

Mr Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The royal parks are a national asset treasured by millions of Londoners, those who work here and countless tourists from all four corners of the globe. For many, they provide an oasis of peace and tranquillity amid the incessant din of urban noise. For others, they are a meeting place, a venue for team sport, an arena—sometimes, at least—for music and a setting for national expression. Balancing those needs is a key part of the Royal Parks Agency’s job, but there is concern that the balance is getting out of kilter. I have raised previously in Parliament the issue of the creeping commercialisation of Hyde park in my constituency; indeed, I did so as long ago as 2004. However, I fear that the matter is ripe for exploration again, so I am delighted to have had the chance to obtain this debate.

This year, the number of complaints received about concerts and events in the royal parks has increased markedly, yet in 12 months’ time this nation will be hosting both the Olympic games, when our royal parks will provide a focal point for even more celebrations, and, of course, the diamond jubilee. Meanwhile, the Royal Parks Agency’s budget is diminishing drastically, heaping on the pressure for further commercialisation. In addition, I believe that plans are afoot to devolve some of the responsibility for the parks to the Mayor of London.

The royal parks are owned by Her Majesty the Queen in right of the Crown and were, in the main, royal hunting grounds and pleasure gardens before being opened to everyone for public enjoyment. In 1851, at the time of the great exhibition, the general power of management for the parks was granted to the commissioner of works and now resides under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport. In that regard, the parks remain—rightly, in my view—a national treasure, a gift from the sovereign to the country as a whole. That is despite the eight sites—Bushy park, Green park, Greenwich park, Hyde park, Kensington gardens, Regent’s park, Richmond park and St James’s park—all being within Greater London.

Those 5,000 acres of parkland are important historical landscapes aside from their role in the living fabric of the city that I represent and love so much. Regent’s park is the largest wetland area in central London. Richmond park is the capital’s largest national nature reserve and a designated site of special scientific interest. The parks have historically provided a national focal point and, rightly, will do so again next year, when the Olympic circus rolls into town. No doubt, that event will swell in number the 37 million people who already visit the royal parks every year.

Hyde park, Kensington gardens, St James’s park and Green park lie within the bounds of my constituency and have an especial place in the lives of all my central London constituents. Naturally, few city-centre residents have gardens of their own. Our green spaces provide an invaluable escape—an oasis of calm—amid the urban jungle, but there has been increasing concern that the parks are adding to the stresses of life in the capital.

As my hon. Friend the Minister knows, the Royal Parks Agency relies on three main sources of income: Government grant, self-generated income and grants

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from other sources. During the past 15 years, the grants from the Government—the first part of that three-legged horse—have been reduced, thus necessitating an increase in self-generated income, the second category. The proportion of such income has doubled in just five years to £14.4 million and in the past year funded 46% of the total expenditure for the royal parks.

Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): May I say how much I agree with the powerful point that my hon. Friend is putting over about the London parks? May I particularly ask him to elaborate on the complaints that he receives about the uses of the royal parks? Many such complaints are about noise and inconvenience, but there is a terrible cost to the fabric of the royal parks and there is a limit to how much those priceless, utterly unique places can physically take. I applaud my hon. Friend for raising this issue with our hon. Friend the Minister ahead of the Olympics and the diamond jubilee, when we will all want the royal parks to look their absolute best.

Mr Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right. I will elaborate later on issues to do with the fabric of the royal parks. Inevitably, there are concerns about noise, but he is precisely correct to identify that issue. The commercialisation is often concentrated over a relatively short period. There have been representations not just from me but, more importantly, from all the amenity societies locally to ensure that that concertina is confined to roughly two or three months every summer. However, as my right hon. Friend rightly points out, some of the fabric is ruined for the other nine months of the year. That has to be stopped as far as possible.

The reduction in the burden on the taxpayer is welcome—clearly, these are times of great austerity and the amount of grant that comes from central Government in all areas is under close scrutiny—but tensions have arisen between the need to maintain the parks as sanctuaries of peace and the requirement to adopt a more commercial approach to ensure self-sufficiency. That tension has never been more evident than in the hosting of events in the parks.

One of the greatest money-spinners for the Royal Parks Agency has been, understandably, concerts in Hyde park—the largest of the central London parks. The Royal Parks Agency has for some years held a licence from Westminster city council for the sale of alcohol and regulated entertainment, permitting it a maximum of 13 major events per annum in Hyde park. However, in my 10 years as the local MP, the file of correspondence expressing concern at the commercialisation of Hyde park has bulged further every concert season. Indeed, the number of complaints from my constituents had swelled to such an extent that I was compelled to initiate a parliamentary debate seven years ago to express their concerns.

At that time, I advised the then Culture Minister:

“In recent years, Hyde park has been host...to noisy rock concerts and large-scale, commercially sponsored events...Such activities have led to destruction of the fabric of the park, from which it will take many years to recover...After last year’s Bon Jovi concert, my postbag was full of letters from local residents who could not believe how loud the noise was.”

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Obviously, there are not too many Bon Jovi fans in Marylebone and Mayfair. I continued:

“That applied not only to roads in the immediate vicinity, but to roads in Marylebone and Mayfair. Nor am I talking about one afternoon or evening of mayhem. The erecting and dismantling of a concert site means literally a week of noise and upset to the park’s tranquillity, including juggernauts moving along roads that were not built for such heavy vehicles.”

I said that the previous year’s Red Bull Flugtag was

“the most destructive event the park has ever witnessed. Trees were badly and permanently damaged, and there was a lot of graffiti in the area.”—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2004; Vol. 421, c. 379-80WH.]

Unfortunately, those problems have remained. There was some diminution of them in the years immediately afterwards, but this year they have worsened. One constituent of mine, Mr Paul Appleyard, a musician and musical arranger, wrote to me at the beginning of this month to report that at 10 o’clock at night, the sound was, in his view,

“louder than a building site whose code of practice requires a cessation of activity after 7pm”.

The bass of this infernal racket was such that the glassware in his flat was being rattled. He went on to say that

“this is not the time to live with closed windows”—

this was in the middle of the brief summer that we had some weeks ago in London at least—

“and even so, the noise penetrates the double glazing. I always thought that parks were supposed to be an amenity for all, not an emitter of noise pollution”.

When I raised similar concerns last year with this Minister, who is responsible for tourism and heritage, he admitted that my constituent was

“not alone in his objections”.

However, the Minister went on to say that the Royal Parks Agency is subject to the Licensing Act 2003, with the number of events that it can hold being strictly limited, and, furthermore, that

“the Agency runs a hotline for local residents during the events season, and concerts are monitored by independent noise consultants as well as a team from the environmental health unit at Westminster City Council”.

This year, there have been nine concerts to date, with two more to follow in September. No doubt, the much-maligned Winter Wonderland will also be returning as the Christmas season begins. On average, there are 53,000 people at such events, although the number can be as high as 65,000 at major concerts. Westminster city council has noted an increase in the number of

calls to its noise team in each of the past three years, from 56 in 2009, to 70 in 2010 and to 85 so far this year. This season, the extent of the area affected by noise has also grown, with complaints coming from as far north as St John's Wood and as far east as Harley street. That is just for events in Hyde park.

Officers monitoring noise levels have noted that although preliminary findings suggest that Hyde park has been broadly compliant with the conditions of its licence, there appears to be some evidence of a public nuisance as a result of concerts. Westminster city council is considering that evidence extremely carefully to see whether the licence for future years should be reviewed or tightened up to improve controls.

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As my right hon. Friend pointed out in his intervention, noise is not the only problem. There is huge traffic disruption, and further problems are caused by the additional number of people using the tube and our buses and pavements. Unsurprisingly, that influx of humanity causes great waste, and the cost burden of dealing with it falls largely on Westminster city council. In the relatively recent Live Aid example, the council committed high core resources to managing the event, but it estimates that there were significant additional financial costs over those 10 days. As a result, the council's cabinet member for city management, Councillor Ed Argar, wrote to the Royal Parks Agency to highlight the burden to the local taxpayer.

Similar concerns have been expressed by the council's planning department. Under the regulations, event operators are permitted 28 days per annum for temporary events without having to apply for planning consent. The council fears that that provision is regularly breached. As a result, residents are not consulted under the planning process about events being held in the parks.

The council has also been approached about the potential erection of advertisement hoardings in the parks. Although it accepts the need to generate income in the current economic climate, it has concerns about the potential impact of over-commercialisation. Has the Minister's Department noted an increase in the number of complaints? Has he had recent discussions on such matters with representatives of the Royal Parks Agency, and does he plan to review current procedures to mitigate the impact of concerts on residents and the fabric of the parks?

For several reasons, this is an opportune moment to discuss these issues. First, the budgetary pressures on the Royal Parks Agency are now huge. The headline cut in grant-aid for the Royal Parks Agency under the comprehensive spending review is some 23%. However, combined with a 10% cut this year to give a 36% cut over five years, the equivalent loss to the agency is about £5.5 million a year. The agency's capital budget will be cut, with immediate effect, by about 45%. That is an extremely serious reduction in resources for our parks, and the agency will doubtless be looking for ways to make up that loss. Further commercialisation is clearly one option. Chris Green of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's public engagement and recognition unit has already advised that the agency will be developing commercial income streams at a time of reduced Government grant.

Secondly, we are fast approaching the London Olympics. I have no doubt that the parks will be called upon to host all manner of events. I received a letter this morning from Carolyn Dicker of the residents association of St George's Fields. She is particularly concerned about the impact that proposed Olympic events in Hyde park will have on her community on the Bayswater road, which is only a stone's throw away from the park. It is a worry that what should be a great national celebration should have a considerable negative impact.

I am well served by a number of amenity associations and local residents, who also serve the whole community. They represent the community's interests to the Royal Parks Agency on such matters. One such group, the Knightsbridge Association, has alerted me to its concerns about the extent of the Olympic programme in July and August in central London next year and its impact on the amenities of the royal parks.

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Live Nation is currently consulting about London Live, when large outdoor screens, free of charge, will be set up in some of the parks. London Live will operate from 28 July to 11 August in Hyde park, with an additional nine concert events and three paid-entry shows. It will be set up on 2 July, and all temporary structures will be removed completely by 24 August. Core hours of operation will be 10 am to 11 pm, but events may begin as early as 7.30 am to accommodate the sporting schedule. It is anticipated that 50,000 people will visit the site at any one time, increasing up to 80,000 for events such as the opening and closing ceremonies.

It is probably appropriate for me to note that no Member from the Greenwich area is here today, but what is happening in Greenwich park is a crying shame for local residents. The park is not in my constituency, but I have visited the area during the last six weeks. Much of the park is already cordoned off; a huge amount of work has been done in advance of the equestrian events. That will have a massive impact on the amenity for local people, who live in a congested part of south-east London. However, it will have an impact not only in July and August 2012; it has already begun, and it will last for two full summers.

Nicholas Soames: I am lucky enough to have tickets to the wonderful three-day event in Greenwich, with its astonishingly beautiful backdrop, but there was a realistic, sensible and, in my view, much wiser campaign to hold it in Badminton or Windsor, or somewhere where it would have been far out of the way and much less inconvenient for those who live nearby.

Mr Field: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. I hope that he also has tickets for the beach volleyball and perhaps other events in which he can partake in the coming year.

Noting that the monitoring of crowds and crowd dispersal was completely inadequate during recent concerts, the Knightsbridge Association is anxious for improvements to be made in time for the Olympics. In previous years, concerts were handled by a minimum of some 200 police officers, but the police were not involved this year. Leaving that to the stewards and marshals employed by the concert organisers resulted in chaos.

The association suggests much better directional signs for tube stations and bus routes. In fairness, I give some credit for that not only to the Government but to Westminster city council. The council has done a tremendous job in improving the amount of signage. Those, like me, who walk in central London will see the huge benefits of improved signage, and I hope that it will continue. I suspect that that might not all be done quickly enough for the Olympics, as it is an ongoing programme, but it is greatly to the credit of the Minister's Department. It has also been noted that the closure of Park lane causes gridlock for several hours at a time, and I believe that its closure during the Olympics is unacceptable. I hope that the Minister will try to ensure that that eventuality is avoided. People in Knightsbridge and beyond naturally share the council's concerns about litter, noise and damage to the park's fabric.

Thirdly, there have been concerted moves in the past couple of years to bring the Royal Parks Agency under the jurisdiction of the Greater London authority. The

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Minister will know that we have been in constant correspondence on the matter over the past year. It is argued that giving that additional responsibility to the Mayor of London would make the Royal Parks Agency more accountable and would fit well with the Mayor's existing responsibilities for tourism and the environment. However, I have expressed serious concerns about the safeguards that would need to be put in place if such a move were to go ahead.

It was originally thought that the transfer of power would be legislated for under the Localism Bill. I made clear to the Minister personally my deep concern that that was inappropriate legislation for making such a change. As I suggested earlier, the royal parks are a national asset and must be treated as such. Westminster city council shared my concerns, but for different reasons.

The proposals would have provided the Mayor with extensive powers, without offering any real influence to the boroughs in which the parks are located. The council regarded that as a lost opportunity, given the risk of not securing greater democratic influence over the management of the parks in future. The boroughs already manage a number of matters in connection with the parks, including planning consent, noise and licensing. They contend that it makes sense for councils to be involved more closely, not least as they have experience of balancing the varied needs of residents, visitors and businesses.

I am grateful to the Minister for the fact that the concerns that I expressed have been taken on board—the provisions are no longer in the Localism Bill—but I remain to be convinced that responsibility should be transferred to the Mayor. I appreciate his press release yesterday; it is something of a halfway house, but I hope that it will keep most people relatively happy. Nevertheless, I want to put those concerns on the record. I accept that the transfer will occur only if a number of safeguards are firmly in place; it is unlikely to be formalised legislatively. I therefore wish for the Minister's reassurance on two points.

First, I am concerned that any Mayor, particularly one in the mould of Ken Livingstone, who was Mayor for the eight years before 2008, might be tempted to use the parks to promote

populist causes to the long-term detriment of their fabric. Mayors might also view the parks as an expandable source of income, leading to yet more commercialisation. I should therefore like to see explicit safeguards to limit the expansion of the existing commercial events programme, to preclude any Mayor running a wide variety of free events in the parks and to prevent the Mayor from granting permission to other groups to host their own events and festivals in the parks. The royal parks are for everyone—residents, workers, visitors and tourists alike—and should not be annexed on a regular basis for other causes.

Secondly, if the devolvement of such a power comes to pass, I believe that active local amenity societies should be given a place on the board. For Hyde park, that applies to the Friends of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens and to similar high-profile groups near other parks. Constituents of mine who live on the boundaries of the royal parks are most affected by their development. I believe that residents and those involved in the voluntary upkeep of our parks must be given a voice beyond that provided by the Mayor in his capacity as an elected, accountable representative for all Londoners.

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As someone who has served on a local authority—I was a councillor for the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea for eight years and vice-chairman of the Holland park committee for some of that time—I know that there is a danger in assuming that busy local councillors can be given another responsibility. A councillor might have a great passion for a park, but that does not provide us with the democratic safeguard that we need. Such powers need to be put in place within resident associations and amenity societies.

Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): My hon. Friend spoke eloquently about who should be in charge of the royal parks, but if I were to press him would he not say that the councils of Westminster and the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea have conducted their oversight role extremely well over many years? They have not been nimby and just looked after the interests of residents but have realised that the parks are a national resource. Does my hon. Friend not think—perhaps the Minister could also answer this in his remarks—that it would be best for the parks to remain under parliamentary or national control but with real local oversight, in tune with localism?

Mr Field: I hope that we are moving in that direction. I agree with my hon. Friend who was formerly the deputy leader of Westminster city council and so has more than a passing interest in these matters. Managing the royal parks must involve balancing the range of needs to which he refers. He is absolutely right to say that the local authority in Westminster has done an extremely good job in trying to bring that balance into play. I have a great deal of sympathy for the Royal Parks Agency, as it tries to keep that equilibrium in place in the face of some very difficult economic circumstances, which will only get more difficult in the years ahead.

The fact is that our parks are adored, which is a testament to the great work that the agency does. I seek in no way to undermine that work in this debate. The events and concerts that they host are enjoyed by thousands, including many of my constituents, and have a tradition that goes back decades. Nevertheless, a key ingredient of the agency's success in the future will be keeping

genuinely concerned local people on board. In that respect, I deem it vital that the ongoing issues of noise, litter and disruption are reviewed again and dealt with before the anger swells.

The impact on my constituency in terms of cost to the local taxpayer as well as the diminution of the quality of life cannot be ignored. Similarly, it would not be right if plans to hand over power of the parks to the Mayor were to go ahead without putting in place explicit safeguards to involve local residents and to prevent the parks being taken yet further down the path of a commercial free-for-all. The royal parks are a tremendous gift to us all. The softest voices supporting this priceless asset must not be drowned out in the bustle for reform.

4.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport (John Penrose): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, looking after us this afternoon, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field) on making some tremendously important points. He

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has been assiduous in pursuing them with me during the past year, and it has been tremendously helpful that he has done so, because he has been a useful sounding board for some of the ideas that have been under discussion. I hope that he is content with our direction of travel. I will endeavour to respond to some of the questions that he asked in his speech.

Let me start by marking one really important point of principle, which my hon. Friend mentioned and with which I thoroughly agree. He repeatedly used the word “balance”. Although it is a difficult task, it is essential that we maintain a balance in considering how we deal with the royal parks. He rightly pointed out that parks are a priceless and hugely appreciated national asset. They are also used as local parks as well. He gave numerous examples of local residents’ concerns about parks being used in ways that may be appreciated across the wider London area and the south-east, but that might impact negatively on local residents’ use of the parks. There is an inevitable tension between that national role and local accountability. Almost certainly, it has always been thus ever since the royal parks were set up in the 1850s.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the need to balance the importance of peace, tranquillity and quiet enjoyment with the concerns about commercialisation. Perhaps one of the most commercial events that the parks have ever hosted was the Great Exhibition and that was a very long time ago. I suspect that these points are rightly raised periodically because the duty of preserving the right balance will never go away. It is an inherent tension that must be managed according to the needs of national users, local residents and society, as the country changes. People might be willing to accept one kind of use now that they might not have regarded as acceptable 30 years ago. Indeed, if we were to wind forward 30 years, that equation might well rebalance itself. There is a need for constant vigilance and recalibration. We must remain sensitive to the competing needs in the future.

I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are hugely committed to ensuring that the ceremonial and royal character of the parks is maintained. They are not just municipal parks. There is something

different about these parks both in their history and in how they are managed now, and it would be a crying shame if we were to put that at risk or to lose that at any point in future.

I am delighted to confirm to my hon. Friend—it is extraordinary that this has not been the case for ever throughout the royal parks' existence—that in future there will be a representative from the royal household on the newly appointed board for the royal parks. I find it extraordinary that something with such immense royal connotations and a vital, ongoing ceremonial role did not have any kind of official representation from the royal household. It is entirely appropriate that it should.

I understand my hon. Friend's concerns about the noise and the rest from some of the events. He mentioned some of the different concerts that have taken place. I can confirm that a number of items have created a few problems this year. The biggest number of complaints came from two different concerts over two nights. On 1 July, we had the Black Eyed Peas, and on 2 July, we had the Chemical Brothers, both of which excited a fair

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number of complaints. My hon. Friend mentioned that not many Bon Jovi fans live in the area, and fans of the other two bands might be relatively few and far between there as well.

Mr Field: May I just put it on record that I am a keen fan of the Chemical Brothers? However, I prefer listening to them in my living room, rather than with many tens of thousands of my constituents at the same time.

John Penrose: I take my hon. Friend's point. He also mentioned the importance of noise during the set-up and take-down of event stands and so forth. It is entirely reasonable that guidelines equivalent to those used on a construction site should be in place. I will, if he will allow me, ask the chief executive of the royal parks to write to him, detailing how they approach these issues, so that he can see the kind of safeguards that are in place.

Nicholas Soames: I accept exactly the point that my hon. Friend the Minister makes about noise, but does he accept that the grass and physical fabric of the parks are put under tremendous strain? The parks already have a substantial backlog of unfunded repairs, and this sort of use can only make matters worse.

John Penrose: I am conscious of the time, but I accept that there is an inevitable issue of wear and tear on the parks' fabric. Again, we have to strike a balance between ensuring that the parks are available for people to use and enjoy and that the effects of that wear and tear are dealt with properly.

One of the reasons why we have introduced the new board is to ensure proper and ongoing inbuilt local representation. One of the board's first tasks will be to create systems and processes to ensure that local community groups, amenity groups and societies can have their voice heard as well as the local council. Clearly, it would be wrong to lock in any amenity group or society because, inevitably, such groups wax and wane and we need to be flexible. Indeed, the new

board will have explicit duty to be flexible. Equally, the board will be required to deliver according to terms of reference, which we will publish to ensure that everyone is clear about them.

Those terms of reference will include the kind of safeguards that will ensure that the royal character of the parks is maintained, that ceremonial events are not compromised and that inappropriate events that would contradict the royal character are not held. I hope that my hon. Friend will see an increase in local representation. He can rest assured that safeguards to protect the ongoing future health of the parks will be put in place, so that these unique assets can be enjoyed for many generations to come.