

East of England's public parks under threat

Today, the Heritage Lottery Fund has published *State of UK Public Parks 2014: Renaissance to risk?* its first report to comprehensively review the condition and management of the UK's public parks. Two decades of public and Lottery investment has ensured that many parks across the East of England are in better condition, but unless future funding is generated in new ways, these parks are at serious risk of rapid decline.

Robyn Llewellyn, Head of HLF East of England, said: "The East of England has a proud tradition of public parks, enjoyed by thousands daily. Highly valued and precious places, they are vital to the physical and emotional well-being of all our local communities. Following decades of decline, Lottery funding has revitalised parks across the East of England but this reports shows that this investment is now at risk. We realise these are financially tough times and that is why we need collaborative action and a fresh approach to halt this threat of decline. Our parks are far too important not to act now."

Key findings for the East of England from the research:

Parks at risk
25 per cent of parks managers across the East of England expect a decline in the condition of local parks over the next three years as a result of average expected cuts to maintenance budgets of 11 per cent.

Trends towards greater community engagement
62 per cent of park managers report an increase of membership to friends groups in the East of England's parks over the last three years.

Protecting £40.3million Lottery investment in the East of England
Parks across the East of England have enjoyed a twenty year renaissance as a result, in part, of £40.3m of Lottery investment. However, local authorities have no statutory requirement to fund and maintain them. Neither is there a national coordinating body able to champion the importance of parks, to assert their value to communities and the economy, and protect them for future generations to enjoy.

Next steps
In addition to calling for continued investment by local authorities, HLF's report highlights the need to develop new ways of looking after and funding parks. It highlights five key areas needing urgent joint action to ensure past investment is not wasted.

HLF pledges to:

- Continue to monitor and report on the public parks across the UK it has invested in
- Invest in innovative ideas for making parks financially sustainable, through the Lottery-funded Nesta Rethinking Parks programme
- Continue investing up to £24m each year across the UK through the Parks for People programme, with Big Lottery Fund providing an additional £10m per year in England until the end of 2015
  Commission and publish a second State of UK Public Parks report in 2016 to review progress

Finding new innovative ways to make the financing and management of parks sustainable is vital to ensuring their future. HLF and the Big Lottery Fund are working in partnership with the innovation charity Nesta on a Rethinking Parks programme. This is supporting organisations and partnerships to explore, test and scale new approaches to generating income for and managing parks. Shortly to be announced are grants totaling £1m that will enable a range of innovative park projects to be piloted. Full details will be announced in July 2014.

Rethinking Parks project

Endowing Parks for the 21st Century
National Trust
This project aims to develop and test ways to raise money for a ring-fenced endowment for public parks that could work in any city or town.The project will explore how to attract and secure funds for the endowment from sources not typically used by parks, including: public giving; corporate giving; local public sector funding, including health and wellbeing; and also investment in the 'eco' services that are provided by parks such as flood management and air quality. Through harnessing the huge value and wide range of benefits parks and green spaces give society, we hope to demonstrate the potential of endowments in securing the future for public parks for everyone.

Successful Lottery-funded park
Howard Park, Letchworth, is named after the social reformer Ebenezer Howard who was a major force behind its construction. It was opened in 1911 as part of the world's first garden city, fulfilling the ethos of a planned, self-contained community surrounded by green belts.

As part of the £1.84m Lottery-funded park restoration project, a statue of the Greek poet Sappho was placed at the heart of the renovated gardens. An original Sappho statue was stolen from the park in the 1990s. Further works undertaken included refurbishing the popular paddling pool, creating improved play areas and the building of a new kiosk providing refreshments and public conveniences.

Notes to editors

State of UK Public Parks 2014: Renaissance to risk?
To establish a national picture of the state of UK parks HLF commissioned three new UK-wide surveys: a survey of local authority park managers, a survey of park friends and user groups, and a public opinion survey undertaken by Ipsos MORI. The research has also drawn on other pre-existing data to assess how the condition of parks has changed over time, and to cross-check our results.

National picture key findings from the research:

Parks are under direct threat

- 86% of parks managers report cuts to revenue budgets since 2010, a trend they expect to continue over the next three years. 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
- 45% of local authorities are considering either selling parks and green spaces or transferring their management to others. This could mean: loss of some parks, parts of parks and other green spaces, 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

Parks are one of the most highly used public assets

- With 34m people estimated to make regular visits parks are one of the UK's most heavily used public services
- 68% of park users 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
- 70% of park managers have recorded increased visitor numbers to their principal parks over the last year

Trend towards greater community involvement

- In the past three years park managers have seen an increase of over 30% in the number of friends and park user groups and over half of expect this increase to continue
- 47% of park friends groups say membership numbers have increased over the last three years
- Community groups are playing an increasing role in championing and supporting parks - with an estimated £30m raised for parks annually by friends group

This announcement can be followed on Twitter #parksmatter

Responses to the report

National Trust
Harry Bowell, Regional Director at the National Trust, said: “We know people love being outdoors and some of their most treasured spaces to relax and play are those on their doorstep, their local parks and green spaces. This groundbreaking report from HLF is a wake-up call. The traditional model for funding public parks is breaking down and bold new ideas are needed. We want to help find solutions that could work in every city and town.

“Our new project, funded by Nesta, aims to harness the huge value and wide range of benefits that parks provide to demonstrate the potential of endowments in securing the future for public parks for everyone. There is a real prize out of this crisis to grow civic pride, connecting people to their local green spaces and giving communities more of a stake in shaping their future.

“We’re excited by the project and look forward to working with our partners in Sheffield and Manchester. Although this project is not about the National Trust owning public parks, it does go right back to the roots of the National Trust and campaigns by our founders to save urban green spaces in London.”

RSPB
Dr ?Mike Clarke, RSPB CEO, said: “Parks are living links in our networks of green spaces which are so important for nature in our towns and cities. And they are where we can get close to wildlife near home and every day – important for adults, eye-opening for children. And we know from research that a connection to nature benefits children in education, health and social skills. Imaginatively managed parks can help species like house sparrow which have suffered dramatic population declines. At their best, our parks can become home for wildlife and great places for people to enjoy bees, birds, butterflies and much more.” ?

Nesta
Lydia Ragoonanan, Rethinking Parks programme manager at Nesta, said: "Heritage Lottery Fund's report is very welcome and shines a light on the huge challenges facing our parks. We're excited to be supporting potential solutions to these challenges through the Rethinking Parks programme which will help parks to develop, test and share new ways to manage their parks. From membership schemes to pop-up meeting spaces and new horticultural techniques, we want to see if these ideas could help sustain our precious parks long into the future."

The Wildlife Trusts
Stephanie Hilborne OBE, Chief Executive of The Wildlife Trusts, said: “Wildlife Trusts have been involved in park management all over the UK for many years and played a key role in securing the beautiful long grass and meadows now present in many parks. Parks are an important part of our Living Landscape. Given we are using our land so hard in rural areas for agriculture, parks can also be genuine wildlife hotspots and of course a vital place for people to reconnect with nature and learn more about it. Being closer to nature enhances our lives. Our work adds to a growing body of evidence of nature’s benefit to our mental and physical health and wellbeing. In an urban culture parks are critical as our lungs and our spiritual nourishment. All the more when they are wildlife-rich.”

Greenspace Scotland

Julie Procter, Chief Executive, Greenspace Scotland said: “The State of UK Parks report is a clear alarm call for parks in Scotland and the UK. With the pressures on Council budgets, difficult decisions on priorities have to be taken. This report should give us all cause to reflect on whether the right decisions are being made. What may have seemed relatively easy, low impact cost-savings on parks and greenspaces could have disproportionately negative and far-reaching impacts on our quality of life, our health and prosperity. We hope this report will be a timely wake-up call and provide an opportunity to look afresh at how our amazing park assets can be managed sustainably in partnership with councils, local communities and businesses. We call on the Scottish Government, local authorities, the voluntary sector, businesses and the public to heed this early warning and respond to the HLF’s call for urgent action.”

4 Children

4Children Chief Executive Anne Longfield OBE said: “Parents tell us that parks make a real difference to family life. Green, open spaces are places where parents and their children can spend some quality time together outside and enjoy the different seasons. Parks are not just somewhere to play; they make communities great places to live in. Parks are especially important for families in poor housing without outdoor space or gardens and it is essential that parks are maintained and flourish – especially in more disadvantaged areas.”

Groundwork UK

Graham Duxbury, Groundwork CEO, said: "Whether it’s a garden for quiet reflection, a place to get closer to nature or simply somewhere to kick a football about, green spaces play a vital role in our communities. They're places to treasure and we need to mobilise the public, private businesses and politicians to protect and improve them. When you have less money what you need more of is ideas. We now think it's urgent that all those with an interest and passion in our parks and green spaces to collaborate to develop new ways of working and funding this vital public service."

National Fed of Parks and Green Spaces

Sarah Royal and Dave Morris, National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces: “This report on the alarming long-term crisis being caused by the underfunding of the UK's parks, so vital to every local community, is a shocking wake-up call which clearly necessitates immediate and effective national action.

“The inspirational rise of the Friends Groups movement over the last 15 years has demonstrated the commitment of the public. We are now demanding an equivalent commitment from the Government to ensure adequate public resources for all green spaces, a statutory duty to manage these spaces to decent (Green Flag Awards) standards, and a national inquiry into these matters.”

Parks Alliance

Camley, Chairman of The Parks Alliance, the newly formed voice of UK parks, which brings together for the first time people and organisations that create, maintain, invest in and use the public green spaces, said: "This timely 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. The Parks Alliance is keen to work with the Government now to halt the potentially disastrous decline in the green spaces, that are at the heart of British life and culture. Together with the people that create, maintain and use parks, national and local government has a duty to protect and improve the country's public green spaces for future generations."

Keep Britain Tidy

Phil Barton, Keep Britain Tidy’s chief executive, said: “Keep Britain Tidy welcomes this report as we believe everyone has the right to live close to a quality park. We know how important having skilled staff on site is to delivering this and

ensuring our parks thrive and benefit the community. This is not something that can be achieved without the support of all those people who use, and care about, our parks. We encourage communities to engage with us and the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces in our Love Parks programme and fight for every park to be well funded and managed to the Green Flag Award standard."

Big Lottery Fund
Peter Ainsworth, Chair of the Big Lottery Fund, said: "This report highlights the importance of protecting and investing in our parks now and for the future. Our parks are essential to the health and wellbeing of our communities.

"That's why our Rethinking Parks partnership with HLF and Nesta is important. This investment aims to help ensure a sustainable future for our parks by supporting a range of projects that will take fresh approaches to the way they are managed. We look forward to seeing these park projects put their creative ideas into action in the coming months."

HLF and the Big Lottery Fund currently run a targeted parks programme, Parks for People. The programme uses Lottery funds to support the regeneration, conservation and increased enjoyment of public parks and cemeteries. In England the two Lottery Funds have been working in partnership from 2006 to deliver a multi-million pound investment in public parks of £150m.

Rethinking Parks
A joint Nesta, Heritage Lottery Fund and Big Lottery Fund £1m programme to fund and support parks innovators to develop, implement and spread new approaches to sustaining and making the most of UK public parks. Nesta is the UK's innovation foundation. Further infomation can be found at the Nesta website.

Further information

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State of UK Public Parks 2014