# Labour’s planning reforms threaten Britain’s historic parks and gardens, warn experts



Every week, Linden Groves makes her way to a cherished park in north London, a space that has witnessed the ebb and flow of her life—from childhood playdates to the solitude of lockdowns and the rigours of marathon training. For Groves, a leading garden historian and advocate, parks and gardens epitomise the essence of British culture, standing as testaments to our rich heritage akin to Shakespeare's works or the comfort of a cup of tea. Her sentiments reflect a deep-rooted appreciation for these green spaces, which she argues are invaluable, meticulously shaped over centuries of care. However, Groves now finds her dedication challenged by recent proposals from the Labour party aimed at accelerating the planning system—a move she believes could dismantle protections for these treasured sites.

The Gardens Trust, Britain’s sole national charity devoted to the preservation of designed landscapes, has already raised concerns about the potential implications of Labour's plans. During the 2024-25 cycle, the Trust lodged nearly 70 critical objections to planning applications that threatened over 1,100 homes near protected sites. The Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government has initiated a consultation proposing to remove various statutory consultees, including The Gardens Trust, from the planning process. Groves warns that such actions would undermine the very frameworks intended to safeguard the historic landscapes that adorn the country, many of which are catalogued on the Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England.

Among the over 1,700 sites listed, gems like Birkenhead Park—the world’s first publicly funded park—Chatsworth House Gardens, and Highgate Cemetery are now at risk. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) has expressed its disquiet over these shifts, with director Alistair Griffiths articulating that the proposed changes risk damaging historic parks and gardens just as the societal understanding of their importance for wellbeing, biodiversity, and climate resilience is strengthening. Ian Sansbury, CEO of nature mental health charity Mind Over Mountains, concurs, stressing that these green spaces are not merely pleasant; they are vital to mental health and community well-being.

Linden emphasizes that the financial contribution of The Gardens Trust to the taxpayer remains modest, costing under £44,000 annually, while the potential loss of their expertise could lead to costs exceeding £30 million for local authorities tasked with ecological preservation and planning. John Watkins, the chair of The Gardens Trust, highlights the irreplaceable nature of this knowledge and warns that without it, planning decisions could degrade the quality of developments, oblivious to the historical and aesthetic ramifications. He argues that the government's noble goal of increasing housing should not come at the expense of nurturing communities that embrace, rather than obliterate, their green surroundings.

Taking pride in their accomplishments, The Gardens Trust has previously salvaged historic sites like the 18th-century Painshill in Surrey. Once in a state of neglect, Painshill now thrives as a community hub, attracting 250,000 visitors annually—the culmination of meticulous restoration efforts. Michael Symes from the Painshill Trust underscores the significance of such initiatives, championing innovative approaches to garden restoration that were previously unexplored in the UK.

As Labour moves to expedite the planning process, Shadow Minister Paul Holmes raises pertinent questions about local representation. He argues that while speeding up planning is vital, it should not marginalise local councils and community voices. This sentiment resonates with Groves’s dedication to preserving Britain’s horticultural heritage. She staunchly asserts that neglecting this heritage is “shameful” and believes the proposed changes risk unmaking decades of progress in conservation.

In a world increasingly conscious of the interconnections between nature, health, and community, Groves warns that hasty planning could lead to "poor decisions" with widely felt repercussions. “We could end up with a lot of housing in a really low-quality environment without the green spaces that enhance our lives,” she warns. The legacy of Britain’s parks and gardens, cultivated by generations, hangs in the balance, with Groves and her colleagues observing events with deep concern. The future, she believes, should reflect an understanding of these landscapes' significance rather than merely a quest for rapid housing expansion; the very essence of British identity is at stake.

As this debate unfolds, the question remains: how will we balance the urgent need for housing with the equally pressing need to preserve our rich tapestry of historic landscapes, ensuring that future generations can inherit both homes and the beauty of nature?

### Reference Map

1. Lead article: All paragraphs
2. Related summary on Levelling Up and Regeneration Act: Paragraphs 2, 3, 5, 9
3. Historic England's initiatives on parks and gardens: Paragraphs 3, 8
4. Heritage reforms analysis: Paragraph 6
5. Historic England's grant for Suffolk parks: Paragraph 3
6. Risk Register for Yorkshire heritage sites: Paragraph 3
7. Investment in Birkenhead Park: Paragraph 5

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2056670/uk-historic-gardens-parks-threat-labour> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://thegardenstrust.org/levelling-up-and-regeneration-act/> - The Gardens Trust welcomes the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, marking a significant milestone in the conservation of historic parks and gardens. The Act introduces planning reforms, notably a duty to have 'special regard' to preserving or enhancing designated heritage assets, including registered parks and gardens. Additionally, it grants statutory status to Historic Environment Records (HERs), requiring local authorities to maintain these records, which may contain information about registered parks and gardens and other sites of historic interest.
3. <https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/features/parks-and-gardens-anniversary/> - Historic England celebrates 40 years since the first 27 parks and gardens were added to the 'Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England'. The register now includes over 1,700 parks and gardens, recognizing their importance to England's heritage and their vital role in everyday life, health, and wellbeing. The article highlights various initiatives, including the 'Missing Pieces Project', which encourages public participation in documenting and preserving historic parks and gardens.
4. <https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/uk-heritage-planning-law-review-2023-1384173/> - This article reviews the heritage reforms introduced in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023. Key reforms include an express statutory duty to have special regard to the desirability of preserving or enhancing all designated heritage assets, such as registered parks and gardens, World Heritage Sites, and scheduled monuments. The Act also creates powers for local authorities to issue immediate temporary stop notices in respect of listed buildings where breaches of listed building controls are perceived.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-62496383> - Historic England has awarded a £36,000 grant to uncover, celebrate, and protect historic parks and gardens in Suffolk. The project aims to inspire local communities to research and protect Suffolk's lesser-known historic gardens. Notably, only 23 of the county's green spaces are currently protected. The initiative has led to the addition of several sites to the National Heritage List for England, including Grade I listed Helmingham Hall and Grade II listed Belle Vue Park in Lowestoft.
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-67357796> - Seven heritage sites in Yorkshire have been added to Historic England's At Risk Register for 2023 due to neglect, decay, or inappropriate development. The newly listed sites include Cannon Hall's kitchen garden wall in Barnsley, Cropton Hall Garth in North Yorkshire, and a round barrow on Wheeldale Moor. Historic England has also removed 13 sites from the register in the past year, highlighting ongoing efforts to protect and restore heritage sites across the region.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c6242nzv327o> - Wirral Council plans to invest £1.5 million in upgrading Birkenhead Park, the world's first publicly funded park, which inspired New York's Central Park. The revamp aims to support the park's bid for UNESCO World Heritage status. The council's formal bid is expected by February 2026, following a comprehensive evaluation. The planned upgrades include improvements to the park's key natural and cultural landmarks, such as the grand entrance, Swiss Bridge, and Roman Boathouse.