- Parks are more popular than ever after £850million of National Lottery investment
- Park use is rising while resources and skills available to manage them are declining
- Downward trend in condition of parks - predicted in HLF's 2014 report - set to continue
- Commercially driven approaches to income generation are increasing and new management models are showing encouraging results
- Careful management, better national and local partnership working and investment in new skills needed to build expertise at a time when resources are limited

Today, HLF has published State of UK Public Parks 2016, its second report to comprehensively review the condition and management of the UK's public parks.

An investment of over £850m of National Lottery money has played a vital role in ensuring more than 800 of the UK's public parks are in better condition, with improved facilities and renovated historic features. However, with park managers reporting an expectation of further budget cuts, the benefits of this investment could be lost as the risk of decline and potential facility closures continues to grow.

The report also outlines the continuing need to develop innovative mixed model approaches to funding parks, such as local authority commitment, commercial opportunities and fundraising, to avoid the risk of rapid decline.

Ros Kerslake, HLF Chief Executive, said: “Put simply, parks are not a luxury. They are essential to our increasingly busy urban lives and thanks to National Lottery players they’ve never been in such great shape. But these are financially tough times and if we are to successfully halt the onset of decline in our parks and avoid wasting this investment, we need to come together now to find innovative and sustainable models of funding and maintaining these highly valued community spaces.”

Key findings from the research*

Parks are valued by the communities that use them...

- £50m - estimated to be raised by park friends groups each year (up £20m from 2014)
- 57% - of adults use their parks at least once a month (up 3% from 2014)
- 5,900 - estimated number of park friends and user groups across UK (up 1,100 from 2014)
- 90% - of households with children under five visit their local park at least once a month (up 7% from 2014)
- 70m - estimated value of volunteering hours given by park friends and user groups each year (up £30m from 2014)

… but their future may not be so bright

- 92% - of park managers report cuts to their revenue budget over the past three years (up 6% from 2014)
- 95% - of park managers expect their revenue budget to be cut over the next three years (up 8% from 2014)
- 27% - of park managers report their parks to have been improving over the past three years (down 14% from 2014)
- 53% - of park managers report their parks to be in a good condition (down 7% from 2014)

Park management will be more varied in the future

- 50% - of park managers report having sold parks and green spaces or transferred their management to others over the past three years. This is expected to increase to 59% of local authorities over the next three years
- 50% of local authorities have transferred outdoor sports facilities to community groups over the last three years
- having exhausted most opportunities to make savings and efficiencies, councils are increasingly turning to raising income in other ways
- 22.5% - of funding for parks comes from external sources and this is expected to increase to almost a third, 29%, in the next three years
- 59% - of the public supported more commercial use of parks (such as through ticketed events and fairs)

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, Chair of ukactive, said: “Our parks are an integral part of our lives, places where we relax, play, and exercise. They are fundamentally important to our long-term physical and mental wellbeing, and support cohesion within communities. As Chair of ukactive I know the importance of parks to keeping our communities physically active, and see programmes such as ParkLives and Green Gym driving park use and supporting investment. Such assets need to be protected and prioritised, not threatened with decay and closure. This important report will stimulate an essential debate on the future of parks, including the key partnerships – both public and private – required for the future.”

What needs to happen now?

HLF and Big Lottery Fund will continue to fund capital improvements to historic parks and support innovation, particularly around new models of finance and management.

Continued local authority leadership is needed. As owners of most public parks and green spaces, local authorities have a pivotal role in ensuring the continued provision of quality parks – the research shows this really makes a difference.

Active partnerships need to be promoted. With the increasing diversity of organisations responsible for managing parks, greater collaboration and coordination is needed between local partners to share funding and expertise to maximise the efficient use of limited resources.

Communities need to be supported to play a more active role. Communities already play an important part in supporting their local parks and green spaces and this is expected to increase. For those groups that are keen to do more, additional support and assistance should be given to make the most of their contribution and ensure this collaboration is of mutual benefit.

New models of management and funding need to be developed. Innovation, adaptation and change are an integral part of successful organisations, including park services. The current climate provides the opportunity to experiment, test and refine new contemporary and possibly more cost-effective models of management and funding.

Data needs to be compiled, coordinated and updated. Robust data is at the heart of all good planning and decision making. While there have been some improvements in the collection of information, including the development of the long-awaited national green space map, many local authorities still have a limited understating of the detailed workings of their parks service.

Notes to editors

*State of UK Public Parks

State of UK Public Parks 2016 is HLF's second report to comprehensively establish the state of the UK's parks. It follows the publication of State of UK Public Parks 2014: renaissance to risk?

To establish a national picture of the state of UK parks, HLF commissioned three 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 Britain Thinks. 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. A fuller research report is available on www.hlf.org.uk/ParksMatter

This announcement can be followed on Twitter #parksmatter

Images and film available

Regional and Country releases available.

Responses to the report

Dave Morris, Chair, National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces

“Our public green spaces are treasured and essential resources for all sections of our communities, as underlined by the rise over the last 15 years of the inspirational movement of many thousands of local greenspace friends groups. Rather than accept the deepening underfunding crisis we call on the public to demand these vital spaces be well managed and secure for current and future generations."

Mark Camley, Chair, The Parks Alliance

“For over 150 years parks have been a well-loved part of the UK way of life – from picnics to sport to playing on the swings. The Heritage Lottery Fund has made a significant contribution to a number of parks by investing in their infrastructure but the future of parks is in doubt. We are at a tipping point and as this report shows, we need to act now if future generations are to enjoy them.”

Paul Farmer, Chief Executive, Mind

“Through Mind’s Ecominds programme and our current partnership with the Conservation Volunteers, Mind is committed to promoting the value of green space and the positive effect it can have on both mental and physical health. There is good evidence that interacting with nature and being in green spaces is instrumental in helping people manage their mental health and wellbeing.”

Stephanie Hilborne OBE, Chief Executive, The Wildlife Trusts

“If you live in a busy town or city, you know for sure how much parks matter. Contact with the natural world is a lifesaver in our frantic, pressured lives. The fresh air, the cool shade of the trees and the sights and sounds of wildlife inspire us to walk, to meet friends, to reflect and to relax.”

Dr Mike Clarke, Chief Executive, RSPB

“Nature conservation and the parks movement share deep roots. Well-managed public parks that give nature a home are an ideal place to have fun and learn about the natural environment. People’s disconnection from nature is a growing problem not just for our wildlife but for our own health and wellbeing. What better place to start putting more nature back in your life than your local park?”

A Focus on Nature, the UK’s youth nature network

“For a child or young person growing up in the concrete jungle, a healthy, biodiverse urban park is much more than just a great place for wildlife; it’s a classroom, an outdoor gym, a playground, a break from work and an oasis, bringing multiple benefits such as happiness, learning and discovery, self-esteem, confidence and exercise.”

Dame Helen Ghosh, Director-General, National Trust

"The NT was set up in the late 19th century to help protect green spaces for the enjoyment and health of urban dwellers. HLF’s report is a 21st century wake-up call to all who care about the benefits parks bring to communities. Together, we must develop innovative solutions to secure the future of parks, with the ambition and spirit that reflects

people’s passion for their local parks.

Rethinking Parks

In 2014, Nesta, HLF and Big Lottery Fund jointly launched a £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. More information can be found on the Nesta website.

HLF and Big Lottery Fund England currently run a targeted parks programme, Parks for People. The programme, which has run since 1996, uses National Lottery funds to support the regeneration, conservation and increased enjoyment of public parks and cemeteries. Since 2006 the programme has been jointly run with Big Lottery Fund and together over £290m has been invested in public parks across the UK. Find out more about how to apply on our Parks for People page.

Further information and images

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