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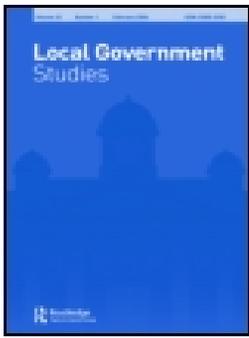
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Local government officers, pragmatism and creativity during austerity – the case of Urban Green Newcastle

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ABSTRACT

In the UK, during austerity local governments face pressures to identify transformative financial solutions to parks provision and to protect parks as public spaces. Yet, *how* local government officers balance these demands is under-explored. This article discusses the transfer of Newcastle upon Tyne's parks from local government to a new entity, Urban Green Newcastle. Working within a project framework, across the local authority, and in public consultation, we show how local government officers crafted narratives to legitimise their work and to provide an ex-post rationalisation for: creative working; the changes to democratic accountability in the new model; and the risks involved in creating UGN. The article deepens our understanding of local government officers' agency during austerity via its attention to legitimisation narratives. We show how local government officers contribute to the (re)conception of parks as public spaces through the negotiation of alternative narratives of parks management, governance, and democratic accountability.

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In the UK, the past decade has been characterised by *austerity-localism*. This refers to the devolution of more decision-making powers to local authorities under the Localism Act, 2011 but in an environment where they have less resources at their disposal due to local government funding cuts (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Ferry, Ahrens, and Khalifa 2019). As explored in *austerity urbanism* studies (Kim and Warner 2021), the context for decision-making by local governments is *austerity governance*. This implies governing in an environment of cost-savings and efficiencies, often with little recourse to alternative courses of action (Ferry, Ahrens, and Khalifa 2019; Peck 2012, 626). In particular, where local authorities in the UK consolidate scarce resources around core services, non-statutory obligations such as cultural and leisure services have fallen foul of cost-cutting exercises (Wills 2020, 819).

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However, *pragmatic municipalism* denotes studies that explore efforts in local government to cut costs *and* protect services (Kim and Warner 2021). In the UK, there is also research, which underlines the agency and resilience of local government officers' responses to austerity (Barnett, Griggs, and Sullivan 2020; Lowndes and McCaughie 2013). This is evident in decision-making processes and the creation of new organisational models, including for non-statutory services in culture and leisure (Rex 2020; Reid 2018; Pill and Guarneros-Meza 2018; Skelcher and Rathgeb Smith 2015). Notwithstanding, there are under-explored questions about how local government officers tackle the demands and challenges of particular services alongside the imperative to make them financially sustainable. Research on local government officers and service domains has the potential to provide in-depth insight into how their agency shapes local authorities' responses to austerity.

This article focuses on the non-statutory parks and countryside service domain (henceforth, parks). As parks are a non-statutory duty, local authorities seek new ways to manage; generate alternative income streams and/or dispose of green spaces (Heritage Lottery Fund 2016, 15). The House of Commons Communities and Local Government (CLG) Inquiry into Public Parks (2017) suggested that 'fundamental service transformation' may be required to guarantee the future sustainability of parks (CLG 2017, 54). The onus is also on the local government to ensure that parks' services remain transparent, publicly accountable and cognisant of the social, cultural and health benefits of parks as public spaces (CLG 2017; De Magalhães and Freire Trigo 2017, 738). We explore the transfer of responsibility for Newcastle upon Tyne's parks from Newcastle City Council (NCC) to a new entity, a charity and company limited by guarantee, Urban Green Newcastle (UGN).¹

Our case study addresses questions about *whether* and *how* local government officers balance financial sustainability and the protection of parks as public spaces. We add to the discussion of the agency of local government officers during austerity as we explore how their response(s) to a service area involves legitimisation. This is distinct from 'actual legitimacy' as a normative phenomenon, which entails evaluative judgements regarding the depth of faith that should be embodied in an institution (Kirkland and Wood 2017, 512). Similar to Kirkland and Wood (*ibid.*) we conceive of legitimisation as 'an empirical process through which the authority of an institution is discursively constructed and conferred . . .'. This may involve attention to the 'legitimising uses' of information and data; for example, how those in decision-making positions in local government, such as elected politicians, appropriate information to justify and gain support for their actions (*ex-post*) to stakeholders within and outside of their organisation (Korac et al. 2020, 555–556; Nitzl, Sicilia, and Steccolini 2019, 689; Giacomini 2020).

Blending a focus on parks with attention to the agency of local government officers, our case study illustrates how the local government officers

(henceforth, the Parks Team) legitimised the decisions they made regarding the transfer of parks' management and governance to UGN. Working as part of a project team; across NCC and in consultation with the public, the Parks Team built narratives around their own roles, democratic accountability in the new model and the risks involved in the creation of UGN to rationalise and to gain political and public support for the proposals. As we discuss in the next section, the creation of UGN also addresses themes that are specific to debates about parks and green spaces. For the first time in this body of work, we show *how* local government officers approach the challenges presented by parks and how they justify their choices. Thus, a principal contribution of this article to both sets of the literature is the exploration of how agency is shaped and informed by legitimising narratives. This deepens our understanding of the role of local government officers' agency in response to austerity, particularly, in relation to the management and governance of parks.

Debating parks during austerity

Parks are part of the social and cultural fabric of the UK (Layton-Jones 2016). A focus on austerity belies the decades of cost-saving initiatives that brought the parks service to breaking point (Whitten 2019; Dempsey et al. 2016, 443–444; Harding 1999, 6–7). There are initiatives open to local authorities and experiments underway to ensure the future sustainability of parks, for example, *Rethinking Parks* (2012–2020) and the *Future Parks Accelerator*.² Studies detail a range of projects to meet the pressures of managing parks during austerity (Mell 2018). These include cross-sector partnerships (Dempsey, Burton and Duncan 2016); the roles of volunteers and public engagement (Smith 2019; Whitten 2019); and approaches to managing green infrastructure that involve diverse stakeholders, contractual arrangements and funding sources (Mell 2020; De Magalhães and Freire Trigo 2017).

The austere context has heightened concerns about the 'creeping neo-liberalisation' of parks, whereby 'evidence-based decision making' constitutes new models to deliver less costly services and commercialise nature (Mell 2020, 10; Wells 2018, 179; Crowe 2018, 63). Debates focus on whether this happens at the expense of principles of public space(s) and place-keeping. Place-keeping refers to an analytical framework designed to 'improve understanding of open space management as a long-term and complex process made up of different yet inter-related dimensions'. These are as follows: 'partnerships, policy, governance, funding, evaluation, design and maintenance within a given context' (Dempsey, Burton and Duncan 2016, 157–158 Dempsey and Burton 2012). Crowe (2018, 63–64) argues that pragmatic solutions potentially undermine 'the original provision of public parks as a social welfare good'. Smith (2014, 260) discusses how the hosting of

temporary commercial events in parks may be legitimised by organisers and advocates as ‘borrowing’ public space to generate income and bring other benefits to an area. Yet, the commercialisation and urbanisation of parks that results from such activities ‘underlines any notion that events loosen public space by challenging conventional interpretations of them’ (ibid.). However, De Magalhães and Freire Trigo (2017, 753) suggest that debates about the ‘offloading’ and privatisation of the public character of parks neglect the complexity of how publicness is configured in models of parks’ governance. Different manifestations of publicness in terms of rights to access, use and control may be negotiated as part of governance arrangements. They state that:

[P]ublicness could be roughly defined as a function of the basic attributes to access, use and control/accountability and the distribution and exercise of the rights associated with them . . . (De Magalhães and Freire Trigo 2017, 742).

In these debates, there are under-explored questions about how local government officers’ agency influences local government responses to the problems that beset parks and whether/how local government officers address the publicness of parks and place-keeping as part of new governance and management arrangements? We looked to the literature on the agency of local government officers during austerity to articulate how the local government officers in our case study addressed the challenge of transforming parks.

Agency, local government and austerity

We draw upon Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998, 971) definition of agency as follows: ‘the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments . . . , which through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations’. There is a perception in austerity urbanism studies that in local government ‘there is very little room to push back on top-down austerity pressures’ (Kim and Warner 2021, 236; Barnett, Griggs, and Sullivan 2020, 513). Reflecting Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) different dimensions of agency, studies of agency in local government underline how local government officers negotiate and contest austerity through the interplay of habitual, often iterative and projective (re)conceptions of roles, and the (re)evaluation of austerity, for example, through narratives that shape and inform discourses and rhetoric, decision-making and relationships.

There are new roles and ways of working as local government officers work less in hierarchical structures, for example, through projects and in collaboration with stakeholders (Cochrane 2020; Fred 2020; Durose 2011). For instance,

Cochrane (2020, 537) suggests that project-working can be a vehicle for the accomplishment of tasks and objectives, alongside/as an alternative to local government's responsibility for service delivery. The project has the potential to be 'a framework for action and imagination' and the articulation of 'wider governance visions' in local government. Much like Leadbetter and Goss's (1998) 'civic entrepreneur' who connects local government and communities, the 'boundary spanner' brokers ideas between people and organisations (Nederhand, Van Der Steen, and Van Twist 2019, 230–233). However, boundary spanners may revert to established, hierarchical structures and ways of working, for example, support from senior managers and political leaders, to accomplish tasks (Nederhand, Van Der Steen, and Van Twist 2019, 230–233). Furthermore, Lowndes (2005, 305–306) likened local government officers to 'institutional entrepreneurs'. Local government officers engage in institutional 'remembering', that is, drawing on past experiences, 'borrowing' and 'sharing' resources, with 'creative' results as they navigate fluctuating contexts. Pill and Guarneros-Meza (2018, 421) discuss how officers in hybrid organisations, often created as a strategic response to fiscal deficits, adopt institutional entrepreneur strategies informed by their own values. Similarly, during austerity Lowndes and McCaughie (2013, 544) speak of local governments' sensitivity to local context; 'bounded as it is by specific institutional legacies'. Local governments draw upon and re-combine institutional elements within their existing repertoire, as well as efforts to creatively expand their repertoire, for example, by involving civil society or the private sector in endeavours. This, they term 'institutional bricolage' (Lowndes and McCaughie 2013, 543).

The agency of local government officers and other stakeholders evaluate 'how and why things are done in local government' (Lowndes 2005, 306). Narratives are constructed by local government officers and other stakeholders to justify and/or to contest projects and initiatives in austere times (Barnett et al. 2022; Etherington and Jones 2018; Fuller and West 2017). For example, Griggs, Howarth, and MacKillop (2017) discuss a county council's use of the rhetoric of austerity to mobilise support for organisational change as a necessary, cost-driven, transformative programme, thus, aligned with the 'logic of depoliticisation [which] seeks to expunge conflict and contestability' from the politics of austerity (ibid., 203). However, district councils developed counter-narratives to legitimise locally driven initiatives, which contested the county council's (ostensibly) inevitable efficiencies and the influence of the corporate centre (op. cit.). Similarly, Fuller (2018, 567) underlines how local politicians and city officials construct 'imaginaries' of what they want to achieve around visions, ideas and discourses. Fuller (ibid.) analyses how imaginaries were mediated through (material) structures and processes to generate support for actions. They were used to legitimise and depoliticise pro-growth, market-led plans for a city centre (ibid., 571–580; see, Fuller and

West 2017). Barnett et al. (2022) identify a discourse of municipal entrepreneurship, which shaped the reframing of austerity by local government officers. Local government officers address the financial challenges of austerity via income generation and entrepreneurial activities. They also craft discourses, which align their practices with serving the public good; reaffirm the agency and potential of the formal and informal domains of the local state and the stewardship of place(s) (ibid., 15–18). These (re)framings of austerity also manifest in decision-making.

Rex (2020) examined how decisions about the selection of museums for Community Asset Transfer was informed by resource and income generation considerations and constraints. Furthermore, decisions were shaped by ‘common sense’ non-evidence-based assumptions about the social/cultural value of museums and the capacities of communities to assume responsibility for an asset transfer. Local government officers can be attentive to ‘what a “public”, a community of citizens have come to “care about” collectively and seek to produce and sustain as qualities and resources available to them’ (Healey 2018, 65). As Ferry, Coombs, and Eckersley (2017) discuss, local government officers engage with multiple *contexts* (plural). This includes the policy and fiscal environment, and the organisational culture, which incorporates politician-local government officer relationships.

Politician-local government officer dynamics can be conceptualised as ‘dual elite’ and ‘dynamic dependency’ models (Entwistle, Martin, and Enticott 2005; Gains 2004). A dual elite dynamic implies a common agenda between officers and politicians. A situation of dynamic dependency depicts the relationship between politicians and officers as negotiation, dialogue, compromise, and potentially conflict when agendas prove divisive and the external and internal/organisational pressures are challenging (Joensuu and Niiranen 2018; Hefetz, Warner, and Vigoda-Gadot 2014, 263; Entwistle, Martin, and Enticott 2005, 544; Gains 2004). Councillors may have particular conceptions of democracy, which evoke what is important to them, for instance, representation or participation? (Heinelt 2013). Thus, the support of senior leadership can be key to the success of an endeavour (Orr and Bennett 2016).

The use of different terms to conceptualise agency reflects how scholars use different approaches to unearth and analyse different aspects of agency, for example, the interplay of existing and new roles with past routines and (pressures for) imaginative action(s). The agency also encompasses the construction of narratives, which inform the evaluation of roles and circumstances and responses to the pressures of austerity, often as part of local government decision-making processes and relationships. Notwithstanding, there are gaps in our understanding of how local government officers’ responses to a problem and the navigation of stakeholder relationships can be contextualised with reference to the characteristics of a service as well as their engagement with the austere context (Giacomini 2020, 488). There are

opportunities to advance our understanding of how local government officers interpret roles in projects and whether/how their interpretation is used to justify their response to the challenges of a service domain. Similarly, we know little about how the creation of new models of governance and management by local government officers affects the purposes services fulfil in the local state, and how local government officers rationalise their choices and decisions (Korac et al. 2020; Nitzl, Sicilia, and Steccolini 2019; Giacomini 2020). We offer a case study of parks services that addresses these gaps in our understanding of local government officers' agency.

Research design and methodology

The NCC is a local metropolitan authority, which serves a population of approximately 300,000 in Northeast England, United Kingdom. Its net revenue budget declined by one-third in the 3-years prior to 2016 (Ferry, Ahrens, and Khalifa 2019, 96–97). NCC's Parks and Countryside budget declined by over 90% since 2010/11 (Mell 2018, 145).³ In early 2015, the NCC convened a team to explore the transfer of responsibility for Newcastle upon Tyne's parks from the local authority to a new trust, which would become Urban Green Newcastle (UGN). UGN is a company limited by guarantee and a charity registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales since March 2019 to manage, protect and improve NCC's parks and allotments to benefit the public.

Our study *explored* rather than tested a theory on the agency of local government officers. Echoing Barnett, Griggs, and Sullivan (2020, 518) and Rex (2020, 191) we emphasise the need to 'show' rather than simply 'tell' how local government officers respond to the challenges and opportunities that austerity presents for their work. We employ a single-case study to gain a deeper understanding of the subject, local government agency in austerity in the domain of parks (Yin 2003)

Our involvement with the case study site started in Spring 2019 and concluded one year later when a strategic plan for UGN was being developed; new staff were being hired and structures put in place. We conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals who had a managerial and/or advisory role in the parks' transformation. We use the Parks Team to refer to the five respondents who were local government officers in the NCC project to explore models for parks services. We also interviewed two UGN stakeholders, not employed by the NCC, with knowledge of the development of UGN and two representatives from external stakeholder organisations who advised the NCC and were privy to the establishment of UGN. An interview with an official in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government provided scoping information on government policy on parks and green spaces. We used semi-structured interviews because they allow flexibility and

adaptability to interviewees' experiences and accounts. The interview topic guide included questions on the roles and activities of local government officers, designed to elicit descriptions of the development of ideas and solutions to problems, challenges, and opportunities. We adopted an interpretivist approach to data analysis where we were interested in interviewees' descriptions and accounts/perspectives on the creation of UGN.

To allow for a systematic analysis, the interviews were transcribed and coded. One of the authors inductively coded the content of the process the respondents discussed. This gave rise to the following themes: the exploration of options for Newcastle's parks; the local authority officer and the project framework; the internal NCC consultation; and the public consultation and engagement programme. All the authors together then reviewed and discussed the codes and linked them to our overarching research focus on how local government officers created UGN for the management and governance of Newcastle's parks. This multi-stage process unearthed how, working within the Parks Team in a context of austerity and the parameters set by the NCC, local government officers developed their own interpretations of their roles as 'creative'. We found that by working across the NCC and with the general public, they crafted narratives pertaining to the (re)conception of democratic accountability in the new model and the risks of creating a new organisational model for parks. As we now discuss, these narratives were used to legitimise the approach adopted by the local government officers to address the problems posed by parks during austerity and the proposals they developed as solutions to these challenges.

Crafting roles: "get out of the way of thinking like a council officer . . . "

Similar to Ferry, Coombs, and Eckersley (2017), we found that local government officers navigated multiple contexts as the parameters of their task, which informed how they articulated and justified creative working. Members of the Parks Team and other stakeholders conveyed that austerity was the principal driver that led to the exploration of new ideas on how to manage parks. Addressing the issue of parks as public spaces, a set of principles and values guided the management and governance of parks. The NCC would remain the 'public owner' of Newcastle's parks in any future model; equality of access for the city's residents, parity of experience and participation in the social and health benefits of parks was paramount; and groups connected to parks had to be involved in the development of new models.⁴ Interviewees gave no clear rationale for this stance. The minutes of Cabinet meetings and supplementary documentation notes NCC's commitment to parks, which reflects NCC's public value strategy (Ferry, Ahrens, and Khalifa 2019).⁵ We found that the Parks Team were attentive to the austere context and the protection of parks as public spaces as parameters of the project. An

interviewee from an external stakeholder organisation observed of the Parks Team; there was ‘a desire to do things differently’ and a realisation that funding alone would not solve the problems presented by parks.

Reflective of Cochrane’s (2020, 537) description of the project as a framework for imaginative action, we found that the Parks Team cultivated ideas and ways of working that were distinct from the characterisations they held of the local authority official, articulated by Ferry, Coombs, and Eckersley (2017, 236) as ‘the local authority way’. They developed a narrative of their work as creative based on how it differed from existing practices within the local authority:

‘There’s been a lot of challenges on the way and there’s been challenges where we’ve sat as a project team and thought, “We really don’t know how to do this. We don’t know how to get around this now”. And then there’s always been something or some catalyst that’s just sparked off a bit of: “Get out of the way of thinking like a Council Officer and think creatively . . . Well, let’s talk to other people. Let’s start investigating how we could do this’. (Local Government Officer, December 2019).

We found that thinking and acting creatively involved co-operation with stakeholders outside the local authority, such as the National Trust and the Heritage Lottery Fund, and consultants, Social Finance. Similar to Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) and Lowndes (2005), we found that local government officers were sensitive to their context – operating in the politics of here and now, but cognisant of past failings in relation to the management of parks. For the Parks Team, balancing the effects of austerity with the protection of parks as public spaces was also about ensuring that ‘less well-off parks’ benefitted from the new model as much as ‘well-off’ parks and that the protection of wildlife is not compromised by commercial endeavours. The team was open to learning new things and *borrowing* ideas from external stakeholders, but also to *sharing* their knowledge of the NCC and its environs (Lowndes 2005). The Parks Team began by researching different models such as mutuals and local trading companies. Similar to other studies by Rex (2020, 197) and Barnett et al (2022) the Parks Team relied on their own common-sense notions of what was right for Newcastle as they considered models from elsewhere.⁶ Local government officers did not point to any specific basis for this knowledge, other than an intuitive sense that models that worked in London that charged people for admission, for example, would not work in Newcastle.

The Parks Team’s articulation of their role(s) in creative terms was justified as imperative to the accomplishment of the task. Despite the narratives that emerged from the interviews about breaking from existing ways of working, they drew upon insights from past knowledge and practices, manifold too in a desire to protect parks as part of their commitment to the principles

surrounding the project.⁷ Moreover, as we now proceed to discuss, they worked across the local authority to convince other local authority employees and elected councillors of the merits of the proposed model, in addition to consultation with the general public. We found that the Parks Team did not overtly challenge the parameters of the project. However, they used their creative interpretation of their task and role(s) to legitimise the changes they proposed to the management and governance of parks.

Addressing democratic accountability

As discussed above, a theme in debates about parks concerns their status as public spaces, which are accessible and accountable to the public as service users and party to democratic accountability/control (De Magalhães and Freire Trigo 2017, 742). The potential loss of democratic accountability and control in the proposed model was a concern within the NCC and amongst the general public. Our findings show how the local government officers addressed the issue of democratic accountability and control, first, via relationship building across the local authority, and second, as part of a multi-stage public consultation. Our study underlines how the Parks Team rationalised democratic accountability/control in the new model: they emphasised the safeguards in the model to politicians in accordance with NCC's principles for future parks governance. They sought to reassure the public about how they would be able to participate in the future governance of parks. These approaches to legitimisation are embedded in the ways in which the Parks Team engaged with local councillors and the public.

In relation to elected councillors, the Parks Team cultivated practices that are akin to *both* 'dual elite' and 'dynamic dependency' models of local politician–bureaucrat relationships (Entwistle, Martin, and Enticott 2005; Gains 2004). The proposal for parks generated extensive media coverage, some of which suggested that councillors supported the creation of the Parks Trust.⁸ However, constitutive of dynamic dependency, for some councillors in the NCC, the model appeared anathema to their associations between parks and local democracy (Heinelt 2013). Joensuu and Niiranen's (2018, 41) study of interactions between political leaders and public administrators in Finnish local government underlined the salience of negotiation and the exchange of information. The Parks Team used meetings, steering workshops and formal scrutiny processes to address councillors' concerns that the model would remove mechanisms of democratic control over green spaces and give responsibility to an autonomous non-democratic organisation. The Parks Team also used consultation and deliberation, mediated by an external body, Open Lab (Crivellaro et al. 2019). The consultation events helped officers to 'think outside the box and more radically' about the future of parks, as well as to receive feedback and develop trust with NCC stakeholders

(and the public, discussed below) (Crivellaro et al. 2019, 15:14). Our findings show how local government officers responded to politicians; they reveal a defence of how parks would remain accountable to the public in the new model. The Parks Team emphasised the safeguards in the new governance structures and the ongoing importance of scrutiny:

'I think a big issue... is the political issue of losing democratic control. The city has... built these green spaces up or they've received them for the benefit of people over 100 years... We were accused of selling off the parks. But we're not selling them, they're leased... we remained the owner. And if the charity failed, all the assets come back to the Council. Losing control of them – and this is a real issue - what's to stop a charitable trust not slowly veering away from its principles over a long period of time? Now, you can say the Articles of Association and the Charity Commission, but somebody has to scrutinise that.' (Local Government Officer, December 2019).

Scepticism may characterise bureaucrat–politician relationships (Baekgaard, Blom, and Serritzlow 2020, 16). The Parks Team was respectful of the democratic process and acknowledged the Opposition's imperative to question the proposals as part of democratic deliberation and scrutiny processes. They recognised the difficulties politically of supporting a model with no in-built democratic accountability structures to match the local authority. As local government is a public sector body, it has to address multiple and diverse interests to legitimise its actions (Giacomini 2020, 484). The Parks Team recognised this, but its response was to use the processes available to provide a rationale for their proposals. This required a defence of the model as part of the dynamics of local government officer–politician relationships. The Parks Team also had to convince the public about how democratic accountability would be maintained in the proposed model for parks.

The Parks Team believed that the success of any model would depend on buy-in from the public, and they wanted the public to shape the proposals as they developed. This echoes findings from Ferry, Coombs, and Eckersley (2017, 230) whereby local government officers underline the importance of managing citizens' expectations through communication, mediation and negotiation. A city-wide multi-platform engagement and consultation programme ran from 13 February–23 April 2017, led in part by the NCC as part of its legal duties in relation to public consultation and by Open Lab (Crivellaro et al. 2019, 15:10–12). Commensurate with Nederhand, Van Der Steen, and Van Twist's (2019) characterisation of the boundary spanner, Crivellaro et al. (2019, 15:9) describe how Open Lab became a 'potential mediator' of a legacy of 'compromised relations', rooted in mistrust and public frustrations towards NCC.⁹ This was not referenced by our interviewees, but we discerned a desire to appease and reassure the public about opportunities for public participation in the new model. One interviewee believed that to save the parks, the creation of the model would mean a setback in terms of traditional

representative democratic accountability, but they also recognised a need to incorporate other forms of accountability:

[T]he challenges that came out to us in the public consultation that we did was the loss of democracy, the loss of democratic accountability, and we had to be really clear that the charity is not democratically accountable. That's the point, that was the point, it had to be independent if it was going to be agile and respond in a way that we couldn't. But we recognised that we had to build in some sort of accountability that would provide a level of comfort to the public, so what it's about, and also that would require the Trust to listen to what the people of the city had to say and to be responsive to what the people of the city had to say within their charitable structure ... ' (Local Government Officer, November 2019).

The scale of the task facing local government officers is exacerbated by the imperative to negotiate the politics of the democratically accountable institution of local government (Wills 2020, 820; Ferry, Ahrens, and Khalifa 2019, 102). The Parks Team's responses to politicians are mediated via democratic deliberation processes in the local authority; used somewhat ironically to legitimise compromises to the democratic accountability/control of parks as public spaces. Similarly, their response to the public via consultation processes is to frame democratic accountability in the model in terms of opportunities for public participation. By unearthing the practices by which ideas come to fruition, combined with how they are justified, we gain deeper insights into how the agency of local government officers has implications for the principles associated with particular service domains, in this case parks as public spaces. Similar to DeMagalhães and Freire Trigo (2017, 753–754) our study tempers debates about the onset of the neo-liberalisation of parks. It indicates how features of public space, specifically rights of democratic control and accountability are (re)conceptualised in emerging models of governance. Specifically, for the first time in debates about parks, we show how local government officers contribute to the (re)conception of public space(s) via the changes they make to democratic accountability and control in relation to parks, and how these changes are justified.

Reframing and justifying risk

Managing risk is a salient part of the repertoire of the local government officer during austerity (Barnett et al. 2022, 12). Balancing the responsibilities of public stewardship and accountability means that risks may not be taken especially when the organisational culture of the local authority mitigates against risk-taking (Ferry, Coombs, and Eckersley 2017, 233). The Parks Team reframed risk vis-à-vis the parks service. They crafted a common narrative when working across the NCC and with the public, which emphasised the benefits of the new model.

The Parks Team had to convince NCC staff of the merits of changing the governance and management of parks (see, Mell 2018, 141). Several

interviewees spoke of the importance of support from senior NCC leaders, including the chief executive (Orr and Bennett 2016). The Parks Team had to assuage the concerns of staff who worked in the parks service, for example, about their roles and financial issues such as pensions. Building on how they conceived of creativity as a break with existing practices, the Parks Team emphasised the opportunity for their colleagues to be free of the 'rules and regulations and hierarchy of a very large authority' (Local Government Officer, December 2019). They rationalised that the new model would generate income and opportunities, including commercialisation, grants and volunteering because 'there were things that an independent organisation could do fairly quickly that we [the local authority] couldn't' (Local Government Officer, November 2019).

The material imperatives of efficiency, cost-savings and income generation were articulated as complementary to protecting the public character of parks.¹⁰ We found that part of the justification for the development of UGN was that even though the NCC would have retained control of parks if they could, the 'irony [is] that they're [parks] being better run, much better run by an independent charity' (UGN Stakeholder, December 2019). The Parks Team rationalised that retaining the public character of parks was possible, whilst allowing for commercial streams of income. Furthermore, according to this interviewee, this has changed perceptions about the purposes of parks and created a framework within which diverse and commercially viable purposes can be realised:

'There's been no structure to anything that's happened [in the past]. I think there's going to be that element of structure now, but I think the thought about how you use parks has changed, as well. Whereas before, it was just seen as, "That's parks". But now... it's about how does it meet the health and wellbeing agenda? What other things can happen? How do you make it as creative as possible? How can you use some of the events and activities to bring in funding opportunities and grants and all that sort of stuff? It's not just a case of everything being funded by the Trust budget; it's about how we work in partnership with others to try and achieve our objective.' (Local Government Officer, December 2019).

Smith (2014) discusses the 'borrowing' and 'loosening' of conceptions of public space(s) particularly by commercial activities. The quotation underlines the potential for local government officers to (re)articulate principles and purposes of service domains as part of the design and vision of new governance and management models. Public rights of accessibility and use of public space encompass 'the rules and codes of behaviour and enforcement that regulate how individuals have access to a public space and can enjoy its attributes' (De Magalhães and Freire Trigo 2017, 742). Our findings show how the alteration of rights of use and accessibility of public space(s) are legitimised as part of the new entity's potential to have positive implications for how parks are used and accessed by the public. The Parks Team recognised the risks involved in their enterprise. However, they re-articulated the risks through the creation of

narratives that envisaged efficiency, commercialisation and income generation as complementary to public space rights of use and access. Attention to the rationale(s) that inform the creation of organisational models like UGN underlines how the agency of local government officers shapes the organisations and principles that make up the infrastructure of the local state.

Conclusion

The transfer of the management and governance of Newcastle's parks from Newcastle City Council to Urban Green Newcastle is a case of how local government officers shape local government responses to austerity in a service domain. It emphasises legitimisation as central to agency mediated via a project framework, which is bordered by austerity and principles set by NCC; cross-organisational working and public consultation and engagement. Our study underlines how legitimisation is part of the crafting of narratives that play out as part of the work of the local government officer. This article has shown how local government officers developed narratives to legitimise their work; specifically, to provide an ex-post rationalisation for (i) creative roles; (ii) democratic accountability and control in the new model; and (iii) mitigating the risks involved in creating UGN. These narratives can be usefully categorised into two types of legitimisation: 1) the *problem narrative*, which in our case centred on issues emerging from austerity and cuts to park provision, and 2) the *solution narrative*, which in our case emphasised the balance between maintaining NCC's commitment to parks as public spaces, and reframing democratic accountability through charitable structures and greater emphasis on new principles and opportunities, for example, income generation. Legitimising narratives are, in turn, mediated via *relationship-building and negotiation*; for example, between local government officers and councillors and *public consultation*, which included using a 'boundary spanner' organisation, Open Lab. The framing of legitimising narratives in this way has potential relevance to other contexts in which local government officers are tasked with addressing the challenges posed by austerity.

This article has addressed under-explored questions about how the agency of local government officers affects the management and governance of parks. Mell (2018, 149) underlines that no one model for parks under consideration by local government represents '*the solution*' (author's emphasis). Notwithstanding, 'there is an opportunity to recalibrate what green infrastructure is funded and how' (ibid.). Debates about parks are broadly framed in terms of what pressures of income generation and commercialisation mean for parks as public spaces and the significance of place-keeping in austerity? A novel contribution to these debates is that this article shows how legitimisation narratives developed by local government officers recalibrate rights of publicness, that is use, accessibility and control, associated with public space(s).

However, income generation and commercialisation are also justified as part of these narratives to reframe the purposes of parks in the new model. As defined earlier in the article, place-keeping has multiple dimensions and it serves as an analytical framework to explore the multi-dimensional and complex character of the management of open spaces like parks (Dempsey et al. 2016). Our article offers a new perspective on place-keeping. It underlines the importance of questions about how local government officers' agency, engaged in the politics of austerity, shapes different dimensions of place-keeping in models of parks management and governance. Blending attention to place-keeping as an analytical framework, with a focus on local government officers' agency, future research could explore how local government officers consider the dimensions of place-keeping as part of the transformation of parks services. Scholars can navigate the complexity of the governance and management arrangements that are in situ and/or under consideration for parks in a way that draws attention to the processes that underpin the principles and structures that come to shape these arrangements.

Notes

1. Urban Green Newcastle-1182534 (charitycommission.gov.uk) Urban Green Newcastle was known as the Newcastle Parks and Allotments Trust ('Parks Trust'). On 20/11/2017, the Cabinet of Newcastle City Council (NCC) agreed to create the Trust to manage the city's 11 principal, 12 neighbourhood and 9 countryside parks and allotments (51 hectares). The Cabinet's Decision Notice, 20/11/2017 records NCC's commitment to provide the Trust £9.5 million for 10 years, and to transfer assets as part of a low-cost, long-lease agreement (125 years), as well as responsibility for staff and operations. In 2019, the Trust was renamed Urban Green Newcastle (UGN). NCC Business Cabinet, 20/11/2017, Background Paper Pack, Appendix B.
2. <https://www.futureparks.org.uk/Newcastle/UGN> was selected to participate in the Future Parks Accelerator
3. NCC Decision Details Business Cabinet, 17/7/2017b, Background Papers, 10.
4. NCC Decision Details Business, Cabinet, 17/7/2017b, 5.30pm; Background Papers, 43; Agenda Pack, 59.
5. NCC Decision Details Business, Cabinet, 20/11/2017a, 5.30pm, Supplemental Agenda, 1, 2-4.
6. NCC Decision Details Business, Cabinet, 20/11/2017a, 5.30pm, Supplemental Agenda, 1, 25-26.
7. NCC Decision Details Business Cabinet, 17/7/2017b, 5.30pm, Background Papers, 43
8. Newcastle Council considers handing running of parks to charity - BBC News 8/2/2017; Newcastle City Council gives go-ahead for charity-run parks, BBC News 21/11/2017 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-42058810>. On media coverage, NCC- Business Cabinet, 17/7/2017, Background Papers, 111-121.
9. Ahrens, T. and Ferry, L. 2015. Newcastle City Council and the grassroots: accountability and budgeting under austerity. *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* 28(6), 909-933.
10. NCC Business Cabinet, 20/11/2017, Supplemental Agenda Pack, 4-7; 24-27.

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