

The Future of Newcastle's Parks And Allotments



Newcastle City Council is having to rethink how it delivers many of its services, including the city's parks and allotments. We want to get your views on our ideas so far, and hear from you about your ideas on how parks and allotments in Newcastle should be run in future.

Why we are doing this?

Over the past seven years, our parks budget has reduced by over 90%, meaning that finding new ways of financing and running the city's parks is essential. We need to do this whilst staying committed to improving the way we deliver parks and allotments, keeping them in public ownership, safe, free to use, and making sure that local people, community groups and partners are fully involved in the future delivery of the service.

Our proposals so far...

We have been working with the National Trust, benefitting from their experience in preserving national heritage across the country, to help us find a positive way forward for Newcastle. In particular, we have been researching the possibility of transferring the operation, delivery and maintenance of a large proportion of the city's parks and allotments to a new Charitable Trust (Charity). This is very much a work in progress, and we would be delighted if you would consider providing your thoughts and views to help shape the way forward.

Caring for Parks

Running a park involves lots of activities, all of which need to be funded, for example:

- Cutting the grass
- Planting, weeding, pruning
- Tree inspections and care
- Litter picking, cleaning, waste removal
- Running events
- Raising funds, and

- A whole lot more!

But parks do not make as much money as they cost to run. That means that public funds have been used to fill that gap. But local authority budgets are now under very severe pressure.

Core principles

As we develop new ideas for the future, we are putting the following principles at the heart of our work:

1. **Council priority:** parks are not a statutory service – in other words, they are not a service which local authorities are legally required to deliver – but their successful future is a high priority for the Council.
2. **Public ownership:** parks should remain in Council ownership.
3. **Safe and clean:** parks should be clean, and visitors should feel safe, and be safe.
4. **Free access for all:** parks should be free to access and use, but charging for some facilities or activities continues and grows.
5. **Existing groups:** integral – part and parcel of any new solutions.
6. **Your parks:** no decisions without engaging with communities, listening, problem-solving together, and feeding back.
7. **One City:** equality of resources and enjoyment across all of the city's parks with no “single park” or “individual” solutions.
8. **No Privatisation:** parks not transferred to a commercial entity but rather an entity with charity and community objectives, which preserves the parks and uses available income sources – including commercial income – to run the estate.

Parks Charitable Trust

We are researching the possibility of setting up a Charity to dedicate all of its attention and resources to Newcastle's parks and allotments. We think a Charity could bring some very important benefits to our parks:

- Independent from the Council therefore removed from the constraints imposed on local authorities
- Legally protects and preserves parks for public use
- Requires active involvement of the community, partners, stakeholders and staff

- Potential for trading and enterprising
- Secures the best human, environmental and social impacts
- Maximises opportunities for income generation to sustain the enterprise (not purely for commercial gain), and
- Unlocks new opportunities to access alternative funding sources.

How might it work?

- Park land and allotments held by the Council would be transferred to the Charity to be preserved and managed for public use (the Council would continue to own the land).
- Existing arrangements such as leases and contracts would also be transferred.
- The charity employs staff, trains volunteers, generates income, and delivers services based around its charitable objectives.
- Income from trading is ploughed back into the Charity and the City's parks and allotments.
- The non-local authority structure enables new capacity, community and volunteer memberships.
- New and existing groups and individuals continue to help look after individual parks under a new supportive structure.
- The Charity would have public reporting and accounting obligations via the Charities Commission.
- The Council as the land owner will operate in the background.

Which parks?

Subject to further work, we think the Charity could potentially look after:

1. Armstrong Park
2. Benwell Nature Park
3. Big Waters Nature Reserve
4. Christon Road
5. City Stadium
6. Denton Dene South
7. Elswick Park
8. Exhibition and Brandling Parks
9. Gosforth Central Park
10. Harbottle Park and Allendale Road

11. Havannah and Three Hills Nature Reserve
12. Heaton Park
13. Hodgkin Park
14. Iris Brickfield
15. Jesmond Dene
16. Jesmond Vale
17. Kingston Park West
18. Leazes Park
19. North Kenton Park
20. Nuns Moor Park
21. Ouseburn Park
22. Paddy Freeman's Park and Castle Farm
23. Percy Pit
24. St. Lawrence Park
25. Sugley Dene
26. Summerhill Square
27. The Quarry (in South Gosforth)
28. The Spinney
29. Tyne Riverside
30. Walbottle and Throckley Dene
31. Walker Park
32. Walker Riverside Park
33. Westerhope Park

Allotments

We also need to consider whether it might be beneficial for the allotments to be looked after by the Charity. These would potentially benefit a new Trust by bringing a more diverse portfolio, urban farming skills, and very clear links to improving public health and wellbeing. With reducing Council resources, we are very keen to secure a positive future for allotments. There are currently:

- Approximately 51 hectares in total.
- 62 Allotment Associations (self-managed with a number of allotment plots) also 42 individual plots, 1 Parish Council Allotment Association, 3 sites managed by the Freeman.
- The Council also manages a number of allotment sites within the 62 above, on the Town Moor, under with an agreement with the Freeman.
- A list of all allotments is also provided.

Recreation Grounds...

These are listed below and we are also considering whether these should also be within the scope of a new Charity:

1. Blakelaw Recreation Ground
2. Broadway West and Redhouse Farm
3. Brunswick Recreation Ground
4. Christon Road
5. Coxlodge Recreation Ground
6. Denton Dene North Recreation Ground
7. Denton Dene South (Scotswood Sports Centre)
8. Dinnington Recreation Ground
9. Fossway Recreation Ground
10. Gala Field
11. Hazelrigg Recreation Ground
12. King George V
13. Kingston Park East
14. Lemington Recreation Ground
15. Manor Park
16. McKendrick Villas
17. Miller's Dene Recreation Ground
18. Norwich Place
19. Swan Hunter's Recreation Ground
20. Throckley Recreation Ground
21. Valley View Recreation Ground

We think the Council will continue to look after....

- **The Town Moor:** this is subject to the Newcastle upon Tyne Town Moor Act 1988 which provides special arrangements to ensure preservation as green open space for public use.
- **Playgrounds:** playgrounds outside of the parks listed above would continue to be maintained by the Council.

Are there other options?

We looked at several other alternatives before coming to the conclusion that a Charity looked like the best solution to investigate in more detail. The other options we thought about are:-

Status Quo / In-House

In the absence of further funding, we cannot continue with in-house delivery – there is no scope to generate the savings needed to meet the budget cuts, and capacity to work on further reducing costs and increasing income is severely restricted - all efforts are being expended on maintaining the status quo.

Create a Local Authority Trading Company (LATC)

We concluded that this would not be agile enough and would not have enough freedom to apply for charitable grants.

Create a Public Sector Mutual (PSM)

The procurement rules in relation to Mutuals mean that this is not a legal option. Even if it was possible, it would only allow relatively short-term contracting arrangements and would not give the service the long-term stability it needs.

Service Providers

There is little scope at present to procure another organisation to provide a “Parks Service” – there is no mature “market”, and the Council no longer has the budget to resource a traditional service contract.

Property Transactions (Leases)

In the absence of a market, there is no one organisation that the Council could asset-transfer the parks to.

Property Transactions (Sales)

The Council’s priority is to preserve the parks as open spaces for the public to enjoy and preserve our natural environment. Furthermore, many of the parks carry covenants which legally restrict the land use to that of a public park. Such restrictions make the property unattractive to commercial organisations and as mentioned previously there is no market for the operation of parks. The opportunity for sales has been investigated and ruled out.

Individual Community or Commercial Ownership

It would be theoretically possible to asset transfer individual parks, providing there are willing commercial or community bodies but with the drawback that parks in less affluent areas may be less attractive and could be left behind, resulting in the Council still having to provide some level of service. This also risks inequality of provision across the City. Keeping the portfolio together is therefore considered the most appropriate option.

Charitable Model

We collaborated with the National Trust, their partner Social Finance, and Liverpool and Sheffield Councils, and this reinforced the view that an entity independent of the Council would be the preferred alternative to local authority operation, and that a charitable structure would provide the best legal protection for the land, preserving public use, but also allowing any income generated to be recycled to look after the estate.

We particularly want to know what you think about...

- The idea of having a dedicated Charity, as opposed to the Council running the parks and allotments, although the Council would continue to own the land.
- The opportunities for parks in supporting public health, and parks' relationship with nearby hospitals.
- The role of parks in delivering a sustainable city including conservation, ecological value, and supporting diversity.
- Volunteers: their roles, recruitment, training, health and safety.
- Involvement in the governance of the Charity.
- The development of destination parks, and the role of neighbourhood parks.
- Events: community and cultural events, flagship events, and their implications.
- Income generation:
 - charging for events and facilities
 - the best use of the buildings in parks
 - restaurants, catering, and licensing issues
 - parking.
- Parks and urban farming and allotments.
- The use of social media and crowdfunding...

....and anything else! Find out more and get involved at:
www.letstalknewcastle.co.uk and www.letstalkparks.co.uk