

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the boroughs, it is deeply worrying that our city's local authority-run green spaces face an uncertain future, writes Julian Bell.

Protecting the parks

Fifty years ago, in April 1965, the 32 London boroughs were created and after the GLC was abolished in 1986 they took over responsibility for managing most of London's parks.

Councillors are rightly very concerned about funding green spaces. In my own borough of Ealing we have already had to reduce the parks budget as we face the need to cut nearly £100m of spending over the next four years.

From many vantage points across the capital it appears that the houses, flats and offices occupy the land left by clearings in some huge forest. This is no illusion: London is one of the greenest cities in the world – some 40 per cent of the city (173 square kilometres) is green space.

from the huge expanse of Hampstead Heath and sprawling Epping Forest to hundreds of smaller parks and gardens that play such an important role in local communities. London's 212 churchyards are also considered part of the green infrastructure due to their wildlife habitats and proliferation of trees.

London Councils represents the 32 boroughs and the City of London and its Transport and Environment Committee (TEC), of which I am Chair, has an important role to play in bringing together local authorities and other organisations in partnership to protect London's green spaces.

As part of my role as Chair of TEC, I represent the boroughs' interests on the Mayor's Green Infrastructure Task Force, formed to look at the threats and opportunities for London's green spaces, as well as other green infrastructure. Other stakeholders represented on the Task Force include Thames Water, the National Trust, Public Health England, the Greater London Authority, Defra, development corporations and the Environment Agency.

Examples of green infrastructure include permeable pavements (which reduce surface run-off), urban forests (which reduce urban temperatures, hold carbon, improve air quality and intercept water), natural or artificial wetlands (which improve water efficiency and quality) and green roofs and green walls (which help to lower urban temperatures, hold carbon, improve air quality and intercept water).

Boroughs must do all they can to encourage volunteering and

the development of more inventive ways to raise revenues, while protecting the health and vitality of our green spaces. Many support and encourage community groups to take care of green spaces by sharing expertise, equipment or resources. Dozens of other stakeholders across all sectors are responsible for other spaces, which underlines the sheer scale of the green resources London has available.

Despite the financial doom and gloom, there are some very positive proposals being developed by boroughs and their partners.


Local authorities are also encouraging people to plant green roofs or walls on new and existing buildings to improve insulation and reduce the excessive run-off which can cause flooding, which can be a particular problem in highly built-up areas.

These are just two of many innovations through which boroughs can protect our green spaces and put them at the very heart of London's future. But boroughs must be given the financial resources and legal powers to maintain these areas which not only form part of London's green infrastructure but also play a key role in daily life for millions of people.

It's clear that while cutting spending on parks might save money in any given financial year,



in the long-run this could be counterproductive. Parks are critical to promoting healthy lifestyles for people of all ages and so spending money on maintaining them now could help reduce pressure on social services in the future.

Boroughs are determined to ensure these natural resources remain a source of enjoyment for Londoners. We will keep searching for innovative ways to maintain our green space and keep it accessible to the public – despite the very challenging financial situation. 

Julian Bell is Leader of Ealing and Chair of London Councils' Transport and Environment Committee

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While these places offer people of all ages somewhere to relax and enjoy the outdoors, they also form part of London's 'green infrastructure', harnessing nature as part of the very fabric of how the city functions. Green infrastructure fulfils a number of different functions and they have not always been fully recognised.

The parts owned and managed by London local authorities range