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Ian Mell

Viewpoint
Parks, COVID-19 and the impact of austerity funding on public-service provision in a time of crisis

Since 2010 funding for local government in the UK has been drastically cut, first under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition (2010/15) and subsequently by successive Conservative governments (2016, 2017, 2019) (Mell, 2020). The impact of this has been a drastic downscaling of funding of local health, education and environmental services. The limitations placed upon local planning authorities (LPAs) by fiscal cuts has been brought to the fore in the UK (and internationally), by the novel coronavirus – COVID-19 – and the subsequent 'stay-at-home' orders issues by the UK government (HM Government, 2020). With restrictions of movement in place, although these are beginning to be relaxed in May 2020, among the few resources available to people are public parks and green spaces. As a result of COVID-19, parks have become both sanctuaries and contentious spaces, physically and conceptually, as the public, LPAs and central government have fought over perceived 'rights' to the landscape, and what practices – if any – should be allowed in them. All of which has been framed within an ongoing debate of austerity government and the management in a time of public-sector contraction. Although the role of austerity in discussions of COVID-19 is centred on the UK, governments globally are engaged in comparable discourses, most noticeably in the United States, where the allocation of federal grants to fund local services is contested (Zimmerman et al., 2019).

How we analyse the impacts of austerity on LPA funding needs to be located within the reaction of governments around the world to COVID-19. Most countries have aimed to limit the spread of the virus by minimising opportunities for social interaction. However, the UK government's Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the Rt Hon. Robert Jenrick MP, stated on 18 April 2020 that 'parks need to stay open', as they support critical health and well-being activities and must be available for people to undertake their daily sanctioned exercise (Walawalker, 2020). The acceptance that parks are currently considered 'critical infrastructure' raises a significant question over the reaction of government to COVID-19 and a ten-year programme of underinvestment in public-service provision in the UK. At a time when parks are needed to address quality-of-life issues, they are in a precarious financial and physical state, as LPAs have systematically cut funding for

Ian Mell, Department of Planning & Environmental Management, School of Environment, Education & Development, University of Manchester, United Kingdom; email: ian.mell@manchester.ac.uk

management to ensure financial solvency (Whitten, 2019). As we progress through the pandemic we can ask whether the current primacy of parks, and green infrastructure more widely,[1] in government consciousness will continue when a sense of normality returns.

Unpacking the complexity of valuing, accessing, using and attributing functionality to parks and public green infrastructure from ongoing examinations of LPA funding remains difficult. Arguments have been made supporting the rationalisation of public-service provision via the downsizing of core grants and other central-government funding, as a mechanism to achieve fiscal sustainability (Local Government Association, 2017). Moreover, through an analysis of policy updates to the National Planning Policy Framework in the UK, we can identify a series of amendments that provide strategies for LPAs, landowners and developers to underfund parks, potentially convert them into developable plots or simply neglect green spaces (Dickinson et al., 2019; Upton, 2019). However, the short-sightedness of this approach has become increasingly apparent to the British public as their ability to engage with spaces outside their homes has become limited.

To aid our understanding of the current situation it is important to reflect on a series of factors that have influenced the funding and management of parks (within a wider discourse of green infrastructure planning) in the UK, the political decision making that has shifted funding away from the welfare state, and the reactions of individuals and communities to the restrictions placed upon them by the COVID-19 lockdown.

There is a legacy of landscape and urban planning illustrating that the provision of parks and green infrastructure was a central component of urban development, and a reaction to health inequality, from the 1800s onwards. The creation of public parks, and the promotion of public accessibility in urban areas, were central to work of Joseph Paxton in Birkenhead Park in Wirral, Victoria Park in London, and the subsequent designs of Frederick Law Olmsted in Boston and New York in the United States (Hall, 2002; Howard, 2009; Eisenman, 2013), with the latter helping to address a cholera outbreak in New York. Additional acts of philanthropic giving coupled with local government purchases provided the stimulus to imbue a number of cities with a spatial legacy of green infrastructure which permeates though urban cores, ensuring public access to high-quality environmental resources. Although such large-scale investments in urban parks are visible in contemporary planning, i.e. the London

1 Within this article, green infrastructure (GI) refers to an interconnected network of green spaces that conserves natural ecosystems, values and functions and provides associated benefits to human populations. GI is the ecological framework needed for environmental, social and economic sustainability (Benedict and McMahon, 2006). GI is used as an overarching term that incorporates a range of terminology used in Liverpool (and the academic/practitioner literature), including green space, parks and blue infrastructure. GI therefore provides the conceptual framework of principles, namely connectivity, access to nature, multi-functionality, the delivery of socio-economic and ecological benefits in one location, and an integrated approach to management.

Olympic Park, we can identify a continuing undervaluation of parks (Young, 2010). Moreover, due to generationally imposed funding shortfalls, i.e. those described by the Heritage Lottery Fund in the 1980s–1990s and current austerity measures (2010 onwards), the structures used to support investment in parks have been compromised (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2016). Therefore, although the need for public space, fresh air in urban areas and opportunities to engage with nature remain prominent, the financial mechanisms available to LPAs to support these activities have been eroded. The positioning of parks as essential infrastructure during the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to redress this shift, and lead to additional lines of funding.

However, within such a political shift lies an inherent problem for local and central government: how valuable are parks economically, as well as socioculturally? Compared to land-value estimates for real-estate development, parks, despite their ecosystem service benefits, are not promoted as the economic equal to built infrastructure (Mell, 2018). In the current market where development is slowing due to access/supply-chain issues, the economic value of parks to society rather than companies has increased. Whether this will be reflected in a more equitable delivery of green infrastructure within development proposals or strategic plans going forward remains open to analysis. What is clear is that even within real-estate discourses, access to high-quality parks improves profit margins, and a green-infrastructure mentality is starting to permeate thinking within the construction industry (cf. Grosvenor, 2015). Whether LPAs can harness this shift in practice is unclear but opportunities exist for them to position parks, communal health and well-being and landscape protection as key issues within development objectives post-COVID-19.

The growing debate focused on the privatisation and commercialisation of public space has also been brought to the fore during COVID-19 discussions. Over an extended period LPAs have been subject to legislative restrictions embedded within the planning system, which provide leverage for increased development over place making/keeping (Dempsey et al., 2014). This has often been to the detriment of local environmental concerns or objections from LPA officers and the public. The post-2010 reforms to the planning system reframed development to maximise delivery and downgrade environment concerns to a secondary consideration. Moreover, as a result of austerity LPA capacity to manage investment through strategic policy has been challenged. Although the streamlining of planning was promoted as decreasing the perceived bureaucratic nature of planning, it could also be argued that central government has stripped the transparency of decision making from the process (McGuinness and Mawson, 2017). In conjunction with more limited capacity, LPAs have been engaged in the sale of assets, whereby public goods are sold to promote development and reduce capital/revenue costs. As a consequence, the funding of green infrastructure has seen significant changes due to these practices, as limiting LPA costs via reduced management has been deemed to be politically expedient. However, due to COVID-19 we are seeing the problems

of asset sales via a growing inequality in the access, spatial distribution and quality of parks across the UK. Moreover, there is evidence that areas of affluence have retained a greater proportion of green infrastructure (square metres/hectares per person) compared to areas of lower incomes (CABE Space and Asset Transfer Unit, 2010). In addition, where demographic profiles are most mixed, i.e. in inner-city wards, the proportion of and access to high-quality parks are most acute. The political direction of planning practice can therefore be viewed as facilitating green-infrastructure 'deserts', especially as communities with lower mean incomes, education and job security are reported as having least access to a private garden.

A further consideration emerging from discussions of COVID-19 is whether we continue to facilitate development at all costs or return to a communitarian view on planning for societal betterment. The latter is an idealistic assessment of planning, one that may never have existed, but the (re-)placement of communities at the centre of planning discourse has been promoted (Healey, 2012). Whether we can plan for communities via a return to the thinking of Ebenezer Howard or Patrick Geddes is debatable (though see Sturzaker, 2020); however, there may be a residual presumption in favour of planning for community infrastructure following the conclusion of the coronavirus pandemic (Hall, 2002). Such a collective perspective would require a significant transference of focus, funding and responsibility from the planning system, central government and LPAs to move away from a development-at-all-costs mandate to a more strategic approach to delivering better places for all.

What are the next steps for planning post-coronavirus? Will we return to a development-first, public-betterment-second rhetoric? Will government in the UK and internationally continue to support, and importantly fund, parks and green infrastructure as critical infrastructure? Or is the view of a greener and more equitable world flawed when located within a neo-liberal market economy that only values these resources in times of civic shortage? There is a wealth of evidence from within the planning and environmental sectors challenging government to fund green infrastructure as a key delivery agent of ecosystem services and socio-economic benefits (Mell, 2020). This is supported by academic research that offers a robust set of arguments identifying the added value that green infrastructure provides to society via health and well-being, climate management (i.e. flooding, biodiversity and air-quality improvements), and economic uplift (Greater London Authority et al., 2017). However, blockages exist in the form of a UK government which continues to attribute to the environment a less significant economic value, thus undermining the extensive evidence base that situates green infrastructure as being as essential as roads, commercial activity and housing in ensuring that cities, and indeed counties, support a high quality of life, place and environment (Pauleit et al., 2019).

It will therefore be of interest to academic and practice-based commentators whether parks and green infrastructure become a legislative imperative post-COVID-19. The

proposed changes to biodiversity net gain[2] and natural capital accounting[3] are two areas where the links between green infrastructure and economic policy are already being co-located. Whether this direction of travel continues, though, will be subject to the mandate of central government, who, in the UK at least, have an economy-first perspective despite the evidence of need and value for green infrastructure developed during COVID-19. In all likelihood we will return to the status quo policy of 'sustainable development aligned with economic growth', yet there are opportunities for change. If the public continue to view parks as critical infrastructure after their choice of location and use is reinstated, and vote accordingly in future elections, we may be entering a brave new world where investment in the environment is of equal importance with built infrastructure.

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2 Biodiversity net gain has been promoted by the UK government as a mechanism to limit the negative impacts of development on the environment. Embedded within the Environment Bill, Biodiversity Net Gain requires developers to provide a net increase in the proportion and quality of ecological resources to obtain planning permission, and upon completion the site must be in a better condition than that prior to the investment commencing. Exemptions are available for major infrastructure projects, some brownfield sites, minor developments and building extensions. In some cases, off-site delivery or compensation will be allowed; however, this must follow the Defra Biodiversity Mitigation Hierarchy (Avoid, Minimise, Remediate, Compensate) (HM Government, 2018).

3 Natural capital accounting is defined by eftec et al. (2019, 6) for the Greater Manchester Climate Authority as 'An investment is an asset or item acquired with the goal of generating income or appreciation'. They go on to state that natural capital accounting takes alternative perspectives: 'In economics, an investment is the purchase of goods that are not consumed today but are used in the future to create wealth. In finance, an investment is a monetary asset purchased with the idea that the asset will provide income in the future or will later be sold at a higher price for a profit. For the purposes of this project, the focus will be investments intended to return principal (initial amount invested) or generate profit while also resulting in a positive impact on natural capital. This includes the complementary use of public and private funds to mobilise additional capital into investable or near investable opportunities. The following definition reflects this: Natural capital investment is funding that is intended to provide a return to the investor while also resulting in a positive impact on natural capital'.

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