

Future Parks Accelerator: Key findings and recommendations



Future Parks Accelerator programme:

Key findings and recommendations

This is a summary of key findings and learning from the evaluation of the Future Parks Accelerator (FPA) programme. FPA is a partnership between the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the National Trust, backed by £14m of investment including £1.2m from the former Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

FPA aims to help local authorities to transform their green space, repurposing it for the 21st century. Eight* local authorities were supported to examine options for strategic planning, funding, management and community engagement to put green spaces on a sustainable footing.

The programme ran from 2019 to 2022. It was devised in response to the continuing decline in local authority funding for parks and green spaces, recognised in 2017 by the House of Commons Communities and Local Government select committee which declared public parks in England to be at 'a tipping point of decline'.

FPA's vision was to create 'a critical mass of public parks and green spaces in the UK on a path to sustainability and transformation to deliver even greater public benefits for the next generation'.

FPA employed a 'high challenge, high support' model, working closely with projects to push them to achieve ambitious goals and providing in-depth support to do so. This help included direct funding; provision of an Account Manager to work with funded projects; support from the FPA team itself, national expertise and learning from National Trust; and technical support from a wide range of external consultants, brokered and paid for by the FPA team.

The evaluation was led by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University, supported by the University of Sheffield and Urban Pollinators Ltd.

Headline findings

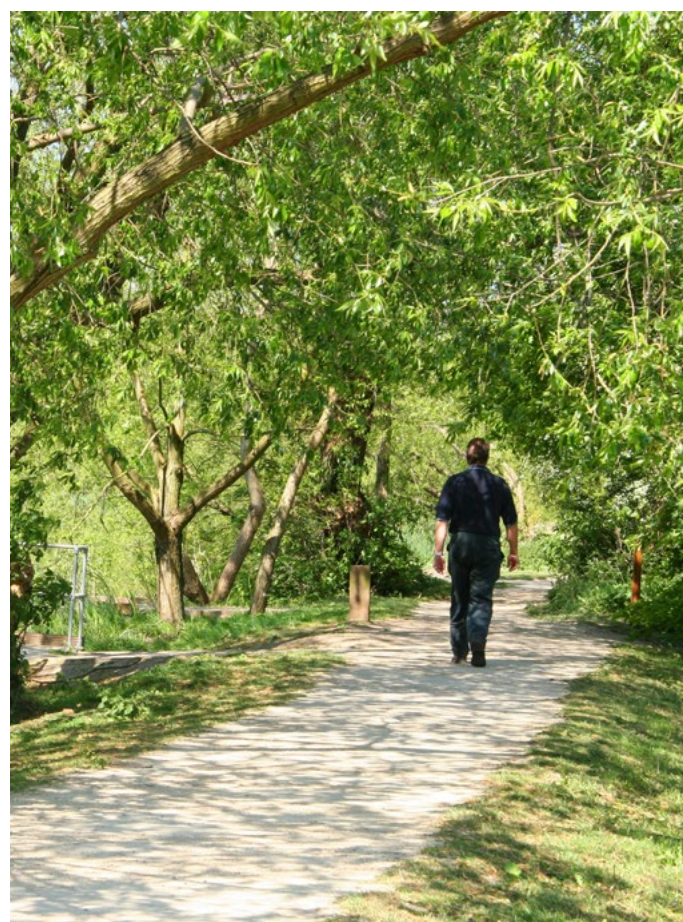
1. FPA was an ambitious programme designed to catalyse systemic change within complex institutions. The creative tension between the 'accelerator' approach and the structures and processes of local authorities generated new thinking in many cases.
2. Across the cohort projects developed new ways of thinking about and planning for green spaces as natural networks supporting a range of health, wellbeing and climate agendas. In most cases this whole-place approach led to adoption or development of new long-term strategies, with buy-in at a senior level. These strategies, if implemented and resourced, can be expected to bring about significant long-term change. For example, Edinburgh Nature Network is seen as a leader in ecological planning in Scotland; Birmingham's environmental justice approach targets investment where inequalities are most pronounced; and Stour Valley Park, in Dorset, shows how green spaces can be planned and enhanced at a landscape scale.
3. Covid-19 foregrounded the importance of green spaces in supporting health and wellbeing. While this disrupted many of the plans for the FPA projects, it helped them to make a long-term case for investment. Similarly, growing awareness of the climate and nature emergencies has strengthened the case for investing in urban green spaces.
4. There is now a significant evidence base on the importance of green spaces, the networks that exist and their ecological benefits, and the values that can be attached to those green assets. FPA has significantly enhanced this local evidence base and linked it with strategies for investment.

* Bristol City Council left the FPA programme in March 2021 but is continuing to deliver some aspects of their initial programme using its own resources.

5. Significant progress has been made in exploring innovative finance in some places, including the establishment of the UK's first urban habitat bank in Plymouth. This has the potential to create a template that may be adopted elsewhere. FPA activities have also successfully supported the case for budgets to be protected in most places, as well as leveraging investment in new capital, revenue and project funding. Combined these amounted to £43m new investment. But funding for parks nationwide remains vulnerable in context of continuing local government financial challenges.

6. FPA did not engage as closely or extensively with community organisations and the wider public as had been hoped. This was largely due to the circumstances of Covid-19, which limited opportunities for face-to-face events. Engagement with a wider range of communities and involving them in decision-making on green spaces was a significant challenge before FPA, and continues to be an area where local authorities need support.

7. Most projects did not create new governance structures (such as charitable trusts and foundations), although the Parks Foundation has been a vital part of the project in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole and is expected to be a key aspect of the council's future plans. In many places it was clear from the outset that the political and public preference was that public green spaces should continue to be owned and managed by local authorities. However, FPA has shown in various ways how local authorities can manage their green spaces more imaginatively and inclusively, drawing on the expertise and enthusiasm of the public and community groups.



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8. There was a consensus that FPA would have benefited from extra time, and a deeper appreciation by the partners at the outset of the complex statutory and democratic responsibilities of local government.

9. FPA will also leave a lasting legacy within the National Trust and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, informing future programmes, partnerships and priorities. The National Trust, for example, is changing the way it manages its own estates, prioritising public benefits in terms of habitat protection and connections with nature as well as attracting visitors and preserving heritage. FPA is also feeding into the development of the Heritage Fund's future strategy.

Impact in the funded places

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Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole

A landscape-wide vision has been developed for the conurbation, the highlight of which is the Stour Valley Park, a multi-partner ambition for a 25km stretch of landscape along the lower River Stour, bringing together landowners, farmers and communities to restore habitats and boost local economies, and catalysing a new strategic partnership with The National Trust.

A new Green Infrastructure Strategy has been produced and adopted, setting out the council's ambitions for green infrastructure development and investment across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole over the next ten years. The Parks Foundation and Council have undertaken work to develop a self-financing Community Parks model which includes volunteering, trading and nature-based activities.

The team have also secured resources to explore green finance mechanisms, in particular through biodiversity net gain instruments. The Parks Foundation, which was the lead organisation on the FPA project, will continue to be a key partner for the council.

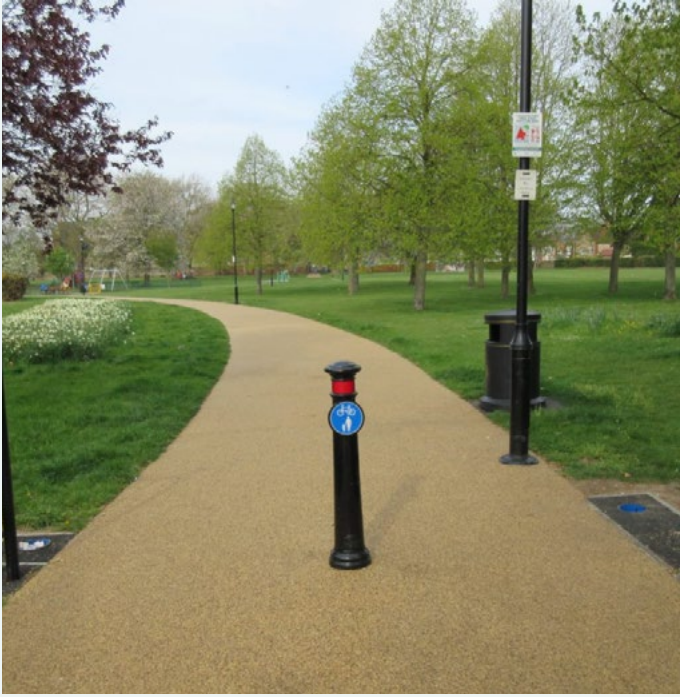


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Birmingham

Birmingham's City of Nature plan was approved in February 2022 and is now official policy. Greenspace is also key to a new health and wellbeing strategy. Investment will be targeted at 'red wards' based on a system of environmental justice mapping which has identified the most under-invested areas. The strategy is supported by a new 'fair parks standard' detailing the quality standards green spaces must meet.

The approach will be tested in Bordesley and Highgate ward with a further five wards to follow. A new City of Nature Alliance will bring together greenspace organisations, including Birmingham Open Spaces Forum, to work with the council and communities and potentially access new sources of funding.



Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

A key achievement has been bringing nine partner organisations together to map natural capital across the area covered by seven local authorities (Cambridgeshire County Council, Peterborough City Council and five district councils). This will be both externally and internally focused, providing a resource for local people, as well as informing planning within local government – for example, linking natural capital with socioeconomic data to highlight areas of inequality at a county-wide scale. A Strategic Parks and Greenspace Unit will continue to coordinate work across the area's green spaces, currently funded until March 2023 with contributions from local authorities.



Camden and Islington

A joint Parks for Health strategy has been agreed in Camden and Islington Borough Councils, with cross-party support. Parks and health have been embedded in working practices - health-related projects are being rolled out and green social prescribing is being introduced across both boroughs. Budgets have been protected to deliver this work. As a follow-up project, Parks for Health principles are being applied in the wider public realm in both boroughs to normalise greening on the highway and create new green spaces.



Edinburgh

Key achievements include the creation of the Edinburgh Nature Network. This city-wide approach to ecological mapping and nature recovery is viewed as a leader for Scotland, and is backed by a Scotland-wide 'fast followers network' of local authorities. This ecological approach to green infrastructure is being integrated into wider plans for city development. Masterplanning has begun for four significant new park development projects. A long-term strategy for the future of Edinburgh's green spaces has been developed, setting out new operational and financial models, and is due to be considered by the council in autumn 2022.



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Nottingham

Like other FPA projects, Nottingham is moving to an integrated approach to greenspace across the city, rather than considering individual parks or green sites. The work links with a range of other council strategies, especially the city's CN28 carbon neutral strategy which has strong political backing. There is increasing emphasis on 'the green in between' and the need to work across council departments and with communities to make the most of the city's green network. A new strategy will be prepared in autumn 2022 to set out a vision of a 'greener, healthier, happier' city.



Plymouth

The headline achievements centre on development of new financial mechanisms for generating revenue, with the city's environmental planning team reporting an additional £9.5m leveraged through FPA. The city has put together a portfolio of potential investment funds, including one of the UK's first urban habitat banks, and has attracted funding to pilot some of these. The first to be put into practice is a biodiversity net gain fund. The council has also received £1.2m from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund for an 18-month 'Plymouth Natural Grid' project. Building from engagement through FPA Plymouth is working to implement change across its workforce, building a workforce with skills for the future.



The context for parks and green spaces

While funding for parks and green spaces within local authorities has continued to decline in recent years, the Covid-19 pandemic heightened awareness of the vital function green space plays in supporting health and wellbeing. This has helped greenspace managers to make the case for budgets to be protected.

Local government funding overall, though, continues to decline in real terms, and also in relation to the demands and duties facing local authorities. The pandemic depleted local authority reserves and many are now struggling to reconfigure their finances, having spent much more during the first waves of the pandemic than they received in government support. The current cost of living crisis makes it more challenging for councils to raise revenue through charges and commercial income.

Similarly, awareness of the climate and nature emergencies has grown in recent years and public awareness of the importance of green spaces in adapting to climate change and providing habitats for other species has increased.

This has led to an increased emphasis on approaching urban green and blue spaces at a landscape scale, strengthening ecological networks as a whole and not just individual parts. This agenda has been at the heart of the FPA projects, all of which now have clearer understandings of the range and connectivity of green assets across their places.

The health benefits of green spaces have also come to the fore through initiatives such as the Green Social Prescribing pilot projects funded by Defra and NHS England, with particularly close integration on FPA in Camden and Islington. These pilots signal a growing willingness in government to consider green and natural spaces as a platform for health and wellbeing initiatives.



What our findings mean for the future

1. FPA has demonstrated how green spaces provide a basis for environmental quality, public health and wellbeing, and with care and investment can play a vital role in addressing a range of pressing challenges. These include mental health, physical activity, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and nature's recovery.
2. FPA has shown how local authorities, given time, resources and imagination, can put green spaces at the centre of their thinking and see them as a vital public asset rather than a liability. Central to this rethinking and testing is an understanding that green and blue infrastructure encompasses much more than public parks, although parks are an important part of it.
3. Achieving significant change within local authorities takes time and requires 'headspace' which FPA provided. Without dedicated time for strategic thinking, supported and encouraged through experts brought together in programmes such as FPA, green spaces risk being sacrificed to solve immediate budgeting problems.
4. Local authorities are well-placed to take responsibility for the long-term care and development of green spaces. But they continue to face challenges to resource that care and FPA has shown that raising additional resources requires an upfront investment of time and energy.
5. There is no single solution to the question of future investment. Local authorities will need to access a variety of sources, but to do so they need capacity in terms of leadership, partnership building and systemic thinking. That in turn requires resourcing: FPA was able to provide this resourcing role but if change is to happen at scale, a more comprehensive approach will be needed.



Main recommendations

- **Funders** can learn from the 'high support, high challenge' methods of FPA in supporting new thinking and ways of working within local authorities and other large institutions and creating space for learning and new thinking to become embedded.
- **Funders** should accept that programmes designed to encourage system change require time and resources of a different calibre to traditional grants programmes. Funding should last a minimum of three years when working with organisations such as local authorities. However, funders also need to be agile in overseeing such programmes, flexing their approach – as FPA did – in the light of new or changed circumstances.
- **Funders** should recognise that the scale of change required within parks and green spaces demands long-term partnerships with local authorities and communities to invest in green and blue infrastructure, repurposing it where needed to meet the challenges of the climate and biodiversity emergencies as well as human health and wellbeing. They should consider how their own funding guidance can be updated to encourage such approaches.
- **Funders** can have greater impact and enhance their own learning by working with a cohort of projects over time and developing communities of practice to share learning and understand common challenges.
- **Local authorities** need to view system change programmes as joint investments, committing senior leadership time to complement the resources provided by external funders. Like funders, they need to give programmes the time and resources to achieve their potential.
- **Local authorities** should learn from the FPA projects about the potential of green spaces to underpin a range of policy agendas. Even in their difficult financial circumstances there are opportunities for them to take the lead in putting green spaces at the heart of wellbeing, inclusion, spatial planning and climate change action.
- **Local authorities** need to fully engage elected members in rethinking parks and green spaces, supporting a cross-party consensus on their importance.
- **Overall, local authorities** need to create a compelling narrative of the change they want to see; set a strategic direction agreed by senior leaders and politicians; resource a dedicated team to take the work forward; and devise a pipeline of deliverable projects to demonstrate what can be done.
- **Local greenspace organisations and community groups** need to promote their spaces as part of a wider agenda of wellbeing, public health and environmental action. They should also consider how they can better reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.
- **National government** should be an engaged partner in learning how change happens in complex environments across multiple strands of policy. This means government should not only support programmes with funding and commission evaluations, but should be present as an active participant, feeding learning back into policy development as programmes develop.

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