

**Transforming the governance of green spaces:  
The case of Urban Green Newcastle**

**DRAFT, NOT FOR CITATION**

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**Paper prepared for the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Public Policy, Barcelona,  
5-9 July 2021**

**Funding: The research that underpins this paper is funded by the EU Horizon 2020 programme, grant number 770591, COGOV: *Co-Production and Co-Governance: Strategic Management, Public Value and Co-Creation in the Renewal of Public Agencies across Europe***

## Abstract

This paper discusses the creation of Urban Green Newcastle (UGN), a charity and company limited by guarantee, by Newcastle City Council (NCC) to manage, protect and improve the city's parks and allotments for the benefit of the public. We argue that the process of transformation can be theorised as a process of hybridisation, which is informed by the institutional logics approach (ILA) (Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith, 2015). We discuss how multiple institutional logics – market, public value, democratic deliberation and political - manifest in the actions, principles and values exhibited by the project team, which was tasked with finding a new model for the management and governance of the city's parks and allotments. Actors engage in institutional bricolage to manage and negotiate the opportunities, tensions and complexities of these multiple logics and, ultimately, to blend them into UGN. This paper advances our understanding of the process of hybridisation as an analytical approach as it focuses on how those involved in the hybridisation process interpret and negotiate the logics that are then carried into the hybrid form. It also contributes to debates about parks and green spaces as it provides a novel understanding of how local authorities are managing to ensure the sustainability of these assets in a context of austerity.

## Introduction

Parks and green spaces provide significant social and health benefits to users as well as being part of the UK's cultural heritage (Heritage Lottery Fund State of Public Parks 2016: 6). However, as a non-statutory duty in an environment of austerity, local authorities are actively engaged in seeking new ways to manage parks; generate alternative income streams and/or dispose of green spaces (Mell 2020; Heritage Lottery Fund State of Public Parks 2016: 15). This paper discusses the creation of Urban Green Newcastle (UGN) by Newcastle City Council (NCC). UGN is a company limited by guarantee and a charity registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales, to manage, protect and improve the city's 33 parks and 61 allotments for the benefit of the public.<sup>1</sup> We argue that the process of transformation can be theorised as a process of hybridisation, which is informed by the institutional logics approach (ILA) (Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith 2015).

An established feature of local governance, hybrid forms bring together, for example, in networks and partnerships actors, organisations, perspectives and approaches from state, market and civil society (Pill and Guarneros-Meza 2018: 409-410; Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith 2015: 433; Van Gestel, Denis and Ferlie: 275). Partnership working extends to the management and governance of parks (Dempsey, Burton and Duncan 2016). Drawing upon ILA, Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith view hybridisation as: *'a process in which plural logics and thus actor identities are in play within an organisation, leading to a number of possible organisational outcomes'* (ibid.: 434). Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith (2015) articulate five different types of hybrid organisation, all of which encapsulate different institutional logics: segmented, segregated, assimilated, blended, and fifth, blocked, where there are irreconcilable difference between logics. In relation to UGN, we argue that Newcastle City Council developed a blended hybrid form. Although formally constituted as a charity and company limited by guarantee, UGN is characterised by the *'synergistic incorporation*

*of elements of existing logics into a new and contextually specific logic*' (Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith 2015: 440).

Our focus is on how a team of local government officers (henceforth, the project team), in collaboration with external partners and as part of an extensive consultation process, interpreted, negotiated - and, ultimately blended - multiple institutional logics to create UGN. The prevalence of multiple institutional logics - market, public value, political, and democratic deliberation - shaped and informed the "repertoires of behaviour" available to the project team and created tensions and contradictions for the team to manage too.

Austerity-localism denotes the devolution of more decision-making powers to local authorities, but in a context where they have less resources at their disposal due to cuts in funding for local government (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Ferry, Ahrens and Khalifa 2019). The theorisation of austerity, or rather austerity-localism considers the consequences and challenges the prevalent environment poses for the field of local government in the UK (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). Following Pill and Guarneros-Meza (2018) we discern a 'scalar' dimension to the process of hybridisation we identify in relation to parks, which embodies market logics of 'offloading' and 'downscaling' in times of austerity - and drove the search for new ways of managing parks. The House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee (CLG) Inquiry into Public Parks (2017) recognised the challenges faced by local authorities to develop sustainable models to maintain and manage parks. It also noted the absence of national strategic government-led co-ordination (House of Commons, CLG 2017: 62-63). However, at the same time it underlined the task facing local authorities to ensure that the management of parks services are transparent, publicly accountable and cognizant of the variety of social, cultural and health benefits of parks. The Inquiry underlines that transformative visions and strategies are integral to this task:

"We believe that addressing the challenges which face the parks sector in a way that secures a sustainable future for England's parks may require *fundamental service transformations*, which takes into account the wider value and benefits which parks deliver, beyond their amenity and leisure value." (House of Commons CLG Committee 2017, p. 54).

In our case study, the potential for market logics to shape the future of parks was tempered by what we call a "public value logic". Newcastle City Council was strategically committed to public value as a response to austerity-localism. Ferry, Ahrens and Khalifa (2019) argue that NCC adopted a public value strategy which actively engaged processes of public deliberation and decision making for the common good in times of austerity and sought to enhance the legitimacy of the local authority. These organisational changes encapsulated a 'new vision for change' which is manifest in the mobilisation of citizens and groups against austerity in Newcastle and nationally (Ferry, Ahrens and Khalifa, 2019: 111-112). They are also illustrative of how the 'logics of democratic institutions' may be embodied, for example, in principles and practices of public deliberation: 'how democratic deliberation takes place in local authorities constitutes an important element of the institutional logic of local government [in England]' (Ferry, Ahrens and Khalifa, 2019, p. 102). We also suggest that commitments to the local authority as a democratic body are evident in a political logic that places a premium on the democratic accountability and significance of local government (Fred 2020).

We discuss how these multiple logics were manifest in the project team's repertoires of behaviour, principles and values. Through strategies that included extensive consultation and deliberation

processes, legal-based research and an openness to work with external partners, the project team sought ways to mediate the issues raised by internal (councillors, staff) and external (public) stakeholders, which were variously grounded in opposition to and/or support for market and/or public value logics, as well as political logic and a democratic deliberation logic. Our case study illustrates how the negotiation of logics as part of the hybridisation process requires actors to be institutional entrepreneurs, engaged in ‘institutional bricolage’; that is individuals poised to develop creative, innovative solutions to problems that draw upon and share a range of resources and skills (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013; Lowndes, 2005).

Our paper proceeds as follows. First, we set out the context for the case study, which underlines why a focus on parks and green spaces is timely and important. In the next section, we elaborate on hybridisation as an analytical approach and how it informs our case study. Then, we discuss the research design and methodology, before presenting our findings. We conclude with a discussion about the implications our case study has for debates about hybridisation generally and more specifically hybridisation and the future of parks and green spaces. We consider how attention to hybridisation as an analytical approach enables us to address some issues and tensions that debate raises about the future of parks and green spaces. This final section will be developed following the discussion of our approach and findings at this conference.

## **Parks and Green Spaces: an Overview**

In the UK, the history of the funding of public parks depicts the myriad of actors and management models that all shaped the establishment of many of the nation’s parks: from philanthropists and trusts, to public subscriptions of support and/or money, to links with commercial ventures, (Layton-Jones, 2016: 12-61). Since the late nineteenth century, local authorities have had responsibility for the majority of municipal parks, allotments and green spaces. Thus, the political and public policy environment has influenced –and constrained - how local authorities fund public parks (Layton-Jones, 2016; Reeves, 2000; Harding, 1999). This includes the Local Government Planning and Land Act (1980) and Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), which prioritised savings over horticultural expertise in the care and maintenance of parks (Dempsey et al. 2016: 443-444; Harding, 1999: 6-7). From the election of the first (New) Labour government in 1997, and the Local Government Act (1999), there was a preference for ‘Best Value’ and the engagement of actors beyond the private sector in civil society in the delivery of public services, including parks (Dempsey, Burton and Selin 2016: 444-445). Since this period, the number of voluntary community groups active in parks has increased, but most remain unenthusiastic about taking on formal management responsibilities. (Heritage Lottery Fund State of Public Parks, 2016: 17). A focus on the future of parks, particularly their financial stability is timely as, over the last decade, The Localism Act 2010, and the Council Tax Referendum Principles, meant that local authorities could not, at their discretion use local taxation to increase public funding for parks (Layton-Jones 2016: 29-32).

Local authorities can draw upon advice, ideas and “best practice”, including from other countries, to guide the transformation of parks (Crowe 2018: 62-63; Drayson 2014). Strategic leadership and initiatives to transform how parks are managed and funded include: the *Rethinking Parks* Initiative

(2012-2020), a partnership between NESTA, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the National Lottery Community Fund. This, in turn, had links with the *Future Parks Accelerator*, a partnership between the National Trust, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, which works with nine parks to protect their natural environment and accessibility. Decisions about models of governance for the future of parks require attention to ‘place keeping’ which involve long-term strategic plans to ensure their future social, economic and environmental sustainability (Dempsey and Burton, 2012, p. 13).

A focus on parks and green spaces is important because the plethora of initiatives and models, which emphasise “innovation”, “creativity” and market-based solutions, have led some scholars to raise concerns about whether the proposals are part of a broader ideologically-driven political agenda to advance the neo-liberalisation of parks:

“By placing the often pragmatic responses to cuts in local authority parks services funding within this frame, it becomes clear that changes in management and governance are not just about dealing with declining funding, but they are inevitably supporting changes in the underpinning and fundamental principles of the original provision of public parks as a social welfare good.” (Crowe, 2018: 64)

The nature of “public” space or “publicness” is increasingly problematised and interrogated, including in terms of who owns it; how is it managed and how is it used? (Németh 2012: 813-815; see also, Smith 2014: 26-261). As they consider different models of funding, and to balance financial challenges and public opinion the management and governance of public green spaces may present moral questions for local authorities. For example, Mell (2020: 10) suggests that ‘the commercialisation of a GI [Green Infrastructure] presents “nature” as an asset to be maximised rather than protected’.

All told, in the existing literature, a mix of academic analysis and so-called ‘grey’ literature, there has been wide exploration of the impact of the policy climate and specific initiatives on parks and green spaces. The financial pressures to address dwindling park budgets and ensure sustainable place-keeping strategies, and indeed, to transform parks can be juxtaposed with concerns about the implications for the future of parks as public entities. We add to this debate but address an important gap: drawing upon ILA and hybridisation as an analytical approach, we explore *how* local authorities engage and negotiate these tensions, and the management and governance models that arise as a result of these processes (see also, Mell 2020).

## **Hybridisation and the Institutional Logics Approach**

Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith (2015: 436) use an ‘institutional logics approach’ (ILA) to theorise hybridity and to develop an analytical approach to hybridisation as a process. Friedland and Alford (1991) underlined the significance of ‘societal logics’ that make up the ‘organising principles’ of (Western) society (for example, state, market, family). The practices, rituals, beliefs and values that characterise each institutional order are ‘available to organisations and individuals to elaborate’, materially, through practices and strategies, and symbolically, reflected in values,

principles and identity (Friedland and Alford 1991: 240; 248; see Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012: 43-44; 54; 67).

Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012: 148) outline how Friedland and Alford's work prompted further inquiry into the significance of institutional logics to particular fields, and to the dynamics of societal and field level logics: They state that 'institutional logics, while embodied in material practices are also symbolic constructions that guide the production and reproduction of institutional practices' (ibid.: 149). Through the analysis of institutional fields and the agency exhibited by individuals in organisations in those fields we can discern how 'organisational forms and managerial practices are manifestations of, and legitimated by institutional logics' (Greenwood, Magan Diaz, Xiao Li and Cepedes Lorente, 2010: 521). There may be multiple, conflicting institutional logics present in fields *and* within organisations (Fred, 2020: 353; Fincham and Forbes 2015). The roles of individuals' embedded agency in organisations are salient as they negotiate the complexity of institutional logics – and indeed challenge the significance of particular institutional logics over others (Meyer, et al 2014; Thornton et al 2012: 148-150; Greenwood et al. 2010). Thus, Fred (2020: 358) argues that logics are part of a concrete rather than abstract performance by individuals; 'they are continuously reconstructed in practice'. Studies underline and explore how actors in organizational settings navigate, interpret and make sense of the multiple logics of institutional fields and negotiate the dynamics of field-societal logics (Gérard, Brittain, Jones and Thomas 2020; Fincham and Forbes 2016; Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta and Lounsbury 2011). Moreover, we remain mindful of 'complexity within logics' (Fincham and Forbes 2015: 658) and how they may play out differently in different contexts (Meyer et al 2014).

As an analytical approach, the ways in which different hybrid forms come into being can be explored as part of the analysis of the dynamics between multiple institutional logics and actors' identities, which play out in formal organisations and structures (Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith 2015: 444). In the context of local governance, Pill and Guarneros-Meza (2018: 412) further argue that there is a 'scalar' dimension to hybridisation processes which is encapsulated in 'the processes of downscaling and offloading deployed in the politics of austerity'. As central governments devolve or '*downscale*' responsibility for managing austerity, the hybridisation of local governance responsibilities and third sector organisations is one ('*offloading*') strategy employed by local governments to meet the challenges of delivering services with depleted resources and budgets (Pill and Guarneros 2018, our emphasis). This overarching policy environment embodies some of the core characteristics associated with societal market logics (Gerard, Brittain, Jones and Thomas 2020: 634). This denotes a set of organising principles, that place a premium on the transactional value of relationships, and purports actions that reflect resource-maximising, non-person-centred norms and private, market-oriented strategies (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012: 56). Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith (2015) articulate hybrid forms as 'carriers of multiple institutional logics', which are constantly (re)negotiated and (re)shaped by the situated agency of actors. Hybrid officers manage a variety of identities as they interpret, negotiate and, indeed, resolve any tensions that arise from the different practices *and* ideological discourses that characterise the institutional logics of hybrid organisations (Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith 2015: 439). This informs the types of daily practices that shape hybrid officers' experiences of hybrid organisations (Pill and Guarneros-Meza 2018).

Absent from this discussion is a sense of *how* those involved in the process of creating a hybrid organisation have to interpret and negotiate multiple logics and how these are then “carried” into the hybrid form. This requires attention to individuals who are in a position to perform ‘*institutional bricoleur*’, that is, individuals ready to re-purpose resources and models to meet objectives in times of austerity (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013: 543). To address the roles of individuals, different terms have been developed and are useful to our analysis. The term boundary spanners describes actors that connect organisations with their environments by mediating between people and organisations to broker ideas (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason 2010; Lodge and Wegrich 2014; Nederhand, Van der Steen and Van Twist 2018). For example, in local government, boundary spanners, which work between policy officers and communities to develop connections between them, have to negotiate multiple, conflicting logics of hierarchy (mediated by the classical model of public administration); market logic (mediated by New Public Management) and the logic of networks (associated with New Public Governance) (Nederhand, Van Der Steen and Van Twist 2018). To describe the “bricolage” potential of actors, others have invoked notions such as innovators and entrepreneurs, emphasising that actors do not only translate, but provide new interpretations to proposals, ideas and other realities in the environment (Durose 2011; Leadbetter and Goss 1998). The concept of ‘civic entrepreneurship’ proposed by Leadbetter and Goss (1998) encapsulates how individuals use innovative strategies and ways of working with local communities (connecting with people, empowering them, addressing problems) in the context of the collapse of existing structures and the emergence of new ones. Lowndes (2005: 305-306) also likened local government officers to ‘*institutional entrepreneurs*’ who engage in institutional ‘remembering’, that is, drawing on past experiences, ‘borrowing’ and ‘sharing’ resource, often with ‘creative’ results as they navigate evolving contexts of change and reform.

As discussed earlier, the existing literature on parks debates the onset of the neo-liberalisation of parks and raises concerns about place-keeping, which is compounded by the plethora of models and initiatives that local authorities can draw upon to shape the future of parks. As such, the question of how local authorities are responding to these challenges and with what effects is a salient one, yet it is underexplored (one exception is Mell 2020). The emphasis on hybridisation as process, and the centrality of institutional logics and the situated agency of actors to this process enables the analysis of how actors who are tasked with leading the transformation of parks make sense of, interpret and possibly challenge opportunities, constraints and tensions presented by co-existing logics. It provides a nuanced appreciation of the parameters and legitimacy of actors’ behaviour, practices and approaches, as well as of the solutions they propose.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

The paper is based on a qualitative case study examining the process leading to the establishment of the UGN. We explored the emergence of different institutional logics in the case of the governance transformation of Newcastle’s green spaces from the Newcastle City Council to Urban Green Newcastle. Our study concluded in Spring 2020 at a time when a strategic plan for UGN was being developed; when new staff were being hired and structures put in place. We therefore

cover the setting up stage of the transformation, including: 1) the exploration of options for the governance transformation of Newcastle Green Spaces; 2) the consultation internal to Newcastle City Council; and 3) the engagement programme with external organisations, community groups and citizens. Our findings are based on an inductive analysis of a number of documents (Table 1) and interviews that we conducted with people involved in the transformation (Table 2). This included people involved from the outset of the process, and those who joined at later stages of the process (for example, trustees), but who have developed an intricate knowledge and understanding of events.<sup>1</sup>

Interviewees were asked to reflect on the experience transforming the parks services, including the triggers, drivers and barriers that led to the transformation. We developed two level codes. One of the authors coded the content of the interviews in terms of what aspect of the transformation the respondents were discussing. All the authors together then looked at the codes, discussed them and inductively identified a common institutional frame or the narrative linking the codes. Through this process we discerned four pervasive institutional logics in: the market, public value logic, political logic and the democratic deliberation logic, which we discuss below.

Table 1: Interviews

	Respondent	Date
1.	<u>Trustee of the UGN Board</u>	19 December 2019
2.	<u>Newcastle City Council employee</u>	<u>20 December 2019</u>
3.	<u>Trustee of the UGN Board</u>	13 December 2019
4.	<u>Newcastle City Council employee</u>	9 December 2019
5.	<u>Newcastle City Council employee</u>	9 December 2019
6.	<u>Newcastle City Council employee</u>	9 December 2019
7.	<u>Newcastle City Council employee</u>	27 November 2019
8.	<u>Heritage Fund employee</u>	4 March 2020
9.	<u>Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government official</u>	9 May 2019

Table 2: Primary resources

<u>Documents</u>
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<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted between May 2019 and December 2020. Eight of the respondents were directly involved in the UGN case. Four of these were either core members or advisors in the operational/management team that Newcastle City Council put together to explore and initiate the transformation of parks services. We also interviewed a park ranger with responsibilities for parks in the municipal model under NCC, who was about to start working for UGN. Two respondents were sitting members of the UGN's Board of Trustees, whose role consisted of overseeing the transfer of assets and UGN's strategic development. One respondent worked for the Heritage Fund and was involved in the case since UGN was a trailblazer project in the Rethinking Park Initiative, which the Heritage Fund co-funded. Finally, we interviewed a government official in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to obtain information on government policy on parks and green spaces. A list of interviews is available at the end of the article.



Newcastle City Council Decision Details:

Creating a Charitable Trust to Protect Newcastle's Parks and Allotments: Decision 27/11/2017, - Creating a Charitable Trust to Protect Newcastle's Parks and Allotments | Newcastle City Council

OpenLab, Newcastle University and Newcastle City Council (2017) the Future of Newcastle's Parks and Allotments Consultation Report. Available at: <https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Libraries%20%26%20Hubs/Parks%20%26%20Open%20Spaces/11.Parks%20Consultation%20Report%202017.pdf>.

Ritchie, E. and Cross, J. (n.d.) The need for change – The Newcastle Parks and Allotments Trust. Briefing paper prepared for COGOV: Work Package 1.1, Repository (unpublished)

Social Finance Limited (27 October 2017) NCC Park Trust Model guide. London: Social Finance. <https://democracy.newcastle.gov.uk/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?IId=91685&Opt=0>

Womble, Bond, Dickinson (2017) Parks Trust Governance Proposal Newcastle City Council, 2 November 2017, <https://democracy.newcastle.gov.uk/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?IId=91685&Opt=0>, Appendix 2

## **Multiple Institutional Logics, Opportunities and Turbulence in the Transformation and Creation of UGN**

### ***Market Logics driving transformation***

The creation of UGN is grounded in the market logics of austerity manifested through respondents' talk of austerity, financial means, cost and loss of human resources. In explaining the context of the decision to transform the management of parks services following austerity, respondents often quoted the non-statutory status of parks services, meaning that local authorities are under no legal obligation to provide for green spaces. NCC's Parks and Countryside budget was a casualty of downscaling, with a reduction of over 90% since 2010/11. As outlined earlier in the reference to the Communities and Local Government (House of Commons CLG Committee) Inquiry into Public Parks (2017), as a non-statutory duty, there was no central government plan to address this deficit; rather it was "devolved" to local authorities to do so, and arguably simultaneously "offloaded" to partnership initiatives such as *Rethinking Parks*. NCC's budget for this service had declined from UK£2.589m in 2010/11 to £0.87m in 2017/18. With the loss of experienced staff and a backlog of repairs and maintenance jobs across all aspects of the service, the traditional municipal model - which sees the local authority taking care of all the aspects of parks management - was not fit for purpose. Many of the respondents agreed that austerity was the principal driver leading to the exploration of new ideas on how to manage green spaces\_(Int #3, #4, #5, #6, #8). One of the interviewees explained in the following terms the need to transform the governance of green spaces (Int #6):

“Purely for austerity. Purely financial originally because we'd lost 93% of our budget over seven years. [...] I think that certainly helped people understand the need for change too.”  
(Interviewee #6).”

In 2015, a team of local authority officers (the Project Team), comprising of legal experts, business and project managers, was brought together to explore options for transforming the City's parks (Crivellaro et al 2019). Their role entailed exploring and assessing legal, financial and governance issues surrounding the potential for a new independent organisation to manage and deliver the City's parks. Options initially included maintaining the status quo, setting up a public sector mutual or creating a Local Authority Trading Company in addition to "copying" other models from elsewhere in the country, but none were deemed to be transferable to the North (Interviewees #1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7). Moreover, although there were examples of NCC using third parties to run services, and invoking commercial solutions to problems, these types of approaches were not deemed appropriate for parks (Interviewee #5). In parallel, the interviews revealed a sense of whether the local authority would have gone ahead with the project had circumstances of austerity not compelled them to do so:

“I’m not so sure if we hadn’t had austerity and this idea had come about [in years time], how open the staff group would have been to that, because they probably would have, “Well, why? What are we doing it for?” (Int #6)

“Obviously, Newcastle in the north-east politically have been harder hit with the austerity measures, so I think were quite severely cut. I think if you go to Edinburgh and Belfast, their parks’ budgets are still relatively healthy. They haven’t got to that stage yet where they need to start thinking.” (Int #6)

“Money. The city, all local authorities looking at their budgets and thinking, “Well we can’t pay for this”. [...] If the local authority had the money I don’t think they would’ve gone through the process of making the parks independent. I think they would’ve preferred probably to keep them.” (Int #1)

The interviews suggest that the market logics of downscaling and offloading that are intrinsic to austerity, and evident in relation to parks in England tell us about the drivers for the process. The interviewees clearly connect austerity to NCC’s decision to transform parks and to the project team’s task to identify a model to address their apparent shortcomings. Yet, respondents cast doubt on whether such a decision would have been made if only the public character of parks was taken into consideration. Despite working amidst the financial pressures posed by austerity, market-based solutions were not embraced as neither an obvious nor failsafe solution to the future sustainability of parks. To see the transformation process as purely a response to austerity belies the other logics that actors had to negotiate, and which align with their values and views on the purpose(s) of parks: we denote these as the public value logic that influenced the project team’s steering of the transformation once the need for change was mandated through austerity.

### ***Searching for a Solution: market logics tempered by “Public Value” Logics***

According to Thornton et al. (2012: 152) theories are ‘the most abstract and systematic forms of symbolic representation’ which along with actual practices are embodied in institutional logics. To varying degrees, theories provide directional principles, which provide a rationale for institutional forms and operations, and/or act as ‘political instruments’ to garner support for a programme of change. Like theories, narratives and frames are also types of symbolic representation. However, narratives, in particular, though informed by theories and framing, perform a more tangible role as they ‘give meaning to specific actors, events and practices’ (Thornton et al 2012: 155). As discussed at the outset of this paper, we know that public value theory is intrinsic to understanding NCC’s response to austerity (Ferry et al. 2019). Despite the centrality of austerity as a driver for transformation, the organisation’s commitment to public value also manifests in a set of core values which served as guiding principles, mobilising change in a particular direction and in many ways setting parameters for material action by the project team. Moreover, these principles created a concrete narrative that gave meaning to the team’s mission and a form of meaningful reference that gave tangible meaning and expression to what they were trying to achieve, and why. In formulating the project team’s mission, the Council laid out key values which were to guide any decision on the governance model. These included:

- (i) The Council should remain the *public* owner of the city’s parks and allotments.

- (ii) There should be no charge to access parks, though charging for some facilities and events was identified as an area of income growth;
- (iii) NCC's commitment to the '*One City*' principle. This is a commitment to ensuring that everyone has equal access to parks and that parks are resourced in a fair and equal way. This ruled out proposals that focused on particular parks;
- (iv) Parks should provide people with spaces and facilities that will benefit their *health and wellbeing*;
- (v) Related to this, parks should be places of safety and maintained to an appropriate standard; and, finally,
- (vi) All groups connected to parks and allotments should be involved in the development of new models for the delivery of this service.<sup>vi</sup>

According to our interviewees, the principles were fundamental for structuring the process that led to the establishment of the of UGN, and they appeared to both reflect and align with the project team's commitments (Interviewees # 2, 3, 4, 5, 7). According to many, austerity brought to the fore the realization that the local authority was risking public failure in the management of parks and green spaces by keeping the status quo and some interviews conveyed the sense of responsibility they had to address this:

'[I]t was clear to us that if the parks stayed with the council they would be subject to further cuts and they were getting to the point where they were perhaps not sustainable and the worry was that we wouldn't be able to maintain them, they would fall into greater disrepair that might involve antisocial behaviour and the parks might become no-go areas, and that was something that we really wanted to avoid, so we knew we couldn't leave it as it was.' (Interviewee # 7).

"If I'm brutally honest, I think things in the past have been done so badly that the only way is up. Things like income generation and events, that was just non-existent, really. (Int #2)

Within the project team, attention to due diligence, for example, legal research on park boundaries and assessments of maintenance gaps, was combined with an openness to learn and to seek advice, including from external stakeholders (Interviewees #1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). NCC collaborated with the National Trust, who sought to coordinate an exploration of alternative solutions together with two other cities, Sheffield and Manchester. NCC also partnered with a not-for-profit organisation, Social Finance, who were tasked with advising on alternative financial and governance models for the City's parks (Crivellaro et al, 2019).<sup>ii</sup> From this initial period of research and collaboration with external partners, it was concluded early in the project that local authorities can retain the ownership of parks, but that assets should be transferred (via the Community Asset Transfer Regulation) to a new entity, a proposed charitable parks trust that is independent of the local authority (Int #1, #2, Crivellaro et al, 2019: 6). With an awareness of the breadth of the challenge, the impetus was to identify the potential for innovative and creative ideas to fulfil the task that had been set:

‘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... creatively and start looking at ... Well, let’s talk to other people. Let’s start investigating how we could do this.’ (Interviewee #3).

From the outset, market logics and public value logics anchored the project’s team’s task, but simultaneously created the potential for a repertoire of behaviours and values that would pull the project in different, conflicting directions. In proposing a charitable parks trust, the Parks team answered a functional imperative to find a solution that would allow the financial sustainability of parks as well as a normative imperative that parks remain accessible and public in character. This was underpinned by strategies of institutional bricolage that involved the development of proposals to redesign and repurpose the management and governance of parks and allotments. However, the presence of other logics, a political logic and public deliberation logic further shaped the need for similar boundary spanning strategies as the team worked with external partners to consult, convince and listen to the views of stakeholders about their proposals.

### ***Political/Democratic Institution Logic***

Fred (2020: 357) suggests that a political logic may be ‘change oriented’, as opposed to the steadfastness of a bureaucratic logic, for example. However, influenced by the timings of elections, it is also ‘a logic of conflicting entities in which different parties reflect different things’ (ibid.). Furthermore, we see the ‘logic of democratic institutions’ as intrinsic to values and beliefs in the salience of the local authority as a democratic body (Ferry et al 2019). This is complementary to, if not intertwined with the democratic deliberation logic. Both logics are manifest in similar, but yet subtly distinct ways in the repertoires of behaviours and actions of the project team.

The Project Team had to address councillors’ concerns that the proposed model would remove mechanisms of democratic control over green spaces and give responsibility to an autonomous non-democratic organisation (Interviewees #1, #4):

I think a big issue which 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. And 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? (Int #4).

As first step towards appeasing some of these concerns, the project team communicated regularly with elected representatives and employees through meetings and steering workshops (Interviewees #4, #5, #7). Engaging in persuasive argumentation through facts and forecasting, the Parks Team earned the backing of the Council’s executive and political leadership, but encountered resistance with the political opposition in the Council, the Liberal Democrats (and

some NCC staff). The project team faced political challenges to their proposal when it was presented to Cabinet in November 2017, which in accordance with Council procedures meant that they had to defend their proposals through an overview and scrutiny committee (Interviewee # 5). Although the concerns about a loss of democratic accountability of parks and allotments were taken seriously by the project team, this interviewee was rather sanguine about the significance of the political questioning of the Trust proposal:

“I think the political challenge was greater than the internal officer challenge and again, well, I don’t know what their motivations were, they could well have just been political, and you might find you could just speak to an opposition member and find they’re personally supportive of the project but as we’ve seen in politics that often the role of the opposition is just to challenge whatever’s been done.” (Interviewee 5)

Having resolved that an independent charitable trust presented a viable solution, but without a fully worked out business case was yet to be developed, NCC embarked on an engagement programme that sought the views of the public and other key stakeholders, but also particularly local councillors and staff in NCC, especially those from the Parks and Countryside Service:

“So we decided that we needed to go out and talk to the public before we quite knew what we wanted to do.[...] we decided that we had to get the proper messages out and engage people in the debate if we were to have any success. [...] We’d always been very open about this [charitable trust] was something we were going to look at. [...] We went out to say what we were thinking of doing and why, the sort of model we were looking at, which would be a charitable trust. But if it were a charitable trust, what should its articles of association be? What are the things that it should hold safe and dear? Who should be involved? ” (Int #4)

The team used consultation and deliberation as a strategy to address the concerns of council employees and democratic representatives. Initial consultations began in autumn 2015 when NCC embarked on a collaboration with Newcastle University’s, Open Lab, a multi-disciplinary centre that utilises ‘human-computer interaction’ (HCI) designs to develop tools and processes that aim to facilitate connections between communities and institutions.<sup>iii</sup> This collaboration marked the start of a three-phased series of stakeholder engagements developed and run by Open Lab. Phase one, entailed Open Lab running a series of early engagements over three months with park’s communities in order to develop relationships and improve understanding of the parks service (Crivellaro et al 2019: 6-15:7). This included “site visits to several parks, shadowing park rangers and parks volunteers, interviews with park managers and council officers, and attending meetings of the Parks Forum - a group of volunteers’ representatives from across the City’s parks” (Crivellaro et al 2019, 15:7). This highlighted uncertainties faced by parks staff, volunteers and communities about the future, and the need for more focused dialogue between these groups and the Parks Team. The project team also faced scepticism from Council staff (Interviewees # 2, 6, 7). In particular, a core task for the project team was to assuage the concerns of staff who worked

in the parks and countryside service, for example, about their roles and financial issues such as pensions, and to help them to see opportunities in the creation the new model for managing parks:

‘A big element of reassurance is TUPE, so same terms and conditions, same pension, that sort of stuff. And it was about ... that it brought more opportunity. As the thinking developed and we built a financial model and we were able to think about the sort of things that could happen and that they would be more empowered because they would be a small team in a small organisation and not subject to all the rules and regulations and hierarchy of a very large authority.’ (Interviewee # 4).

Open Lab used dialogue-focused events, and participatory games to open-up spaces for participants to articulate and deliberate on values, concerns and ideas associated with the scenarios and reflect on the resources needed to take action (Crivellaro et al, 2019:8). Phase two of Open Lab’s engagement programme built on the experiences of phase one and was set to focus on the Parks Team’s ongoing work on the transformation of parks. In doing so, Open Lab collaborated with Social Finance. As Crivellaro et al describe (2019: 15;9) a new set of game scenarios, based on Social Finance’s ideas of potential income generating sources for the Parks Trust, were developed under the following themes: “business and community engagements, capital projects, environment, events, food, infrastructure, fundraising activities, and health”. As Crivellaro et al (2019: 15;9) describe, two events were run; one with 18 participants comprising of representatives from other local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, public health experts, parks volunteers, rangers and park managers. The other entailed 20 participants, including politicians, park rangers, parks managers and members of the Parks Team (Crivellaro et al, 2019:9). However, it was the final phase of Open Lab’s programme that saw the broadest consultation about the future of the city’s parks and allotments.

### **Democratic Deliberation Logic**

As discussed above, the consultation programme was part of a strategy that the project team adopted as part of a need to seek stakeholders’ responses and views on their proposals to address the problems that beset parks and allotments. In addition to a political logic, this choice of strategy manifests a democratic deliberation logic that aligns with NCC’s overarching commitment to a public value strategy. Ferry at al (2019: 100) note: ‘At the heart of public value lies a deliberative process because it is what the public values and what adds value to the public sphere.’ The process realized this principle: public support was necessary and as part of the actions and values that were intrinsic to the team, support from the public had to be negotiated. The intention was that the public could truly have an influence over the course of the process. However, it meant that, at times, the project team struggled to explain the still unfinished proposal for transformation. Moreover, the challenge was to explain that the consultation was not a “Question and Answer” session, but a chance to co-create and contribute ideas. One respondent who does not work for NCC observed:

‘I think they struggled really early on with engaging local communities but without telling them too much and, if you like, driving people’s ideas in a particular direction, being really open and

that was a challenge and I don't know how you get around that, I know that was something [a staff member] was quite concerned about at the start. [...] I think as the model became more defined, I think it was easier for people to get involved and actually come up with really good comments back, but at the early stages it was really difficult for them.' (Interviewee # 8).

Notwithstanding, the need to consult and engage broadly came from the Project Team's belief that to succeed, the initial proposal for a charitable trust had to acquire stakeholder buy-in across different groups of people (Int #1, #2, #4, #5,#6, #7, #8):

“We developed probably the largest stakeholder list in history.[...] There was a massive, massive spreadsheet. The organisation on that, I haven't even heard of. It was almost like having a family wedding but being afraid to miss anybody out in case you got it in the neck.[...] It wasn't just a case of us trying to identify absolutely everybody and anybody; it was about using our networks and strategic partners so that they could reach out, as well, and make them aware that there was this huge programme of engagement going on. And then give them the option if they wanted to contribute, as well. I can't remember how many events we had across the city. We were very keen to have them dotted across the city to make sure that everybody had a chance to get to those.” (Interview #2)

“It was a massive consultation process for which the city benefited I think because they really went out there and talked to people and listened to people and got feedback.” (Int #1)

Phase three of Open Lab's engagement programme was city-wide (13th February 2017 to 23rd April 2017) and involved giving different stakeholders, including residents, the opportunity to reflect and discuss the project team's ideas and the proposal to create a Parks Trust (now UGN) to look after parks and allotments. This was run alongside NCC's own public consultation activities that were needed for NCC to fulfil its legal duties relating to public consultations (Crivellaro et al, 2019, p15:7). Stakeholders included residents in the city, as well as other organised interest groups such as the 'Friends of the Park' and allotment associations. The engagement programme involved inviting people to have their say through: Let's Talk Newcastle, a webpage that offered a way for stakeholders to have a say and take part in Newcastle City Council's consultations online; drop-in sessions; writing letters and emails; and sessions held with stakeholders such as the Friends of Groups, the Elders Council, Disability North etc.

A need for further consultation with the public was identified and entailed a series of engagements, including: Let's Talk Parks, in which a series of workshops were run involving a further iteration of the Parks scenarios-based board game; four hour-long twitter sessions in which different scenarios were explored and participants could vote for future Parks scenarios via live polling; and a Let's Talk Parks digital consultation platform which offered opportunities for people to contribute further responses and ideas to questions, themes and related scenarios, and was used a tool to collate and disseminate responses generated from the twitter hours and Lets Talk Parks' workshops (Crivellaro et al, 2019:11-12). In part, the challenge of convincing people about the merits of the proposed model to ensure the future governance and sustainability of the city's parks and allotments was rooted in different expectations that people have about the role(s) that parks



and open spaces should fulfill. As a city-wide exercise, the project team encountered different agendas and priorities:

“You’d have a tension between – a proper tension between people supporting countryside parks and people supporting town parks. In town parks, people wanted more facilities, in countryside parks, people wanted less so that it didn’t disturb the wildlife. It was managing all those different agendas.” (Int #4)

This interviewee (Interviewee #2) stressed the need for clarity about core messages about the goals and opportunities presented by the proposed model, particularly around contentious issues like using the parks for commercial events:

‘There are going to be potentially some things like that, in terms of income generation, that may not sit comfortably with a lot of people. But the message again, is about that money is used to maintain the parks but also to put on other community focused events as well – to subsidise those events, basically. Without that, then nothing would be possible, it’s those sacrifices sometimes you have to make.’ (Interviewee #2).

Once the consultation was concluded and the project team’s mandate fulfilled, a fully worked out proposal was presented to the NCC Cabinet on 20 Nov 2017. The final outcome of the process was a blending of the multiple logics into what we see is a blended hybrid form.

### **Entrepreneurial institutional bricolage: blending of logics in UGN**

On 20 November 2017, NCC Cabinet agreed to create a new charitable company (then referred to as Newcastle Parks and Allotments Trust, and now called UGN). The governance proposal that was presented to the Cabinet set out the constitution of what became UGN as a company limited by guarantee: it has charitable objectives and a trading company, which is limited by shares. The Cabinet also agreed to a set of processes and governance arrangements, which were required to meet the legal, fiduciary and human resource implications of the decision. In a formal sense, UGN is a charity and a company limited by guarantee, but the use of hybridisation as an analytical approach underlines how it amounts to the blending of logics. Skelcher and Rathgeb-Smith (2015: 445) suggest that blended hybrids are more likely to be associated with environmental turbulence since these ‘offer space for creative and innovative responses...drawing on different aspects of plural institutional logics’. The blending of different logics inevitably however, involved trade-offs: market logics blends with public deliberation and political logics; public value remains in tact, but as one interviewee suggests, a new vision for parks has emerged as a result of the process.

Austerity was the principal driver for the creation of the project team and their mission, but market logics are not the principal drivers of UGN. As a charitable body registered with the Charitable Commission for England and Wales, UGN serves public purposes and the public good, yet this is blended with market-like claims that the new structure has made the management of parks more efficient:

“The irony is that they’re [services] being better run, much better run by an independent charity. The costs are much lower because we are on it, because we understand what the costs are and in a

huge local authority if somebody doesn't cut the grass who cares? But actually if they don't cut the grass in Leazes Park they get a phone call by lunchtime and there's a service level agreement that will fail if they don't do what they said they were going to do. (Interviewee #1)."

Furthermore, the interviewees felt that features of UGN's governance structure, namely the membership of councillors on the board of trustees and the creation of forums for community representation and input were effective solutions to the issues of public accountability encapsulated in the negotiation of political and democratic deliberation logics. Notwithstanding, one interviewee believed that to save the parks, the creation of the trust would mean a setback in terms of "traditional" representative democratic accountability. However, the respondent thought that a trade-off had to be made between democratic accountability and the delivery of a good quality service. (Interviewee 7):

"[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 governance structure..." (Interviewee #7).

The Project Team argued that independence from NCC guarantees freedom from local government regulations and avoids political influence and budgetary cuts. The proposed model also provided opportunities to access new sources of funding which are otherwise unavailable to local authorities, and has the potential to spur creativity. Overall, the chosen model was perceived to overcome the constraints imposed by other options, such as the foundation model, which provides greater opportunities for income generation, but less chances for creativity, or the local authority trading company model, which would subject the trust to the same financial constraints as local authorities. Several advantages retaining the publicness of parks were therefore possible all the while allowing for commercial streams of income, which, according to one interviewee, has changed the ways in which the purposes and functions of parks are perceived:

"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 open 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. And I think that's where the innovation comes in and that's where the creativity comes in, which up until now it's just been pretty blunt." (#Int 2)

In analysing the creation of UGN, we have identified a range of logics at play in the process leading up to its establishment. The principles values that are intrinsic to co-existing logics have shaped and, many have been embedded in, the stated aims, ethos and governance of UGN (see table 3 below). UGN can be seen as, what Skelcher and Rathgeb Smith suggest (2015: 439) a 'carrier of multiple institutional logics' and as such is a hybrid organisation. Core values, beliefs and practices can be identified that map onto elements of market, public value, political, public deliberation logics. Thus a key contribution of this article is the focus on hybridisation as process that enables a nuanced understanding of how logics manifest in the behaviours, actions and values of individuals tasked with finding creative, multi-faceted solutions to complex problems. In this regard, it also makes a substantial novel contribution to debates about the future sustainability of parks and allotments, showing how local authorities are responding and, significantly, how this can be theorised as part of wider analyses of the politics of austerity and local governance.

Finally, we see key lessons for policymakers and other local authorities. Firstly, the articulation of a clear set of values by the Council in relation to the future model for the management of the parks underpinned the exercise. The values included the requirement for access to all parks to be free and that all groups connected with parks and allotments should be involved in the development of new models for the delivery of this service. A second crucial element was the dedicating of sufficient staff capacity within the Council to drive and lead the process of developing the new approach. These public managers operated as collaborative leaders, working in and across different environments with different stakeholders – attributes recognisable in a collaborative leadership model. An extensive and open programme of public consultation was undertaken, and meetings held with key stakeholders such as Friends of the Parks groups. A significant financial commitment of the Council in terms of initial funding for UGN made the new arrangements viable. Finally, the design of the governance arrangements for the new trust, explicitly separate from the council, was important in establishing the independence of UGN.

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<sup>i</sup> [Urban Green Newcastle - 1182534 \(charitycommission.gov.uk\)](https://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/Urban-Green-Newcastle-1182534) Urban Green Newcastle was previously known as the Newcastle Parks and Allotments Trust until 29 Jan 2019, and prior to this as the Newcastle Parks and Allotments Trust until 5 Dec 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Social Finance Limited (27 October 2017) NCC Park Trust Model guide. London: Social Finance. <https://democracy.newcastle.gov.uk/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?IId=91685&Opt=0>

<sup>iii</sup> [Home | Open Lab \(ncl.ac.uk\)](https://www.ncl.ac.uk)