Parks: 'Our Natural Health Service'

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Dr Manon Antoniazzi, Chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund in Wales, introduces some new research which makes worrying reading for anyone interested in the state of Welsh parks.

Parks and green spaces are for everybody. The Heritage Lottery Fund's (HLF) Parks for People scheme, which has invested millions of pounds into restoring and improving green spaces all over the UK, has touched almost every local authority area in Wales.

Thanks to the dedication, vision and energy from local communities and park users, there have been some huge changes to restore parks that were neglected or run-down. Since 1994, HLF have invested £33.85 million to 38 parks in Wales. Soaring visitor numbers suggest the investment has paid off in spades.

We are proud at HLF that two decades of public and National Lottery investment has ensured that the majority of UK parks are in a better condition.

Public parks play an important part in the social and environmental infrastructure of communities, making neighbourhoods more attractive, healthy and enjoyable places to live. Over the long term they underpin the character and identity of neighbourhoods, protecting and increasing the value of land and property, supporting tourism and making places more attractive for businesses to locate and invest.
Parks are highly valued, precious places that are vital to our physical and emotional well-being. Think of Cardiff without Bute Park, Neath without Victoria Gardens or Wrexham without Bellevue Park, and you would get a very different town indeed.

Socially, they offer opportunities to rest and relax and meet friends, for children and young people to play, to hold events, to pass through on the way to work, to exercise and take time out from the pressures of everyday life.

Our recent report 'The State of UK Public Parks 2014: Renaissance to risk?' outlines that, unless future funding is generated in new ways, parks are at serious risk of rapid decline and even being sold off and lost to the public forever. Across the United Kingdom, 34million people are estimated to make regular visits parks and of these 68% consider spending time in their local park as important or essential to their quality of life. This rises to 71% in urban areas and 81% for those with children under 10 – the very same groups of people that often rank highly amongst the socially excluded.

It is the first report ever to comprehensively review the condition and management of the UK's public parks, and it makes worrying reading for park lovers throughout the United Kingdom, not least in Wales.
Local authorities have no statutory requirement to fund and maintain parks. Thus at a time of spending reductions,

parks are vulnerable. What's more, at a time when funding is being reduced, demand for using parks is increasing.

The newly formed Parks Alliance, which has been created as a voice of UK parks, believes the report "provides the evidence to back up the experience of park staff and volunteers on the ground that the parks we know, love and use are close to crisis point."

HLF realises these are financially tough times. We do not dispute tough decisions have to be made. Yet we also believe that we cannot afford to lose parks without considering the consequences. That is why we need collaborative action and a fresh approach to halt this threat of decline and stop this cycle of boom and bust.

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The report sets out in stark terms why people are worried:
• 86% of park managers report cuts to revenue budgets since 2010, a trend they expect to continue over the next three years. The report suggests this could mean: park facilities such as cafes and toilets are closed or opening hours reduced; grass left uncut, flower beds left empty, play areas less regularly cleaned and inspected, and more anti-social behaviour due to less park staff. Wales was one of the areas reporting the largest proportion of park managers who reported that their parks have been declining in condition.
• 45% of local authorities are considering both selling parks and green spaces or transferring their management to others. This could mean the loss of some parks, parts of parks and other green spaces; or the management of parks being divided between different organisations, community groups being asked to take on larger parks and needing support to do so effectively.
• 81% of council parks departments have lost skilled management staff since 2010 and 77% have lost front-line staff, though it is worth noting that Wales' cuts in this respect compare favourably with most other parts of the United Kingdom including regions of England.

Bellevue Park, Wrexham
Bellevue Park in Wrexham has seen a new lease of life in recent years. Having fallen into a state of disrepair and dereliction during the 1970s, the Edwardian park, once a green space for families at the turn of the 20th Century, became a place where "people were afraid to visit", according to Friends of Bellevue organiser, Barbara Jones. However, following a £400,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the park has taken its place at the heart of the local community once again.

"The funding we received to restore Bellevue Park has made an immeasurable difference; the whole park has had a makeover!" says Barbara, which is reflected in the significant increase in activities and events that are held in the park regularly. The thriving Bowling and Tennis clubs have gone from strength to strength in recent years with local school children and club members visiting weekly. Both the tennis courts and bowling green as well as the football pitch, basketball court and children's play areas have all been revived from their previous unkempt state.

At the centre of Bellevue Park lies the natural, landscaped amphitheatre which is still home to one of the Park's original Edwardian features; the bandstand. Built in 1914, the bandstand was used for Sunday brass band concerts in days gone by and restoration efforts to this historic feature means that free summer music events, organised by Friends of Bellevue, continue to keep this historic park alive. As Barbara states, "It really has made such a difference."

Bute Park, Cardiff

Named in 1948 in honour of the 5th Marquess of Bute, Bute Park lies at the heart of Cardiff and was originally gifted to the people of Cardiff to enjoy this 56 hectares of open space, including Cardiff Castle and its grounds. With around 2million visits each year, maintaining and ensuring the upkeep of this haven in the centre of the Wales capital city is a difficult task. However, with the £3.1m Heritage Lottery Fund grant awarded in 2008, important restoration works have been undertaken as part of a major £5.6m Bute Park Restoration Project.

Part of the work has included restoring the unique Animal Wall which lines the park's boundary. Before the restoration project began, the wall had deteriorated badly but since 2010, it's been given a new lease of life, with the stone work cleaned, repaired and restored to its former splendour. New facilities have been provided and notable buildings throughout the grounds have been revived as part of the project, including West Lodge, now home to Pettigrew Tearooms, and Blackfriars Friary, a scheduled ancient monument dating back to the 12th century.

Equally as recognisable for its Arboretum as its buildings, Bute Park's natural heritage have also been brought back to life to ensure their protection for the future. Cabinet Member for Environment, Councillor Bob Derbyshire said "Our park is extremely important to the community, giving them a place to enjoy a wealth of activities including walks, cycling, picnics, concerts, major cultural events and sports. People also like to find a quiet place to relax and enjoy the beautiful environment and interesting wildlife in the greenest part of the city. It is vital that Bute Park is protected for future generations and our HLF grant will help to ensure that this is the case."

Cyfarthfa Park, Merthyr Tydfil

Referred to as the "Jewel in Merthyr's Crown", Grade II* listed Cyfarthfa Park has been a constant feature in Merthyr's fascinating history, providing a backdrop to the Cyfarthfa Castle and home to what remains of the 19th Century estate built by William Crawshay II, known as the "Iron King". The Crawshay family were owners of a vast ironworks empire, including the Ironworks in Merthyr Tydfil and the estate was built so they could overlook the family's business and the park continues to provide an extremely important connection between Merthyr's industrial past and the present.

Lyndsey Handley, Cyfarthfa Heritage & Environment Project Manager said "The park was such a focal point of the industrial revolution and needs to be preserved for future generations so that they can understand the significance of this period in our local history on the area."

With around 550,000 visitors each year, the park requires continued care and protection to ensure that its unique industrial heritage and historic features are maintained and the £3.3million grant awarded to the park by HLF in 2012 is already making a difference. Importantly the sustainability of the park can now be developed with the park ranger able to host woodland and heritage walks around the park, using the many ponds and paths to explain the area's fascinating history. "The Castle Woods Ponds and Circulations Paths have just been completed and the response so far has been excellent!" says Lyndsey, noting that now restoration of tennis courts will commence along with reconstruction of the estate's derelict Icehouse and the creation of a new heritage centre.

According to Lyndsey, "Restoration and enhancement works undertaken in the park as a result of our grants will undoubtedly ensure the longevity of the park and preserve its important heritage for future generations."