

SUBMISSION FROM BERKSHIRE GARDENS TRUST to the Select Committee Consultation on Public Parks

1. Berkshire Gardens Trust (BGT) would like to submit a response as follows:

- We are aware of a range of challenges facing our public parks in the context of reduced local authority budgets on parks and have particular comments on the impact of such reductions on the valuable contribution of Friends Groups and other volunteers.
- Our submission also includes some general comments in relation to the usage of public parks, their administrative status and questions relating to how they are best managed and supported.

2. BGT was launched in July 2009. We are a member of The Gardens Trust, the national body which I understand will also be replying on behalf of all County Gardens Trusts¹. Our key objectives include the conservation, protection and enhancement of designed landscapes in Berkshire's six local Unitary Authorities for the enjoyment of all. Activities include research into historic designed public parks and garden landscapes, as well as liaison with the authorities and individuals responsible for planning policy and applications, conservation and relevant leisure facilities within the county.

3. Public parks are the most local and easily accessible form of designed landscape for many people to experience directly. Within Berkshire, several of the more historic parks have been restored and enhanced over the last decade due to the financial and expertise of the local authority concerned as well as support from Friends Groups and funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and other sources. However, despite this commitment by the relevant local authorities across Berkshire to the restoration and enhancement of several public parks, which has resulted in some robust management plans, it is clear that in practice local authorities struggle with day to day budgetary and management issues.

3. We are especially concerned about the impact of reduced budgets on the presence of designated parks managers responsible for managing parks throughout the year and provision of flexibility to cater for holidays or other contingencies. For example, we understand that one local Friends Group which tidied up their local public park in the absence of any local authority presence were later advised that there was no insurance provision for this activity, although there was no evidence that any other arrangements were in place to do dead-heading during the manager's summer holiday. This seems at odds with the fact that the group regularly supports various events and activities which take place in their local park, which they might reasonably expect to help deliver tangible benefits there, either in terms of maintenance activity or in the provision of appropriate facilities and planting.

4. In conclusion, local authorities should at least have some statutory obligation relating to the provision of infrastructure for public parks, including clear Health and Safety responsibilities. It should therefore be clear what activities the local authority is responsible for, as well as what tasks Friends and other volunteer groups can undertake. For example, we understand that currently local authorities are responsible for emptying bins and cleaning public toilets where they are provided, but who is responsible for cleaning the outside of litter bins and sweeping steps of leaves which could be dangerous if there is no parks manager presence? Finally, in addition to ensuring that appropriate insurance is available to cover the activities which it is agreed can be carried out by Friends Groups, consideration should also be given to other support which might be needed by them, from hosting websites to providing basic facilities for volunteers. Without such a framework we feel that many public parks will inevitably suffer and deteriorate.

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