

Future Parks Accelerator evaluation: final report, July 2022

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University

Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Sheffield

Urban Pollinators

Austin Macauley, Consultant

Contents

FUTURE PARKS ACCELERATOR EVALUATION: FINAL REPORT, JULY 2022	1
CONTENTS	2
SUMMARY	3
HEADLINE FINDINGS	3
WHAT OUR FINDINGS MEAN FOR THE FUTURE	4
MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS	4
1. INTRODUCTION	6
1.1 ABOUT FUTURE PARKS ACCELERATOR (FPA)	6
1.2 ABOUT THE EVALUATION	7
1.3 REPORT STRUCTURE	8
2. THE FPA PARTNERSHIP	9
2.1 STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP	9
2.2 OPERATIONAL PARTNERSHIP	9
2.3 POLICY PARTNERSHIP	10
LEARNING JOURNEY 1: QUINTON CARROLL, CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH	11
3. ASSESSING PROGRESS	12
3.1 INTRODUCTION	12
3.2 WHAT WILL BE DIFFERENT AFTER 2022?	12
3.3 OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS AGAINST INTENDED OUTCOMES	14
3.4 A WHOLE PLACE APPROACH	17
3.5 FINANCE AND INVESTMENT	20
3.6 GOVERNANCE, DECISION-MAKING AND ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES	25
3.7 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP	27
3.8 DRIVERS OF AND BARRIERS TO CHANGE	28
LEARNING JOURNEY 2: ADRIENNE KELLY, NOTTINGHAM	35
4. LEGACY AND SUSTAINABILITY	36
4.1 THE CONTEXT AFTER COVID-19	36
4.2 STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES: HOW PROJECTS SEE THEIR LEGACY	38
4.3 TRANSITIONING FROM FPA TO 'BUSINESS AS USUAL'	40
4.4 LEGACY WITHIN NATIONAL TRUST AND HERITAGE FUND	42
4.5 IMPACT ON POLICY	47
4.6 ASPIRATIONS BEYOND FPA	47
LEARNING JOURNEY 3: LINDA ANGLIN, CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL	49
5. RECOMMENDATIONS	50
5.1 FOR FUNDERS	50
5.2 FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT	50
5.3 FOR THE WIDER GREENSPACE SECTOR	52
5.4 FOR FUTURE FPA-STYLE PROJECTS	52
5.5 FOR NATIONAL GOVERNMENT	52
APPENDIX 1: FPA OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK	54
FPA LOGIC MODEL	55
APPENDIX 2: REPORTED ADDITIONAL INVESTMENT RESULTING FROM FPA	58

Summary

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. 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.
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.
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, projects reported that these amounted to £43m of 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 BCP 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.
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.

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 at least 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.

1. Introduction

This report is the final report of Future Parks Accelerator (FPA) programme evaluation. It synthesises evaluation findings from three years of evaluation activity, providing a summative assessment of FPA delivery. It focuses on how the FPA partnership has worked, project outcomes, and legacy and sustainability of the programme beyond the end of the initial FPA funding period in July 2022. The report findings reflect a wide range of achievements for FPA to date, notably the emergence of new ways of delivering, managing and financing greenspaces through ‘whole place’ approaches in local authority areas. Through FPA, projects have set in place foundations for potentially transformative outcomes for greenspace and the related benefits of high quality accessible greenspace to people and places, including for health, wellbeing, inclusion, climate and biodiversity.

1.1 About Future Parks Accelerator (FPA)

FPA was a partnership between the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the National Trust, backed by £14m of investment, initially over two years. This period was extended to July 2022. It aimed to help UK local authorities transform their whole network for green spaces by putting them on a path to financial sustainability and service transformation.

Previously the National Trust and Heritage Fund supported Newcastle Upon Tyne City Council to set up an independent charity to take on management of its parks and greenspaces. This provided a pathfinder to test new approaches. The FPA team continues to support that new Charity, Urban Green Newcastle although this work has not featured in this evaluation report. The following organisations received funding through FPA:

- Birmingham City Council (known locally as Naturally Birmingham)
- Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council
- Bristol City Council¹
- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough (Cambridgeshire County Council, Peterborough City Council and five districts)
- City of Edinburgh Council (known locally as Thriving Green Spaces)
- London Boroughs of Camden and Islington (known locally as Parks for Health)
- Nottingham City Council
- Plymouth City Council

The Future Parks Accelerator sought to help local authorities to find sustainable ways of funding and managing green spaces for the long term at a time when parks have suffered from successive rounds of funding cuts over the last 12 years. It also sought to help local authorities to better embed greenspace within strategic priorities for places, and improve public and community engagement with parks.

The Future Parks Accelerator 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. Support 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

¹ Bristol City Council left the FPA programme in March 2021 but is continuing to deliver some aspects of the programme using its own resources.

of external consultancies, brokered and paid for by the FPA team. Vivid Economics drafted natural capital accounts for each cohort member, while Finance Earth worked with projects to develop different ways of attracting private investment. Other consultancy support covered the following topics:

- Finance and operating models
- Income generation / commercial business development
- Asset management (built assets)
- Fundraising and philanthropy
- Project management
- Strategy development
- Problem solving and facilitation
- Marketing and communication
- Volunteering
- Community engagement and participation
- Leadership development, coaching and mentoring

1.2 About the evaluation

The Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR), Sheffield Hallam University, in partnership with Urban Pollinators and the University of Sheffield, was commissioned to conduct a programme-level evaluation of FPA. The evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

- What progress is being made towards the long-term impacts outlined in the FPA Outcomes Framework? (see Appendix 1)
 - What activities are taking place that are contributing towards a step-change in public engagement with green spaces?
 - What new cross-sector partnerships have been formed and how are they enhancing collaboration and use of green spaces?
 - How are new sources of funding and financial models being developed, and what effects are they having?
 - How are local authorities and their partners adopting a systemic, whole-place approach to green spaces?
- How effective is the design of FPA and the subsequent delivery structures?
 - How effective is the partnership/relationship between Heritage Fund and National Trust? What has each partner learnt about working in partnership?
 - In what circumstances does an impact investment model work well?
 - What more could FPA offer to support places, now and if there are future cohorts?

The evaluation combined three sets of activities:

- Longitudinal qualitative case studies focusing on each of the FPA projects. This involved four rounds of interviews with project leads and project stakeholders over the evaluation period, as well as a series of baseline workshops. In total 146 interviews with projects and project stakeholders were conducted over three years.
- Two cohort-wide focus groups and attendance at cohort activities to understand how the cohort is building partnerships and explore shared themes across projects.
- Interviews and regular update meetings with the FPA team and account managers to understand FPA delivery and gain FPA team insights to project progress.
- Production of six 'learning stories' of individuals' journeys on projects

- Analysis of local project documentation, including local evaluation materials

Almost all activities have been conducted remotely since April 2020, except for attendance at two cohort events in 2021 and 2022

1.3 Report structure

The rest of this report is divided into four sections. Section 2 outlines the FPA partnership at programme level. Section 3 sets out findings on FPA progress and outcomes, focusing particularly on progress towards a whole place, systemic approach to greenspace delivery, and on developing new financial models. Section 4 assesses legacy and sustainability of FPA following its completion. Finally, Section 5 provides recommendations for funders considering similar programmes for greenspace or other sectors, for local authorities and for government. To show how individuals experienced the programme we have also included three 'learning journeys' interspersed between sections, providing the perspective of FPA project team members.

2. The FPA partnership

A strong strategic and operational partnership has developed between the National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Trust through FPA. While the future form of the partnership has not been decided, it has been appreciated by projects and will have a significant influence on both organisations in the future.

2.1 Strategic partnership

The partnership between Heritage Fund and National Trust has had a significant influence within both organisations, although the outcomes and impacts differ and the long-term effects will be subject to wider discussions about future strategies and priorities at both organisations (see more detailed discussion in section 4.4).

While the partnership will not continue in the form devised for FPA, it has provided a strong and workable model of an integrated intervention bringing together the skills and strengths of two different organisations with distinctive styles and cultures. National Trust is likely to draw on learning from FPA in forging joint ventures with other organisations in future, building on its capacity as an enabling organisation as well as a direct owner and manager of land and assets. FPA has also provided National Trust with a bedrock of learning about the importance and potential of urban green spaces and the communities who use and benefit from them, and how long-term change may begin to happen at an urban scale. The Heritage Fund is likely to use learning from FPA to inform its next generation of place-based funding programmes, and more broadly to deepen understanding about how to deliver system change transformations, as well as understanding the effectiveness and resources associated with effective cohort working

In addition the partnership has generated important learning about working strategically with local authorities. While Heritage Fund has extensive experience of working with local government in overseeing site-based capital projects in green spaces (for example, through the Parks for People programme), FPA has shifted the focus to a strategic level and required engagement with politicians and senior executives. We discuss the learning for both organisations in more detail in Section 4.4.

2.2 Operational partnership

A real success of FPA has been the way that the FPA team has come together as a cohesive unit. While in theory the team is made of people seconded from both National Trust and National Lottery Heritage Fund, the team have commented throughout the programme that they see themselves very much as one unit. Members of the team said that they had learnt a lot from working together and understanding different institutional contexts.

The decision to offer further funding to five of the seven places through Urban Nature Development grants means that the FPA team will be able to focus its support in the final phase of FPA; however for those places that did not receive additional funding there is a need for the FPA team to ensure relationships are maintained to mitigate risk of a two-tier system developing.

In the long term, the projects all expressed appreciation of the way the FPA approach had created 'headspace' and the ability to act strategically within an often pressured local authority environment. They valued the support they received and expressed a desire for the relationships that had been built up to continue. The feedback from

places affirms the FPA's 'high support, high challenge' approach which pushed local authorities out of traditional ways of working and set an ambitious bar for achievement, but provided consistent support through the presence of account managers as 'critical friends', alongside specialist consultant input. Projects considered the Account Manager role to be integral to the success of FPA and any future programmes of this type. Account Managers' support and challenge to projects as 'critical friends' was considered invaluable. At the same time projects saw the FPA team as flexible and proactive in bringing in different forms of specialist support to complement the FPA offer. Projects valued and benefited from this assistance.

National Trust and Heritage Fund are actively considering how this support can be provided in future through their existing structures. In practical terms, the integration of Heritage Fund and National Trust staff within a single joint FPA team was successful and generated what one interviewee described as a 'family' relationship between the staff involved. This way of partnership working was experimental and integrating organisation cultures and systems was challenging at times.

FPA reflected a new way of working for all those involved and inevitably some challenges integrating organisational cultures and systems were encountered. New processes were developed to manage FPA and this required flexibility as the programme and its needs evolved. The FPA team (including AMs) worked effectively in this regard, despite 'backroom' difficulties such as incompatible IT systems and different approaches to HR. This agile working can also create some challenges. At earlier stages in the programme, some of the team considered this approach could be combined with some clearer planning of tasks and reflection points to maximise the value they can bring to FPA. The FPA team continued to work to address these challenges as the programme evolved.

At senior management level, there was also reflection on how disparity in size between the two organisations created specific challenges: National Trust is a much larger organisation than the Heritage Fund, but the relationship in the past has often been one in which the Fund was providing grants to the National Trust. This required leaders in both organisations to develop a new relationship, from a grant provider – grantee relationship to working as a partnership with equal qualities.

A further challenge has been the significant change in senior leadership at the Heritage Fund, with a new chief executive appointed in 2022 as well as new board members. The Heritage Fund is considering its future strategy and programmes, and while learning from FPA will influence these, the extent of that influence will not be clear for a while.

2.3 Policy partnership

An important part of the original vision for Future Parks Accelerator was to create a partnership that could inform policy through the involvement of the then Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), now reconstituted as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). MHCLG committed £1.2m to FPA and was a formal member of the FPA board, but in the end acted largely as a sleeping partner. We discuss the experience of working with national government and its implications later in the report in section 4.4.4.

Learning journey 1: Quinton Carroll, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

'It's been bloody hard work but we got there in the end.'

Quinton Carroll was under no illusions when he got involved with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's Future Parks programme. As an assistant director at Cambridgeshire County Council, he was well versed in the complexities of working in a three-tier local government area. But even he admits that he and his team were 'a bit overly optimistic' about what could be achieved during the lifespan of the project.

The overriding objective was to create a common vision and sustainable future for parks and open spaces through a cross-sector partnership. In practice, that meant bringing together seven local authorities – a county, a unitary and five district councils – the Local Nature Partnership and Nene Park Trust.

'We were unlike any other member of the Future Parks cohort,' Quinton explains. *'The county council didn't have a green spaces team and all our parks are owned and operated by other people. For us, the emphasis always had to be on what we can do in partnership.'*

Three years on, the partnership is in place and a legacy organisation is being established. But the journey has been far from straightforward with two 'resets' along the way.

The pandemic was, inevitably, a game-changer, as health and wellbeing rocketed up the priority list across the county. It hadn't been a major theme in the original bid but became front and centre. This galvanised partners and enabled Quinton's team to build momentum from the growing public support for parks and open spaces.

The team was also restructured to appoint someone at a more senior level with the experience and clout to accelerate progress. *'That effectively jumpstarted the whole thing again. We had quite an uncomfortable birth!'*

The big casualty, says Quinton, was the planned focus on shaping the development of new green space in one of the fastest-growing areas in the UK.

'I don't think we bottomed that out. It was a conscious decision because it was incredibly complex and tied in massively to local plans and different planning authorities' expectations of green space.'

But it remains firmly on the 'to do' list.

'I'm very keen on it and don't want to see that particular agenda dropped. It's too important. It's something we do have to tackle because we already have an imbalance in housing quality in this county and the last thing we want to do is be creating more concrete jungles.'

Thanks to Future Parks, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough have the foundations to get new green spaces back on the agenda, he says. The project's legacies include the interactive Greenground Map, which for the first time charts the area's 2,900 parks and green spaces in a practical, visual way. Crucially, the dataset that sits behind it means the county finally has all this key information in one place – opening the door to other uses, from mapping natural capital opportunities to a new nature recovery strategy.

Having the national Future Parks team on hand along the way proved invaluable, he says.

'If we needed advice we could call them and get someone involved. Having that pool of expertise to get the input we needed when we needed it was extremely helpful.'

While he is optimistic about the future, the coming months will be critical.

'We have a three-year plan, we have a partnership, we have lots of people being very enthusiastic about it and we have political support. But we have got to get this embedded and fundamentally that means getting into the business planning cycles of all the partners – particularly on the health side and combined authority – to get the income that we need.'

'We've created so much over the last three years and Future Parks gave us that opportunity. In two or three years' time the question will be, did we take that opportunity?'

3. Assessing progress

The original aim of FPA was to generate rapid learning to transform the way parks and green spaces are funded and managed, with a view to putting public green spaces on a path to a sustainable future. Each place worked towards a long-term vision for the future of its spaces. As FPA nears its conclusion, many places are well on the way to putting such visions into place or have already done so. More importantly, most have significantly expanded their view of 'parks' and are now seeing urban green spaces as ecological networks underpinning a wide range of public benefits.

3.1 Introduction

The places that took part in FPA were all very different and have chosen different priorities for investment and development. However, some common themes have also emerged. In this section we begin with a summary of the headlines from each of the seven remaining cohort projects. We then briefly provide an overview of FPA's achievements mapped against the outcomes framework that has provided its guiding logic.

We go on to consider the achievement in more detail under the following headings:

- A whole-place approach (including landscape/ecosystem approaches)
- Finance and investment
- Governance and decision-making
- Community engagement and partnership
- Enablers of and barriers to change

To ensure that some of the headlines are not lost in the detail, some of the standout achievements of each place are summarised below.

3.2 What will be different after 2022?

3.2.1. Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole

Greenspace teams from three local authorities have been integrated within a new unitary authority which was created by the merger of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole councils in 2019. The Parks Foundation which was the lead organisation on the FPA bid has been expanded to cover the whole unitary authority and is a key partner in supporting its green spaces. A Green Infrastructure Strategy has been developed, 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. National Trust are a key partner in this activity, building from relationships developed through FPA. A model for community parks has been developed, incorporating volunteering, improved trading, and park activation via nature activities.

3.2.2 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 (see Figure 1, p23). 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. The strategy will sit within the Inclusive Growth directorate, integrating City of Nature thinking into spatial planning and development, with plans for 400 new green public spaces as part of an enhanced and connected nature network. 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.

3.2.3. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

A key achievement has been to build an effective partnership of nine organisations working across seven local authority areas. A critical output from this work has been to map natural capital across the area covered by the seven local authority areas (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, funded until March 2023 with contributions from local authorities.

3.2.4 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 within a restructured parks service in Camden, and health-related projects will be rolled out across both boroughs. Green social prescribing is being introduced across the boroughs. In Islington, Parks for Health principles are being applied in the wider public realm to normalise greening on the highway and create new green spaces.

3.2.5 Edinburgh

Key achievements include 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' in 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, which includes new operational and financial models, although consideration by the council has been delayed until autumn 2022 following a change of political control.

3.2.6 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.

3.2.7 Plymouth

FPA in Plymouth has made progress across several themes, all tied into a transformative change in strategic approach which has moved towards a holistic view

of the city's blue and green estate as an asset (rather than financial challenge) for the city. Activities include initiatives aimed at workforce change, led by an 'appreciative inquiry' approach, and a social enterprise programme. However, the headline achievements centre on development of new financial mechanisms for generating revenue. The city has put together a portfolio of potential investment funds and has attracted funding to pilot some of these. The first to be put into practice is a biodiversity net gain fund. The council reported that they have leveraged an additional £9.5 million funding building from their initial programme of work, including £1.2m from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund for an 18-month 'Plymouth Natural Grid' project. More details of these initiatives are in section 3.5.3.

3.3 Overview of achievements against intended outcomes

Throughout FPA, investment and support has been guided by an outcomes framework (Appendix 1) that summarises the logic behind the suite of interventions and the anticipated results. The outcomes framework needs to be considered in the context of the FPA's long-term ambitions, which extend well beyond the period of support on offer. It is too soon to say whether the long-term impacts in the framework will materialise; however, noting achievement against the short and medium-term outcomes indicates the likely direction of travel. What follows is a short summary rather than detailed consideration, as much of the detail is covered under other headings later in this report.

3.3.1. The rationale for FPA

It is worth repeating here the overarching rationale for FPA as it highlights the context in which an intervention was considered necessary. As expressed in the outcomes framework, the argument is:

The old model of funding public parks through annual council revenue budgets is broken. This puts access to green space and nature at risk for millions of people. This is particularly acute in the major metropolitan areas. Individual park restorations are difficult to sustain against the backdrop of austerity, and now rarely offer value for money. We need a widespread systematic solution to the funding of green space, one that is connected to communities.

Five objectives were set in the light of this context:

- To enable councils to develop new business and investment models to sustain and enhance their network of public parks and green spaces
- To support councils and their partners to repurpose parks for the 21st century, making them an integral part of local community life and essential infrastructure of cities and towns
- To use the learning, know-how, new models and wider outputs from FPA to help to develop a national framework, toolkits, guidance and finance to enable other councils across the UK to secure the future of their parks
- To develop and test an impact investment model which embraces high support/high challenge
- To build an effective partnership for delivery including a blended team and effective systems and processes

The last two of these objectives relate to the National Trust and Heritage Fund rather than the funded places. These are considered further in section 3.8.4 and 4.4.

3.3.2 Intermediate outcomes

While no time frame was specified, the framework set out a series of seven intermediate outcomes that FPA was expected to achieve. These are listed below in bold, along with a brief summary of the state of play at the time of writing this report in July 2022.

- **Places are delivering work that is forward thinking, broad, creative and pioneering.** This aspiration highlights the expectation that places will have moved beyond what was described in the early stages of FPA as a 'maintenance mindset'. Without exception, there has been a broadening of horizons across the projects and each place has adopted, or moved towards adopting, more expansive and inclusive visions of the future of their green spaces. This has included some pioneering approaches to – for example – new financial models for greenspace provision.
- **Clear foundations have been laid for systemic change, including development of strong connections across local authority directorates.** Every project has achieved this to some degree and according to individual context. It is particularly evident in Plymouth, Edinburgh, Birmingham and Camden & Islington. We consider this further in section 3.4 under the heading of 'a whole place approach'.
- **FPA local authorities are looking to the future and clearly planning to embed project outcomes/outputs into strategy/operations.** Again, this is true across the board, although to differing degrees. It is probably most challenging in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, which is constrained by the need to find common ground between seven different local authorities. But despite these challenges the project has made significant advances.
- **Learning is shared with other local authorities/organisations, and is considered to be easy to engage with and useful.** This is beginning to happen but is still at quite an early stage. Promising examples include the 'fast followers' network of Scottish local authorities, and the possibility of other London local authorities adopting Camden and Islington's Parks for Health approach. The FPA team are currently developing resources to support wider sharing of learning, and are also hosting an FPA learning conference in October 2022
- **Clear and convincing plans are in place to secure a financial future for parks and green spaces.** This has proved one of the more challenging aspects of FPA. Short-term gains have been made, in terms of protection of existing budgets in many cases or the securing of additional funding (such as the £150,000 made available in Birmingham through the Commonwealth Games legacy fund). FPA activities, including efforts to provide natural capital accounting for each project area, has contributed to ensuring widespread recognition that investment in parks and green spaces contributes to wider local authority agendas: this has led to financial commitment from some local authorities to continue the work started by FPA. Plymouth has done most to pioneer alternative approaches to investment, although this work is still being piloted. The seven partners in Cambridgeshire have all committed to continuing to support the work of FPA by investing in a Strategic Parks and Greenspace Unit (SPAG) until March 2023.
- **A strong peer network has been developed. Collaboration and sharing become the norm among FPA places and beyond.** Strong bonds have been formed between the FPA projects, especially through the cohort events which have been widely appreciated (especially when held in person), and there is a good chance that this will continue. Wider collaboration and sharing among local authorities and within the greenspace sector is a work in progress.

- **Teams and leaders feel they have the skills needed to lead for transformation, or know where to get it.** Projects have valued the leadership training provided by FPA and even where progress has been delayed, there is a strong sense that they know what needs to be done. In some local authorities (such as Plymouth, Camden and Islington) this leadership is embedded across teams which gives confidence for long-term sustainability of approaches developed through FPA.

3.3.3. Medium term outcomes

Within the framework a set of eight longer-term outcomes sits between the intermediate outcomes and long-term impact. Again, no time frame is attached to these. Given the progress against the intermediate outcomes, it might be realistic to think of these as milestones to be achieved within two or three years of the end of the project – that is, by around 2025/6.

- **New, more diverse and blended finance models are in place and being further developed; in some places this will include innovative and impact finance.** As well as Plymouth, some other local authorities including Edinburgh and Birmingham are actively considering innovative finance models, although progress is more incremental in these places. Community-based fundraising is being developed in Birmingham via the City of Nature Alliance. Other projects are developing commercial income streams.
- **Councils in the cohort start to transform the relationship between communities and green spaces at scale so these public assets deliver ever greater levels of public benefit.** Camden and Islington's work on parks as public health assets and BCP's development of community parks show the potential for both greater public involvement and greater public benefits. Nottingham has developed a city-wide approach to greenspace volunteering which is attracting new participants. Birmingham's City of Nature Alliance brings together greenspace organisations in a new partnership. However, projects are aware that there is still work to be done to reach new groups of people and address social inequalities.
- **Thinking on parks and green spaces is at the heart of how the local authorities will operate in future.** While local authorities are prone to reorganisations and changes of strategy, much has been achieved in putting green space at the forefront of local authority thinking. This has been most obvious in Plymouth, Edinburgh, Birmingham and Camden & Islington.
- **New cross-sector partnerships have been established or developed. Parks are not managed in silos.** Parks are now considered integral to a range of local authority agendas in most project areas. This is often being achieved within local authorities rather than through formal partnerships with partners outside local government.
- **The cohort is a mature peer network. Collaboration and sharing become the norm and are sustained beyond FPA.** While it is too early to say whether this will happen, the prospects are promising, with some initial examples of cooperation with each other and/or National Trust on joint funding bids.
- **Learning, tools, guides have been well disseminated and are being used by the FPA cohort and other councils looking at the future of their parks and green spaces.** This is happening within the FPA cohort, although it is too soon to say whether this learning is being taken on board elsewhere. Work to disseminate the learning from FPA is continuing, including through resources developed by the FPA team and FPA learning conference

- **The leaders from the FPA cohort have developed new skills and experience of leading for transformation and change.** This is true in all cases. In some instances (such as Nottingham) the FPA project lead will be in charge of delivering the long-term strategy for the authority's green spaces.
- **Heritage Fund and National Trust better understand how to work well in partnership with others and how to set up partnerships for success.** The partners understand how best to utilise an impact investment model. There has been important learning for the two partner organisations, and there is a high likelihood that this will feed into strategic thinking, partnership working and future investment (see section 4.4). While the partnership between the two organisations is unlikely to continue in its current form, FPA has provided a model that may be replicated with other partners in future.

3.4 A whole place approach

There are different ways of thinking about a 'whole place' approach to parks and green spaces, and these have developed and matured as FPA has progressed. Three distinctive aspects have become prominent:

- Working across local authority departments and hierarchies
- Working across landscapes and green networks
- Working across public policy agendas

3.4.1. Working across local authorities

A key aim of projects has been to obtain buy-in at a strategic and political level to strategies that recognise the importance of green spaces. In most authorities this has moved on from being about protecting parks budgets, to consideration of how investment in green spaces supports a positive agenda of nature recovery, climate action, wellbeing and inclusion. Developing new evidence bases, using tools like natural capital accounting, has supported this buy in. It has also required working across departmental boundaries and winning hearts and minds in departments such as planning, highways and finance. It has also involved persuading senior executives and leaders of the relevance of an overarching narrative about how green spaces fit within a vision for a place. This was summed up succinctly by one interviewee:

I think where we find ourselves now, is actually there is a really positive pitch to sell around the value of urban green space. [...] And the huge prize [is] to bring the urban green space asset to life within poor communities ... it's the growth mindset and a positive framing. And it's there as a kind of a job creator, social enterprise engine, but particularly around tackling the health, climate and biodiversity crises (Executive, National Trust).

[Birmingham's City of Nature plan](#), for example, puts green spaces at the centre of the city's emphasis on economic and social inclusion, using the concept of environmental justice to identify places that are under-invested and to set priorities for the creation of new green spaces. It ranks electoral wards by drawing together data from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation and four other factors: access to green space of two hectares or more within 1km; flood risk; urban heat island effects; and health inequalities, measured in terms of mortality data. The Future Parks team has worked increasingly closely with the planning department to consider how biodiverse green spaces can be integrated into new housing developments.

Whilst they were planners and flooding engineers merely talking about flooding there was no capacity in the parks service to be part of those conversations. Having the funded FPA team has created that capacity for parks to have a voice

so that it's able to raise awareness of the role that parks can play with flooding engineers and landscape architects in planning, who are now waxing lyrical about the opportunities. (Birmingham interviewee)

By reaching out to other departments, the project team has found itself able to make unexpected alliances and achieve more than could have been done within a parks department:

The planning service have totally embraced the programme and ... they saw the FPA programme as an opportunity to accelerate their own sort of greener vision for Birmingham. So we've had considerable support from them. And they've really run with the idea of, yes, let's really embrace this and look at how we can change our internal practices from a planning and development point of view. We thought when we set out that it would be a challenge to change their mindset, whereas they were just waiting for an excuse to jump ship, really, and take on those greener ideas and thinking. That's been a surprise to us. (Birmingham interviewee)

A similar story could be found in Plymouth, where FPA spanned two departments: strategic planning and infrastructure, and street services and waste:

That whole relationship is incredibly strong now. It was okay before, [but] I think Future Parks has really strengthened the relationship and the opportunities and you know, continuing that relationship. (Plymouth interviewee)

The Parks for Health approach in Camden and Islington sets out an agenda for investment and maintenance that highlights the multiple functions of green spaces and extends that thinking beyond parks to highways and other parts of the public realm. In Camden, green spaces in housing estates may be opened up as 'shared gardens', while stub (or dead-end) roads in Islington may be transformed into pocket parks.

The collaboration now is expanding, so I lead a taskforce now that works across people-friendly streets, highways, traffic and engineering, transport policy, to deliver this ambition around greening the public realm. (Camden interviewee)

Camden has turned part of a street into a park. It's really Central London and turned basically what's two lanes of road into a park. That started in 2016 ... but in selling the benefits of what that park brings, that's all about Parks for Health, it's all about how [it] supports communities... that's been really, really important and it's done really, really well. (Camden interviewee)

In Edinburgh, too, the Thriving Green Spaces project developed closer links between council departments, and has begun to see colleagues approaching the team for collaboration, rather than the other way round. As one interviewee reflected, this would require ongoing work:

We have made lots of really good strides forward ... trying to think [about] the way we work with health, the way we work with planners, ideally working with my participatory budgeting colleagues and neighbourhood colleagues a lot more. Actually, what's happened now is that other people are advocating our project, so I now have people contacting me saying I just met with such and such and they really need to speak to you because you're [the] Thriving Green Spaces project. But what is very apparent is that this is a continual job ... You've got to spend the time with people making contacts or helping them out or going to their workshops as well as they're coming to your workshops and just keeping aware of all the different projects. (Edinburgh interviewee)

3.4.2 Working across landscapes and green networks

The second standout element of the whole-place approach adopted across the cohort is the focus on green infrastructure and ecological networks at a place or landscape scale. This is a significant shift from the concern over ‘parks’ as the key issue to be addressed, which dominated many of the early discussions within FPA.

We don't talk about parks now, we talk about either green space or open green spaces. And, you know, things like the CN28 [Carbon Neutral 2028] strategy and us becoming carbon neutral, again, that all talks about green space rather than parks... So we're a long way down the road of being green space and not parks. (Nottingham interviewee)

A focus on green networks and habitats plays into the need to address the climate and nature emergencies, issues which were not seen as the concern of parks managers in most places a few years ago. FPA arrived at a time when concern about the need for local action was growing, and government policies were beginning to become more favourable, with proposals for ‘biodiversity net gain’ to be achieved through the planning system, the national adoption of carbon neutrality targets, and an increasing environmental focus within local authority policies and planning (for example, Nottingham’s CN28 plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2028). The government’s 25-year environment plan and proposals for local nature recovery strategies have also focused attention on the importance of a thriving natural environment, in towns and cities as well as the countryside.

As highlighted in section 3.2, many of the major achievements of the cohort have focused on landscape-scale improvements to the quality of green spaces and efforts to join up the work of different partners and landowners. The proposed Stour Valley Park in BCP is possibly the most ambitious of these, but Plymouth’s Natural Grid project, Birmingham’s City of Nature plan and Edinburgh’s Nature Network are also important advances. In each case the focus on the natural network is echoed (or is planned to be) within the councils’ strategic development plans. Across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough a new ‘greenground’ map has helped to create an understanding of how green spaces are distributed around the county.

We've mapped the whole of natural capital across the whole of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, not just parks. Then we've overlaid that with social and economic data to highlight the priority areas for health inequalities for example. And where there might be environmental interest, so greater flooding possibilities or greater pollution, which is in the same places as poor health and deprivation. That mapping then will set the priorities for the unit (Cambridgeshire interviewee)

In Plymouth thinking has now extended to green *and blue* space with the development of its National Marine Park², which aims to enhance economic, environmental and social values within the Plymouth Sound, and promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the area by the public. Building from FPA, the Plymouth FPA project team secured a Defra Natural Environment Readiness Fund grant to explore green finance of sea grass as a carbon sink.

3.4.3 Working across public policy agendas

While climate and biodiversity policies most obviously link to the provision of green space, FPA has tapped into a range of other key policies for local authorities. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the role of green spaces and connections with nature in supporting mental health, while parks have long been known as a resource

² <https://plymouthsoundnationalmarinepark.com/>

for fitness and physical activity. In Camden and Islington, as part of the boroughs' green social prescribing work³ delivered by the FPA team, members of both councils' public health team are now meeting with parks staff as a matter of course: '*We never would have been part of these conversations before now.*' (Interviewee, Camden Borough Council).

In Birmingham, the FPA team has re-engaged with schools and the education services:

For a good few years we have, as a service, lost our connections with schools because we were asking the ranger service to do maintenance jobs rather than school engagements... [Now] there's a huge programme and presence of early years across Birmingham, they have completely engaged with it and are wanting to have this as a central plank of their development. (Birmingham interviewee)

Health has been a key element of the work in BCP too:

We've had a really encouraging development around public health and our relationship with them as a consequence of the FPA. It's an area that we've possibly struggled with in the past because it's always come down to finances... it was just an opportunity for them to work with us in that non-challenging environment of money to understand the health and welfare benefits of parks so that's been really, really useful. (BCP interviewee)

Analysis such as Birmingham's environmental justice mapping shows how the benefits of green spaces are less available to more economically disadvantaged communities. Birmingham has agreed a set of priorities for investment based on this analysis, with primacy given to a group of 14 'red' council wards with high levels of deprivation and relatively low levels of high-quality green space (see figure 1, above). Interviewees described their ambition to use this data to improve the quality of and access to green spaces in the most deprived areas.

I would hope to see a very significant shift in the importance of green space in cities or nature in cities at the highest level in the organisation. So it's not seen as a nice-to-have or something that's pulled out for public messaging purposes, but it's actually central to improving people's lives, and that that's understood by all sections of the council – political and executive – and that you'd be able to point to demonstrations of that across the 14 red wards. So after 10 years, it says that we will have got all the park spaces and the green spaces across those wards up to the fair standard. But also we would have done it with the broader programmes of levelling up and nature recovery and climate resilience, et cetera.. (Birmingham interviewee)

3.5 Finance and investment

FPA has had a positive impact in highlighting the importance of green spaces among financial decision-makers, resulting in protected budgets for the first time in many years as well as some new spending commitments and the development of new potential income streams. Overall, projects estimated that FPA has led to approximately £43 million new investments across a variety of sources, including revenue funding and capital projects (See Appendix 2). Perhaps most importantly FPA has provided revenue funding to projects, which has provided capacity to develop other sources of income, such as the innovative and eye-catching investment projects that Plymouth is developing. Equally important has been the role of FPA in making the

³ Green social prescribing is the use of outdoor or nature-based activities to complement medical treatment for physical and mental health conditions. A six-month pilot green social prescribing project was funded by Defra in Camden and Islington in 2019-20, which formed part of the FPA programme in the boroughs.

case within local authorities to protect greenspace budgets. Projects reported that protected budgets amounted collectively to £18.2 million (see Appendix 2).

It is worth reflecting on the importance of FPA revenue funding to the success of the programme, before considering other financial successes. The national FPA partnership reflected on its role in providing access to revenue funding. While capital funding for green spaces was available through various national and local government schemes, revenue funding has consistently been harder to come by in recent years. This funding, the partnership felt, afforded teams the opportunity to plan, build partnerships and develop long-term programmes to transform green spaces. This, in turn, has built capacity to apply for future opportunities.

There's something about trying to build that essential headspace in through the big investment programmes, because ... there is not a shortage of capital, but finding the revenue budget, so that.... [for] Heritage Fund, that's the easy bit you know, we can fund revenue, that's something we're really able to do, which lots of funders aren't able to do. (FPA Team interviewee)

It's very unusual to get revenue funding to [give you the] capacity and resource to go and get those extra plug-ins and that has been the absolute value of this programme, enabling us [to have] the resource capacity and opportunities to grow so we can go out and get that because you know what have we landed in the last year? We've had National Marine Park nearly £10 million, Community Forest will be probably nearly £8 million, we have had all sorts you know... and partly because we have been able to start thinking in a different way and [had] the resource to do that. (Plymouth interviewee)

Perhaps most importantly, FPA has shown there is not one solution to financial sustainability, and projects have developed blended models utilising a range of approaches to revenue and finance. FPA enabled the trialling of new approaches to explore appropriate configurations of different models in different contexts.

3.5.1 Protecting existing investment

The challenges for local government have deepened since the outset of FPA. When FPA launched, council finances had been battered by a decade of austerity. While public spending has increased since 2019, fuelling the claim that austerity is 'over', the fact is that local authority finances are more precarious than ever. There are multiple reasons for this, including increasing demand for statutory services such as social care; the impact of Covid-19, which was only partly covered by government support in 2020-21; and most recently rising costs and a cost-of-living crisis, causing councils to be squeezed by additional costs coupled with increased demand for services (see also section 4.1). Projects are aware that some of their gains over the last two years are precarious:

If you put a cost of living lens on that, it maybe makes members a little bit jittery. I think that an assumption that ... you'll generate £100,000 worth of income for a café in this park, undoubtedly it's going to be threatened because those organisations are going to say, well, cost of materials means it's going to cost me more to fit out that café than maybe 12 months ago, and maybe people won't buy as many nice coffees and cakes now. (Edinburgh interviewee)

Whilst people are thinking long term, we are well up the agenda now. The minute we start hitting financial difficulties, [it's] how quick the long term directions of plans are scrapped for short term savings targets and that I think is the biggest risk. (Birmingham interviewee)

In this context, local authorities are continuing to be under pressure to make savings. Edinburgh Council, for example, is seeking to save £265m in the next financial year; Camden and Islington must find £100m between them. Nottingham City Council remains in special measures following the collapse of Robin Hood Energy in 2020. This puts pressure on decision-makers to support actions that either deliver immediate cash savings rather than long-term benefits, or avoid immediate spending commitments even if it can be shown that these will pay for themselves later.

However, FPA projects reported that by and large, budgets for parks and green spaces had been preserved for the time being. After years of successive cuts, this is a remarkable achievement.

So only just approved in February there and implemented for 1 April we saw... I think in the region of about an additional £900,000 of revenue invested in the parks service. (Edinburgh interviewee)

[Because of FPA] I think there is a stronger case. It certainly gives me more confidence and a stronger case now as, you know, as we go into our next round of budget proposals [as] we're doing right now. (Edinburgh interviewee)

We all understand, you know, nominally the value of parks but when you come to a financial position, sometimes it's really difficult to put that value into pounds, shillings and pence. And I think this has enabled us to do that to some degree. (BCP interviewee)

Interviewees reported that the use of parks during the Covid-19 lockdowns had helped to persuade councillors and decision-makers of their value. This reinforced FPA's arguments about the importance of green spaces as an underpinning resource for wellbeing and community life, in addition to their environmental value for carbon retention, temperature regulation and floodwater management.

I think what the pandemic did was really amplified the benefits of green spaces. Because in Camden I think 40% of our residents don't have access to private outdoor space. So our green spaces – our parks, our green spaces, our pocket parks – are absolutely vital to our residents. (Camden interviewee)

We've also seen that kind of increased support from members because of Covid, you know, and areas like infrastructure. So last financial year as in the year before last we got £4 million of additional capital for parks infrastructure. And I actually think that that was as much to do if not slightly more to do with Covid than Thriving Green Spaces, but it helped that the parent committee were very well versed because of the Thriving Green Spaces strategy that they obviously fully support that. (Edinburgh interviewee)

In some cases, natural capital accounting is being used to make a financial case for investment in parks: Camden and Islington calculated that one recently created green space, Alfred Place, would create a return on investment of £525,000 per year, paying back the initial costs within four years. Projects have also worked hard to consider where limited resources should be targeted. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's habitat mapping, for example, has enabled investment to be focused on areas where inequalities are deepest.

Of course it is not possible to say how long the change in approach will last. Councils will have to continue to make difficult spending decisions and the pressure to replace revenue budgets with other forms of funding will continue. But the raised profile of greenspace in these local authorities does suggest that green spaces will fare better in spending decisions than they have in the past.

3.5.2 Fundraising and income generation

All the FPA projects are exploring sources of funding beyond local authority budgets. These range from paid-for facilities such as cafes to ticketed commercial events. There is widespread recognition that such sources of income will need to be tapped more regularly in future. But there is also some resistance from communities to the prospect of eroding rights to free access; indeed there are fears that the social value of local authority parks will be undermined if poorer members of the community are increasingly excluded from the events and facilities on offer.

There has also been realisation that the scope for commercialisation is limited beyond a small number of 'flagship' parks. Community cafes, for example, are often dependent on volunteers and the supply of voluntary labour is limited. While cafes in popular locations can generate income (as highlighted in the first quote below), others may result in ongoing costs (as highlighted in the second quote):

I think probably the single biggest bit of support we've had from the commercial piece from all parties is ... in our premier parks, getting the cafes and toilets rolled out there to get those facilities increased. We know from other parks in the cities that that is a big income stream because, you know, it's Edinburgh. (Edinburgh interviewee)

We've figured out actually cafes, it's really difficult to make them generate enough money, and the idea was that the income from the café was going to finance all this other great stuff we'd do in those places and it's not, we need more money than that... I think we need as a council to accept that there's possibly a bit of money that they need to stick in the pot as well. (BCP interviewee)

Plymouth has focused on supporting the development of social enterprises in a small number of parks. This has some revenue benefits, as well as supporting the council's ambitions to be a Social Enterprise City. Although income from these projects might be limited, it provides an example of how alternative approaches to commercial revenue can be adopted that also support local social, economic and environmental regeneration.

In BCP, three Pilot Parks were identified to trial a 'Green Heart Park' model. The pilots centred on the role of 'park activators' to enhance biodiversity, working with the local community to do so. Park activators were employed to organise community events and there was a focus on developing commercial trading and volunteering in these spaces. This workstream unlocked additional funding, as the project team was able to evidence the outcomes associated with this element of FPA.

I would say the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, that quarter of a million pounds definitely wouldn't have happened if we weren't doing the work in those three Pilot Parks, so definitely that will lead to further funding ... Similarly we've got some funding for the community café that we run to improve the pavilion here and if we were going to replicate that elsewhere I could definitely go back to that same funder and say look, you funded this and look how awesome it is, could you do it again, so yes, lots of potential there definitely. (Interviewee, BCP)

Beyond commercial income, projects have also had increasing success in raising charitable and philanthropic funding. Councils such as Birmingham have invested in fundraising capacity within the voluntary greenspace sector, paying for expertise to enable greenspace groups to attract grants. In other cases, such as BCP, this has been via a Parks Foundation with charitable status that can sit outside local government structures and tap into different sources of funding. This has brought many benefits, but BCP highlights that there are also longer term challenges.

If we want the Foundation to continue in the way that they do, all the money that they make goes directly into the parks so it is not like there's any money hived off. If we want to continue that and take advantage of the fundraising they can do, the volunteering they can engage, the grants they can apply for, Gift Aid they can apply for, all the good stuff that we get from having a Foundation, we have to support them and that is quite a fundamental principle we need to take on board. I think there's still also a bit of a fear [from some people] and 'why don't we just do all this ourselves as a council'. That relationship is going to be a continued bit of work I think until it is more embedded. (Interviewee, BCP)

3.5.3 Innovative finance

Within Heritage Fund and National Trust there is genuine excitement about the potential for Plymouth to chart a way forward for other places:

Our furthest ahead place is probably Plymouth where we've seen transformation in partner ambition ... and tangible moves towards investment and money and capability being directed towards the things we had always hoped would happen. So we see a future for natural resources, parks, green space in Plymouth which is now within our grasp and has got money behind it. (executive, National Trust)

In Plymouth the development of a series of sub-funds around the idea of an 'Ocean City Fund' was central to the ambition of embedding a systemic approach to the value of green (and blue) space to the city:

I can see the building blocks, the foundations that we've put in place, I think we're close to realising that, from the habitat banking vehicle, and I think we're starting to see a bit of that with the natural grid project which has spun off this, which is actually doing it out on the ground as well. (Plymouth interviewee)

Plymouth has received funding from the government's Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund for three projects. The first is using natural surface water drainage approaches to reduce flood risk and 'unlock development' – aiming to attract investment from water companies and developers. The second involves exploring use of seagrass beds as a carbon sink which could be sold as carbon offsets. The third project aims to generate biodiversity net gain credits in urban and peri-urban areas, which would attract investment from developers needing to comply with new planning guidance that reinforces the role of developers in maintaining and improving biodiversity⁴. The plans for these finance vehicles were initially developed through FPA. The council has also received £1.2m from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund for an 18-month 'Plymouth Natural Grid' project, which seeks to improve habitats and access to nature in 390ha of land stretching across the city.

Plymouth's achievements have been impressive, and it has travelled further than other projects in developing new finance mechanisms. Most other projects' progress in exploring forms of innovative finance has been slower than they and the FPA team envisaged at the beginning of the programme.

We initially started down the path of natural capital investment ... We had a number of runs at it, but you could not get people to agree, for example, a list of investable projects. [...] And there was limited capacity in terms of understanding that this was really payable money and in order to do it, you needed scales, you needed a number of projects, you needed to all work together, for an investor to be interested. (Cambridgeshire interviewee)

⁴ <https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/topics/environment/biodiversity-net-gain>

I think there is a reluctance to jump because we will be seen to be the authority over here, doing something completely different to everybody else. (Birmingham interviewee)

The expertise of external consultants has been key to progress. Plymouth worked closely with Finance Earth – a consultancy specialising in environmental finance mechanisms - who were retained by FPA to advise projects, and valued their work highly. But capacity to provide this level of support was limited, meaning that not all projects received the same level of support – although not all were in a position to do so. Birmingham, BCP, Camden and Islington, and Edinburgh continue to work up proposals for green bonds, but these are at an early stage.

... part of that new green team we want to see at the centre of the council includes a new green finance officer. (Birmingham interviewee)

We have been working with the Green Finance Institute around a green finance token for urban greening that will create a pipeline of projects that private investment can invest into ... the Environmental Social Governance funding stream. So not necessarily a direct return on investment, but tax credits and other value that can be generated from that, that could be offsite greening for developers, it could be tax credit benefits, and allow companies to invest in local projects that support the community as well as greening and health and wellbeing benefits, so that's our next ambition. (Camden and Islington interviewee)

3.6 Governance, decision-making and organisational structures

This section deals with the oversight and decision-making structures for parks and green spaces. At the start of FPA there was a great deal of discussion about the possibility of setting up parks foundations or similar arm's length bodies with charitable status, along the lines pioneered by Urban Green Newcastle. In most cases these were rapidly ruled out because of political and public opposition to anything that could be interpreted as privatisation.

The exception is BCP, where a charitable Parks Foundation was established in Bournemouth in 2014 through the Nesta and Heritage Fund Rethinking Parks programme and subsequently expanded to cover the Christchurch and Poole areas following the merging of the local authorities. Over the course of FPA the relationship between the new unitary authority and the Parks Foundation has matured, with memorandums of understanding and programme agreements for the foundation's work now in place.

I think we've learnt a lot about ourselves as well as that general operation of parks. Where the boundaries lie, what traditional assumptions are almost cast in stone and those which [elected] members are prepared to be more pioneering with... Initially [members were very apprehensive [about the Parks Foundation] because they saw this as a loss of control... it's taken some time for us to educate members to the amount of money that's made ... but also how little impact that would have on the council's overall budget but what a significant impact it has on helping the parks ... so by having the parks activators in place we've managed to introduce things into parks that haven't been there for quite some time. (BCP interviewee)

This MOU [memorandum of understanding] will give councillors, will give senior officers within the local authority that confidence that there is the robust sort of governance between the two organisations... [...] we always had a MOU, but a better MOU in place gives those senior officials the confidence that actually yes, everything's going in the right direction. (BCP interviewee)

In Plymouth, a bespoke governance model is being explored as a potential option to manage innovative investments, although parks remain firmly within local authority control. Options will be taken forward in the next phase of the city's green and blue space transformation (Urban Nature Development Grant). One option sees the Ocean City Fund providing a governance apparatus to manage the different investment funds that sits outside (but wholly owned by) the council, providing more freedom to develop new investment models. These would be governed by the council's green estate team but managed by a dedicated fund manager.

Birmingham has established the City of Nature Alliance as a coordinating body for the voluntary and community greenspace sector, outside the local authority but supported with seed funding from the council to build capacity to raise funds and develop activities. The alliance is at an early stage, but participants are optimistic that it will become an important addition to the council's resources in supporting community action and attracting additional investment.

... the other thing that, again, at the moment we're very happy with is the fact that there is a functioning City of Nature alliance, which is this collaborative body of all the third sector partners. And again, that gives us reach not only into communities but also into funding that we wouldn't necessarily have access to. (Birmingham interviewee)

In Nottingham, despite early resistance to any form of governance outside the local authority, the council has more recently begun to investigate the possibility of expanding the remit of two small charitable trusts. However, current legal advice is that this would be problematic.

Among the other projects, changes in governance and oversight are mostly internal. Camden and Islington has strengthened partnership arrangements between the two boroughs, and parks staff have revised job descriptions reflecting changing ways of working – for example, rangers are now greenspace partnership officers. But the councils still have separate departments dealing with parks and green spaces. Islington has proposed new roles around communications, not only to convey the importance of green spaces to the public but to make the case to councillors and decision-makers:

Having a comms officer and a marketing strategy is crucial in telling the personal stories. Business cases are all very good and well but what [elected] members respond to is human stories. (Camden & Islington interviewee)

Elsewhere, restructuring continues to take place: Birmingham, Edinburgh, Islington and Nottingham have all restructured or are in the process of restructuring their parks or public realm services. These reorganisations have been driven more by the need to make financial savings than by the drive to align the service more strategically with the FPA's goals, although they have provided an opportunity to link services more closely with the FPA's work.

In BCP, the combination of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole into one local authority coincided with the start of FPA. While this has, at times, hampered progress as restructuring continues (with resulting staffing changes, need to clarify responsibilities and roles, and lack of capacity), FPA is seen as having a positive impact in terms of giving staff and departments the opportunity to collaborate on a fresh initiative:

The FPA has been almost instrumental in helping us achieve those goals in terms of building a single culture within open spaces to get [people in] so had we tried to bring the authorities together, establish a culture, establish a way of working

and an approach to parks independently without FPA, we might well be even further behind in our journey than we are now. The FPA gave us a purpose. It wasn't legacy Bournemouth, it wasn't legacy Poole or Christchurch, it was brand new. And it was a rallying point that I think everybody could get to that didn't feel conflicted by their previous allegiance. (BCP interviewee)

The other significant change in oversight is the creation of a Strategic Parks and Greenspace Unit to coordinate activities across the seven Cambridgeshire local authorities. This will be situated within Cambridgeshire County Council to help create and maintain greenspace-related networks and link with the county's lead responsibility for nature recovery. However, the unit is only currently funded until March 2023. Cambridgeshire County Council is contributing £40,000, while Peterborough City Council and the five district councils are contributing £5,000 each.

3.7 Community engagement and partnership

Overall, the hope that FPA would lead to deep and widespread engagement with communities has not yet been realised. In some cases detailed plans for community conversations and engagement in the first year of FPA had to be shelved because of the impact of Covid-19, both through preventing face-to-face engagement and in the loss of capacity within FPA teams as staff were seconded to emergency duties. The disruption caused by these events, which were outside FPA's control, should not be underestimated.

One of the real challenges for the programme, is that by the time it got to the engagement phase Covid had happened and so there was a need to pivot to doing things electronically⁵ as opposed to more face-to-face activities... I think what we can probably say is, given the constraints there was a really good reach out in terms of community engagement but we probably reached those who were already interested in and actively using parks and green space and we're probably still missing those who don't currently benefit from them. (Edinburgh interviewee)

In more than one case external partners commented on local authorities' tendency to retreat into their internal systems when under pressure. There were only limited attempts to pick up the community engagement work as lockdown restrictions were lifted. National FPA partners noted this as one area where more work could have been done.

The bits where I think we've made the least progress is on community participation and there are a number of different reasons for that. But I think local government finds partnering your community hard to do and local government culture is quite resistant to do that, because it's about giving your own power... but I think there has been some progress. But there is a lot of potential to do so much more, so that's an area where we're thinking about future focus. (FPA Team interviewee)

There were, nevertheless, examples of emerging practice. In places such as Birmingham the post-lockdown phase saw a strong push to engage with the communities most affected by the pandemic and a growing recognition of the unequal access to high quality greenspace across the city. The City of Nature Alliance provides a link between the council and those communities and interest groups that are most involved in green spaces in the city, but there is still work to be done to amplify the

⁵ The reference to 'doing things electronically' included use of a range of virtual collaboration and engagement tools across the cohort.

voices of communities that have not traditionally engaged in ‘friends of’ or other voluntary groups. Similar issues were raised by interviewees at other projects.

We’ve got a green space forum there where we work with [‘friends of’ groups]. I can see us expanding that. Through Covid there’s been a lot more community wish to get involved. But I think I see the potential for more of the stakeholders. So the university, some of the voluntary sector, even some of the businesses that have a bit more involvement in parks. (Edinburgh interviewee)

We have got Greener Together champions where we are trying to take a community organiser approach to training local volunteers to support their communities in carrying out these activities, so we are working with one of our partners that we’ve worked with through Parks for Health, Octopus Community Network, to train up both practically and like how to do the gardening, but actually how to do grassroots community organisation and how to bring your neighbours together [...] if you want to do something in your street, in your neighbourhood, there’s no support mechanism, there’s no skills, so we are trying to create that missing gap if you like. (Camden and Islington interviewee)

There are some noteworthy partnership-building achievements that would not have happened without FPA. The Stour Valley Park partnership developed by BCP existed prior to FPA but has significantly benefited from FPA support. The partnership has worked with multiple private and public partners, including 40 different landowners, and the scale of the project is ground-breaking (a 25-km regional park). In Nottingham, a new city-wide volunteering portal has drawn new people into activities in green spaces and has been welcomed by the city’s voluntary organisations. And in Plymouth, in partnership with Real Ideas – a social enterprise capacity-building organisation – the project engaged with a wide range of social enterprises with an interest in supporting greenspace in the city. Through this work the project developed new guidance for the council’s approach to engaging with social enterprises.

Other partnerships have tended to be more internally focused than outward-facing. They are valuable in terms of connecting systems to achieve public benefits, but are less clearly visible to the public. Camden and Islington, for example, has developed important strategic and practical links with public health and the wider health system through its Parks for Health programme. The programme is referenced in Camden’s public health strategy and is informing work with the council’s special educational needs and disabilities team: the two councils have developed a joint Parks For Health strategy, and have also adopted a ‘healthy parks framework’, underpinned by analysis commissioned from University College London.

[One] thing I think is a real success is the partnership with health and VCS [voluntary and community sector] around social prescribing, green social prescribing in particular. I think one of the challenges was being able to get around the table and have conversations with health partners. Through the social prescribing work, which is directly linked to working with GPs, we’re able to start that conversation. There’s still work to do but, green spaces being part of the Health Forums, and to be in those kinds of multi-agency discussions around how we can provide opportunities for early intervention and prevention, it has been invaluable. (Camden and Islington interviewee)

3.8 Drivers of and barriers to change

3.8.1. Political leadership and buy-in

A key challenge to securing a long-term future for the achievements of FPA is ensuring consistent political support. The nature of local government means that strategic

activity is interrupted by electoral cycles and the need for parties to make their case to the public. In the past, parks and green spaces have had a low political profile and spending on green spaces was not often seen as a vote-winner. The experiences of Covid-19 have changed that, showing how much people value their local green and natural spaces. This has been reflected in more positive attitudes by politicians across the political spectrum.

Even where there has been consistent support, there have often been changes among cabinet members or portfolio holders that have required FPA teams to engage with new political leadership, making the case again for the value of public green space and explaining their plans. This has been time-consuming work and elected members have limited capacity to get to grips with the detail of FPA. The strong political support for FPA in Birmingham, Camden and Islington, Nottingham and Plymouth (despite political change in 2021 and need to engage with a new administration) is thus a significant sign of progress. In Edinburgh, too, the political support has been clear and consistent, although following a change of political control in May 2022 there is now a need to re-engage with a new set of portfolio holders.

BCP and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough have experienced more difficulties, not least because of the scale of the areas involved, and complexities of working across different or newly formed organisations. In Cambridgeshire FPA has had to work with seven different political administrations simultaneously: it is unsurprising that brokering agreements has been tricky. The constant round of elections at different scales makes it difficult to achieve political consensus across boundaries, and it can be harder still to secure spending commitments.

Every single year, one of them will be having a full election at some point. Because the election cycles work like that. I think that drives it all to be very short term ... So I think that's one of the biggest risks, is that we don't have a long term financed plan. We can always have a long-term plan but it's whether or not people are willing to back it financially. (Interviewee, Cambridgeshire)

BCP, as a new unitary authority, has brought together three former councils with different political complexions. Much of the council's attention in its early stages has focused on bringing together processes and systems, and it has been challenging to secure sufficient attention from senior leaders.

It has meant that it's quite difficult to deliver a strategy in an organisation that doesn't know how to agree things because the three have become one. So things like the GI [green infrastructure] strategy, that should have been done a year ago. That hasn't been. ... there's a café in one of our pilot parks that also should have been delivered a year ago and should be open, it now isn't and is a derelict building and we just have not been able to find a way through with that. (Interviewee, BCP)

Progress has been made in some areas where impacts were easier to evidence. For example, interviewees from BCP highlighted that the Pilot Parks workstream had enabled them to demonstrate their impact at a strategic level and encourage support, particularly from members representing the areas where Pilot Parks were located who had seen the benefits first-hand.

Those members who've had a Pilot Park in their ward and they've witnessed the work of the parks activators, it's unquestionable. I think they value it, they can see the impact that it's made and they're relishing the prospect of having more of it, but we've only had three. (Interviewee, BCP)

3.8.2. Local government context and culture

One of the biggest challenges in the early stages of FPA was to embed an ‘accelerator’ approach in local government. The FPA team were initially frustrated by how long it took to approve decisions and recruit staff. Initial plans had not fully accounted for the impact of the electoral process, which requires a halt to activity during pre-election ‘purdah’, and the need to coordinate with meeting cycles and established budget-setting processes. In some cases work was slowed further by the need to get special approval to recruit staff to new roles on FPA projects.

With local government it’s just a different way to what we’d hoped, work[ing] within that environment, that decision making process, the restrictions local authorities have got, makes it really hard to deliver fast. I think that’s changing and I think that the work that’s coming out of FPA seems to have affected that way of thinking within councils. ... [but] to shift culture like that is a hard battle. (FPA team member)

The impact of Covid-19 was a further challenge. Because local authorities are responsible for emergency planning and essential services, in the first half of 2020 for most projects at least some attention was drawn away from FPA delivery to deal with the immediate threats and risks posed by Covid-19. There was often as a result reduced capacity for strategic thinking and planning about green space. However, as noted above, the lockdowns also highlighted the importance of local green spaces.

As highlighted in the previous section, working across boundaries (in the case of Cambridgeshire) or bringing previously separate authorities together (in the case of BCP) or both, as in Camden and Islington, also takes time and absorbs senior leaders’ attention. Parks for Health, for example, was always seen as a development project. Having identified the desired project outcomes, the team says it is at ‘the end of the beginning’, and physical changes are now being implemented:

It may not be the big shiny thing you can point at, it’s more subtle, it is genuinely truly transformational and cultural change of working. (Islington interviewee)

To some extent the tension between the ‘accelerator’ approach and local government culture continued throughout FPA delivery. Although not the intention of the FPA team, staff at one project, for example, felt that they were not given sufficient credit nationally for achievements that were not as ‘showy’ as some of their peers.

Sometimes it’s not the big showy stuff, sometimes it’s the graft that’s done behind and I think [we’ve] come a long way in making [our] green spaces fit for the future but perhaps not in the showy way that [we felt] the FPA wanted or needed to go and get more funding.

The FPA approach did not work for all projects, and in Bristol the project was brought to an early close in 2021:

Not all the park investments we started out with survived the process. We had to take the decision to drop Bristol from the cohort about a year ago... there was enormous caution in the fund about doing that and we spent a lot of time trying to make it work [before ultimately bringing the project to a close]. (FPA Team interviewee)

In addition to the inherent challenges of local government processes and systems, FPA also had to deal with regular reorganisations, changes of personnel and reshuffles of senior leaders. Birmingham City Council had three chief executives during the course of FPA. While each one was a strong supporter of the programme,

this did require repeated work to explain the FPA project to new leaders. Edinburgh, too, had to work to maintain partnerships and the profile of its FPA project through a wider council restructure.

It's been a little bit hampered by that wider restructuring across the council, and that reflects the reality of operating, there will often be other drivers in play. So another achievement was all of the partners are still working together and wanting to continue to work together beyond the programme. (Edinburgh interviewee)

Where projects worked with and through the challenges associated with local government processes, they were able to make significant progress. From the beginning Birmingham sought to work across council directorates, integrating green spaces into plans for housing and planning, employment and skills, health and wellbeing and children's services. Not all of these succeeded. But by summer 2022 close relationships had been formed with planning and the housebuilding team, integrating green spaces into plans for future developments; and perhaps of longer-term significance, relationships had been established with the finance department, bringing green spaces to the fore in budget-setting decisions.

Some areas highlighted good engagement with other public services, such as GPs' surgeries and skills providers, but challenges in fully embedding those relationships. The wider policy and operating context posed barriers in both cases.

One of the things that there is still a way to go is getting that full engagement of GPs. GP practices are overwhelmed anyway. They don't have outreach people. For me a success would be if there's a closer relationship within each of our localities with the health centres and the general practitioners. (Camden and Islington interviewee)

One of the things that's dragged its feet has been the whole skills agenda. Because there's so much energy and effort put into that at a national, regional and local level, but actually precious little has changed. And we had a dedicated worker from that team. All I can say is that team have now got a whole sector around green skills that they're trying to promote so it's definitely shifted their offer. But in terms of achievements and outputs, no. There's not a whole set of adverts for new green skills yet. And we're still talking to the universities and colleges about curriculum changes, you know, and gaps in the market... Everyone is pushing the green agenda but there's no one at the other end prepared or set up or established to actually deliver the change. (Birmingham interviewee)

In Edinburgh the work of FPA is being integrated into the proposed City Plan 2030, due to be submitted for Scottish Government approval this year. Nottingham, too, is examining how FPA work can feed into spatial planning. The masterplan for the development to replace the city centre's Broadmarsh shopping centre, for example, will include new green spaces.

Across FPA, there were innovative efforts to confront or work around or through aspects of local government culture that were considered barriers to progress. In Plymouth, Appreciative Inquiry techniques were used to question working cultures and engage staff with FPA proposals, while the Plymouth FPA team brought together two different council directorates: strategic planning and infrastructure, and streets services and waste. In Camden and Islington, public health professionals worked closely with the project team, resulting in effective partnership working across both authorities. In BCP, the bid for FPA funding was led by the Park Foundation and this sometimes allowed progress to be made more quickly (for instance, staff recruitment).

3.8.3 Staffing and workforce issues

Cuts and restructurings were the backdrop to FPA and have continued to rumble on throughout the programme. It has been noticeable that despite continued financial challenges, local authorities have been less willing to reduce the staff directly employed in parks maintenance – though, arguably, many places were already managing at a minimum level. Restructurings have been time-consuming and have involved essential consultation and negotiation with the workforce. In some cases the benefits are not immediately apparent; in others there is now a better alignment of roles with the aims and aspirations of FPA. In Nottingham, for example, the FPA project lead will be responsible for business development including the implementation of the city's greenspace strategy once it is approved.

Related to the above, a key issue, was the turnover of senior staff within local authorities. For instance, Birmingham and Nottingham both had a change of chief executive and strategic directors during FPA delivery. Both authorities continue to face significant financial challenges, and Nottingham remains in special measures and subject to additional restrictions on spending. In Nottingham's case, the additional approvals consequently required for recruitment have made it difficult to retain staff or replace those who have left. In BCP, one interviewee commented on the need to 'sell the programme back to the senior leadership' in the context of staff turnover at executive level.

Turnover of project staff was also an issue in some places, notably Camden and Islington and Nottingham, where consultants have had to be brought in to fill gaps. While this has generally kept the project activity on track, it has been at the expense of embedding knowledge and commitment within local authority staff. In Cambridgeshire, a high level of turnover in the project team was highlighted as a challenge which had slowed progress at certain points. The impact of turnover of staff outside the project team was magnified due to the scale of the Cambridgeshire projects across the districts. For example, one interviewee noted that in setting up their active parks unit they were attempting to get political support across all districts for this and put financial agreements in place, but 'someone's having an election every year' which inevitably made building partnerships more challenging.

Looking beyond staffing changes, in several cases work still needs to be done to integrate the vision and aspirations of FPA – and the FPA project teams - with the day-to-day work of greenspace staff. This is a risk in cities such as Birmingham and Plymouth, where strong strategic ambition needs to be continually reconnected with the day-to-day work of greenspace management. In Plymouth there was a lot of work early in the programme to engage with staff and begin a process of redefining the roles of parks team members. This work slowed over the last six months of FPA, and interviewees expressed some concerns that operational staff were beginning to feel 'left out' of the changes taking place, and that the aims of restructuring the parks team might not be fully realised.

Unless we crack on with that restructure soon I think that progress is going to stall because we now need some structural changes and they need some structural changes so that they know that everything we have been working on is going to stick and not roll back. (Plymouth interviewee)

I think [in BCP] there is a mixed picture of how many of the operational staff have been involved in the strategic body idea and I guess they have all heard about it, but whether it actually stuck in as something that was relevant to them, or whether they just hear that there's going to be a restructure three years down the line, I don't know, but what I do know about from Birmingham and the BCP and maybe also from Plymouth is there are lots of good people on the ground who want to do

this stuff, so it's not that you have necessarily got a workforce which is antagonistic or it's going to be that difficult to bring onside with it. (FPA Team interviewee)

This highlights the need, expressed by several interviewees, for communications roles within parks and green space teams. There is a need for clear internal communications to promote the role of green spaces across local authority departments and among elected members, as well as external communications to generate community support for the broad visions of FPA.

Next time I would think about having a comms engagement but [someone] totally dedicated to comms in particular. I think it needed perhaps more dedication especially on the comms side. (Edinburgh interviewee)

In Birmingham, publication of the City of Nature plan was backed by a series of 'earth stories' in which local residents spoke about what their local green spaces meant to them. Such narratives put a human face to plans that can otherwise appear bureaucratic and disconnected from community life because of the framing and language used. At BCP, for example, one interviewee spoke of the need to 'shout louder' about what had been achieved and highlight the important role of the Parks Foundation in delivering outcomes for parks .

3.8.4 Relationships between the FPA model and places

The purpose of FPA was to create 'a sustainable future for parks and green spaces', recognising continued and entrenched funding and management challenges facing local authorities in the UK. Its approach was premised on the need to build capacity within local authority teams to enable strategic, long-term decision-making rather than ad-hoc responses to challenges. Each place received funds to pay for a project manager and a professional team; FPA also funded support infrastructure within a joint Heritage Fund and National Trust team. Integral to this support package was a culture described as 'high support, high challenge' that demanded rapid progress from local authorities but, in turn, promised to provide professional expertise, specialist consultant help and the funders' reputational clout to help get things done. This approach was generally considered very successful.

I think it's been a lot more collaborative and supportive I think, down to people like [name] as the kind of relationship manager and the consultancy support. It has felt more like a support package than a funding package. (Edinburgh interviewee)

We have needed to be challenged and pushed a little bit as well and without that push we wouldn't be getting to the masterplanning conversations now that we are having. (Birmingham interviewee)

[There's] something about being part of a programme [that] adds additional credibility to it because places know that there's other places going through this. There's a lot of resource, so it's not just they've been able to get some funding which has given them the head space, it's actually being part of a programme because there's accountability to somebody else, but there's also vast networks and resources that have been made available to them that they wouldn't have had if they went on this journey by themselves. (FPA Team interviewee)

The account managers' role was key, with each supporting two or three places as 'critical friends', working closely with project managers and their colleagues. This approach has been valued by the projects, although it has posed some challenges, especially during the mid-point review in 2021, when each place had to account for its progress to qualify for continued funding: some projects said that the mid-point review

process was overly burdensome and distracted efforts away from the transformation change they were attempting to achieve.

The role of the account manager has been really critical in that the time investment has been really high, but also sort of critical friend and their ability to be able to see the wider network So I think them having that sort of bird's eye view has been really helpful. Coming together to share that experience and learning, it's also been massively beneficial I think, both in terms of shared experience, but also enabling us to grow as individuals. The time investment has been brilliant and the quality of the staff has been fantastic ... (Plymouth interviewee)

Alongside the team employed directly within the FPA, the programme made available the services of a wide range of specialist consultants. Notably, in the first year support was provided by Vivid Economics, which helped each place produce or update a set of natural capital accounts, and later by Environmental Finance (now Finance Earth) which advised places on developing forms of innovative funding. Finance Earth's support focused especially on Plymouth, where it was instrumental in developing the local authority's habitat banking proposals (see section 3.5).

Without the support offered through FPA, the programme's achievements would have been difficult to attain. Project staff particularly valued the 'headspace' to think differently and creatively, alongside the opportunities to bounce ideas off their peers across the cohort. In most places the relationships between projects and the Heritage Fund/National Trust team have been excellent. The only example of a relationship breaking down was Bristol, which was not attributable to one particular set of factors. The FPA team has reflected on the lessons for future programmes, particularly how to identify early warning signs. In one project, the decision to decline the council's application for extension funding prompted some resentment towards the end of the programme.

Interviewees did also suggest some areas for improvement or expansion. Some interviewees said they missed the opportunities for peer learning, which were curtailed due to Covid, although overall they were mostly very positive about the opportunity to develop connections across the cohort and learn together through FPA.

I think the things that it would have been great to do more of have only been held up by Covid so I find the cohort events super super helpful especially in person and all that network which has been limited a bit. (Plymouth interviewee)

Many project representatives also highlighted challenges in getting up to speed at the start of the project, and in keeping up with monitoring requirements.

I think some of [it] felt very intense... when we probably should've been spending more time on our own development in the co-design phase, we ended up doing a lot more tendering, learning, sharing workshops and bits and pieces. There is one argument that actually you need to have some of that stuff upfront to get you even thinking about it and what you might need to have in place, but then I think the detailed side of that ... needed to come a bit later where you could probably take it onboard more and do more with it. (Edinburgh interviewee)

They obviously had to report back about how [milestones] were going and things like that, but that midpoint review was an absolute mammoth task to get through and essentially just from the coming out of Covid, another three months were taken, you know, navel gazing and getting everything in place for that. It's a short-term project and then doing that just takes you off kilter a bit and, you know, takes your focus away from what you were doing... (Nottingham interviewee)

More generally, the learning from the support package offered to funded places has informed thinking within both the National Trust and Heritage Fund about how it could construct cohort-based programmes in future. We discuss this in more detail in section 4.4.

Learning journey 2: Adrienne Kelly, Nottingham

At one of the Future Parks Accelerator programme's early events in 2019, Adrienne Kelly summed up the task ahead as being about *'taking a lot of people on a journey of change'*.

Nottingham's parks and green spaces had made it through austerity in *'good nick'*. But as manager of the FPA project team, she was concerned failure to build a sense of collective responsibility, backed by a long-term strategy, would lead to decline and leave them in need of major intervention.

After three years of concerted effort, she believes the city is now far better placed to protect its assets and ensure new developments prioritise green spaces. A wide-ranging strategy, currently out to consultation, is *'going down really well'* and should be adopted from September.

'It's bringing different services together and different partners and that was one of our hopes, that our team would become more of a conduit to do that.'

For Adrienne, the clearest sign of progress is that green spaces have moved up the pecking order, both within the city council and with private developers.

'I was very conscious that parks and green spaces could be affected by proposals and decisions made by developers and planners and we were not really at the table. Whereas now we're at the table and in some senses we're at the forefront of how decisions are made in areas like urban greening.'

'That's partly down to the rise in importance of green space around climate change and during the pandemic, but also the hard work of the team in bringing forward its benefits. We were very much on the outside looking in before. We have shown we really do need to be there.'

To get to this point, there has been a relentless focus on *'meetings, conversations and writing briefing papers'* while also building clearer understanding of Nottingham's green estate via audits and mapping.

Adrienne cites the support from the national FPA team as a critical success factor, whether it's the constant contact and advice from an account manager or opportunities to share learning with other projects. This support and the backing of a dedicated team enabled the project to ensure green infrastructure plays a key role in the city's carbon neutral strategy.

'Having the FPA team in place allowed us to respond quickly to the draft strategy and become one of the deliverers for the city becoming carbon neutral.'

Nottingham's skyline is currently dominated by cranes with two major developments in the city centre. The £250m Broadmarsh scheme will see a dated shopping centre make way for new shops, restaurants and leisure facilities while Waterside is creating low energy homes along the River Trent as part of a development that will help to connect central Nottingham to inner city neighbourhoods.

Adrienne and colleagues have been involved at an early stage in discussions on how green space can become integral to the designs, and she believes it's a sign that attitudes are changing.

However, there have also been frustrations, including being unable to take forward a new way to manage and fund parks and green spaces. The pandemic disrupted progress and, combined with extremely challenging financial circumstances for the council, put this on the backburner.

With FPA coming to an end, Adrienne will now focus on delivering the long-term strategy in her role as green space development strategy manager.

'I'm optimistic for the future. I see the strategy as the start. It's given us our direction of travel and an understanding of where we want to focus, whether it's urban greening or green spaces to protect, and bring a more strategic approach to how we manage and look after spaces.

'We are here for such a small time and it's our duty to look after this amenity as much as we can. If we don't, it's gone forever.'

4. Legacy and sustainability

This section focuses on the longer-term impacts of FPA, considering how it contributes to a process of changes within the funded places, the funding organisations and more widely. It begins by considering the broad policy context, and then reflects on how each project views its strengths and opportunities in terms of a lasting legacy. It then looks at the transition to 'business as usual', the likely legacy for Heritage Fund and National Trust, and some future aspirations.

4.1 The context after Covid-19

The initial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, was highly disruptive for FPA. It diverted resources from project work, slowed down decision-making and planning, and frustrated community engagement plans. But there were unexpected consequences that proved beneficial in terms of raising the profile of public parks and green spaces.

Because urban populations were limited to their localities in the first lockdown in spring 2020, public parks, woodlands and nature reserves were heavily used for exercise and recreation. Many people discovered these spaces on their doorstep for the first time; many more reported how important they were for their mental health at a time of extreme stress. These messages were picked up by local politicians and council chief officers, who became noticeably more open to arguments about the importance of public green spaces.

As a result it became easier for FPA projects to make the case for greenspace strategies. However, the question of sustainable funding remained as pressing as before. 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.

Demands for savings are set to continue, increasing the pressure to find other sources of income to cover the costs of public green spaces. While the 2022/23 financial settlement for local government allowed a potential 7.4 per cent increase in spending⁶ (subject to local agreement on council tax increases), this has already been eroded by inflation. The current cost of living crisis has also led councils to question previous assumptions about the potential to fund parks through commercial activities.

4.1.1 Green spaces, the climate emergency and nature recovery

Over the course of FPA, national and international awareness of the climate and biodiversity emergencies has grown. Events such as the COP26 summit in Glasgow in 2021 have underlined that these emergencies are happening now and are not simply a future threat. While the current energy and cost-of-living crises, coupled with the impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war, have derailed some moves towards

⁶ Local Government Association (2022). Final Local Government Finance Settlement 2022/23. <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/final-local-government-finance-settlement-202223-house-commons-9>

decarbonisation, the need for action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and restore natural habitats is now broadly accepted.

Urban natural habitats and green spaces will play an increasingly important role as national and local governments seek to respond to these emergencies. This strengthens the case for funding existing spaces and creating new ones. It also highlights the importance of viewing 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. Green strategies link closely with zero carbon plans in Nottingham and Plymouth, and with nature recovery plans in Plymouth, Birmingham, Edinburgh and BCP.

Such moves complement national legislation. In England, the Environment Act 2021 created the basis for a national Nature Recovery Network (NRN). Up to 50 local nature recovery strategies will map habitats and natural assets and consider how goals for nature recovery can be integrated into spatial planning and investment decisions. The NRN will be supported through a £640m Nature for Climate Fund, alongside a set of initial projects funded through the £80m Green Recovery Fund.⁷ In Scotland, the Scottish Government is providing direct funding to local authorities through a Nature Restoration Fund, launched in 2021 and subsequently expanded to provide a minimum of £60m over five years.⁸ Scotland's new national planning framework, NPF4, also highlights the importance of nature networks.

4.1.2 Green spaces and public health

Before the launch of FPA in 2019 an increasing body of scientific and policy evidence had made the case for the importance of urban green and blue spaces in supporting public health.⁹ One of the FPA projects, Camden and Islington, put public health at the heart of its proposals. The Covid-19 pandemic made these connections highly visible across the country.

The health benefits of green spaces are no longer in question, but the best way to secure those benefits remains open. Public health is a local authority function, but funding for public health via central government grants to local authorities has remained static since the pandemic. There is scope to fund activities in green spaces through the primary care system in England, especially through social prescribing, where activities in the community are offered to complement traditional healthcare interventions. Defra and NHS England have part-funded a £5.77m project across seven 'test and learn' sites over two years to investigate how 'green social prescribing' can improve mental health outcomes and reduce health inequalities¹⁰. These pilots have strong links with voluntary sector greenspace organisations, but are less closely integrated with local authority parks services. However, they do signal a growing willingness in government to consider green and natural spaces as a platform for health and wellbeing initiatives.

⁷ Natural England (2022). Nature Recovery Network. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nature-recovery-network/nature-recovery-network>

⁸ NatureScot (2022). Scottish Government Nature Restoration Fund (NRF). <https://www.nature.scot/funding-and-projects/scottish-government-nature-restoration-fund-nrf>

⁹ World Health Organization (2016). Urban green spaces and health. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2016.

¹⁰ NHS England (2020). Green Social Prescribing. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/social-prescribing/green-social-prescribing/>

4.2 Strengths and opportunities: how projects see their legacy

To avoid repeating material included earlier (see section 3.1) this section takes a thematic look at some of the strengths and opportunities identified by projects. Teams from each project gathered at a cohort-wide meeting in Birmingham in February 2022, and engaged in a collective SWOT analysis looking at their potential legacy. The summary here is based on that event, updated and fleshed out from interviews with project staff.

4.2.1 The strengths: building blocks in place

As well as considering how FPA and its projects have fared against the outcomes framework discussed earlier (section 3.3), it is useful to consider where projects feel their strengths lie as this can inform future planning and investment.

All but one of the projects identified a strength in **strategic planning and political support**, even if strategies were still in development. From projects' perspective, there is strong integration with local authority policies and plans and a sense of commitment from the top – even where political control has changed during the programme. Plans such as Birmingham's City of Nature are highly visible and are likely to continue long after FPA has concluded. The exception was Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, where the plethora of partners involved requires a much higher degree of consensus-building and makes the project's achievements more vulnerable to changes of control or priority within any of the individual partners.

Every project identified the **project teams and relationships** formed as strengths to build on. These relationships spanned council departments, relationships with partner organisations, and the relationship with the Heritage Fund and National Trust. However, as FPA comes to an end the core project teams are likely to be broken up with staff moving on to different, if related, roles. The test will be whether FPA team members can transfer the knowledge and strategic thinking from the programme into new roles and networks.

A smaller group of projects were ready to identify **cultural or systemic change** as one of their strengths. Birmingham and Plymouth felt that systemic shifts were occurring within their local authorities. Camden and Islington identified its Parks for Health approach as a significant shift, embedding health within parks management. At BCP, the team felt cultural change was starting to happen across the local authority.

This is not to say there is no cultural or systemic change elsewhere. Some projects' hesitancy about seeing their achievements in such terms perhaps reflects a realism conditioned by experiences of previous short-term funding initiatives, coupled with the 'firefighting' mode that has become entrenched in many local authorities. Systemic change will demand continual application and attention at a senior level.

Four of the projects – BCP, Cambridgeshire, Edinburgh and Nottingham – identified their **evidence-gathering** as a strength, and all have built their evidence base significantly through FPA. This evidence base does not simply consist of the data about green spaces and the facilities and habitats they provide; it provides a credible basis for targeting and prioritising investment for years to come.

Given the initial framing of FPA around a sustainable future for parks, it is noteworthy that only four of the projects – BCP, Camden and Islington, Edinburgh and Plymouth – highlighted their ability to draw in **additional funding** as a strength. Of those, only Plymouth has made significant strides in preparing the ground for innovative finance. Across the board, however, there have been successes in terms of protecting existing budgets and in some cases accessing capital for new projects (see section 3). It is not

possible to say whether this protection will continue in the long term, but there is certainly much greater awareness now of the importance of parks in supporting a range of policy objectives.

Three projects – BCP, Birmingham and Nottingham – highlighted strengths in **engaging the public and volunteers** and communicating their ambitions to a wider audience. The ‘earth stories’ collected in Birmingham support the FPA’s aspirations through relatable, personal stories from a wide range of individuals about the importance of the city’s green spaces. Nottingham’s work on volunteering has brought new members of the public in, making a practical contribution to the upkeep of the city’s parks. BCP has piloted new ways of engaging with residents.

Another theme to emerge as a strength across several projects was the ability to **work at scale**, considering large swathes of landscape and natural networks rather than individual parks. This was important in BCP, where the Stour Valley Park offers significant opportunities for nature recovery and community involvement, and in Cambridgeshire, where there is a new understanding of the way natural spaces work together across the county. But it is also significant at a more compact, urban scale: Edinburgh, Birmingham, Plymouth and Nottingham all have a much greater appreciation of the way their cities function as networks of habitats and amenities for their residents.

4.2.2 The opportunities: launchpads for future work

While projects have identified a host of opportunities to develop the work begun under the FPA banner, some of the common themes emerging from the cohort spotlight opportunities that may exist more broadly among local authorities and their partners. These are areas where the Heritage Fund, National Trust and other funding partners may see potential for future investment and support. Five themes emerged.

The first theme is **finance and income generation**. This includes green bonds and innovative finance that may bring large-scale long-term investment into green spaces, but also smaller-scale opportunities to expand charitable funding and income generation. Given the challenges in making progress towards sustainable funding models, it is important to highlight that none of the projects have given up on this. All of them highlighted finance as an opportunity for further work, although some are keener to explore innovative models than others. BCP, Birmingham, Camden and Islington and Edinburgh would all like to follow Plymouth’s lead in developing green finance models, and Nottingham is still interested in this as a longer-term option. Plymouth is still also developing ideas for nature-based enterprises.

A second significant theme is the **opportunity to work at a landscape scale**. While most places are considering this within their own boundaries, BCP is working with Dorset Council on the Stour Valley Park and Plymouth is looking to develop a ‘national marine park’ and a community forest for southwest Devon. More widely, the work on green infrastructure mapping is continuing and feeding into plans for new and improved green spaces. Birmingham hopes to create 400 new green spaces through its City of Nature plans, while Edinburgh is working up masterplans for makeovers of four major parks across the city.

The third standout opportunity is **integrating green spaces with spatial development**, especially the provision of new housing. Government policies for biodiversity net gain payments under the 2021 Environment Act will require developers to improve biodiversity, either on sites they develop or by paying for improvements elsewhere by buying ‘biodiversity units’. This offers an opportunity to use payments from developers to support local green spaces, and is being piloted in Plymouth (as outlined above). Demand for new housing nationwide could provide funding streams

from new developments; major schemes such as HS2 could also contribute. In areas of significant housing pressure, such as Cambridgeshire, there are likely to be opportunities to develop and improve green networks at a large scale.

A fourth opportunity is the possibility of **sharing and replicating promising practices and approaches**. Birmingham, for example, sees its fair parks standard and environmental justice mapping as an approach that other local authorities could adopt on a national basis. Camden and Islington's public health work, similarly, has the potential to inform other local authorities' work: Plymouth is already looking at developing green social prescribing, for example. More generally, the cohort's work on habitat mapping and ecosystem services is widely transferable to other contexts.

The other significant theme to emerge from the cohort meeting was the potential for **new partnerships and collaborative approaches** to grow out of the relationships established through FPA. Peer networks, public engagement, and collaborative work within and between local authorities were all seen as areas to continue to explore and develop. In Scotland there is also potential to work on a national basis, both in partnership with the Scottish Government and on a peer basis with other local authorities, coordinated through the Scotland-wide 'fast followers' network.

4.3 Transitioning from FPA to 'business as usual'

A common challenge for time-limited funding programmes is embedding or 'mainstreaming' achievements for the long term. Even major national regeneration programmes have a history of failing to achieve this, leading to successions of short-term interventions and disillusionment among partners and the public. Any programmes seeking to achieve systemic change or long-term sustainability need to avoid this pitfall.

From the FPA projects, four approaches can be identified that could help to ensure long-term sustainability. None of them can guarantee a legacy, but all can contribute towards it. When several of these elements are in place there is a greater likelihood that the achievements of the programme will 'stick' for the longer term.

The first approach is to craft a **compelling narrative** that can guide decision-making and investment, and can be enshrined in policies and plans. Such narratives offer simple, memorable summaries that link strongly to an organisation's identity and priorities and provide a rationale for decision-making. Birmingham's City of Nature plan and the accompanying environmental justice framework do this. 'City of Nature' is an inclusive, easy-to-understand headline that can be used as a rallying point for a variety of activities and policies. The environmental justice framework links the idea of nature with social and spatial inequalities, countering any suggestion that green space is a luxury for the middle classes and should not be prioritised at a time of funding pressure. The accompanying fair parks standard provides a baseline standard for greenspace provision. The narrative links with government policies on nature recovery and can be used to guide decisions ranging from spatial planning to services for children and young people. Interviewees recognised the importance of maintaining this messaging into the future.

It's going to require this very definite strong leadership from the top, politically and from the executive side. In the conversations we've had with the strategic director; he said the number one thing we mustn't lose here is momentum. And I think that is the key to it – is that if this all goes quiet it will drop off the radar. So it's everybody's responsibility to make sure it doesn't go quiet – that, actually, there's a growing voice that says we're doing the right thing and, actually, this needs more resource or more attention or more support. (Birmingham interviewee)

Camden and Islington, too, have a compelling and easily communicated narrative through Parks for Health. While this is less all-encompassing than City of Nature, it signals a clear view of the benefits green spaces provide for local communities and how investment should be prioritised. There is an accompanying set of standards set out in the healthy parks framework developed by University College London, and the potential to influence other London boroughs via Parks for London and the Greater London Authority.

In Plymouth, the exploration of alternative long-term funding models also has the potential to provide an overarching narrative for the council's approach. The concept of the Ocean City Fund links the council's green spaces with its investment strategies, highlighting green and blue spaces as public assets rather than problems to be solved.

The second approach, often alongside an overarching narrative, is to set a **strategic direction** approved by the local authority as a whole. Most of the FPA projects have made it a priority to get a long-term strategy approved by their local authorities; this has already been achieved in Birmingham, Camden and Islington, and BCP.

In February the treasury team put a new treasury strategy through council, which has now built in a test for all investment funds brought into the council, which asks the question: have we explored green finance? Are we meeting our climate obligations? Are we measuring these against sustainable indices? And that's all come from our finance working from the FPA. (Birmingham interviewee)

In Edinburgh and Nottingham preparation of a city-wide strategy is at an advanced stage, although political approval is not expected before Autumn 2022. Nottingham's strategy is expected to set out a vision of a 'greener, healthier and happier' city and to tie closely with the council's CN28 net-zero carbon strategy. The process of developing the strategy has also included significant work behind the scenes to get partners on board and ensure its principles are firmly embedded.

We're waiting for the final strategy but we have the vision objectives which we've started socialising with other people and that's been received well and I think the strategy as a whole [will] give us the reasoning behind the direction of travel we're going with. But also we've been working with other service areas – it's quite funny because we've heard some of the words played back to us. Other people taking on what we're saying, so we're "greener, healthier, happier", and the health team, obviously, have picked up on that so they're using it, so from that point of view the project's been very successful. (Nottingham interviewee)

Of course adoption of a strategy does not guarantee its implementation or that it will be given equal priority alongside other strategies and policies. There may be wrangles over who is responsible for implementation; a council department may want to take the lead in order to extend its influence, or may wish to pass the baton to others to avoid the workload associated with additional responsibilities. In Birmingham there are ongoing discussions over whether the Inclusive Growth directorate's planning team, which currently leads the City of Nature strategy, should continue to do so.

The third approach, again complementing the others, is to resource a **dedicated team** to take the work forward. A compelling narrative and approved strategy can still run into the ground if resources are not made available. In Plymouth, additional staff have been recruited across the departments working on green spaces to support delivery as the FPA approach becomes embedded within the council. This contrasts with Edinburgh and Nottingham, where the number of staff working on FPA has diminished as the project nears its end – although in Nottingham the FPA project lead will now be the strategy and development manager responsible for longer-term implementation,

and it has been possible to retain some of the core team in Edinburgh by extending contracts.

One of the strengths is that there has been a way of maintaining some of the core team over this transition period because that's always a huge challenge with a time limited project, that you lose all of that organisational learning, even if you document everything, who's there to actually pick that up? So, I think that's been the flexibility of the programme in terms of being able to extend some contracts and the next piece of work has been really important. (Edinburgh interviewee)

BCP has arrangements in place via a memorandum of understanding between the local authority and the Parks Foundation, while National Trust is funding a programme manager to lead development of the Stour Valley Park. Cambridgeshire has set up a bespoke unit, the Strategic Parks and Greenspace Unit (SPAG), within the county council, linking with the county's lead responsibility for nature recovery. This will be staffed in a similar way to the FPA project team to allow work to continue, although long-term funding needs to be found beyond March 2023, and there remain political challenges in working across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. There is a transition plan to help the move from FPA to SPAG run smoothly, with continuity of leadership.

[We] have an exit and transition plan. That maps out all the different elements of us exiting and transitioning and where we have to hand over stuff to people, who we hand it over to, is secure and signed off etc., so we're following our exit and transition plan as best we can at the moment. The beautiful bit is that the SPAG unit is in the same service as FPA, with the same head of service. So, the head of natural and historical environments runs FPA. He then will also [have] overall responsibility of the SPAG and for the local nature recovery strategy. (Cambridgeshire interviewee)

The fourth element that can help ensure a successful transition is a pipeline of **deliverable projects** that can be taken forward under the FPA banner or whatever succeeds it in each locality. In Edinburgh, the long-term strategy is being accompanied by proposals to redesign four major local parks. BCP's Stour Valley Park and Green Heart Parks provide a clear focus for future activity. Birmingham has already prioritised investments in the Bordesley and Highgate ward as a pilot for its longer-term environmental justice approach. Plymouth is able to focus work around its planned National Marine Park.

On their own, individual projects do not guarantee that strategic long-term thinking will continue, but they can support and make visible ideas that may have limited traction if they only exist as strategies and aspirations.

4.4 Legacy within National Trust and Heritage Fund

While the focus of FPA was on changing the way local authorities and their partners manage urban green space, the impact has also been felt within the partner organisations. For both National Trust and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, FPA was a new way of working and it demanded a level of buy-in and risk-taking beyond that required for traditional programmes. Some immediate effects have already become visible.

4.4.1 Impact on long-term thinking within the funding organisations

National Trust

National Trust has had an urban agenda for some years, although it has sometimes been peripheral within the organisation. The focus in the past has been largely on developing new forms of management and governance as a means of putting local authority parks on a sustainable footing. Following grant funding from the Heritage Fund alongside support and advice from National Trust, Newcastle City Council agreed in 2017 to transfer its parks and allotments to a new charitable trust, now known as Urban Green Newcastle.

Urban Green Newcastle has a wider agenda than funding and management, with an increasing emphasis on supporting wildlife and mitigating the impacts of climate change. This approach is now becoming more pronounced within National Trust, which over the years of FPA delivery has increased its focus on the wider potential of the network of urban green spaces to support public policy agendas around net zero, biodiversity protection and wellbeing.

This is likely to affect future partnerships with local authorities, stressing the importance of green infrastructure as a network rather than parks as a service:

Already it's flagged in our strategy that urban is big for us but urban green, urban nature, urban parks, have got a very clear life in the next phase of the strategy and that is what we are working at. (National Trust interviewee)

This is likely to lead to an extension of the type of working pioneered within FPA. National Trust, despite being one of England's most significant landowners, has realised that it is not necessary to own the land to influence how it is looked after. This is not only a question of managing and delivering programmes, but of considering how the National Trust can exercise influence strategically in the context of the climate and nature emergency:

It is providing a real pointer to where the organisation's ambition needs to be for bringing nature to people and how you go about achieving that, not just through our places but through how we work beyond our boundaries. So [the] big learning for us is what does it take and how do we generously convene support, and then catalyse action that goes well beyond our places. Because our places are tiny in a national context whereas shifting cities, that's big news and if we can shift cities and turn them onto nature, then I think that feels like an enormous step forward and that is where we are heading. (National Trust interviewee)

It is also changing the way the National Trust looks at its own estates, which increasingly are being managed not only to preserve heritage and attract visitors, but to provide public goods in terms of habitat protection and connections with nature:

We now have a programme of large estates within the Trust who... are adopting our accelerator approach as well and we call them the Nature Accelerator Portfolio and they are the places where we think [there are] the biggest gains for nature. Now these are rural, not the urban places at all, they are big rural estates where we've got some big ambitions. But we are taking some of the learnings and the practical approaches that we've used in our future parks work into the way we are setting up and supporting those internal communities to do exactly that kind of intelligent enquiry, understand need ... and just nurture and support them through that very bespoke way they need to achieve their goals. (National Trust interviewee)

For both the National Trust and Heritage Fund, there is recognition that institutional change takes time and that colleagues and board members need to be won over. However, the chance for long-term corporate realignment is seen as a key opportunity that has been informed by the FPA work.

National Lottery Heritage Fund

For the Heritage Fund, the shift from FPA into future ways of working is still in development. This is partly because there is a strategy refresh underway at the Heritage Fund and FPA's future was still under review at the time of writing. However, place-based programmes will form a significant part of the Fund's work in future and FPA has provided important learning about working strategically at a place-based scale. Alongside its traditional site-based capital interventions, the Fund is likely to continue to work strategically at a large scale in some of its programmes and will be able to apply learning from FPA about working across local authority areas and with senior leaders and policymakers. This learning will also provide material for internal reflection and discussion:

One of the things that we have learnt from Future Parks is that in terms of future delivery, having that multilateral partner approach is going to become more and more important to us. We have to get more comfortable about different ways of funding and supporting areas to regenerate, whether they are parks or green spaces or high streets or whatever. We [need to] work alongside others and that approach means different skills for the fund, it means different approaches to risk.
(Heritage Fund interviewee)

FPA has also demonstrated to the Heritage Fund the value of cohort working for approaches focused on addressing more complex or systemic challenges. This will be taken forward into future programmes.

4.4.2. Approaches to partnership

The partnership between National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Trust

Despite the successes of FPA, the form of any future partnership is uncertain, although both organisations have stated a desire to work together in future. There are several reasons for this. Most immediately, the Heritage Fund is undertaking a strategy refresh and inevitably means that programmes and partnerships are under scrutiny and that what has worked in the past won't necessarily be considered key to future strategies. At a deeper level this taps into issues about institutional culture and positioning. National Trust is aligning itself increasingly with environmental agendas and considering how its asset management and funding programmes should support environmental goals. The Heritage Fund remains, in general, more focused on preservation of individual buildings and spaces, although learning from FPA is changing this to be more considerate of green and blue spaces.

However, both organisations feel the partnership has brought value and enabled them to see the benefits of a close working relationship in pursuit of a common goal. One Heritage Fund interviewee contrasted the FPA partnership favourably with the fund's other collaborations:

We are doing a piece of work at the moment looking at our strategic partnerships where we have tried to map our partnerships against a sort of maturity scale between zero and three, and the Future Parks partnership is the only one which we have ended up putting it as two/three because of the nature of the commitment from both the Heritage Fund and the National Trust, and that it's not just a delivery

mechanism for anything, it's about us both bringing skills, experience, capabilities into the partnership and getting more out of it...

This approach may be used as a template for other partnerships, as a National Trust interviewee argued:

We want to carry on working with the Heritage Fund, but this was never supposed to be about just our two organisations. We now have a really great platform to offer other key investors, funders, government in terms of major external change on an agenda that has become much more relevant.

Interviewees highlighted the need to capture and share the learning from FPA, both internally and externally:

I think it's our biggest challenge going forward, we've done all this brilliant work and now we need to share, spread, engage with those beyond (Heritage Fund interviewee).

Working with local authorities

FPA has provided important learning about how to work with local government. The early experiences of FPA were a reality check as it came up against local authority procedures and processes. Recruitment of project managers and other key individuals took longer than expected; approval processes were slow by the funders' standards; and the need for political accountability added an extra layer of apparent bureaucracy. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic provided a salutary lesson that crisis management is a key part of local government's work, and in a crisis non-essential work has to take second place. Yet FPA overcame these hurdles, and the pandemic raised the profile of local parks and green spaces among politicians and senior local government staff.

However, these experiences underlined the need for space away from day-to-day tasks to enable strategic thinking. Even though some project staff were seconded to other roles at the height of the pandemic, they eventually returned to their FPA work.

As important as the headspace for project managers was the space for senior local government executives to understand FPA's potential and its links with other key local authority agendas, from net zero carbon to planning and housebuilding and health and wellbeing. This is likely to require a different kind of engagement in future, working more strategically on shared agendas:

It has asked really interesting and challenging questions about where do we need to reflect on our process ... because we can't work at this intensity for every project, but where do we really want to do that because we are trying to deliver a bigger change? (Heritage Fund interviewee)

As well as working with senior executives, FPA has highlighted the importance of investing in project level leadership. Project managers and their sponsoring directors needed to be able to make their case clearly and boldly at a council-wide level – a significant change in departments that have often been side lined in the past and that have not been the career choice of those looking for senior management roles in local authorities. One interviewee observed:

It is an obvious thing to say that leadership is everything and you know the success or otherwise of individual places within the cohort has largely rotated around the quality and continuity of leadership in the place. ... Plymouth is the stellar example, now I think one of the things we have learned through this programme and that we've built into it by deliberate design is a focus on the

leadership and leadership development. And the more I've gone on with this the more I've realised that if we are partnering with others that's something we really want to pay attention to. (National Trust interviewee)

4.4.3 Culture change within National Trust and Heritage Fund

FPA was very much focused on the places that were supported, but it is worth considering how it has contributed towards, and echoed, a process of culture change within the funding organisations. While this has been more pronounced at National Trust, it also applies to some extent to the Heritage Fund. Three aspects of this cultural change stand out.

First is the **importance of investing in time away from the demands of the daily work**. Just as this has enabled the cohort of projects to think differently, the decision to dedicate time and funding to a bespoke joint programme has catalysed thinking within the funders and generated understanding of how change can be achieved:

We have tested and proved that hypothesis that focused partnership can deliver meaningful system change even within the relatively exacting timescales that we have been working to, and even with the disruption of Covid, and I think there has been some significant impact across the portfolio. (Heritage Fund interviewee)

Second is the **approach to risk**. This has been a significant change for Heritage Fund in particular. In a traditional capital project there are risks but they are largely controlled through regular monitoring, and it is possible to take action quickly if a project begins to look unviable. A programme such as FPA, because of its orientation towards system change rather than project delivery, runs the risk of failing on a larger scale. Even if it succeeds it is harder to evidence success. Learning to live with higher degrees of risk and how to manage it has been an important learning process for the FPA team and the two funders.

Third is the **importance of investing in leadership**. This applies internally as well as within FPA. The experimental nature of FPA has underlined the importance of commitment by senior leaders within each organisation, not only to running the programme in the first place but also to sharing and assessing its learning for each organisation. While the commitment from the leadership of both the Heritage Fund and National Trust was evident, there are more signs at the National Trust that learning is feeding back into the organisation: for example, the FPA team are being used as internal consultants on other land management programmes. Because of the hiatus at Heritage Fund associated with a change of leadership, it is not yet clear how the learning from FPA will feed into strategy and programme development.

4.4.4. Working with government

There has been the lack of engagement in FPA from UK government. Despite initial investment the then MHCLG failed to get actively involved in the future direction or learning from FPA.

One challenge is that parks and green spaces do not fit neatly into a departmental brief. While MHCLG (now DLUHC) was the partner department, National Trust and Heritage Fund often have stronger relationships with Defra on environmental issues. Even before the mass resignations across government in July 2022 and subsequent leadership contest in the Conservative Party, there was limited continuity among key ministers or coordination of policy across departments.

4.5 Impact on policy

As indicated above, hopes that FPA would influence UK government policy via the partnership with MHCLG (now DLUHC) have not been realised. However, the wider context following the Covid-19 pandemic offers opportunities to link FPA with a wide range of policy agendas in the short to medium term. Scotland's NPF4 national planning framework, which is expected to be approved in autumn 2022, highlights the need to respond to the nature emergency through spatial planning decisions.

4.5.1 Sub-regional and landscape scales

Perhaps the most significant opportunity for FPA to feed into policymaking is at a sub-regional or landscape scale, working either through regional projects such as the Stour Valley Park or via Local Nature Recovery Strategies as part of the Nature Recovery Network in England. At present the mechanisms to integrate learning from FPA into nature recovery strategies have not been developed, but there is an opportunity for National Trust, Heritage Fund and individual projects to work together on this agenda. In doing so, they can add the benefits of their profile and reputation to these emerging strategies.

4.5.2 Local government policies and practice

Individual projects have strongly influenced local policies and strategies. There are also opportunities to influence local government more broadly by sharing learning via professional networks such as APSE (the Association for Public Service Excellence) and political networks like the Local Government Association and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. These networks bring together large numbers of local government managers and councillors, and are important in communicating the potential of urban green and blue spaces to a wider audience. Specialist networks such as CIPFA (the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy), the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Royal Town Planning Institute can all help share FPA's achievements. These will be important for communicating the importance of investment in green spaces beyond the greenspace sector, and making the case for novel approaches to management or finance.

There are some wider opportunities to influence local government. In Scotland the existence of a 'fast followers network' of local authorities provides a direct route to share learning and test out new practices; and greenspace scotland provides a wealth of resources that can support this and has worked closely with the Thriving Green Spaces team in Edinburgh. In London, the Greater London Authority supports Parks for London, which brings together greenspace professionals across the capital and offers a prime conduit for sharing the learning from Parks for Health and influencing London boroughs beyond Camden and Islington.

4.6 Aspirations beyond FPA

There is shared desire to build on FPA activity at a national level, expressed across the wide range of individuals interviewed within the seven projects, the Heritage Fund and the National Trust. How this should be done is less clear, although patterns and priorities may emerge over the coming months.

FPA itself, of course, has been a step along a journey towards rethinking parks and green spaces that looks different within each place and at a national scale. It is not the only catalytic approach available and Heritage Fund and National Trust may consider that it has fulfilled its purpose. What matters is that the underlying work continues. There are three key elements to this.

The first is that there needs to be a **national voice for new thinking** in parks and green spaces that clearly links the funding and management of public spaces with the climate and nature emergencies and the need to support public health and wellbeing. Previous forums and networks have not done this in a coherent way. Participants in FPA projects could play an important role, along with Heritage Fund and National Trust, but this does not necessarily mean that National Trust or Heritage Fund should be responsible for making it happen.

The second element is a **peer network of places** that have adopted, or are developing, new approaches to their parks and green spaces. FPA provides a basis for such a network but experience elsewhere suggests that networks falter if they do not receive dedicated support.¹¹ Individuals who already have multiple responsibilities and time pressures are unlikely to find capacity to coordinate a national network, however much they believe in its value. NGOs such as National Trust could do so, but this inevitably links the network with the reputation and positions of a particular organisation. This may be a risk worth taking to provide a forum to share experiences and ideas.

Third is the importance of **collaborations and partnerships**. Each place and organisation has its own aspirations that have been informed by the FPA experience. FPA does not need to continue for these to feed into organisational strategies and thinking, or for organisations such as the Heritage Fund and National Trust to continue to work together. However, by working together they have achieved more than they might have done alone. There may be ad-hoc and informal partnerships that emerge from FPA; for example, the National Trust are considering joint funding bids with Birmingham, Plymouth and Camden and Islington. It is also continuing to partner BCP in developing the Stour Valley Park and is working with Plymouth on different initiatives including the National Marine Park. More creative partnerships of this sort may emerge in future, although they depend on the existence of a continuing web of trusting relationships underpinned by shared goals and values. FPA areas can also continue to learn from one another, and take forward ideas developed elsewhere, using the learning generated from each project. For example, the experience of the BCP Parks Foundation is influencing long-term thinking in Edinburgh:

There's the potential for a charitable foundation that [has a] role in managing our parks. If we get that over the line that opens up a whole swathe of new opportunities that aren't even on our radar right now in terms of the philanthropic approach and CSR opportunities with the business community. (Edinburgh interviewee)

Similarly, work on innovative finance pioneered in Plymouth could lead to large-scale rethinking of the built environment and infrastructure elsewhere:

We've identified that [there are] a thousand stub [or dead-end] roads in the borough, so the potential scale for transforming, if we can get the green private finance to work ...we are going to have a sort of design specification, tweak it to what people need locally, but the basic sort of component parts are going to be pretty similar [...] we can just convert thirty percent of those, that's six hectares of additional new green space... that's massive. (Camden and Islington interviewee)

¹¹ See, for example: Dobson, J., Harris, C., and Macmillan, R. (2020). Network support: Community business peer networking before and during coronavirus. <https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research/publications/network-support-community-business-peer-networking-before-and-during-coronavirus>

Learning journey 3: Linda Anglin, City of Edinburgh Council

Even when you've spent a good chunk of your career working on parks projects, it doesn't quite prepare you for the scale and ambition of FPA.

Linda Anglin admits the early days in her role leading Edinburgh's Thriving Green Spaces initiative were *'a bit hazy'* as she and her team embarked on what's been a steep learning curve over the past three years.

'When you're doing a park restoration project, for example, you're doing something that's been tried and tested, you can see the steps you need to take and the route ahead,' she explains. *'Whereas with this we were a bit unsure about how we were going to proceed, things were more up in the air and there was a lot of learning and sharing at the start.'*

The deluge of information was overwhelming to begin with as Linda found herself pulled in different directions. But starting with a clean slate and throwing yourself open to different possibilities was precisely what was needed, she says.

'It got us to think holistically about things and how everything is interconnected. It's taken longer than expected but we haven't deviated too much from what we set out to do and we've delivered against all eight of our workstreams. Future Parks allowed us to stand back and think, discuss and consider. We normally wouldn't have been able to do that for this length of time.'

The council and its partners set out to create a 30-year strategy for Edinburgh's parks and green spaces to protect and enhance them and link them to the city's wider strategic objectives, from sustainability to tackling health inequalities. Looking back over what's been achieved, Linda points to the fact that the overriding strategy has been written and the key 'building blocks' for future success are ready – operational and financial models along with asset management, volunteering and communications and marketing strategies.

The city also has a far clearer picture of its natural assets and data with which to make informed decisions about investment in green spaces that contribute towards strategic priorities. It's tested out different approaches to management and income generation across four pilot areas, each of which now has a masterplan. Getting to this point has been difficult, says Linda. While many colleagues across the council share her passion, turning sentiment into effective practice has required a cultural shift away from reactive ways of working to *'a more positive and proactive approach'*.

'We didn't have a clear vision and weren't always working around common priorities. But now we will have a strategic vision with a plan of how we will achieve that vision and some of the tools we need to deliver that.'

She believes that greater sense of purpose will also accelerate the shift to making the management of green spaces a much more collaborative effort, working with Edinburgh's many partnerships and active volunteer groups.

Running the project could have been a lonely endeavour, she says. But the FPA team made life a lot easier.

'It's a very different way of funding and feels a lot more like a partnership than a provider-recipient relationship. It has felt like they are fighting the fight with us. They bring skill sets that we don't necessarily have in the council, such as support around financial modelling, and a sense of steerage.'

The strategies and models devised must now be approved by the council and if given the green light, a new business development unit will be created that will bring a more consistent approach to parks and green spaces while exploring income generation opportunities and other ways to secure more sustainable footing.

'I'm optimistic but also cautious,' Linda says. *'We're trying to bring a longer-term approach and councils tend to think short term. It's hard to sustain the focus on things like this when local government is still having to make cutbacks. But this strategy and unit will put us in a better position.'*

5. Recommendations

This section brings together some key recommendations from FPA for government, funders, local authorities and others. These are intended to be actionable points that build on the learning from the programme. However, in bringing together learning from FPA in the form of recommendations, we are not presenting a blueprint for success. Place-based system change is complex and challenging and success cannot be guaranteed; success may often look quite different to the outcomes envisaged at the start of a programme. Our recommendations are thus about creating the conditions that are most likely to enable beneficial outcomes. Such outcomes depend on all the partners involved playing their part; the recommendations show how each can make a contribution to this shared endeavour.

5.1 For funders

Overall, funders need to ensure they give a programme enough time to fully understand and respond to the complexities of the challenges it addresses. Funding should last a minimum of three years when working with organisations such as local authorities. In support of this overarching theme, we would recommend:

- The 'high support, high challenge' model has stimulated new strategies and thinking across the FPA cohort and provides a template for future programmes. This requires transparency and empathy throughout, as well as clear communication about the limits to support.
- Be agile in flexing the programme to meet changing circumstances. While this was largely achieved during the Covid-19 pandemic, funders should always be ready to rewrite timetables and priorities as a programme unfolds.
- Where a programme is seeking to achieve system change, the degree of risk is high and funders need backing at a senior level in such risk-taking. FPA provides a good example of how this can be done.
- The skills needed for system change are not the same as those needed for grant distribution and monitoring. Where programmes are seeking the type of transformation FPA desired, the delivery team should have the skills and confidence to work with partners at a senior level and a wide understanding of relevant policy and practice.
- Working with a cohort of projects offers opportunities for shared learning that should be encouraged by supporting strong communities of practice. There is an immediate opportunity to apply the learning from FPA to local nature recovery strategies, which should be taken up while these strategies are being developed.
- The relatively intense cohort-working approach taken through FPA has been successful and should be considered in other programmes. However, this requires commitment to sufficiently resourcing such an approach, especially in terms of staff.
- Working with local authorities requires clear understanding of – and making allowances for – the sometimes complex local authority decision-making processes, electoral cycles, regular restructuring, and the need for work to ensure political buy-in, as well as understanding the capacity impacts of a challenging financial context.

5.2 For local government

Local authorities have wide-ranging responsibilities and huge pressures on time and resources. Interviewees highlighted the potential risk that programmes like FPA, which

are relatively small in local government terms, become sidelined and their catalytic potential is not realised. We therefore recommend:

- Local authorities should learn from the FPA projects about the potential of green spaces to underpin a range of policy agendas. Even in 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.
- Where a programme aims to create systemic change, dedicate senior leadership time to ensure learning can be shared and assessed across the local authority and its partners.
- It is important to join up policy agendas at an early stage and identify the departments and senior leaders who will need to be involved in a programme or whose work will be affected by it, to ensure ambitions are not frustrated by a lack of engagement within particular service departments. Programmes such as FPA should be linked at the earliest opportunity to overarching corporate goals.
- Political support for strategic programmes such as FPA can be a key to their success. Investment in green spaces should appeal to all political groups and given the frequent changes in political control in some places, it is important to build cross-party consensus.
- Recognise that the grant available for a programme will not fund all the time and activity required to maximise a programme's potential. Joining a programme like FPA should be viewed as an investment by a local authority, not simply as an additional resource.
- Recruit and support the staff needed to do the job. One of the difficulties in the early stages of FPA was in securing approval for recruitment, which could have been foreseen. Once a team is in place they should not normally be required to move to other duties during the period of the programme (Covid-19 created exceptional circumstances and in some cases moving staff to other duties was unavoidable).
- Create a solid evidence base that can be used across the local authority to inform decisions. The ecological mapping done through FPA will have long-term value in supporting spatial planning, linking with legislation on nature recovery and biodiversity net gain.
- Work closely with planners and development partners to ensure strategic development plans enhance existing ecological networks and provide new opportunities to create spaces that the public can enjoy freely.
- Consider how to ensure staff are in place throughout the programme. When staff are on short-term contracts they will almost inevitably look for other work as the programme nears its end. Local authorities should recognise that joining projects such as FPA can represent a career risk to staff and should offer exit routes that support career progression.
- Where novel forms of finance and funding are being considered, staff within finance departments and appropriate external experts need to be engaged as early as possible.
- 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.

5.3 For the wider greenspace sector

While greenspace organisations have consistently argued that natural spaces support a wide range of public goods, they have often done so in isolation. There is clearly still a case to be made for funding ‘parks’ in the traditional sense, but this is one part of a wider agenda. Greenspace organisations need to build stronger bridges with organisations that share common interests, particularly around climate change, biodiversity and public health, adding their expertise as needed. We therefore recommend:

- Greenspace organisations, including ‘friends of’ groups, should consider how to link up with voluntary and community organisations with environmental or health agendas to make a stronger case for investment.
- Greenspace organisations and ‘friends of’ groups should work together to more closely reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, especially in more disadvantaged areas.
- Community-based organisations should engage with local councillors to share their understanding of the wide range of benefits provided by public green spaces.
- Organisations should also consider how they could work with landowners and across council departments to create new green spaces, especially in areas that are under-served.

5.4 For future FPA-style projects

While FPA is not likely to continue in its current form, it is likely that other local authorities will want to partner with funders in future to address similar issues. These recommendations relate specifically to such projects, summarising some key learning points from FPA.

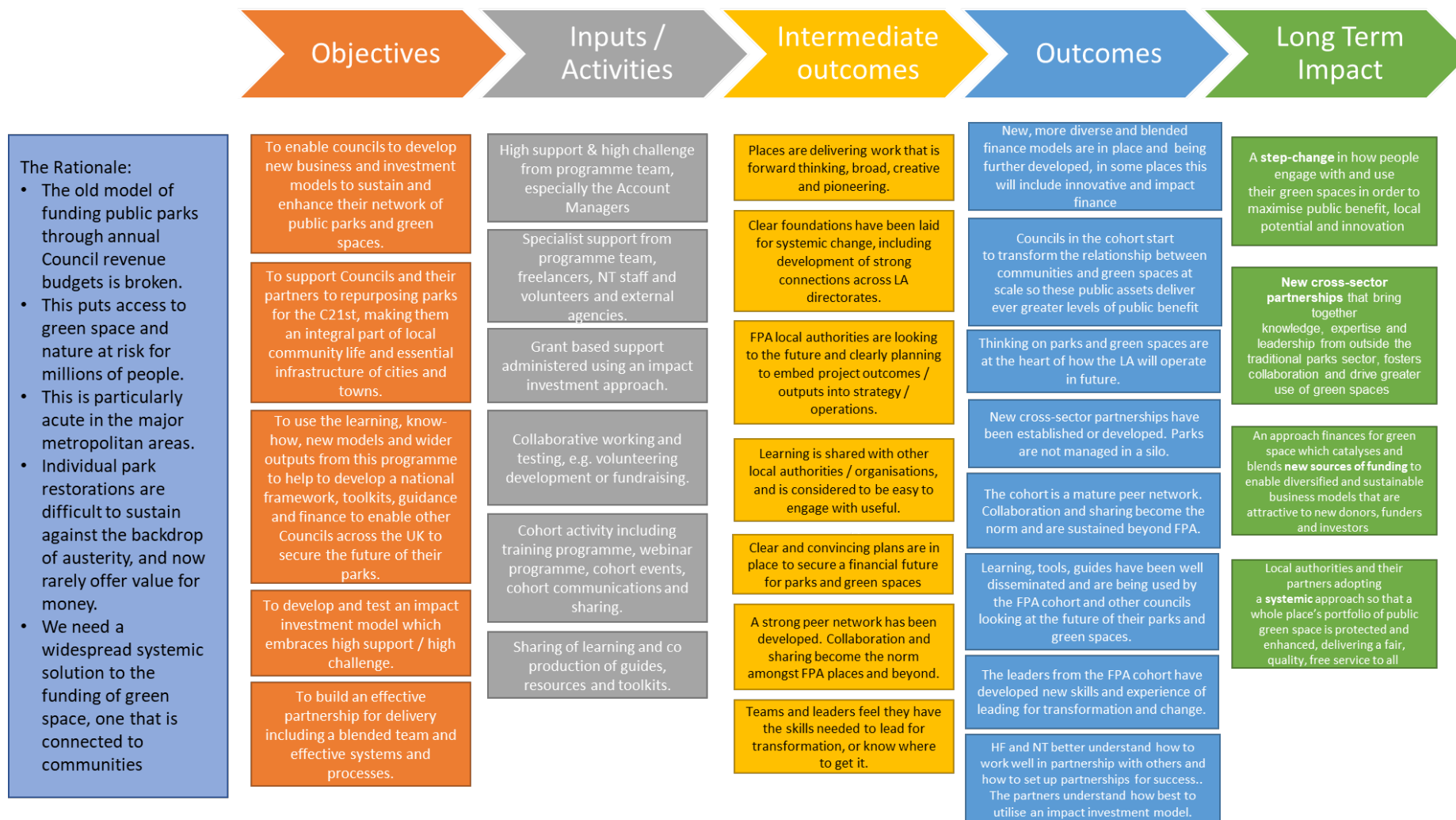
- Allow time and resources for start-up. The more dedicated time is available for preparation, the more likely the project is to gain traction and have lasting impacts. Demands to spend money quickly can short-circuit the necessary work of partnership building.
- Create ‘headspace’ by resourcing a dedicated team with a project sponsor at senior level who is prepared to argue its corner. Allow time to recruit the right people.
- Be flexible enough to respond to changing circumstances. Different plans may be required to achieve the project’s goals.
- Work closely with funding partners and peers to share learning and information and to resolve difficulties.
- To maximise the chances of leaving a lasting legacy, consider how to combine a compelling story; a strategic direction; a dedicated team to continue the work; and a pipeline of deliverable projects (see section 4.3).

5.5 For national government

Learning from practice does not guarantee that policy will improve, but it increases the chances. Governments frequently fund or support programmes designed to generate learning or test hypotheses, but it is important to remain engaged throughout those programmes, and to apply the learning to policy development. There are some core messages governments and policymakers need to take on board to avoid repeating mistakes.

- Be an engaged partner. It is not enough simply to support a programme with funding and then walk away. Government needs to be part of the conversation about how learning can be applied and embedded, and ready to examine where its own practices are supportive or unhelpful.
- Give a programme enough time. There is a common view that FPA could have achieved more with extra time. Governments often want 'answers' to policy questions rapidly, but rapid responses seldom engage adequately with the realities of achieving systemic change.
- Embed learning. Research summaries and conferences may be useful in capturing headlines, but governments need to engage on a deeper level. Governments should aim to increase understanding of local authorities and greenspace organisations through secondments of civil servants into those organisations.
- Be prepared for complexity. A holistic view of urban green space involves engaging with policy challenges around climate change, biodiversity, physical and mental health and social inclusion. Any policy initiative needs to be coordinated to achieve benefits across the board. Only providing funds for short-term capital investment in parks, as mooted in the Levelling Up White Paper, is unlikely to lead to lasting change and risks wasting public money.

Appendix 1: FPA outcomes framework



FPA logic model

The Rationale

- The old model of funding public parks through annual Council revenue budgets is broken.
- This puts access to green space and nature at risk for millions of people.
- This is particularly acute in the major metropolitan areas.
- Individual park restorations are difficult to sustain against the backdrop of austerity, and now rarely offer value for money.
- We need a widespread systemic solution to the funding of green space, one that is connected to communities.

Objectives

- To enable councils to develop new business and investment models to sustain and enhance their network of public parks and green spaces.
- To support Councils and their partners to repurposing parks for the C21st, making them an integral part of local community life and essential infrastructure of cities and towns.
- To use the learning, know-how, new models and wider outputs from this programme to help to develop a national framework, toolkits, guidance and finance to enable other Councils across the UK to secure the future of their parks.
- To develop and test an impact investment model which embraces high support / high challenge.
- To build an effective partnership for delivery including a blended team and effective systems and processes.

Inputs / Activities

- High support & high challenge from programme team, especially the Account Managers.
- Specialist support from programme team, freelancers, NT staff and volunteers and external agencies.
- Grant based support administered using an impact investment approach.
- Collaborative working and testing, e.g. volunteering development or fundraising.
- Cohort activity including training programme, webinar programme, cohort events, cohort communications and sharing.
- Sharing of learning and co-production of guides, resources and toolkits.

Short term outcomes

- Places are delivering work that is forward thinking, broad, creative and pioneering.
- Clear foundations have been laid for systemic change, including development of strong connections across LA directorates.
- FPA local authorities are looking to the future and clearly planning to embed project outcomes / outputs into strategy / operations.
- Learning is shared with other local authorities / organisations, and is considered to be easy to engage with useful.
- Clear and convincing plans are in place to secure a financial future for parks and green spaces.
- A strong peer network has been developed. Collaboration and sharing become the norm amongst FPA places and beyond.
- Teams and leaders feel they have the skills needed to lead for transformation, or know where to get it.

Intermediate outcomes

- New, more diverse and blended finance models are in place and being further developed, in some places this will include innovative and impact finance
- Councils in the cohort start to transform the relationship between communities and green spaces at scale so these public assets deliver ever greater levels of public benefit
- Thinking on parks and green spaces are at the heart of how the LA will operate in future.
- New cross-sector partnerships have been established or developed. Parks are not managed in a silo.
- The cohort is a mature peer network. Collaboration and sharing become the norm and are sustained beyond FPA.
- Learning, tools, guides have been well disseminated and are being used by the FPA cohort and other councils looking at the future of their parks and green spaces.
- The leaders from the FPA cohort have developed new skills and experience of leading for transformation and change.
- HF and NT better understand how to work well in partnership with others and how to set up partnerships for success.. The partners understand how best to utilise an impact investment model.

Long-term outcomes

- A step-change in how people engage with and use their green spaces in order to maximise public benefit, local potential and innovation.

- New cross-sector partnerships that bring together knowledge, expertise and leadership from outside the traditional parks sector, fosters collaboration and drive greater use of green spaces.
- An approach finances for green space which catalyses and blends new sources of funding to enable diversified and sustainable business models that are attractive to new donors, funders and investors.
- Local authorities and their partners adopting a systemic approach so that a whole place's portfolio of public green space is protected and enhanced, delivering a fair, quality, free service to all.

Appendix 2: Reported additional investment resulting from FPA

	BCP	Birmingham	Cambs. & Peterborough	Camden	Islington	Edinburgh	Nottingham	Plymouth	TOTAL
1. Existing budgets protected	-	-	£10,000,000	£2,600,000	£3,540,000	-	-	£2,060,000	£18,200,000
2. New capital funding	£188,867	£500,000	-	£1,890,000	£2,772,000	£120,000	£1,015,000	£8,965,000	£15,450,867
3. New project funding	£173,151	£265,000	£160,000	-	£50,000	£267,000	£4,032,000	£2,900,000	£7,847,151
4. New recurring funds	-	£40,000	-	£1,120,000	£317,000	-	-	-	£1,477,000
5. Total additional funding	£362,018	£805,000	£10,160,000	£5,610,000	£6,679,000	£387,000	£5,047,000	£13,925,000	£42,975,018
6. Forecast investment - green finance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	£1,500,000	-
7. Forecast green finance income generation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	£75,000 / year for 30 years	-