

Battle to halt the decline of Britain's shabby public parks

Written by Darren

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A few hardy souls sit on Downhills Park's benches, reading or watching squirrels scamper through multicoloured piles of leaves. Parents and toddlers wrapped up in hats and scarves are braving the playground while pupils from Wisdom School nearby are using the park for their PE class, a run that has collapsed into a walk for many of the giggling teenage girls. Downhills is a well-loved green space in densely populated Haringey, one of London's more deprived areas.

"This park is my lungs," said dog walker and health worker Elizabeth Bell, 62. "I come here most days because it's peaceful and cheers me up to see the colour in the trees and the little ones playing. It lets you breathe again. Not many people round here have gardens, and if they do they're filled with wheelie bins and recycling bins. This is our giant garden. We need it for our health – mental and physical."

But cardboard and polystyrene takeaway boxes are strewn around, nettles are flourishing and there is no sign of a park attendant or even someone sweeping up the leaves.

"Its shabby," said local resident Yash Khan, walking alongside his scootering granddaughter. "This litter didn't used to be so bad. What's going on?"

The park is one of Britain's 30,000 green spaces that campaigners now say are under serious threat. Two decades of work restoring our parks from the neglect and decay that typified urban parks in the 80s and 90s will be wasted and the environmental and social impacts are "just dire", said David Morris, the campaigns officer of the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces.

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"It takes a huge cost to turn things around once the rot has set in, we can't let that happen," said Morris, who says that last year Downhills won a Green Flag award, a new cafe opened and a wildlife pond was dug.

But then came the cuts. Like all councils, Haringey has no statutory duty to maintain its parks. Last year it slashed its spending by more than half. It now employs only three full-time gardeners across its 46 parks and no maintenance budget for 43 of them.

"So this year Downhills is covered in weeds and the litter isn't being picked up," Morris said. "We have 40 friends of parks groups in Haringey, people have been doing their bit, but they can't possibly do it on their own. We need to have resources and local authorities are starved by central government of funds for non-statutory services. Parks are on a downwards trajectory. It's not just here, this is a national crisis in parks and green spaces, it's disastrous."

At the Lordship Recreational Grounds nearby, a £5m lottery-funded regeneration scheme has just finished. "But the lottery money available could only cover less than half a per cent of our parks, so although it's very welcome, it's not enough, and even for those that get it there needs to be a follow-up maintenance regime," said Morris.

He and the 5,000 local friends of parks groups that have sprung up around the UK in the last few years are not alone. A survey by Ipsos Mori last month, commissioned by the environmental charity Groundwork, found more adults wanted councils to protect spending on green spaces, including parks and playgrounds, than on libraries, youth clubs and helping people find work. Groundwork is campaigning for private backing to bridge the dramatic funding gap.

Landscape designer and Gardener's World presenter Chris Beardshaw said green spaces in cities were vital. "If we invest in them properly, we can mitigate some of the worst of the cuts in other areas. We know that the NHS has to find £20bn of savings, but we also know that access to green space reduces the likelihood of obesity and could save as much as £2bn.

"We also know that helping people get involved in activities and events on their local green spaces can make communities more stable and cohesive. Increasing a sense of community by just a small margin could be enough to save more than £350m in the cost of tackling crime and antisocial behaviour. That's equivalent to saving more than 7,500 police jobs.

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"Greening our towns and cities will also help us cope with flooding – predicted to treble over the next 30 years and already costing us more than £2bn."

David Tibbatts is development manager at the charity GreenSpace, which is preparing to launch the Green Places Fund, a national fund encouraging businesses and people to donate towards local projects.

"The decline is under way, but it will be gradual, most parks are still green and beautiful, but if you scratch the surface you'll see the problems – the bedding has gone and bins not being emptied, the grass being cut less. Neglect is taking hold. We're hearing it from park managers about severe cuts on what is a soft target. In the 80s a lot of places were lost to the community this way. Teens and lads became the only people who'd go into the parks, so everyone else was put off. Kids weren't allowed to play there, so a huge number of spaces became lost. It's a cycle of decline that has started again."

There is a body of research showing the benefits of parks to health and well-being, social cohesion and to the development of children. It's difficult to imagine urban life without safe green spaces but it could happen, say campaigners, and there are not enough volunteers to cover the void being left by local authority cuts. For Tibbatts, it may mean parks becoming charities in their own right.

"We are also working with a new forum of parks managed under trust status and will shortly be releasing guidance on the transfer of local authority stock to citywide trusts," he said. "This is one of the things we would love to see further down the line with local parks managed through a large-scale endowment which would provide the revenue and capital funding without being reliant on political will and the changing fortunes of public sector finance. It's a big ambition, but the model works in the States and elsewhere. If the average parks team had an endowment of £80m they could manage the service to a much better standard and never again need a single penny of taxpayers' money. It doesn't seem so ambitious given that around 70% of the population will regularly benefit," Tibbatts said.

In Downhills Park the local people are clearly enjoying their "lung" in the midst of an intense city environment. "Without it? Oh, it'd be bad ... I couldn't bear it, no, we need our parks," said Elizabeth Bell.