1. Introduction
1.1. The Leeds Parks Project is a two-year multi-disciplinary Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project: ‘The future prospects of urban parks: The life, times and social order of Victorian public parks as places of social mixing’ (Grant Ref: AH/N001788/1) which began on 1 November 2015.
1.2. The research explores expectations about the social role of urban public parks in the past, present and future, and examines how these relate to people’s everyday experiences of parks and their regulation. We believe that enquiry into the uses of parks over time is valuable to understanding their significance to the contemporary city and to assessing visions and expectations of what parks might become in the future. Leeds City Council (LCC) Parks and Countryside are project partners. Fieldwork focuses on Leeds, which has 62 community parks and 7 major parks. The research is supported by a national Advisory Network. Further information about the project can be found at: https://leedsparksproject.wordpress.com/
1.3. Our evidence is based on initial findings from historical archival research, a public survey, interviews and focus groups with park users, as well as a broader assessment of the existing literature.

2. Executive summary
2.1. Public parks are vital elements of our cultural heritage. They provide a wide range of benefits to the health and well-being of diverse communities across the life-course. Yet they are currently under a level of threat unprecedented in their nearly 200-year history. There are real concerns that parks, as a non-statutory service, will be financially unsustainable within the next few years. Under significant pressures of fiscal restraint, the steady decay, closure or impending sale of parks (or parts thereof) are all firm realities. Urgent action is required on the part of central and local government to prevent irrevocable damage to the structure of historic parks and gardens, and to ensure that benefits are sustained across future generations. The Authors recommend the following:
2.2. A firm commitment from central government to the founding principle that public parks are open and accessible to all and free of charge to enter.
2.1. Consideration be given to introducing a system of Registered Garden Permission, based on the framework which exists for sites of special scientific interest, or enhanced Registered Garden Consent (or similar), which encourages the active conservation of parks and protects them from re-development.
2.2. A statutory duty is placed on local authorities to monitor and manage public parks to a Green Flag Award standard or equivalent.
2.3. A dedicated national agency is established to represent the interests of urban parks and to secure their value and contribution to the well-being of cities and their diverse populations.

3. Who uses parks and open spaces, how often and for what
3.1. Public parks were established in the nineteenth century (Conway, 1991) but have become integral to the contemporary city. They are places which people visit and
revisit across the life-course, from early childhood through youth and parenting to old age. Many are used by the majority of the local population. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) reports into *The State of Public Parks* (2014 and 2016) provide the fullest national picture relating to patterns of park use. They estimate that 57% of the population visit parks at least once a month. This figure rises to 90% for households with children under five, and to 71% for black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. Not only are parks used frequently, but three quarters of the public perceive parks to be ‘essential’ or ‘very important’ to their quality of life (HLF, 2014).

3.2. Park use is greatest in urban areas: 61% of adults use their parks at least once a month. Parks in towns and cities are the most frequently visited places in the natural environment (Natural England, 2015). They are places where people can go to escape the hustle, pollution and grime of the city. However, there is no dedicated national agency to represent the interests of urban parks and to promote their value and contribution to the well-being of cities and their diverse populations.

3.3. *The Leeds Parks Project Findings:* Findings from our survey of Leeds residents indicate even greater use of parks than the national figures outlined above. The survey was launched online on the 3 June 2016 and closed on the 30 September 2016. Given the deadline for submitting evidence to this Inquiry, we are able to provide selected preliminary findings based on responses submitted on or before 15 September 2016 (n=2,376). The survey was promoted widely via local radio, print and TV media, social media, and targeted communications organisations and institutions such as the Leeds Citizens’ Panel. Respondents classified themselves as follows: 42% as male, 56% female; 93% as white, 4% BME. We found the following in relation to public park visits in Leeds:

- 96% had visited one or more parks in Leeds in the past 12 months.
- 87% reported visiting their favourite park at least once a month in the summer (85% in the winter).
- 51% reported visiting their favourite park at least once or twice a week in the summer (35% in the winter).
- The top five reasons for using parks were to ‘get some fresh air’, ‘for a walk’, ‘enjoy nature’, ‘relax or think in peace and quiet’ and ‘to exercise’.
- 61% said that visiting their favourite park was ‘essential’ or ‘very important’ to their quality of life.

3.4. Our survey findings are broadly consistent with previous surveys conducted by LCC (2009). In partnership with LCC, we are currently administering a broader postal survey to a random sample of 20,000 residents from across the city. The project team will be able to provide the Committee with the full findings from the survey in early 2017.

4. The contribution of parks to the health and well-being of communities

4.1. Belief in the moral and physical benefits of urban green space was prominent in the original, Victorian parks movement (Hickman, 2013). Against the backdrop of rapid urbanisation, expected health and well-being benefits were the principal theme in campaigns to purchase parks. Furthermore, the health-giving properties of parks helped to justify their acquisition as public assets (rather than simply local amenities). This contribution of parks to health persists in our own time, though in
changed forms - from clean air to exercise and relaxation. Parks have a role to play in confronting many challenges, including obesity, social isolation and climate change.

4.2. While shaped by their own history, parks are also places where history is made, both in terms of major public events – political rallies, mass meetings, demonstrations and civic celebrations – and in terms of people’s intimate lives – their romances, friendships, family outings and personal commemorations. These aspects of park life make them important places of well-being for communities. Organisations engaged in social prescribing initiatives have reported that such referrals have resulted in visible improvements to the physical and mental health of patients across a diverse range of communities.

4.3. There is a wealth of existing evidence illustrating the direct and indirect benefits of parks to health and well-being as well as to the economy, society and the environment (see CABE Space, 2004; Konijnendijk et al., 2013).

5. The impact of reductions in local authority budgets on parks and their administrative status as a non-statutory service

5.1. There is clear evidence that urban parks are likely to endure considerable consequences as a result of local authority funding cuts over the next decade at least. Indeed, local authorities fear they will be unable to fund non-statutory services, including parks, by 2020 (HLF, 2016). Yet there also appears to be a disproportionate impact from cuts on parks. The Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) found that 78% of local authorities who responded believe that ‘the squeeze on public sector resources is affecting parks and green spaces disproportionately to other service areas’ (2016: 4).

5.2. The present moment constitutes a possible turning point in the historic trajectories of urban public parks with long-term consequences. There are genuine fears that, without adequate baseline funding, public parks may fall into a state of decline and disuse worse that that seen in the 1970s and 1980s. Alternatively, they may be sold off – either wholesale or piecemeal - so that local authorities can utilize the proceeds for general funding of statutory services (HLF 2014; 2016). Under significant pressures of fiscal restraint, the steady decay, imminent closure or impending sale of parks are all possible outcomes from which there would be no easy recovery.

5.3. While local authority budget cuts are a significant contributing factor to the uncertain predicament facing parks, the parks funding crisis has deeper roots. The ‘History of Public Park Funding and Management (1820-2010)’ report identifies how the economic vulnerability of parks derives from a ‘systemic failure’ to secure their long-term future during their Victorian foundation (Layton-Jones, 2016: 2). In most cases, public parks – whether acquired by local authorities, obtained through subscriptions or donated by philanthropists – were not supported by any coherent economic, political and legal strategy to ensure adequate maintenance over the long-term.

3.5. The quest for innovative and sustainable models of funding public parks is not entirely new. Many contemporary models have been adapted from historical precedent (Layton-Jones, 2016), some of which have failed previously. No one funding model has proven to offer a clear path for the future, although some, such
as the ‘endowment’ model, show promise. We believe that the best way to guarantee the long-term survival of public parks is through statutory protection.

5.4. **Leeds Park Project Findings:** Our public survey asked respondents to identify their ‘hopes’ and ‘fears’ for the future of parks and their key priorities. An overriding hope was that parks would continue to exist for present and future generations. However, there were fears about the continued existence of parks as a free-to-access resource, due to funding cuts and threats of re-development. There were also concerns that, should parks decline, their poor condition may deter users. The top three priorities – ‘to keep the park clean’, ‘to keep the facilities open or to improve them’ and ‘to ensure the park remains free to enter’ – accounted for over half of all responses.

6. **Statutory protection**

6.1. The Historic England Register of Parks and Gardens was created as a result of the National Heritage Act 1983. However, the Register is a statutory document which in itself brings no new statutory controls (Pendlebury, 1996). It was intended as a first step towards successive mechanisms of protection for parks (Feilden, 1994). Comprehensive statutory controls did not follow.

6.2. The Register of Parks and Gardens has led to increased local authority attempts at protection (Stacey, 1992). Local authorities have used a large and diverse range of measures to protect registered sites. Many of these measures were originally conceived for other purposes, and so can include superfluous powers that have little or no impact on the protection of parks.

6.3. The current mechanisms for the protection of parks in Britain are complex, fragmented and inconsistent. We believe that parks would be better served by the introduction of unifying, proactive legislation that commits the state to their protection.

6.4. The model of statutory protection we propose is informed by the Green Flag Award criteria and builds upon Historic England’s Register of Historic Parks and Gardens. Two key principles are to ensure that parks are maintained to a certified quality threshold and protected against redevelopment or encroachment. We recommend that the Inquiry develop a model of statutory protection based on these principles. There may be unintended implications of statutory protection, such as the potential for greater exploitation of parks as commercial assets; consequently, we recommend the committee consider this in their findings. While there have long been some facilities in public parks that contribute to raising revenue, the park as a place of ‘commercial neutrality’ (Layton-Jones, 2016: 4) should be defended.

7. **Advantages and disadvantages of different models of funding and management**

7.1. City councils are responding in different ways to the current funding situation (Nesta, 2016). These developments have broad implications for what is expected of parks in the future, and their social purpose. We contend that the future is likely to see the emergence of a plural patchwork of varied urban parks, as municipal authorities respond in different ways to the challenges of funding restraint, increasing social and cultural diversity, an ageing population and increased competition over urban green spaces. Parks are likely to be tasked with doing more
for their ‘user’ populations for less (in terms of resources), as councils experiment with diverse modes of functionality.

7.2. We develop seven visions of what parks might become in the future, as managers seek to navigate the challenges outlined above (see Table 1). These ‘ideal types’ are unlikely to exist in complete form in any ‘real-life’ experience and may co-exist within any given park at one time. All have historic exemplars. We suggest that all represent possible futures, although on current trends some appear to be more probable than others. Preferable futures for parks, on the other hand, are those most strongly aligned with normative choices and moral predispositions. We suggest that the preferable future as articulated in this paper may not be the probable and that the probable future is likely to be a plural and variegated mix. We encourage the inquiry to reflect on these possible futures for public parks when considering alternative funding and management models.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Possible Park Futures</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ownership, funding and access</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Club parks</strong>&lt;br&gt;A ‘club good’ or club-managed commons</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theme parks</strong>&lt;br&gt;A residual public good hosting ‘club goods’</td>
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<td><strong>Variegated parks</strong>&lt;br&gt;Differentiated public goods</td>
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<td><strong>Co-mingling parks</strong>&lt;br&gt;Public good</td>
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<td><strong>Laissez-faire parks</strong>&lt;br&gt;Public good</td>
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<td><strong>City magnets</strong>&lt;br&gt;Public city-wide good</td>
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<td><strong>‘For sale’ parks</strong>&lt;br&gt;Private good</td>
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Source: Barker et al. (2016)
8. Contact information
8.1. For further information about points raised in this response, please contact Dr Anna Barker: a.c.h.barker@leeds.ac.uk or 0113 343 5023.

9. Bibliography

September 2016