within 300 metres of green space. It was also calculated that the most affluent 20% of Local Authority areas in England have five times the amount of urban green space as the most deprived 10%.

Thus discussions are currently taking place both at local and national level to consider the future governance of the urban forests currently owned and managed by the Local Authorities in the UK. Three considerations seem to be on the table. First, owning, managing and delivering a local urban forest could be made a statutory requirement for Local Authorities by the National Government; secondly, more community/friends groups should be set up, and be given more responsibilities, especially in raising monies to carry out their management duties, and thirdly, establish far more Charitable Trusts, along the lines of the Milton Keynes Charitable Trust, which has been and continues to be a very successful organisation.

#### **4. Case Study: The Milton Keynes Parks Trust**

A Landscape Structure Plan, articulated by a significant urban forest, was one of the hallmarks of the UK's Third Generation New Towns. When it was decided by the UK Government in 1992 that the towns were at a suitable stage for the Development Corporations that had created them to be formerly closed down, it was decided that the urban forests of

the three key towns — Warrington, Telford and Milton Keynes — would each be managed in a different way. The management of Warrington's urban green space would be split between the local authority and an adjacent community forest — the Mersey Forest; Telford's green space would be given wholly to the Local Authority — the Telford and Wrekin District Council and Milton Keynes would experiment with setting up a Charitable Trust. It was set up as a self-funding independent charity, dedicated specifically to managing some 2,023 ha of the green infrastructure of the city, including about 130 km of the urban forest adjacent to the main public highways. This comprises about 25% of the city area.

Like many things in Milton Keynes — such as the remit from the designers that no building should be higher than the eventual height of the adjacent trees — the creation of the Parks Trust broke new ground. It was the tradition at the end of the 20th century that most urban open space and the urban forest was owned and managed by the appropriate Local Authority. The designers of Milton Keynes however wanted to be sure that the city's unique urban forest structure would be managed and protected forever, without having to compete for funds with other council priorities.

When the urban forest was transferred to the Trust in 1992, the Charity was endowed with a property and investment portfolio, then worth approximately £4 million. The Trust remains entirely self-financing, and the income from that portfolio pays for the vital work of nurturing and enhancing the city's landscape. The Trust's green spaces add greatly to the quality of life and the environment in Milton Keynes, which is currently one of the most successful cities in the UK economical. The green space is constantly improved by nurturing the urban forest structure, providing new facilities, increasing biodiversity and enhancing wildlife habitats.

The Parks Trust is a charitable company, limited by guarantee, and is governed by a Board of Trustees, who are also directors of the company. The Board sets the

strategic direction of the Trust, and ensures that the Charity is properly managed and complies with all relevant legislation. The Trustees have a duty under charity law to ensure that the Trust's assets and resources are only used to further the Trust's charitable objectives, which are:

- To provide, maintain and equip the parks, gardens, landscaped areas, urban forest, green spaces, playing fields, playgrounds and recreational amenity species found in Milton Keynes;
- To advance public education with particular regard to horticulture, arboriculture, urban forestry, wild plants and wildlife;
- To provide or assist in the provision of facilities for recreation or other leisure time occupations.

The Trust produces a Strategic Plan every three years which sets out its vision and priorities for the Milton Keynes urban forest for the coming years. The landscapes are over 40 years old, and require significant investment to manage them as they mature and age, including thinning tree plantations that were planted as part of the original urban forest. The population of Milton Keynes is becoming increasingly diverse, and the Trust has to respond to what older people want from their urban forest; what young people want and how people from different ethnic backgrounds see and want to use the urban forest.

The Milton Keynes Parks Trust is deemed to be a successful, responsive, reliable and creative institution, held in high regard by the diverse communities of the city. It is being held up as one positive example of how the ownership and management of local authority urban forest portfolios might be owned and managed in the future.

## 5. Conclusion

In spite of a significant and increasing interest in their local urban forests and the services they provide from the people who live, love, work and inhabit the towns and cities of the UK, without a doubt, the provision of these services will be facing immense

challenges over future years. Adequate funding remains the most critical issue, and there are no simple, straightforward solutions. Urban green spaces are provided for public benefit, and history and logic suggests that they will continue to need public funding to properly serve their surrounding communities. Commercial activities are definitely on the increase however, and many Local Authorities are increasingly responding to the financial challenges that they face to achieve positive change during this time of austerity by working with businesses through direct sponsorship and corporate volunteering. The jury is still out on whether these activities will bring about significant changes in the governance of the urban forests of the UK and the very significant benefits they bring to the urban populations of the country.

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