Background

1. The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces (NFPGS) is the umbrella organisation amplifying the voices of the 6,000-strong local Friends Groups' movement throughout the UK.

2. This short submission is intended to highlight the important role of parks and green spaces in providing a focus for inclusive community development and aims to stress the need for additional support to nurture and assist this contribution which, in the current and future economic and social climate, is becoming even more significant and crucial to both local communities and indeed, green spaces themselves.

3. With this in mind, although NFPGS comment is submitted to be of general relevance to the inquiry topic, the submission is of most specific relevance in relation to the following inquiry questions, viz.:

4. Q.12 Can you give examples of initiatives and role models that have helped promote a positive vision of British Citizenship within a tolerant and cohesive society?

4.1. There are estimated to be more than 27,000 parks and green spaces across the UK. These spaces are diverse, ranging from large city parks with many facilities and amenities, to small local neighbourhood or pocket parks.

4.2. The recent Heritage Lottery Fund's State of UK Public Parks 2016 report found that three quarters of local authority park managers had reported increases in visitor numbers over the past three years. Usage was particularly high among:

   - people between the ages of 25 and 34 (70 per cent use their park at least once a month);
   - households with children under the age of five (90 per cent use their park at least once a month);
   - people identifying as Black and Minority Ethnic (of whom 71 per cent use their park at least once a month compared to 56 per cent of people identifying as White).

4.3. Park usage is also higher among those living in urban areas than those living in rural areas (61 per cent compared to 51 per cent use their parks at least once a month). Different parks play different roles in their communities, and people use different parks in different ways.
4.4. On a regular basis these inclusive environments are an integral component of the lifestyle of all, irrespective of age, income, ability or ethnicity. Moreover, the nation’s parks and green spaces have become an established focus for community activity and integration, common ground where individuals, families and user groups can meet, socialize, relax, play and recreate.

4.5. In this manner, parks have become an important driver for community cohesion, providing an accessible, free resource supporting activities vital to health and wellbeing, helping develop a sense of place and local pride and removing neighbourhood barriers.

4.6. To support this activity large numbers of community and ‘Friends’ groups have developed across the UK – an estimated 5,900 according to the HLF State of the UK Parks 2016 report. These committed and enthusiastic local champions work to sustain their local green assets through projects and events and the 2016 report estimated park friends groups raise £50m each year, with a further ‘in kind’ contribution of £70m from volunteering hours each year. In many cases this has been achieved through partnership working and building relationships between individuals and groups, often including public and private sector - from schools to supermarkets.

5. Q.7 How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

5.1. There is a growing crisis for the management of the UK’s 27,000 urban green spaces, as central Government continues to cut local authority funding. With similar challenges to public services in the late 1970s and 1980s many parks gradually but inexorably slid into decline over the next two decades. In response, the Friends movement mushroomed from a few hundred local groups to now several thousands nationwide.

5.2. Owing to current austerity measures, public sector funding for discretionary and ‘non-statutory’ services like parks is projected to continue to fall by 60 per cent or more over the next decade hence the significance of the contributions of park communities to local neighbourhoods is becoming increasingly important. However, austerity is now also jeopardizing the viability and activity of these groups with the loss of resources, both in terms of capital and revenue funding affecting not only the fabric of green spaces but also the vital community development and support work essential to sustain the groups themselves.

5.3. The combination of reductions in park management and maintenance, coupled with threats to the mitigating effect of community engagement is creating a downward spiral of deterioration, often exacerbated by increased
anti-social behaviour - the antithesis of the positive impact resulting from cohesive parks communities engaged in successful place-making and place-keeping activities.

5.4. With these issues to the fore, last year the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Committee undertook a Public Parks Inquiry, and the subsequent report (11 February 2017) duly noted:

*The level of response has clearly demonstrated the strength of the feeling people have for their local parks and green spaces, and how much parks are valued by individuals, families and communities.*

*Parks and green spaces are treasured assets and are often central to the lives of their communities. They provide opportunities for leisure, relaxation and exercise, but are also fundamental to community cohesion, physical and mental health and wellbeing, biodiversity, climate change mitigation, and local economic growth. These benefits have long been recognised, but within a context of budget reductions and tightening financial circumstances it is increasingly important that we find ways to quantify the wider value of parks in order to access new sources of funding and target investment in areas of greatest impact.*

*Parks face considerable challenges. As shared community assets, they must serve many different purposes, and be able to respond to the different and sometimes clashing needs of local communities. They must compete with other services for investment to secure their short and long term sustainability. Distribution of parks is unequal across the country, with many deprived communities struggling to access the benefits which green spaces can provide.*

5.5. Chair of the DCLG Public Parks Inquiry, Clive Betts MP stated:

*Parks are treasured public assets, as the overwhelming response to our inquiry demonstrates, but they are at a tipping point, and if we are to prevent a period of decline with potentially severe consequences then action must be taken. The Government have a leadership and co-ordination role to play and volunteers do fantastic work in the sector, but the primary responsibility lies with local authorities.*

5.6. Moreover, the Inquiry reported noted the importance of Park friends and community groups:

*We welcome the contribution made to parks by friends, volunteer and other community groups and individuals across the country. The time and efforts which people freely give to their parks should not be underestimated, and nor should the benefits for parks, communities and for the individuals themselves.*

5.7. Many of these groups meet up together locally through more than 50 local area Forums and NFPGS is actively working to support and develop the local, regional
and national network to improve sharing of good practice and provide a collective voice to support, protect and improve this legacy.

5.8. Indeed, in 2016 the HLF ‘State of UK Public Parks’ report recommended greater collaboration and co-ordination between partners to maximize the efficient use of limited resources and local networks to support groups. This report also recommended new opportunities for capacity building skills and training to help groups and the parks sector.

5.9. These recommendations were endorsed by the CLG Public Parks Inquiry report:

_We welcome the steps taken by the parks sector in England to fill the gap left by CABE Space and Greenspace, such as the establishment of the Parks Alliance and the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, the Future Parks project led by the National Trust, and the work undertaken as part of Nesta’s Rethinking Parks programme to bring together a database of people and groups with an interest in parks. However, these initiatives, although important and commendable, will not necessarily be enough to provide the coordination and facilitate the sharing of best practice which we believe is necessary to secure and support a sustainable future for England’s parks. We believe that the importance of parks to national strategic objectives such as climate change mitigation and public health mean that there needs to be leadership and vision at the level of national government. We look to the Minister to provide this._

5.10. It is the firm belief of NFPGS that in recognition of the important contribution which parks and their communities make to citizenship and community engagement, the CLG inquiry recommendations are equally applicable to this House of Lords Inquiry.

5.11. Moreover, in recognition of the multiple benefits to both environment and people associated with parks and their communities, the NFPGS reiterates the call to make the provision and management of parks a statutory obligation, protecting and sustaining this special community legacy.

_8 September 2017_