

SPECIAL SECTION

De-municipalisation? Legacies of austerity for England's urban parks

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Abstract

Parks are important urban infrastructures that contribute a broad range of health, environmental, social, and economic benefits. Despite this, UK parks' status as non-statutory services makes them particularly vulnerable to local authority budget cuts. This paper focuses on parks in English cities as these were particularly affected by severe cuts to local government budgets 2010–2019. This period of austerity affected parks provision in various ways, including service reductions, increased reliance on volunteer labour, and pressure to generate commercial revenue. Combined with a series of other factors, including ongoing neoliberalisation, austerity-driven changes left a range of physical, social, and institutional legacies. This paper explores these using the notion of de-municipalisation to frame the discussion. The paper is based on an innovative synthesis of research conducted by the authors 2016–2022 and presented at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in 2021. The paper identifies that austerity-driven changes included an experimental 'shaking up' of park governance, away from local authorities and with greater involvement from national-level NGOs. Changes also involved a 'breaking down' of municipal management, with responsibility delegated to dedicated parks trusts but also to community groups and volunteers. Ultimately, austerity 2010–2019 altered parks governance, transforming the stewardship and condition of parks, reducing accountability and accessibility, and exacerbating inequities in parks provision. Rather than representing new directions, these changes perpetuate those instigated in previous austerity eras. The noted trend towards de-municipalisation also reduces parks' capacity to serve as integrated infrastructures – something that may hinder efforts to make cities more sustainable and resilient.

KEYWORDS

austerity, cities, England, governance, green space, parks

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Urban parks are important social and green infrastructures that contribute multiple benefits across various policy agendas. They provide recreational amenities and ecological services, and support human wellbeing by offering places to socialise, unwind, and connect with nature. In England, their long history, resonant imaginaries, and widespread appeal mean urban parks are symbolic institutions that represent civic municipalism. Traditionally, elected local authorities have been responsible for funding, management, and maintenance, reinforcing parks' reputation as democratic and public spaces. Despite these credentials, parks' status as non-statutory services makes them vulnerable to local authority budget cuts, leading to changes in the ways parks are funded and managed (Smith, 2021).

This paper assesses the legacies of austerity for public parks in England. We examine how austerity has reshaped the ways parks are governed, and assess changes in light of past trends and imagined futures. There has already been some consideration of English parks under austerity, but existing research tends to focus on individual cities or specific parks (e.g., Mell, 2020; Smith, 2021). The intention here is to provide an overarching account across a range of cities, particularly large municipalities disproportionately affected by funding cuts: Bristol, Liverpool, London, Newcastle, Nottingham, and Sheffield. We have deliberately examined cities that have introduced new approaches and so, while these are not necessarily 'typical' cases, we cover most of England's largest cities and indicate the direction English urban parks management is heading.

Our Anglo-centric focus is justified for several reasons. England hosted the first urban public parks and pioneering models were exported globally, with many cities across the world still boasting 'English-style parks'. In the period 2010–2019, England endured some of the most severe austerity measures adopted by a developed nation, with urban areas most affected by austerity-driven budget cuts. Scottish and Welsh governments were more successful in protecting local governments from UK government cuts (Gray & Barford, 2018). Therefore, English cities, and their parks, are globally noteworthy because of the scale of cuts they experienced and the likelihood that austerity measures might be replicated elsewhere.

De-municipalisation is a process associated with new public management and privatisation, and is often used to describe changes to social-housing provision (Laffin, 2019). In this paper, we use the term to highlight and better understand austerity-driven changes to parks governance. The term has particular resonance in a parks context, given the widely understood notion of the municipal park – one which is run by municipal government, as part of a portfolio of civic services, for the benefit of all. 'De-municipalisation' in parks has involved delegating responsibility to local charities and social enterprises, and collaborating with national-level NGOs. This double-rescaling has shifted responsibility for parks away from municipal councils.

Our paper involves a collaboration drawing on several research projects conducted by the authors between 2016 and 2022, including Smith's work on park commercialisation, Whitten's work on park governance, and Ernwein's work on park labour and the circulation of new management models (Ernwein, 2021; Smith, 2019, 2021; Whitten, 2019, 2022). These studies deployed semi-structured interviews with representatives of organisations responsible for managing municipal parks and other key stakeholders, including friends groups and relevant NGOs. This paper synthesises place-specific research focused on London and Newcastle, and a nationwide project that examined local authorities' participation in park 'innovation' programmes. These studies generated in-depth knowledge about specific places and wider comprehension of national-level trends. Key policy documents produced during this period were also analysed.

In the paper, we explore and critique the relevance of de-municipalisation as a way of understanding changes introduced 2010–2019. We first review English austerity 2010–2019 and its effects on discretionary local government services. We then examine how austerity induced both a 'shaking up' of local authority park management, including greater and revised involvement from NGOs, and a 'breaking down' of green space governance from local government to civil society. Subsequently, we examine the entanglement of different temporalities in the processes described, reflecting on the legacies of previous periods of cuts and the imagined futures of English public parks. We conclude that 'de-municipalisation' is not inevitable, and suggest emerging 're-municipalisation' might offer a better chance of addressing acute challenges.

2 | AUSTERITY 2010–2019: GEOGRAPHIES AND LEGACIES

In 2010, the UK government – a Conservative-led coalition involving the Liberal Democrats – introduced the 'most significant reorganisation of public spending' in the post-war era (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016, p. 359). The subsequent Conservative-led government (2015–2019) also pursued an austerity-driven agenda. Between 2009/2010 and

2019/2020, grants from central government to local authorities were cut by 37% in real terms, reducing local authorities' spending power by 16% (Institute for Government, 2022). This 'scalar dumping' is a common way that national governments respond to austerity, with local governments in turn shifting responsibility for providing public services to local communities. The cuts, and measures to deal with them, were delivered largely in and through cities (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016). This 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012) disproportionately affected already disadvantaged people, with poorer neighbourhoods affected more by service cuts such as reductions in public-realm maintenance (Hastings et al., 2017). Effects were exacerbated as the UK's urban population continued to grow (Government Office for Science, 2021), with demand for public services, such as parks, increasing while budgets were diminishing (Local Government Association, n.d.).

In the period 2010–2019, large cuts were made to discretionary local authority services, including parks provision. These cuts forced governance changes, as councils could not – or would not – take on management of new spaces and found it difficult to maintain existing parks (Dempsey et al., 2016). 'State of UK Public Parks' reports published in 2014, 2016, and 2021 identified a significant decline in parks budgets, amounting to £690 m across a decade of austerity (Association for Public Service Excellence, 2021; Heritage Lottery Fund, 2014, 2016). Midway through the period 2010–2019, the Gardens Trust highlighted the threat of park dilapidation, risking an all-too-familiar spiral of decline with neglect leading to further problems such as vandalism and safety concerns (Layton-Jones, 2016).

2.1 | A shaking up: Experiments in new parks management

The economic crisis of the 1970s opened up the city as a laboratory for experiments and the same could be said of the crisis post-2008 (Oosterlynck & González, 2013). England's urban parks have been at the forefront of experimentation, with revised modes of managing and funding parks devised, tested, and launched in the period 2010–2019. The notion that public funding would be reduced and that new approaches were needed became a pervasive discourse within parks management. This was evident in comments by the Chief Executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence: 'If parks and open spaces are to survive the age of austerity then it will be done by sweating out efficiency, generating income streams to offset budget drops and by seeking new forms of innovation' (Association for Public Service Excellence, n.d.). Innovation was also advocated by a Parliamentary public parks inquiry (2016/17): 'To support service transformation which parks require, the Minister and his cross-departmental group should work with local authorities which are pioneering alternative management models or funding arrangements' (House of Commons, 2017, p. 54).

At the same time, austerity measures meant the UK Government closed multiple QUANGOs, including CABE Space, the government's advisor on architecture, urban design, and public space, in 2011. In this advisory void, the National Lottery, the Land Trust, and the National Trust emerged as key stakeholders. In 2012, the Land Trust and the Big Lottery Fund launched 'Prosperous Parks' to highlight new ways of generating income. Subsequent grant schemes were offered by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), National Trust, and Nesta, an organisation dedicated to designing, testing, and scaling 'new solutions to society's biggest problems'. These schemes combined grant-funding with 'intensive support and skills development' and, unlike previous HLF grants, focused on capacity-building rather than site improvement. The flagship 'innovation' programme was titled 'Rethinking Parks: New Business Models for the 21st Century' (2012–2020). This scheme advocated 'new' approaches, including that local authorities should adopt a private-sector mentality, incorporating market research and financial expertise into parks management.

Rethinking Parks tested ways to supplement public funding, but these experiments had limited scope to transform the sector. Most, in fact, were never adopted, either in the test site or in other locations. One example was Park Improvement Districts – funding parks through a levy on local ratepayers. Therefore, at first glance, the direct legacies of the Rethinking Parks scheme were limited. However, this programme generated discussion and debate, and provided the foundation for the above-mentioned Parliamentary inquiry. This inquiry generated a big response from the public against any privatisation of public parks – but a less impressive response by the government. Significantly, the widespread call to make parks a statutory, rather than discretionary, service was ignored (Barker et al., 2020).

The most recent innovation scheme (launched in 2019) was the Future Parks Accelerator (FPA), coordinated by the HLF, the UK Government, and the National Trust to help selected local authorities develop sustainable funding strategies. The National Trust had already worked with Sheffield and Newcastle under the HLF/Nesta programme and through the FPA the National Trust helped local authorities transform park governance. This repositioning of the National Trust exemplifies the transformation of relations between local authorities and the charitable sector: in previous periods such organisations were envisaged as service providers but they are now expert facilitators, using their networks and funds

to influence land management. The National Trust had expertise in volunteering and fund-raising, but they also steered local authorities towards private funding – from philanthropy to commercialisation.

The grant funding awarded 2010–2019 embedded exclusionary and self-perpetuating notions of competitive success by repeatedly rewarding cities that engaged with national programmes. One grant tended to lead to another, each providing the basis for a subsequent, often larger, bid. For example, Bournemouth Parks Foundation was established via a Nesta grant and subsequently submitted various other successful applications, including for the FPA, and secured funds from the HLF. Newcastle was awarded HLF funding to develop a new parks trust, then became one of nine cities supported by the FPA. Similarly, Nottingham successfully applied to both the Nesta Prototyping and FPA schemes. This, we argue, risks creating a two-tier system in which cities that grab early opportunities gain visibility and connections to secure further funding, while everywhere else gets left behind.

2.2 | A breaking down: Relegating and delegating responsibility

By complementing analysis of top-down ‘austerity urbanism’ with recognition of bottom-up ‘pragmatic municipalism’ (Kim & Warner, 2021), we can examine how England’s municipal authorities and other local stakeholders responded to austerity 2010–2019. Austerity urbanism analyses highlight the ways cuts and privatisation contribute to ongoing neoliberalisation, but a ‘pragmatic municipalism’ perspective recognises that local governments can use alternative revenue sources/modes of governance to protect service delivery (Warner et al., 2021). Austerity measures formulated by English municipal authorities were responses to measures imposed at the national level, but there was also local government agency. Local authorities continued providing services, in part because they redesigned delivery (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016) and the major change for parks services was greater emphasis on external income generation. By 2016, 22.5% of parks budgets was generated from external sources and, while this figure fell to 19% during the coronavirus pandemic, it is expected to rise to 24% by 2024 (Association for Public Service Excellence, 2021). Some municipal authorities now generate almost all their parks budget from commercial income. For example, by 2017, Nottingham was generating 92% of its (£5.02 m) parks-service costs from commercial sources (Curry, 2017).

Bristol also tried to generate more commercial income to offset effects of budget cuts. By 2019, Bristol’s parks and green spaces budget had been reduced to £1.6 m, a £4.35 m reduction since 2014. In the period 2018–2020, the plan was to generate an additional £1.415 m, including £315,000 by introducing ‘new fee-paying activities into parks’ (Bristol City Council, 2018). This was opposed, with some councillors worrying the drive to commercialisation might render those who cannot pay for activities ‘second-class citizens’ (Combley cited in Pipe, 2017). In other urban areas, parks foundations, such as the Bournemouth Parks Foundation and the Leeds Parks Fund, were established to generate additional income. These new organisations did not replace local authority services, they were introduced in parallel to supplement funding (Barker & Pina-Sánchez, 2019). Parks foundations encourage donations and legacies from businesses and individuals, lead fundraising campaigns, and grant applications. Unlike public authorities, foundations have charitable status and can claim tax relief from donations via the Gift Aid scheme.

Diversifying income streams during the period 2010–2019 led to more fundamental changes in parks governance and management, as local authorities are not regarded as efficient vehicles for generating external revenues. Accordingly, social enterprises were set up at various spatial levels to supplement or replace established parks management. In most instances these enterprises applied for charitable status to ensure they were eligible for tax relief and other funding opportunities. New organisations were also established to reduce costs, as they were subject to different contracting and tendering rules than local authorities. Governance transfers raise fundamental questions about the ‘publicness’ of green spaces, particularly the public’s capacity to influence how they are managed (De Magalhães & Freire Trigo, 2017). New park management organisations tend to be deliberately distanced from elected, local authorities, and reduced accountability is one of the most significant legacies of austerity-driven park de-municipalisation (Smith, 2021). This reflects a wider shift away from democratic control and public accountability that tends to accompany austerity policies (Lobao et al., 2018).

In London, various new management arrangements were introduced 2010–2019. In 2015, Wandsworth Council established a new social enterprise, Enable Leisure and Culture, to manage its leisure and cultural venues (Smith, 2019). Enable, now a registered charity, manages parks and handles park-related general queries on behalf of the Council. However, as in most cases we have examined, Wandsworth Council retains ownership and oversight, and Council staff moved over to work for the new organisation. In other instances, responsibility for large parks on borough boundaries was transferred to new charitable trusts or not-for-profit organisations. For example, Gunnersbury Park Community

Interest Company was established in 2015 to manage this West London park (Smith, 2021). Similarly, a new trust has been established to provide a new way of managing Crystal Palace Park in South London, taking over from Bromley Council. This trust has charitable status and a new business plan which aims to raise 70% of the money needed annually to run the park via event hires (Crystal Palace Park Trust, 2020). The benefits of the new governance model include greater capacity to focus exclusively on the park, unlike conventional models where parks management is just one of multiple functions performed by local authorities. Moving away from local authority control puts the park in a stronger position to raise commercial, charitable, and grant funds. However, as a recent London Green Spaces Commission report notes, new arrangements 'have not yet been independently and objectively tested or evaluated to determine their effectiveness' (2020, p. 21).

The most significant and ambitious governance shift during the austerity period was Newcastle City Council's decision to transfer 33 parks and six allotment sites to a city-wide trust launched in 2019. This model had previously been explored by Sheffield City Council with the National Trust. However, councillors rejected creating an independent, endowed, charitable organisation to manage Sheffield's parks, in part because of the perception that it entailed 'selling off the family silver' (Lindholst et al., 2020). The new way of managing Newcastle's parks was prompted by a 91% cut to the city's parks budget, which was reduced from £2.58 m in 2010/11 to £87,000 in 2017/18. Newcastle City Council has committed £9.5 m of funding to fund the new organisation, Urban Green, over its first 10 years, by which time they hope it will be self-sustaining. The aim is to generate £1.8 million a year by 'maximising the revenue from current assets', and to raise a further £400,000 per annum through 'sponsorship, philanthropy, and fundraising' (Urban Green, 2020). However, these plans have already been disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis, which reduced income and increased costs (Urban Green, 2020), and by opposition to (BBC, 2022a) and low demand for (BBC, 2022b) commercial events.

Austerity-driven commercialisation 2010–2019 has left material legacies. For example, there are now significant concerns about the amount of time and space that expensive, fenced events occupy (Smith, 2019). Other types of austerity-driven commercialisation are also associated with legacies of exclusion: expensive cafes, new visitor attractions, and formalised sports provision deter people who are unwilling or unable to pay (Smith, 2021). Thus, alongside reduced accountability, reduced accessibility is an important legacy of austerity-driven park de-municipalisation.

2.3 | Involving volunteers and community organisations

In tandem with budget cuts, the government pushed localism and its 'Big Society' agenda, encouraging communities and volunteers to fill service gaps. This 'austerity localism' (Findlay-King et al., 2018) saw responsibility for amenities threatened with closure transferred to volunteers and local residents (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012). Given their discretionary status, value to local residents, and opportunities for volunteering, parks fitted with aims to devolve public services to non-state actors. As supposedly democratic spaces, parks suited efforts to decentralise power, responsibility, and decision-making (Mathers et al., 2015). This accelerated a governance shift as non-state actors took responsibility for parks management, maintenance, and fundraising (Whitten, 2019). An unprecedented range of stakeholders became involved, further breaking down the role of municipal government.

Extensive cuts to local authority budgets left community organisations with little support. For example, more than half of London councils cut funding for volunteer support, including community engagement officers who liaised with friends groups (LAEC, 2017). This reduced local government's capacity to engage with community groups and the voluntary sector. Cuts contradict localism or Big Society ideals, as reducing council budgets 'is likely to handicap rather than liberate community activism and self-help' (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012, p. 32). Indeed, the rise in volunteering in London parks ebbed in 2012 due to lack of supportive resources from local authorities (National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, 2016).

Overall, the number and influence of friends groups grew in the period 2010–2019. Friends or other stewardship groups may take over management of a space when the alternative is loss of the space, but volunteers lack the skills and resources to manage a site without support from the municipal authority (National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, 2017). These organisations do not want 'to substitute for well-trained and resourced staff, or to feel exploited as cheap labour' (NFPGS, 2016). Instead, they prefer working in partnership with local councils, recognising that 'if local government loses staff, it curtails what they can do with volunteers' (London Parks and Green Spaces Forum, 2012, p. 9).

Luxmore Gardens, in the London borough of Lewisham, provides an instructive example of the legacies of austerity and need for continued municipal support. This space had become neglected, with local residents referring to it as 'dog poo park' and considering it unsafe. Lewisham Council provided the newly formed 'Friends of Luxmore Gardens' with

£30,000, which the Friends used to apply for match funding and secure other grants. However, rather than illustrating the potential of community groups, Luxmore Gardens highlights the *limits* of governance based on volunteer contributions and grant funding. As the landowner, Lewisham Council, retains responsibility for the site, but has ceded management, maintenance, and funding to a group of local residents, making Luxmore Gardens' accessibility contingent on a cache of willing, skilled, and resourced volunteers. Despite their success, the Friends have expressed unease about the new arrangements. They are concerned that some volunteer groups in the borough lack the time, skills, and experience required to apply for grant funding and manage green spaces, potentially leading to unequal access to quality green spaces.

Friends groups in Birmingham have similarly told the local council they could not continue volunteering without the essential support of frontline council parks and maintenance staff (National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, 2017). Concern also has been raised about how democratic and representative community groups are (Whitten, 2019): we should not fall into the trap of thinking that local civic groups are more democratic or more inclusive than governments (Campbell et al., 2022). Increased involvement of community organisations in decision-making can privilege their interests over wider public preferences, further entrenching power inequalities (De Magalhães & Freire Trigo, 2017). As local government's role is diluted, the democratic underpinnings of 'people's parks' are watered down – another significant legacy of de-municipalisation.

Volunteers' insistence on the need for staff, resources, and infrastructure from municipalities contrasts with assumptions made by local authorities about decreasing labour costs. Within national government rhetoric about 'Big Society', some authorities envisioned 'armies of volunteers', a phrase used during consultations about Newcastle's parks trust. The presumption was that a charity would recruit more volunteers than a city council. A trust was also seen as a route to avoid paying contractors via public authorities' payment processes. However, despite cost-cutting rhetoric, it is worth noting that Urban Green Newcastle now employs more staff than the Council parks department did after 2010.

3 | AUSTERITY REVISITED

Austerity 2010–2019 led to a focus on income generation and increasing reliance on community organisations to maintain parks, but these were neither new nor unexpected developments. As Barker et al. (2020) note, many recent 'innovations' have been adapted from historical precedents. Rather than a critical turning point, we argue that the period 2010–2019 reinforced and accelerated trends started in previous decades – in periods of crisis and so-called 'renaissance' (Layton-Jones, 2016).

The Urban Parks Forum identified 1979–1984 and 1989–1994 as periods when urban green spaces across England saw drastic budget reductions, leading to 'widespread decline' in quality (Wilson & Hughes, 2011, p. 207). These periods were characterised by significant cuts and associated local government reorganisation. Pre-empting debates 2010–2019, concerns about commercialisation, dependence on grant-funding, and reliance on volunteers and community organisations were raised.

Chronic under-funding of parks during the recessions of the early 1980s and early 1990s led to 'a spiral of decline' (Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee (ETRAC), 1999). The national government's pursuit of public-sector efficiency led to the requirement that local authorities put construction and maintenance work out for competitive tendering. This compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) mandate had long-lasting negative effects, such as on horticultural skills (Dempsey et al., 2020). These changes facilitated the decline of smaller neighbourhood parks, as privatisation and outsourcing efforts were best suited 'to large-scale specific tasks such as grass cutting and weed-killing edges, but not for dealing with small items of maintenance and daily gardening care' (ETRAC, 1999). In contrast, the period 1996–2010 is often described as 'renaissance years' for English parks – a period of material improvement during which many parks were refurbished and the spiral of decline was interrupted (Layton-Jones, 2016). This was driven by the Heritage Lottery Fund (est. 1994) and capital-funding grants they distributed. Between 1996 and 2016, more than £850 m was invested in parks, ending years of disinvestment and neglect.

Many volunteer and friends groups that local authorities sought to rely on during the 2010–2019 period actually emerged in previous periods (Jones, 2002). For example, the Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park formed in 1990 because of concerns about neglect and now manage the park through a service-level agreement with the London borough of Tower Hamlets. Other volunteering groups called on during the 2010–2019 period were established during the 'renaissance' period: HLF grants included a match-funding clause, which partly came in the form of volunteering. In Newcastle, one of the first structured volunteering programmes was set up after the parks department received a £6 m grant to improve one of the city's parks. The match-funding included £250,000 in volunteer labour. When, years later, the

council made all park-keepers redundant and decreased parks' budgets, volunteers effectively became the park's main source of labour.

Similarly, the idea of handing parks to charitable trusts largely predates 2010. For example, at the city-wide level, the Parks Trust was established to care for parks and green spaces in Milton Keynes in 1992. At the site-specific level, multiple park trusts existed prior to 2008, including Potters Fields Park Management Trust in London, established in 2005. Therefore, while austerity 2010–2019 involved a relegation and delegation of municipal responsibility for parks, legacies both from previous periods – of crisis and renaissance – influenced local communities' capacity to step in.

4 | CRITIQUING THE NOTION OF AUSTERITY-LED DE-MUNICIPALISATION

Our interpretation of recent shifts in parks governance as a continuation, rather than a recalibration, of existing trajectories is supported when we consider the extent to which changes implemented 2010–2019 were caused by austerity. It takes a long time to plan, negotiate, and establish a parks trust, so only those developed very recently (e.g., Newcastle and Crystal Palace) are direct responses to cuts imposed by Conservative-led governments 2010–2019. Some new organisations now tasked with running parks were envisaged earlier. For example, the aforementioned Gunnersbury Park CIC was proposed in a report by the Parks Agency in 2004 (Smith, 2021). While austerity may have provided an additional push, other factors need to be acknowledged. In the cases of Gunnersbury Park and Crystal Palace Park, new governance arrangements (explored above) were associated with the regeneration of large destination parks, and the requirement to resolve long-standing governance problems. Both parks are situated on territorial boundaries, complicating management by a single local authority. These problems emanate from a previous de-municipalisation, in 1986, when the Greater London Council was abolished and responsibility for large parks across London was handed to individual boroughs.

There are significant geographical variations in the extent and outcomes of austerity-driven budget cuts for urban parks. New approaches to parks governance adopted 2010–2019 are concentrated in London, perhaps reflecting the severity of budget cuts, but also greater commercial potential of the capital's green spaces. Elsewhere, the new governance model adopted in Newcastle remains the exception, rather than the norm, but it is specifically identified in key reports as an approach other cities should consider (House of Commons, 2017).

Thus far, uptake of radical new approaches has been limited, even in cities which have experienced dramatic cuts. Although new organisations were established 2010–2019, more than 85% of urban parks remained in local authority control at the end of the 2010s (APSE, 2021), so it is important not to overemphasise the scale and extent of the changes. In cities such as Liverpool, where the City Council's core budget was reduced by 58% 2010–2015, radical proposals were widely discussed but not taken forward (Mell, 2020). There was a real danger that Liverpool's green spaces might be sold for development because of austerity-related budget pressures. From 2013 to 2018, campaigners successfully thwarted a plan to sell part of Sefton Park Meadows to housing developers. These threats receded thanks to a new initiative: in 2021, the City Council formed a partnership with Fields in Trust, a national charity that works to protect parks and green spaces, providing accessible places for play, sport, and recreation. Through this partnership, Liverpool City Council became the first local authority to commit to protecting all its parks and green spaces in perpetuity. This is a less acknowledged – and more positive – legacy of austerity: the threat of losing parks has prompted some significant commitments to protecting them – albeit without the finances needed to back these up.

It is also important to look beyond headline cuts and critique the wider rationale for changes. In cities like Newcastle that have introduced new modes of parks governance, cuts to parks budgets were conveniently used to justify new arrangements. As Loughran (2022) notes, strategic retrenchment creates the political space that allows private interests to be presented to the public as the only viable plan. This is not to deny that some cuts were necessary, but decisions to make draconian cuts to park budgets were deliberate choices based on the perceived potential to generate more commercial revenue from parks and increase contributions of volunteer labour. Extreme cuts were strategically communicated as sudden reductions in budgets, but in reality, these changes were scheduled over longer time periods, allowing alternative sources of funding to be developed. For example, Newcastle City Council emphasised 91% cuts to the city's parks service budget to justify their new trust. But, concurrently, they committed up to £9.5 million over 10 years to establish it and provided more than £2 million in funding in 2019/20 alone (Urban Green, 2020). This suggests the new organisation was not simply a response to reduced budgets, but also driven by other objectives. The severity of budget cuts – and their effects – should not be underestimated, but austerity is a rhetorical tool as much as a fiscal reality. Dramatic narratives of immediate cuts were used strategically to promote new ways of operating council services. Following a tried-and-tested

tactic, sometimes very large cuts were announced which, following the inevitable public outcry, were then reduced to indicate compromise. For example, Bristol announced a 100% cut to its parks service budget in 2017, which was almost immediately downgraded to a 75% reduction.

While it is easy to paint the period 2010–2019 as one where municipal responsibility for parks was shaken up and broken down, a counter trend, including a move back towards municipal maintenance also occurred (Wills, 2020). This reflects a wider re-municipalisation post-2008, as local authorities realised efficiencies of operating public services themselves (Wollmann, 2018). Contracting out a range of responsibilities to private companies became widespread from the late 1980s through the 1990s/2000s, when the state shifted towards a regulatory role and away from directly delivering services (Institute for Government, 2019). Parks, along with roads, were ‘spearheads’ in the marketisation of public services, with the UK a pioneer (Lindholst & Hansen, 2020, p. 13). However, in times of extreme austerity – with less scope for private companies to profit from local authority contracts – many councils have brought services back in-house. For example, the number of London boroughs operating in-house parks maintenance rose from 14 to 17 in the period 2017–2019 (Parks for London, 2017, 2019). This generated cost-savings, for example by deploying staff across a range of green spaces, not just conventional parks (Wills, 2020). The consolidation of private contractors following the acquisition of Quadron by ID Verde in 2016, and the 2018 collapse of Carillon (a significant grounds-maintenance supplier), also contributed to this trend. Local authorities, with their accountability to local residents and coordinating responsibilities across a municipality, are perhaps better positioned than private, for-profit companies to manage friends groups and volunteer labour – another reason parks work has returned in-house. This re-municipalisation of park maintenance can be regarded positively, but the circumstances in which it has occurred mean local authorities are not in a position to capitalise. This reinforces Kim and Warner’s conclusion about difficulties reclaiming municipal control: ‘reasserting the public role and maintaining social values requires capacity which may be further eroded by austerity’ (2021, p. 245).

5 | IMAGINING A FUTURE OF PERPETUAL AUSTERITY

There are already signs that the 2020s will differ from the previous decade as the viability, and attractiveness, of commercially oriented parks governance have been undermined by the COVID-19 pandemic. Losses were incurred from event cancellations, but also from lost sponsorship revenues, car-parking charges, sports bookings, and entrance fees. Our research focused on the period 2010–2019, but COVID-19 presented major challenges to nascent parks organisations 2020–2022. Although established to distance themselves from the uncertainty of public financing, new bodies had to ask local authorities for financial assistance during the pandemic. As in other sectors, the pandemic exposed and worsened existing problems facing public parks, including the precarity of commercial funding. A potential change of direction post-pandemic is highlighted by APSE’s chief executive, who previously advocated innovative commercialisation as the only viable response to austerity. By 2021, his stance had shifted: ‘You can’t continuously rely on innovation, entrepreneurship, commercialisation of facilities. Ultimately, to get back on a level footing, there needs to be an increased grant that flows through the system back to parks through local authority budgets’ (quoted in Stearn, 2021). This reflects Layton-Jones’ (2016) conclusion that ‘for most parks there is no viable alternative’ to local authority funding and management.

Future visions now include welcome variations from conventional efforts to diversify income. Several FPA projects have suggested partnering with water agencies or public health authorities to generate income streams that pay parks for environmental functions (such as cleaning water) or their social role (such as reducing demands on mental health services). The FPA also includes a work-stream on impact funds and green bonds, with green-finance firms advising. This suggests a further shift, from commercialisation to financialisation. Implementing a broad range of capital and maintenance funding options – including bonds and tax-increment financing – had been suggested before the current austerity period. But English local authorities had been reluctant to explore financial options that increased debt without sustainable revenues (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) Space, 2006). However, green or sustainable finance and the influence of environmentally and socially responsible investors has evolved since 2010, as part of a wider change in ‘mindset’. This is explicit in FPA documentation, which advocates transitioning from a ‘municipal culture’ towards a ‘socially entrepreneurial’ one, with parks reimagined as civic infrastructures rather than leisure spaces (Heritage Lottery Fund/National Trust, 2018). Ironically, the idea that parks should be regarded as integrated infrastructures that provide fundamental public services is a good justification for (re)municipalisation – transition towards resilient and climate-friendly cities is driving re-municipalisation across Europe (Lindholst, 2021). But the new vision to reimagine parks as integrated green infrastructures sits awkwardly with the trend 2010–2019 to establish new organisations focused on specific parks. These may hinder rather than help integration of urban parks into municipal-level

strategies. New city-wide parks trusts – such as Urban Green in Newcastle – may not help either as they reinforce approaches that treat parks as a siloed function, hindering the transition to sustainable cities ‘composed of regenerative, multi-functional systems including green and blue spaces’ (Campbell et al., 2022, p. 713).

6 | CONCLUSIONS

The legacies for urban parks resulting from the period of austerity 2010–2019 can be understood as a process of de-municipalisation. Established roles for municipal councils have been altered by involving charitable organisations that have taken responsibility for individual parks at the local level and become more involved in directing policy at the national level. Simultaneously, volunteers and community groups have become more involved in parks funding, maintenance, and management. These changes have shifted responsibility away from elected municipal authorities, rescaling parks governance. Roles have been altered, in some cases dramatically, with local authorities relinquishing long-held responsibilities. We have summarised these shifts as involving a shaking up and a breaking down of municipal control. Although we have expressed concerns over alternative ownership and management schemes, challenging the status quo and adopting new, innovative ways of working can be positive – especially if they align parks with key social, environmental, and climatic challenges (Caldwell et al., 2019).

Our analysis has shown that de-municipalisation is not a totally new trajectory for England’s municipal parks. Instead, it represents a continuation, intensification, and culmination of processes that predated the 2008 financial crash. And while a significant trend, de-municipalisation has not been realised to the extent planned and envisaged by national-level stakeholders (House of Commons, 2017; Heritage Lottery Fund/National Trust, 2018). English cities such as Liverpool and Sheffield have been reluctant to follow Newcastle’s example and delegate responsibility for their parks services to a charitable trust, although a discernible shift towards commercial and other ‘external’ sources of funding has occurred. Many changes that have been implemented are typical of neoliberalising ‘austerity urbanism’ measures. However, there is also evidence of ‘pragmatic municipalism’ (Warner et al., 2021), enterprising actions taken by local authorities which protected services and reduced the need for radical governance changes. We also identified a counter-trend – a re-municipalisation – in instances of extreme austerity where maintenance has returned in-house. At present this trend is driven by expediency, but there are valid hopes that it will be sustained to help address acute problems. Re-municipalisation is bolstered by the latest vision for parks: as integrated socio-ecological services funded via health and environment budgets.

Austerity 2010–2019 diversified park funding and governance modes. This has (further) confused responsibility for parks management, which threatens, rather than secures, the future of England’s city parks. Two related legacies need to be acknowledged. First, people have been inspired to play a more active role in parks management by establishing, or contributing to, a local community group or by campaigning against inappropriate commercialisation (Smith, 2019). Second, citizens and councillors (e.g., those in Liverpool) have become so alarmed by the prospect of parks being sold off that they have resolved to give them greater protection. Demands on urban parks continue to evolve with expanding evidence of their multifaceted benefits. Parks are increasingly posited, in research, policy, and practice, as contributing to a range of municipal agendas, including meeting climate change targets, increasing biodiversity, supporting active travel, and mitigating flood risk (Whitten, 2022). However, this convincing new direction sits awkwardly with governance changes made 2010–2019.

The geographies of parks provision have been altered by austerity 2010–2019. As Lobao et al. (2018, p. 395) note, pushing cuts on to the local state and re-scaling governance ‘invariably results in spatial inequality’ and this means greater variation in the ways parks are managed, but also in the quality of parks provision. Reliance on grant funding has privileged serial applicants, deepening the divide between areas where parks are well maintained and everywhere else. Rather than a uniform delegation of responsibility to non-elected organisations, the de-municipalisation of urban parks involves an uneven splintering of control, with some parks remaining council-run and others being handed over to social enterprises and community groups that have varying capacities. The delegation of large ‘destination’ parks to charitable trusts that raise and retain income means these parks will remain well maintained, unlike smaller spaces in less-affluent areas (Smith, 2019, 2021). Alongside lower accountability, this is one of the most negative legacies of de-municipalisation, as it restricts the redistribution of income and erodes shared responsibility across a municipality. The material legacy is a large number of parks in a dilapidated state and, while this may inadvertently make spaces wilder, it creates unsafe, under-used spaces. Pervading commercialisation has encouraged the subdivision of individual parks, with more space allocated to paid-for facilities, including fenced events, which

divide users into those who can pay fees and those who cannot. This uneven provision – well-maintained, larger parks alongside dilapidated, smaller ones – is the key legacy of the austerity era. Neither iteration is inclusive: the former excludes by imposing financial and physical barriers, while the latter excludes by making vulnerable groups feel unwelcome or uncomfortable.

The focus on governance in this paper helps us understand the long-term effects of austerity on English urban parks, and identifying these may help predict (or prevent) changes to parks management in other parts of the world affected by austerity. The framing of changes as de-municipalisation also enhances wider understanding of how cuts to local government budgets affect discretionary service provision. Further research is required to establish whether de-municipalisation also provides a useful lens through which to analyse effects of austerity on statutory services such as libraries, social care, and education.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new primary data were created or analysed in this study.

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