

YOUNG GREEN LEADERS

Promoting social
action to sustain
green spaces

YOUNG GREEN LEADERS

Section 1. Young people and their environment - crisis or opportunity?	1
Section 2. Place to go and places to grow	4
Section 3. Developing tomorrow's decision-makers	8
Conclusion	14
References	15

Young people and their environment - crisis or opportunity?

1

In an era of restricted public spending, organisations engaged in managing and maintaining local services, facilities and infrastructure are being required to make decisions which will have far-reaching consequences for our communities. The way in which those decisions are being made varies enormously, particularly among local authorities who are often at the sharp end of this debate.

While some have embraced an outsourcing culture, streamlining their own structures to a 'commissioning core', others have publicly stated their priority is to preserve in-house services and jobs. Whichever model is applied the impact on most people's experience of front line services is likely to be pretty similar. With limited room for manoeuvre spending priority is inevitably going to be given to 'critical' services such as child protection and adult social care – tightly targeted on those most in need - at the expense of more universal services and facilities.

An obvious consequence of this is that an increasing percentage of available spend is being allocated to a reducing proportion of the local population. It also means we all have to think differently about services and facilities that we've long taken for granted, including those that frequently score highest when people are consulted about what makes their area a good place to live. Two of those are facilities and activities for young people and the provision of parks and open spaces, both of which are facing major pressures and demanding radical solutions.

Cuts already applied to local authority youth services are reported to range between 25 - 75%ⁱ, with the National Children's Bureau and The Children's Society recently estimating a further 13% reduction in early intervention spending in the current yearⁱⁱ. These reductions have had significant knock-on impacts for voluntary sector organisations who have traditionally provided a web of more informal, community-based activities on behalf of or alongside council provision. The focus of government programmes is to continue driving down the number of young people who are not 'earning or learning' (more than 900,000 young people were not in education, employment or training at the last count)ⁱⁱⁱ while building the character and resilience of young people through support for uniformed organisations and its flagship National Citizen Service. Both are laudable endeavours but neither likely to make up for the loss of informal, community-based youth work which has been so instrumental over the years in keeping young people occupied, motivated, diverted away from damaging behaviour and plugged into the fabric of their communities.

Young people and their environment

1

The places many young people spend a lot of their free time – and where they *can* be plugged into the fabric of their communities – are also in trouble. Contrary to common perception, most young people spend most time not in their bedroom with a games console but out in their neighbourhood, in the network of formal and informal green and open spaces that serve as hang-outs, meeting places and kickabout areas. The general public sees access to quality green space as a key public service, alongside housing, health and education but this essential part of neighbourhood living is under threat. The Heritage Lottery Fund report *State of UK Public Parks 2014* warns that unless funding is generated in new ways, parks and green spaces are at serious risk of rapid decline or being lost to the public forever. 86% of park managers report significant cuts to revenue budgets since 2010 and 45% of local authorities say they are actively considering selling green spaces which they can't afford to maintain.^{iv}

Survey after survey shows that people believe providing facilities for children and young people should be a priority for public spending, and 61% of the park-going public agree.^v

Clearly there's no single or simple answer to this funding conundrum. One thing that is inarguable, however, is that local communities will need to do more for themselves if they want to see these services sustained. Call it Big Society, call it neighbourhood devolution, call it old fashioned community spirit, the fact is that more activities and assets that we currently see as important to our quality of life will need to be self-sustaining and volunteer-led and managed if they're going to survive.



Young people and their environment

1

We should have confidence. In both areas – activities for young people and the upkeep of green spaces – voluntary action has been widespread for years. The Scout and Guide movements, for example, continue to mobilise thousands of volunteers every year and networks of local ‘friends groups’ caring for parks are expanding and developing a powerful national voice. What we haven’t yet achieved – and where there is a bigger prize to be gained – is connecting these concerns and these voluntary movements. If we want young people to be informed, active local citizens then playing a bigger role in looking after the physical fabric of their neighbourhood is an important first step in developing their decision-making skills. If we want our parks and green spaces to continue benefiting us socially and environmentally long into the future then we need to enthuse young people to become their custodians and champions.



Place to go and places to grow

2

It has been well established that good quality, accessible, multi-functional green and open spaces contribute significantly to the wellbeing and prosperity of communities (over and above their evident environmental benefits). We also know that without enough places to hang out, young people are more likely to congregate where they feel safe - on street corners or in front of local shops - precisely where adults don't want them to.

The growth in popularity of 'friends' groups in recent years has seen an upsurge in the number of green spaces being improved and managed by local communities. Volunteers from all walks of life and in all parts of the country have devoted their time and energies to make our parks great places to visit, and fundraise an estimated £30m each year for their development and upkeep.^{vi}



Place to go and places to grow

2

When we think about young people in our open spaces, however, society in general still sees them as a problem or inconvenience. Anti-social behaviour by young people remains high on the agenda of most friends group meetings and a high priority for local neighbourhood police teams responding to community concerns. Young people are blamed for much of the graffiti, drug taking, alcohol abuse and vandalism that happens in parks. The fashion a few years ago for ‘mosquito’ alarms, which emit a high-pitched sound designed to disperse young people from particular places showed how far we had sunk as a ‘child-unfriendly’ society.

As with the fear of crime, public perception of negative youth culture is much higher than the reality. Research shows that alcohol and drug abuse among young people is on a downward trend^{vii} ^{viii} and that young people are much more likely to be victims of violent crime.^{ix} The experience of many organisations working in the sector is that young people are often more scared than adults to use green spaces if they are dark, obscured by heavy vegetation and littered with drug paraphernalia.^x

These issues are thrown into even sharper relief for young people growing up in more disadvantaged areas. The landmark report *Urban Green Nation*, completed by CABI Space shortly before it was dismantled as the government’s green space champion, conclusively established the link between social deprivation and access to good quality green space. It showed that people who live in areas of multiple disadvantage are most likely to have poorer quality green spaces nearby and to use them less.

There are many reasons why we need to think differently about how we engage young people in action to improve the local environment. Chief amongst them is the fact that young people spend more time outdoors in their local area. They also have strong views about how it could be improved. Natural England’s longitudinal study Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment found that between 2013 and 2014 there were 778 million visits to parks in towns and cities with 52% of people strongly agreeing access to local green spaces is important.^{xi}



Place to go and places to grow

2

A BBC poll found parks were the third most frequently used public service for 78% of respondents just behind 86% using hospitals and 90% using GP surgeries.^{xii} Whilst stereotypes abound that young people spend the majority of their time behind closed curtains immersed in social networks, in actual fact 62% of 16-24 year olds say they visit the outdoors once a week or more.^{xiii} They also want better quality green space with 15% believing parks are the aspect of their area that most needs improvement.^{xiv} A lack of facilities is a big barrier for young people, particularly lack of football or cricket pitches, and two thirds of 9-11 year olds in the UK are dissatisfied with the quality of outdoor play activities, rising to 81% for 15-16 year olds - higher than any other European country.

This desire for better local facilities and a more equitable distribution of those facilities in more deprived areas won't be met if, as concluded by the *State of UK Public Parks*, there is an increasing trend to make parks a 'pay to use' facility, for example by charging for the use of sports pitches in order to offset budget reductions. This will only further disadvantage young people from poorer families. Similarly the trend to focus shrinking green space budgets on high-footfall town centre parks and gardens at the expense of less formal, neighbourhood spaces will again impact most heavily on young people who, being less mobile, rely on parks, play areas and informal spaces within easy walking distance of home.



Place to go and places to grow

2

High quality, well-maintained parks and green spaces provide multiple benefits. They provide a range of free activities for all age groups, from outdoor play to free music and community events. They act as a venue for sports, learning, nature conservation and adventure. Connecting children and young people with community-based environmental projects is good for their learning and development, for re-engaging those who may be at risk of underperforming or dropping out of school, and also for preparing young people for employment and a transition to adult life. Hands-on, multi-sensory teaching methods in the outdoors are particularly effective for engaging people with learning difficulties and disabilities. Open spaces encourage social and inter-generational mixing and provide settings to establish routines and habits that keep us physically active and mentally well.

Green spaces are fundamentally important to the health and wellbeing of our children. If we can engage more young people in making decisions about how those green spaces are managed and in volunteering to improve and maintain them we can deliver even more benefits.



Developing tomorrow's decision-makers

3

Encouraging 'social action' by young people is a major priority for government and an aim shared by many youth organisations. The campaign *Step Up to Serve* set a target for the government to get 60% of young people volunteering or contributing to their communities over the next five years. Most eggs have been put in the National Citizen Service (NCS) basket, a programme of outward bound adventure and community volunteering designed to give 15-17 year olds the character, problem-solving skills, confidence and resilience they will need for future employment, as well as offering them a transformative experience at a key transition point in their life.

NCS has not been universally welcomed with detractors characterising it as a 'gap year' type experience for the better off and better able, funded at the expense of other tried and tested provision. However, delivered well and inclusively, NCS can be life changing. It is popular politically and among those young people who do take part, with a 2013 evaluation finding that over 90% of participants reported developing useful skills for the future.^{xv} The real challenge is how we turn a one-off experience into a long-term commitment to community action and how we provide parallel opportunities for young people who don't benefit from the NCS experience.

The think tank Demos argues that the skills engendered by NCS and other social action initiatives are necessary to boost our economy and our democracy in the long-term. Their series of reports on young people argues that this new 'Generation Citizen' is more socially engaged with activism and volunteering than ever before.^{xvi} One million young people are participating in youth-led democracy, responding to campaigns and elections run by the UK Youth Parliament over the past two years. Young role models like schoolgirl and Nobel peace prize winner Malala Yousafzai increase the number of young people who believe they can make an individual difference. The Scottish referendum and the Labour leadership campaign demonstrate that young people can be integral to national movements for political change.

Developing tomorrow's decision-makers

3

This upsurge in youth activism should prompt us to think differently about our modes of engagement across a whole range of fronts. Born as digital natives, this generation responds to campaigns that can deliver more immediate results. It's not hard to understand why social media campaigns like the *Ice Bucket Challenge* are likely to be seen as more satisfying than the slower process of local governance. If we want to engage young people as agents of change in their neighbourhood then we can't expect to do that through the traditional forms of committees and consultations. Neither can we rely any more on networks of funded youth workers acting as intermediaries between young people and adults in their community or decision-makers in town halls. We have to find new ways of inspiring and supporting young people to become active citizens and community leaders and new models to make that engagement self-sustaining.

The appetite is there. A recent YouGov Survey commissioned by Groundwork found that 69% of young people responding said they want to volunteer to help create community spaces, but only 7% currently do.^{xvii}

So how do we turn appetite into action? There are three keys to success. We need to do things differently as adults, get the maximum bang for our shrinking buck and pay much more cognisance of young people's priorities and motivations.

1 Digital disruption

Improving the physical fabric of local neighbourhoods requires practical action. However, it is also dependent on decision-making by public bodies and consultation with the wider community. Delivered in traditional ways both can serve to exclude or disaffect young people. The experience of many organisations is that supported, project-based activity focused on relatively simple outdoor tasks can provide a perfect test bed for nurturing lasting active citizenship. Young people can partake in projects that are relevant, local and deliver tangible results and, through the process of achieving change, learn how to interact with adults, councillors, public bodies, businesses and democratic institutions. The sense of achievement and ownership built by that active involvement can be instrumental in young people taking pride in their area and recalibrating their own personal aspirations.

With an increasingly threadbare fabric of local youth provision, there is a need and opportunity to support existing and new voluntary groups to adapt their approaches to secure the involvement of young people in a less 'managed', more networked way. Digital media provides huge potential in this respect. Rather than being seen as a driver of individualism – something that stands in the way of young people experiencing the 'real life' benefits of open spaces – we should embrace the ability of young people to build networks and drive campaigns online which can deliver practical 'offline' benefits in terms of volunteering, consultation or rapid decision-making.

The digital sphere also allows young people to make a much more obvious connection between what's going on in their neighbourhood and national political campaigns or even global movements. The goal is to harness digital creativity to find new modes of local citizenship, which in turn have the potential to drive stronger democratic engagement.

Developing tomorrow's decision-makers

3

The Fabian Society's report *Places to Be: green spaces for active citizenship* argues there is a prime opportunity to use green spaces as an arena for empowering citizens and encouraging wider democratic engagement. It urges councils and communities to rethink their relationship with each other to fashion partnership solutions to the challenge of austerity.

"We need to think anew: about how to support people to do more for the places they care about; for local councils to do things differently and find new and innovative ways of co-ordinating services; and for central government to give clearer leadership and organise better." ^{xviii} – Fabian Society - *Places to be: Green spaces for active citizenship*, 2015

The interest shown by young people in the spaces and places that surround them opens the door to a programme that develops citizenship skills and fosters democratic renewal, which could both provide a driver for the local management of services and reinvigorate political campaigning.



Developing tomorrow's decision-makers

3

2 Focussing investment

There have been more than 100 government programmes funded over the last thirty years aimed at tackling problems faced by young people. Few have survived for more than three years, whilst disadvantage amongst 10 - 20% of young people persists. Councils are now being told that what happens next is up to them, backed up by devolution deals intended to ensure local initiatives match local need. Given the parallel reductions in spending, the other side of the devolution coin is the need to do more for less and to get the maximum impact from pooled local budgets.

Helping young people plan and drive projects to improve parks, create new recreational facilities or take over the management of community assets or services can stimulate significant cross-cutting benefits which, in turn, can realise savings across a range of hard-pressed service budgets.

Reductions in anti-social behaviour and the associated costs of cleaning up vandalism or responding to nuisance events are a common outcome of programmes focused on youth-led practical environmental action. Making green spaces better, more accessible and safer for the wider community also brings with it measurable improvements in health and wellbeing. 20% of visits to parks by 16 - 44 year olds are motivated by exercise and health and more GPs are recognising the potential of 'prescribing' outdoor exercise or volunteering.

Demos make the connection between youth social action and improving mental health, an increasingly prevalent issue affecting young people, especially those who are long term unemployed or who have grown up in care.

"Youth social action can help to combat mental health issues by giving young people a sense of achievement, empowerment and worth". – Demos, Service Nation, 2013

The report highlights a particular study which found a sports-based volunteering programme aimed at young people led to a 10% increase in self-esteem, emotional wellbeing and resilience with participants 15% less likely to worry or feel anxious.

The challenge in terms of unlocking resources lies in providing empirical proof of what we all know to be self-evident (that getting involved in making physical improvements to the local environment makes us feel better) and changing the way services are commissioned so that outcomes are captured and savings recognised in a way that enables a range of local agencies to invest in the same provision. If we want public health teams or GPs to invest in helping young people improve local green space then we have to prove that it leads more young people to make healthier lifestyle choices or avoid the negative health impacts of becoming NEET and we need a system that allows the long-term cash savings to the NHS to be 'banked' upfront.

Devolution will assist this process as the budgets of local agencies become more integrated and flexible enabling longer-term planning. However, it's vital that the second half of the devolution deal holds good – namely ensuring that local agencies then work together to devolve decision-making and service management to the neighbourhood level. With the right encouragement and support this is the level at which meaningful involvement by young people in the way their neighbourhoods are run becomes a realistic – and exciting - prospect. Circle Crew for Change is the country's first youth-led mutual. Established in South Consett, County Durham, with the support of Groundwork and a range of local agencies it is now providing a vehicle for helping young people shape local service provision in the area, offering a range of services from residential trips to mentoring.

Developing tomorrow's decision-makers

3

3 Making citizenship pay

Even with the right infrastructure and funding in place, we need to work hard to ensure that engaging in community projects or social action is attractive and rewarding for young people, some of whom will have few positive role models and a distrust of authority. Understanding the motivations of young people and designing models of engagement that help them realise their aspirations are central to unlocking talent and creativity.

For many young people, volunteering provides the first real opportunity to acquire the skills and disciplines that are required in the workplace. Working to protect and improve open spaces can help young people develop the competences employers are looking for and prepare them to compete in the labour market for sought-after jobs or apprenticeships. As the British Chambers of Commerce has highlighted, it is not specific vocational capabilities but the soft skills and attributes such as communication, resilience and confidence that are perceived to be lacking amongst today's young recruits.^{xi} Studies evaluating three youth social action providers has found participants develop such skills alongside an enhanced sense of community.^{xx} With youth unemployment at 16%, opportunities that equip young people with transferable skills are essential for the future health of the British economy.



Developing tomorrow's decision-makers

3

Not all young people will be focused on their futures or careers, particularly those who are younger and who see adulthood as a more distant prospect. However, it is at this younger age that attitudes are formed and expectations set. Getting this group engaged in practical environmental action is also dependent on understanding the future returns to the individual and to society that accrue. Fun, hands-on practical projects allow children the space to develop their characters and test their boundaries. They also help to create or maintain facilities that are important to children learning about the world and developing the habits of an active lifestyle – from nature reserves and city farms to sports pitches and skateparks.

An informed view of young people and how to engage them entails understanding that this blanket terminology itself is sometimes unhelpful. Children, teenagers and young adults have different needs and different motivations, but all have something to gain from being involved in processes to plan, design, maintain and manage open spaces in their neighbourhood. What we need is the insight and capacity to plan and structure consultation and engagement activities around green spaces so that all views are heard and treated with equal importance. This needs to be underpinned by work to develop trust and build relationships with young people so that they have the confidence that what they say will matter. These are the core disciplines of youth work that we now need to instil in many other people, places and institutions.



Conclusion

Most adults who think back to their childhood can summon memories of a green space that provided an important backdrop to their development. In many cases they were places where young people escaped adult boundaries and were able to enjoy a sense of freedom and exert a level of control over their surroundings. They were places where dens were built, secret places explored, risks taken and friendships forged. They also helped to create a sense of identity and belonging – your turf or patch was part of who you were. Most would instinctively agree the importance of ensuring that young people growing up today have the same opportunities.

We must of course see through the mist of nostalgia and recognise that young people's lives and priorities are very different now than they were even 20 years ago. However, what hasn't changed is the desire of young people to connect with each other and make their presence felt in their community. Digital democratisation has enabled many to build these networks and develop this sense of identity online. Through social media young people have demonstrated their desire and capacity to create, to campaign and to bring about change. How much richer would our society be if we were able to apply this same potential to the way our neighbourhoods are managed and services sustained?

To achieve this we need to make our neighbourhoods and the decision-making that surrounds them 'young people friendly'. This means changing the way we think about local services, changing the way they're funded and changing the way our local democratic structures work. The prize is a generation equipped and energised to take a lead in protecting and improving the assets that are important to them, the wider community and the wider environment. A generation of young green leaders, unencumbered by the memory of how things used to be done and living by the dictum that what matters to everyone is everyone's responsibility.

References

- i FPM/Groundwork - Young People Friendly Neighbourhoods (references NYA, Youth Services in England, The state of the nation), 2014
- ii NCB and the Children's Society – Cuts that Cost: trends in funding for early intervention services, 2015
- iii ONS – Young people not in education, employment or training August 2015
- iv Heritage Lottery Fund - State of UK Public Parks, 2014
- v Public Opinions Survey – Heritage Lottery Fund
- vi Heritage Lottery Fund - State of UK Public Parks 2014
- vii E Fuller - Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among young people in England in 2012
- viii E Fuller - Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among young people in England in 2012
- ix ONS – Crime statistics for period ending March 2012
- x Groundwork - Access and usefulness of green space by demographic group, 2014
- xi Natural England - Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment 2013-14
- xii Heritage Lottery Fund - State of UK Public Parks, 2014
- xiii Natural England - Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment 2013-14
- xiv Groundwork - Access and usefulness of green space by demographic group, 2014
- xv Demos - Service Nation 2020, 2015
- xvi Demos - Introducing Generation Citizen, 2014
- xvii YouGo - Press release, Groundwork, 2015
- xviii Fabian Society - Places to be: Green spaces for active citizenship, 2015
- xix BCC - Workforce Survey, 2014
- xx Demos - Service Nation 2020 (reference Behavioural Insights Team - Evaluating Youth Social Action), 2015

(PTO)

Published by Groundwork UK. January 2016.

info@groundwork.org.uk
www.groundwork.org.uk

Groundwork UK is the operating name
of the Federation of Groundwork Trusts,
a company limited by guarantee.

Company Registration No: 1900511.
Charity Registration No: 291558.

