

Initial Report to FoRP on **DEFENDING YOUR PARK**

23 Jan 2016 meeting at Chester organised by the
NORTH WEST PARKS FRIENDS FORUM



INTRODUCTION

This was the second such meeting run by the Forum and I attended together with around 40 other park Friends, almost all of whom were from the NW.

Participants are promised that several of the documents/presentations at the workshop will shortly be circulated by the organisers and I will send whatever I receive to FoRP as and when. So what follows is just my initial report.

STRUCTURE OF THE WORKSHOP

Though there was a printed programme, this was largely set aside, a pragmatic response by the organisers to the absence of at least one speaker and additional folk volunteering contributions. The result was a well-managed, lively, informative and instructive meeting starting at 11.00 and ending around 16.00.

Three contributions addressed very different threats to specific parks (in Chester, Liverpool and Saltaire) and three spoke to general themes – the current, general threat to open spaces, how

to use social media, and the importance of ecological knowledge in the defence of parks.

In this report, I will not report these verbatim but highlight some key issues and flag up matters which FoRP should consider.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

The meeting opened with a slide entitled 'The Graph of Doom'!



This showed that, by 2022, as a result of central government cuts, expenditure by local authorities on statutory services (those they *must* deliver) will exceed total income. This means that there will be *no money at all* for non-statutory local government services – and that includes parks.

However, some local authorities are already planning to reduce park expenditure to zero at an earlier date. Liverpool propose to do this by 2017.

It could be that, in light of the above, we are facing a countrywide mass sale of the green spaces owned by local government.

In some places the process has started, though not always because of cuts. In 2012, officers in Chester sent to auction, and sold, a park-keeper's house and a large plot of park land. In Liverpool, a very large park was systematically denuded of its facilities (even the park benches were removed) after which –without any forewarning let alone any consultation - Everton FC announced it was to build a new stadium on the land!

The battle, in both cases, is joined.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE BY THOSE WISHING TO DEFEND THEIR BELOVED GREEN SPACE?

Some proposals that emerged during the day...

A

You need to know the legal status of your park. This became a theme of the day. When the s**t hits the fan, understanding the park's status can be critical. Our own case demonstrates this perfectly. A year ago, FoRP did not understand in detail how the R Park charitable trust operated and had no idea at all about the HLF/BMDC contract- and hence we did not know what opportunities there were for defending the park.

Discussion at the meeting suggested that there might yet be things to learn about 'land trusts'.

B

Involve more people in the life of the park. This is probably best done by building partnerships with local groups. An obvious, existing example in our case is the Saltaire Festival, run by a group and delivering massive numbers of users to the park each year. (We cannot allow the Festival to die!). Another emerging example is the running events suggested by Coun Davies which would tap into the enthusiasm of athletic clubs and a charity. Ditto the partnership with local croquet enthusiasts suggested by Sue. These examples require relatively little effort by FoRP. The volunteer power and most of the hard graft comes from outside.

We should be brainstorming how we could promote the use of our park by local groups and then discussing our thoughts with Mel and the team.

C

This ties in with a proposal made by an ecologist who addressed the meeting. Given the importance of environmental considerations in the determination of planning application, she urged Friends to do a wildlife survey/environmental audit of their parks. Should we not be commissioning this from our local birders and natural historians?

D

Ensure that the park is a key element in local development and neighbourhood plans. These count for something when cuts and planning applications are being considered.

Les Brook

25 January 2016