

<b>Institution:</b> The University of Leeds		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 18 Law		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Safeguarding and revitalising local authority-led governance of public parks		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2015-2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Anna Barker	Associate Professor in Criminal Justice & Criminology	2016-
David Churchill	Associate Professor in Criminal Justice	2014-
Adam Crawford	Professor of Criminology & Criminal Justice	1993-
Jose Pina-Sánchez	Associate Professor in Quantitative Criminology	2015-
Nathan Booth	Research Officer in Urban Sociology & Social History	2016-17
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015-20		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Research into the history, management, funding and use of public parks by a multidisciplinary team at Leeds contributed to safeguarding and revitalising local authority-led park governance in the face of sustained funding cuts and absence of statutory protection. The research influenced policy and professional practice in Leeds park services and informed Leeds City Council's ten-year parks strategy, particularly regarding the accessibility and quality of parks. Through public engagement, the research cultivated civic involvement in park governance and shaped the <i>Love Leeds Parks</i> charitable initiative. Nationally, government policy-makers, parks charities and civil society organisations used the research to inform their thinking and strategies, including as evidence for a UK local authority parks toolkit, a national business case for parks, and for fundraising initiatives.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Public parks have been vital components of cities since the nineteenth century, providing over GBP6.6 billion in health, climate protection and environmental benefits each year in England (<a href="#">The Parks Alliance</a>, 2020). The importance of high-quality local public green spaces for physical and mental well-being has been brought into sharp focus by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet deep funding cuts, increasing user demand and a lack of statutory protection have left local authorities struggling to provide and maintain urban parks. Some have abandoned local authority governance for untested alternatives (e.g. trusts), whilst others have heavily commercialised parks assets, reduced maintenance or have sold off portions of parkland. A <a href="#">Parliamentary inquiry</a> (2016-17) concluded that Britain's 27,000 parks are at a 'tipping point', under threat of decline leading to 'severe consequences'. The team's research supports safeguarding local authority-led governance and revitalising it to meet ongoing financial and structural challenges and constraints.</p> <p>The underpinning research derives from two projects conducted in partnership with Leeds City Council (LCC). The Arts and Humanities Research Council project, 2015-17 <b>[a]</b>, explored the use, experience and prospects of parks in Leeds, in their Victorian origins and today. It combined original archival research with a representative citywide survey (6,432 respondents) and interviews with 165 stakeholders. It created a new digital archive of publicly-sourced historic photographs of Leeds parks (hosted by Leeds Library Service at <a href="http://www.leodis.net/">http://www.leodis.net/</a>) and analysed the implications of financial and social pressures on parks. The National Lottery/Nesta project, 2018-20 <b>[b]</b>, formed part of the national 'Rethinking Parks' programme, which piloted innovative models of funding and management with potential to make UK parks sustainable. Combining surveys and interviews with park volunteers, users and businesses, it explored attitudes to <i>Leeds Parks Fund</i> – a charitable initiative launched in 2017 by LCC, Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Forum (LPGSF) and Leeds Community Foundation to improve parks through</p>		

donations and community engagement. The reach and influence of the above research [a,b] was extended through engagement with the public and policy-makers at local and national levels [c,d].

### Findings

Linked programmes of multi-method, interdisciplinary research provided a distinctive analysis of urban parks, connecting past and present in ways that ‘care for the future’. Key findings included:

- Local authority leadership has played a vital and enduring role in sustaining urban parks despite external threats, preserving their significant social, environmental and economic benefits [4,1].
- People invest significantly in their attachments to local parks but they are largely unaware of threats to their management, the lack of statutory protection and diminishing funding [2,5,6]. Park-users must be engaged in understanding financial and social pressures, and actively shape future parks’ strategy and governance [2,5,6].
- Harnessing the resources, knowledge and capabilities of civil society, businesses and park-users can help to revitalise local authority governance, sustaining free, equal access to quality parks [2,5,6]. Multilateral initiatives, such as *Leeds Parks Fund*, support local authorities to engage communities in improving parks, including through voluntary donations. Some 76% of residents and 69% of business leaders surveyed support donations to supplement public funding [6]. The research uncovered motivations and barriers affecting donations to parks and recommended an independent governance model for *Leeds Parks Fund* [6].
- Parks that meet recognised quality standards offer enriched user experiences and are significantly associated with higher levels of satisfaction and visitation [5]. Yet user satisfaction and park quality are unevenly distributed across Leeds’s communities [5]. The research team recommended that parks below quality standards have site management plans to reduce differentials in satisfaction, ensuring a quality visitor experience is available to all [5]. Moreover, they identified a need to enhance accessibility to ensure all benefit from urban parks. While over 45 million park visits are made in Leeds each year, older and disabled people are relatively low users, often due to poor health, disability and accessibility concerns [5].
- A longstanding hallmark of local authority park governance has been the presumption of free, open public access and the provision of a democratic forum for managing conflicting uses [1]. Improving the quality and accessibility of urban parks is vital to their public purpose as places of social mixing, offsetting moves toward social segmentation in hyper-diverse cities [3].

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] Churchill, D., Crawford, A. and Barker, A. 2018. ‘Thinking forward through the past: prospecting for urban order in (Victorian) public parks’. *Theoretical Criminology* 22(4), 523-44. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1362480617713986>. Listed in REF2.
- [2] Barker, A., Crawford, A., Booth, N. and Churchill, D. 2020. ‘Park futures: excavating images of tomorrow’s urban green spaces’. *Urban Studies* 57(12), 2456-72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098019875405>.
- [3] Barker, A., Crawford, A., Booth, N. and Churchill, D. 2019. ‘Everyday encounters with difference in urban parks: forging “openness to otherness” in segmenting cities’. *International Journal of Law in Context* 15(4), 495-514. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744552319000387>. Listed in REF2.
- [4] Booth, N., Churchill, D., Barker, A. and Crawford, A. 2020. ‘Spaces apart: public parks and the differentiation of space in Leeds, 1850-1914’. *Urban History*. FirstView: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926820000449>.
- [5] Barker, A., Churchill, D. and Crawford, A. 2018. *Leeds Parks Survey: Full Report*. University of Leeds. <https://doi.org/10.5518/100/4>.
- [6] Barker, A. and Pina-Sánchez, J. 2019. *Charitable Giving to Parks: Public and Business Opinion in Leeds, UK*. University of Leeds. <https://doi.org/10.5518/100/11>.

The research was supported by multiple grants secured in open peer-reviewed competition:

- [a] AHRC ‘The Future Prospects of Urban Parks: The Life, Times and Social Order of Victorian Public Parks as Places of Social Mixing’, (GBP195,703; 2015-17, AH/N001788/2). LCC contributed in-kind resources of GBP35,240.

**[b] National Lottery Heritage Fund, National Lottery Community Fund and Nesta** 'The Leeds Parks Fund: Developing a Model for Charitable Giving to Parks', (GBP171,289; 2018-20). LCC was the lead applicant (GBP30,054 to the University of Leeds).

**[c] ESRC Impact Acceleration Account** funded two projects to extend the impact of **[a,b]**. The first (GBP15,997.30, 2017-18) developed a national network to foster a research-informed policy debate following the Parliamentary inquiry. The second (GBP6,380, 2019) used the research to engage over 900 park-users in a public consultation on Leeds parks strategy (ESRC Festival of Social Science, 9 November 2019).

**[d] Research England** (GBP1,900; 2020) project extended activities in **[c]** through engagement with over 50 representatives from LCC and external organisations (30 January 2020).

**Barker** was the PI on grants **[a-d]**. **Churchill** and **Crawford** were named Co-Is on grants **[a,c]**. **Pina-Sánchez** was Co-I on grant **[b]**. **Booth** was the research officer employed on grants **[a,c]**.

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research led to changes in parks policy, practice and civic engagement in Leeds – resulting in improvements for park-users and funding for community groups – and fostered debate in national policy fora. Key beneficiaries included park managers, park-users and volunteers in Leeds, and municipal authorities, national park alliances, civil society organisations and government policy-makers. The three dimensions of impact from the team's research were:

##### (i) Influencing local policy and practice to safeguard high-quality, accessible parks in Leeds

The research contributed to safeguarding high-quality, accessible parks and strategic commitment to local authority-led park governance in Leeds **[A,B]**, the second-largest urban local authority in the UK. Impact resulted from quarterly meetings to discuss interim findings with the senior leadership team of LCC's Parks and Countryside Service (2015-17) and a half-day workshop with 25 members of the Service's management team (19 January 2018).

In the face of budget cuts of 50%, the team's research underpinned investments in park quality. Findings linking park quality to levels of use and satisfaction **[5]** led Parks and Countryside to refocus investment on improving community parks and to make park quality a key priority of their 2020-2030 strategy **[A,B]**. The Chief Officer stated: *'The research... enabled us to work out if we are delivering a service that serves the public well (which is key for a public service), and where to make improvements. In particular, research findings on the significance of park quality for visitation and user satisfaction have underpinned the Service's ongoing commitment to invest in improving quality across the city's parks... As a result, both Access and Quality were identified as key areas for consultation and have been proposed as priorities for the next Parks and Green Spaces Strategy.'* **[A]** The 2020-2030 strategy also introduces management plans for community parks, as recommended in **[5]**, to drive improvements in satisfaction and use **[A,B]**.

The research drove work to improve accessibility, extending the benefits of park use to wider groups. In response to findings on lower levels of use among older and disabled people **[5]**, Parks and Countryside worked with Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Forum (a voluntary organisation representing over 90 local groups) to identify concerns about equality of access in annual park audits. The LPGSF Chair confirmed: *'Anna's [team's] research has shown us that parks are least visited by elderly and disabled people for a number of reasons, one being poor accessibility. As a result, with LCC officers, we have embarked on an audit of accessibility, using Forum members as a volunteer resource to collect data, which will help to prioritise improvements'* **[C]**. Further, Parks and Countryside made accessibility a key priority of its strategy **[A,B]**.

Impact on policy and practice improved the quality of parks, with knock-on benefits for users. Some 70% of parks met the Leeds Quality Parks standard in 2018, compared with 50% in 2016. Some 91% of residents are park-users, 88% of whom view parks as important to their quality of life **[5]**; this suggests over 700,000 potential beneficiaries. The Parks and Countryside Chief Officer also confirmed economic benefits were accrued: *'the research findings on visitation levels have been used to set business sponsorship rates across various sites'* **[A]**.

##### (ii) Revitalising local park governance through civic engagement in Leeds

The team led a programme of research engagement activities with park-users, volunteers and businesses, improving public understanding, cultivating civic engagement in parks policy and

informing Parks and Countryside's 2020-2030 strategy consultation. Activities included: public exhibitions of research findings across the city (e.g. Roundhay Park, 29 April – 1 May 2017, attracting over 1,000 visitors); a new digital, photographic archive of Leeds's parks (<http://www.leodis.net/>); and regular project updates to LPGSF meetings (2016-19).

Public engagement activities, widely covered in regional media (e.g. [BBC Look North](#), 6 July 2016; [BBC News](#), 25 April 2017), enhanced local understanding of parks and raised awareness of the difficulties parks face due to spending cuts and lack of statutory protection. Visitor feedback at exhibitions attests to raised awareness among park-users: *'The exhibition... made me realise parks may be in danger'*. Volunteers benefited from these insights too – the Chair of LPGSF said: *'The research... helped us to understand the challenges facing [parks], including an awareness of the national picture... which has been useful in comparing Leeds' situation with other cities'* [C].

Greater awareness and understanding contributed to an informed public consultation, shaping Parks and Countryside's 2020-2030 strategy [B]. With Parks and Countryside managers and LPGSF, the research team led a public consultation event (over 900 attendees, 9 November 2019), which used research findings (via displays, an [animated video](#), talks and workshops) to support civic engagement [A,B,C]. Parks and Countryside cited the findings [5,6] extensively in its consultation documents [B] and used the research in over 35 consultation events (which produced over 2,000 responses) [A,B]. The Chief Officer confirmed: *'Engagement with the research led to a high-quality, evidence-based consultation in which members of the public were able to assess strategic priorities fully informed of the key facts and issues'* [A]. The LPGSF Chair affirmed: *'With the benefit of the research... the Forum's impact is greater when speaking with LCC officers, Councillors and other decision-makers, using [research] evidence as examples'* [C].

Research findings on barriers to charitable giving for parks [6] directly influenced the rebranding of *Leeds Parks Fund* to *Love Leeds Parks* [D], the move to establish an independent charity [A,C], and fundraising and marketing strategies [A,D]. According to the Chief Officer of Parks and Countryside: *'a decision has been taken for the charity to become completely independent because confusion around the governance of the scheme was an issue highlighted in the research'* [A]. *Love Leeds Parks* applied to be registered at the Charity Commission on 27 October 2020 (charity no. 1193205). Impact resulted from monthly steering group meetings with *Love Leeds Parks* partners (2018-20), who used the research [5,6] to engage residents and businesses, including through the [Give A Little Back Campaign](#) (June 2020), ['Help Our City Grow' Tabloid](#) (February 2020) and *Love Leeds Parks Festival* (8-16 August 2020) cultivating civic engagement through voluntary donations. In 2019, 13 community groups involving 90 volunteers benefitted from donations raised (GBP23,182), supporting improvements to park quality and accessibility (e.g. guided walks for under-represented user-groups), including 2,477 direct beneficiaries [D].

### **(iii) Informing national policy debate and municipal authorities beyond Leeds**

Through developing a national network of parks organisations, the team mobilised their research findings to advocate for local authority-led park governance and promote initiatives to diversify park revenue streams, thereby helping to shape the development of UK parks policy.

In light of the 2016-17 Parliamentary inquiry into parks, which cited the research to affirm the enduring value of parks [E], the team developed collaborations with Historic England, The Parks Alliance (TPA) and Groundwork. This network [c] drew on the research (notably [2,4,5]) on the social value of parks and the implications of spending cuts to call for a sustainable UK parks policy. Impact was achieved through a joint national conference on [The Future of UK Public Parks](#) (13 July 2017), organised and hosted by Barker, with attendees from 66 organisations (including the Chair of the Parliamentary select committee that led the parks inquiry), and through accompanying media engagement (e.g. [The Metro](#)). The conference deliberations informed the work of the UK Government's [Parks Action Group](#) (PAG) launched in September 2017, comprising government officials and sectoral representatives. Impact resulted from: network partner representation on PAG; a meeting between the research team and a PAG representative from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) (13 November 2017); and a national workshop of research findings from [b] (20 April 2019), attended by MHCLG officials. These activities shaped government thinking on new approaches to parks funding. The then Minister for Communities and Faith remarked: *'...officials in the Parks and Green Spaces team have been*

*actively engaging representatives from the University of Leeds for some time... My officials will... promote the learning from the "Charitable Giving to Parks and Green Spaces" report and... build this into our policy thinking' [G]. TPA drew on the research [5,6] in developing the [Business Case for Parks in England](#) (June 2020). The TPA Project Manager stated: 'The findings... contributed to the strategic and management cases...to the financial case...and the recommendations for diversifying revenue streams to maintain funding for public parks' [F]. The National Landscape Advisor for Historic England drew on the research in national policy exchanges to advocate for local authority governance [H], and confirmed: 'The University of Leeds research has helped corroborate and deepen our understanding about the role of parks and how people use [them] and the tensions between communities, park uses and choice of parks. The 2020 Covid-19 Lockdown experience and the importance of public green space has [highlighted] the importance of this research and in particular equity of access and governance' [H].*

Through engagement with Nesta – an innovation foundation that helps policy-makers and communities recraft public services – the research findings on barriers to charitable giving for parks [6] benefitted municipal authorities and park charities nationally. Impact resulted from contributions to Nesta's national 'Rethinking Parks' programme at specially convened meetings (2018-19) and a [national workshop](#) [6] with 46 delegates from 31 organisations across public, voluntary and charitable sectors (30 April 2019). The research [6] formed one of four reference points in Nesta's toolkit to promote parks foundations in supporting UK local authorities adapt in a challenging financial context [I]. The Head of New Operating Models at Nesta confirmed that the research was used in Leeds, Bournemouth and the Lake District as a 'reference point for evidence-based decisions on what works in fundraising in a time of changing funding to public parks' [I].

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

**[A]** Leeds City Council Parks and Countryside, in relation to 4(i) and (ii). Letter of corroboration from the Chief Officer dated 23 July 2020.

**[B]** Leeds City Council, in relation to 4(i) and (ii). 'Towards a parks and green spaces strategy 2020 – 2030' (2019, pp. 4, 8-10, 14-15, 17, 19, 24): <https://democracy.leeds.gov.uk/documents/s194426/Item%209-%20Appendix%20%20-%20Towards%20a%20Leeds%20PGS%20Strategy%20to%202030.pdf>; 'Parks & Green Spaces Strategy 2020-2030 – findings of public consultation' (2020, pp. 2, 4-6, 8-10, 18), PDF supplied.

**[C]** Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Forum, in relation to 4(i) and (ii). Letter of corroboration from the Chair dated 27 March 2020.

**[D]** Leeds Parks Fund/Love Leeds Parks, in relation to 4(ii). 'Fundraising and marketing strategy' (2019, pp. 2-6) PDF supplied; *Love Leeds Parks* articles 2019-20: <https://loveleedsparks.org.uk/news/> ('We have changed our name to Love Leeds Parks!', 'First grants focus on environment', 'Festival line up announced', 'Love Leeds Parks tabloid published', 'Give A Little Back campaign'); Leeds Parks Fund Outcomes Report (2021, pp.3) PDF supplied.

**[E]** House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee, in relation to 4(iii). 'Public Parks - Seventh Report of Session 2016–17' (2017, p. 17): <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmcomloc/45/45.pdf>.

**[F]** The Parks Alliance, in relation to 4(iii). Letter of corroboration from the Project Manager dated 3 March 2020.

**[G]** Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, in relation to 4(iii). Correspondence between Minister for Communities and Faith and MP for Richmond (N. Yorks) dated 2 September 2019.

**[H]** Historic England, in relation to 4(iii). Letter of corroboration from the National Landscape Advisor dated 19 October 2020; 'Response to consultation on Running Free - Preserving the Use of Public Parks' (2017, p.4) <https://historicengland.org.uk/content/docs/consultations/response-consultation-running-free-preserving-use-of-public-parks-jul17-pdf/>.

**[I]** Nesta, in relation to 4(iii). Letter of corroboration from the Head of New Operating Models dated 24 February 2020; 'How to set up a Parks Foundation' Toolkit (2020, pp. 6, 25, 42): <https://www.nesta.org.uk/toolkit/how-set-parks-foundation/>.