



State of UK Public Parks 2014

Renaissance
to risk?





Renaissance to risk?

As a result of the philanthropy and vision of our Victorian forebears, the UK is fortunate to have some of the world's greatest public parks, which 34 million of us visit regularly each year. Some of our earliest childhood memories are of visits to a local park to feed the ducks, enjoy the playground or picnic with friends. For our increasingly urban population the park is often the only green space where people can meet, play, relax and come close to nature.

But all is not well with the UK's public parks. Most are owned and maintained by local authorities, and increasing competition for council funding means that many face an uncertain future.

Parks have always been a priority for the Heritage Lottery Fund. We first started to invest in them in 1996 and have awarded over £620million across the UK, with the Big Lottery Fund joining us to invest a further £80million in England. Our funding has been matched with time and money from councils and community groups, collectively delivering a renaissance in the fortune of many parks. But our research shows that this investment, as well as thousands of parks and green spaces, may now be at risk.

This study, based on new research, establishes a benchmark on the current condition of the UK's public parks whilst also looking at how the quality and nature of parks might change in the future. It makes suggestions for action and better ways of working, including commitments from us here at the Heritage Lottery Fund.

We care passionately that everyone should have access to good-quality and exciting parks. We want this report to inspire all those who own, manage and use public parks to appreciate their importance and the critical role they have in modern life. Parks are vital community assets, essential to the local economy, to public health and wellbeing, to tourism, to social cohesion and to nature. We must keep them in good heart.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Jenny Abramsky'.

Dame Jenny Abramsky
Chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund

The state of parks at a glance

The UK invented the municipal park movement, an enduring legacy of the industrial revolution that has been admired and imitated across the world. Every park has its own story, from Birkenhead Park in the Wirral, which opened in 1847 and provided the model for New York's Central Park, to the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, created for the London 2012 Games.

We greatly value our public parks but as a national resource they are not represented by any national body, nor is there any statutory requirement governing their upkeep.

Since 1996, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has led a parks renaissance through its investment, and has developed knowledge and expertise through the projects that have been funded. This research report is in part prompted by the need to protect and sustain this investment in over 700 individual public parks. In addition, we are also keen to support everyone who uses and manages parks right across the UK, to ensure that every community has access to and can enjoy a good-quality local public park.

Our research

To establish a national picture of the state of UK parks we 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. We have also drawn on other pre-existing data to assess how the condition of parks has changed over time, and to cross-check our results. Here we present the key findings. A fuller research report is available on www.hlf.org.uk/StateOfUKParks

Why we need to act now

After two decades of investment and improvement, the UK's parks are in a good state. However, they are at serious risk of slipping back into decline, as they did in the 1970s and 1980s. Without adequate maintenance, parks become underused, neglected and vandalised. Their immense social and environmental value is quickly eroded and they become a costly liability for those who manage them.

Our research shows that maintenance budgets are being reduced, capital will be less available for improvements, park facilities are becoming more expensive to use, management and maintenance skills are being lost, and some parks and green spaces may be sold or transferred to others to maintain.

However we know that people care passionately about their parks. We know that good parks are vital for our health and wellbeing, they support economic growth and tourism, and they play a significant part in addressing climate change in our cities.

At the end of this report you will find five key areas for action. For each we set out how HLF is intending to respond but we also call on others to work collaboratively to address this emerging risk. Our calls to action include:

- renewed local authority commitment;
- establishing new partnerships;
- getting communities more involved;
- collecting and sharing data; and
- developing new finance models and rethinking delivery.

Together we can avert this return to the past, but it will require the concerted effort of all those who use, own, manage, work in or have an interest in parks. We must also develop new ways of working, raise awareness of the hugely important role parks have, and continue to invest in their future.

2.6bn

estimated visits are made to the UK's parks each year

£30m

estimated to be raised each year by park friends and user groups

83%

of households with children aged five and under visit their local park at least once a month

70%

of park managers have recorded increased visitor numbers to their principal parks over the last year

Parks are valued and in good heart...

47%

of park friends and user groups say membership numbers have increased over the last three years

Key findings

We predict that the quality and condition of many parks will dramatically decline if action is not taken now to address this emerging risk.

86%

of park managers report cuts to revenue budgets since 2010 and they expect the trend to continue for the next three years

...but the future may not be so bright

71%

of households with children under 10 are concerned that reductions in council budgets could have a negative impact on the condition of their local park

81%

of council parks departments have lost skilled management staff since 2010, and 77% have lost front-line staff.

45%

of local authorities are considering either selling parks and green spaces or transferring their management to others

Park managers report higher visitor satisfaction, but many people are concerned budget cuts could have a negative impact on their local park.



What we found

About this report

We commissioned three new surveys for this report:

- a survey of local authority park managers;
- a survey of park friends and user groups; and
- a public opinion survey from Ipsos MORI.

CFP Consultants undertook an online survey of park managers. This targeted all local authorities in Great Britain and Northern Ireland alongside trusts which manage green space. The survey ran from 29 August to 8 October 2013.

A total of 178 local authorities completed the survey, representing 41% of UK local authorities, along with six responses from other organisations. These authorities collectively manage parks and green spaces for more than 31 million people, almost half the UK population.

CFP also undertook an online survey of park friends and user groups, to which 436 groups responded, representing a membership of 27,802 people. The survey was conducted between

29 August and 27 September 2013. It was promoted by CFP, regional forums, the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, and Greenspace Scotland.

Ipsos MORI surveyed a representative sample of 1,037 adults aged 15 and over living in the UK. The survey ran between 11 and 17 October 2013. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in-home using the Ipsos MORI Capibus. Data has been weighted to the known population profile for the UK.

The changing condition of parks

Our surveys show that the condition of parks across the UK has improved significantly since 2001. However this picture is about to change.

We found that 59% of park managers, as well as 50% of friends groups and the park-going public, considered their parks to be in good condition. In 2001 only 18% of park managers considered their parks to be in good condition. The improvement in parks is reflected in the number of Green Flag Awards (the voluntary, nationally recognised quality accreditation scheme for parks and green spaces). In 2001 Green Flags were awarded to only 81 parks in England. By 2010 this had risen to 905, and by 2013 there were 1,116 awards.

We also recorded increases in visitor satisfaction and numbers. 50% of managers said that visitor satisfaction had increased over the last three years, and 47% reported that visitor numbers had risen over the last year. For principal parks (the main parks a council manages) 70% of park managers said that visitor numbers had risen over the last year.

Turning to the condition of parks over the coming three years, we found that only 21% of managers and 32% of friends groups

anticipate that their parks will still be improving, while 37% of managers and 34% of friends groups anticipate that their parks will be declining.

Evidence suggests that the renaissance of our public parks that has been underway for the past 15 years is fast coming to an end. Our Ipsos MORI survey found that 63% of the park-going public are either 'fairly concerned' or 'very concerned' that reduced council budgets could have a negative impact on the condition of their local park. This level of concern increases to 74% for those who also say that their local park is currently in poor condition. And 71% of households with children under 10 are concerned that reductions in council budgets could have a negative impact on the condition of their local park.

“Parks and open spaces have been an easy hit for council savings. The provision and maintenance of open space is not a statutory requirement.”

Park manager

Pressure on budgets

The Audit Commission¹ reports that Government funding to local authorities reduced by an average of almost 20% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2013-14. Some of the poorest councils in the most deprived areas of England have experienced cumulative cuts that will average 25% by 2016². Council budgets are expected to continue falling for the rest of the decade.

As parks are a non-statutory service, their budgets are highly vulnerable. We found that:

- | most parks budgets have been cut since 2010, many above the 20% average reported by the Audit Commission;
- | 86% of park managers report that revenue budgets for day-to-day maintenance have been cut;
- | over half of park managers report that capital budgets for investing in fabric and facilities, such as play areas, toilets and paths, have been cut.

This situation is likely to worsen. The Local Government Association³ warns that, for England, funding for services other than social care and waste disposal will drop by 46% by 2020. Our survey shows that over the next three years:

- | 87% of park managers expect further cuts to revenue budgets;
- | 63% of managers also face further cuts to capital budgets.

“Floral features removed, no budget for infrastructure maintenance. We have substantially increased park charges to compensate.”

Park manager

This decline in spending is potentially greater and more rapid than that faced by public parks in the 1970s and 1980s, a time of chronic decline in the state of the UK’s parks.

To give an example of the scale of cuts, Liverpool City Council’s parks department budget of £10million will be cut by 50% over the next three years⁴.

Unlike some cuts to services, such as closing a leisure centre or library, reductions in park maintenance may go unnoticed before a tipping point is reached. The reduction of management tasks such as grass cutting, weeding beds or repairing seats may initially result in few complaints, but eventually the build-up of neglect may lead to the abandonment of the park by the public. A spiral of decline quickly follows.

Those working in parks voice concern that by 2020 some local authority park services will no longer be viable. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation⁵ suggests that local government may cease to provide some services altogether, transferring responsibilities to other agencies, sectors and partnerships.

The cost to park users

Over the last three years most local authorities have increased charges for facilities in parks.

- | 83% of managers reported increasing fees for facilities such as sports pitches, car parks, allotments and the hire of grounds or buildings for private events;
- | 85% of managers intend to increase fees in the next three years.

While revenue generation needs to be part of the mixed economy that will support parks in future, charges need to be balanced against provision of accessible services to as wide a range of people as possible. The cost of hiring sports facilities is increasing at a time when there is urgent need to promote active lifestyles to tackle obesity and poor health.

Sale of parks and green spaces

A significant number of authorities are considering selling or transferring management of their parks and green spaces over the next three years.

- | 45% of local authorities are considering disposing of some green spaces;
- | 19% of local authorities specifically mentioned disposing of parks as opposed to other green spaces.



Buildings in parks are at risk of being sold, and parks decline where there is a lack of investment.



“Our park ranger service took a 50% cut – the rangers have gone from a team of 32 to 10 in the last three years.”

Park manager

Loss of staff and skills

The staffing of parks has fallen in line with the decline in funding over the last three years.

- | 77% of councils have reduced frontline parks staff; and
- | 81% of councils have cut park management staff.

The loss of park management staff means that local authorities will be much less able to support the work of community groups, promote innovation or assist the process of transferring or sharing management with local organisations and partners.

Evidence from Lottery-funded projects shows that volunteering plays a critical part in creating vibrant community parks. If, however, groups are not developed, trained and motivated by skilled staff, volunteer numbers quickly dwindle.

Regional inequalities

Our survey of park managers highlights that there are differences in the condition and funding of parks across the UK.

- | The largest proportion of good parks is in London and the East Midlands.
- | The largest proportion of parks reported to have improved over the last three years is in London and the East of England.
- | The largest proportion of parks declining is in Scotland, Wales and the North West of England.

In terms of funding and staffing, park managers in the North West of England are reporting the highest proportion of cuts to revenue over the last three years and are also expecting the highest cuts to both revenue and capital over the next three years. They also reported the highest loss of frontline and management staff over the last three years.

The North East and Yorkshire and the Humber expect high levels of budget cuts and staff loss over the next three years, but the limited number of survey returns from these particular regions precludes firm conclusions.

Our research suggests a proportionately higher level of budget cuts and staff losses in the north of England. Furthermore, the urban metropolitan and unitary authorities, where the use of parks is greatest, received a higher proportion of cuts and staff losses in the last three years. This trend is expected to continue.

The power of communities

Community groups have an increasing role in championing and supporting local parks. In the last three years:

- | managers have seen an increase of over 30% in the number of friends and user groups, and over half of managers expect this to continue;
- | 47% of groups have seen an increase in membership.

There are an estimated 5,000 friends groups or park user groups across the UK. Each group raises on average £6,900 per year, representing over £30million raised for parks annually.

Impact on quality of life

Those who use parks value them highly. Some 68% of park users consider spending time in their local park important or essential to their quality of life. This rises to 71% for park users in urban areas, and over 81% for households with children under 10.

The highest percentage of park users are those households with children. 83% of households with children aged five and under visit their local park at least once a month. In the UK it is astonishing that almost 600 million visits are estimated to be made by households with children under the age of 16 each year. In total 2.6 billion visits are estimated to be made to the UK's parks each year.



Parks provide a range of volunteering opportunities, and make a real difference to family life.

Skilled staff are needed to maintain horticulture in historic parks.



Local urban parks are often the only green spaces where people can meet, play and relax.



Why parks matter

Central to family life

Some of our earliest childhood memories include visits to local parks. Socially, parks offer opportunities to rest 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.

Other reports also acknowledge the importance of parks to children. *Making Britain Great for Children and Families*⁶ – a manifesto launched by 4Children, the national charity working towards a more integrated approach to children’s services – includes better provision of parks in its list of ways to create good places for children to grow up in.

Supporting health and happiness

Parks have a positive effect on people’s wellbeing and the health of their neighbourhoods. Evidence from the University of Exeter’s European Centre for Environment and Human Health, published by the Association for Psychological Science⁷, reveals that people who live in greener urban areas report greater wellbeing and lower levels of mental stress than city dwellers without nearby parks and gardens.

An increase in visitor numbers, particularly in urban parks, was recorded by Natural England in their annual Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) surveys⁸. In 2012–13 there were fewer visits to the countryside and a significant increase in visits to green spaces in towns and cities. This points to the growing importance of parks as the only place some people encounter nature.

The *State of the Nation’s Waistline* report⁹, published by the National Obesity Forum, states that over 25% of adults in England are considered obese. By 2050 the figure is expected to rise to 50%. Parks provide vital health resources that help to support healthy populations. Their value to public health is emphasised in *Public Health and Landscape*, a recent position statement by the Landscape Institute¹⁰, which demonstrates parks are a key ingredient in creating healthy places.



“Parks are particularly important as for many people they provide their back garden.”

HLF Parks for People programme evaluation¹¹



Parks are great biodiversity hotspots and a place where children can learn about nature. They also provide opportunities for local businesses such as cafés, and help to support local economies.

Improving social cohesion

Recent research highlights that “there is good evidence suggesting that the natural environment contributes to social cohesion. This appears to be particularly the case for well-maintained green spaces”¹². An example from Chicago suggests that parks can actively promote “inter-community relations in a way which is almost unique in urban life”¹³. A Joseph Rowntree report¹⁴ notes that, as communities across the UK become increasingly mixed and diverse, local social amenities will become more and more important. Public parks offer one of the most important social spaces in a neighbourhood, but, as interviews in the research highlight, their condition is a key issue, as poor-quality parks can have a detrimental effect on cohesion.

Promoting local economic development

Public parks have been used throughout history to promote investment and growth. Developers frequently use the proximity of parks to attract investors. A study on improving the competitiveness of England’s core cities¹⁵ notes that “soft location factors are an increasingly important part of economic decision-making”. Good-quality parks and public spaces contribute to these factors, which help to attract and retain skilled workers and their families.

Forward-looking cities with a good environment and easy access to natural amenities are working at preserving and improving them. They know that for skilled employees “the quality of life for themselves and their families is an increasingly important factor”¹⁶ of location. Recent research from Natural England¹⁷ draws together a growing evidence base on ways the natural environment, including parks, can enhance the economic competitiveness of a particular region and increase employee productivity.

Good parks also boost the tourist economy. Visit Britain¹⁸ has found that, of the 31 million tourists visiting Britain, over a third enjoy visiting a park or garden, making it one of the most popular activities (ranking above visiting a museum, castle, historic house or art gallery). Clissold Park, a local neighbourhood park in the London Borough of Hackney, receives the same number of annual visitors as London’s National Portrait Gallery, and more than St Paul’s Cathedral (2.1 million, 2.1 million and 1.8 million visitors respectively).

Investing in parks is a recognised way of helping to regenerate and re-vitalise an area. There are economic indicators to show this works, and strong evidence of the impact of parks in protecting and enhancing land and property values. The presence of a well-maintained park has been shown through research by CABE Space¹⁹ to add on average a 5% to 7% premium on house prices. Equally, a declining park has the opposite effect.



“Open space provides habitats and green corridors for safe species movement. (It) should be valued for its potential to mitigate climate change.”

Park manager

Delivering environmental services

Parks are a key component of the ‘green infrastructure’ of towns and cities, complementing the heavily engineered and costly ‘grey infrastructure’ of roads, utilities and sewerage systems. Properly planned, attractive green networks of parks, green spaces and river corridors provide natural systems and ecological services that collect and clean water, improve air quality and reduce peak summer temperatures. There is increasing interest in parks’ ability to improve the resilience of neighbourhoods to the impacts of climate change.

Parks also provide biodiversity hotspots. The qualities of an ecologically rich functional landscape were built into London’s Olympic Park at the outset. As the UK’s newest large public park, it not only provided an attractive and dramatic setting for the London 2012 Games but also continues to reduce flood risk, store surface water, and accommodate a rich diversity of plant and animal species.

A call to action

Our research provides an early warning of the potential risk facing the UK's parks. It is a risk that can be averted if action is taken in time.

Here we set out five key challenges for the future. For each we state how HLF intends to respond, together with calls on Government, local authorities, business, the voluntary sector, academic institutions and the public to take urgent action.

1 Local authority commitment

Local authorities' ongoing and renewed commitment to fund, staff and manage parks is essential. There is a strong link between people's satisfaction with their local parks and their satisfaction with their neighbourhood and council. Parks are one of the most heavily used public services, particularly by families, and are therefore a priority for voters.

2 New partnerships

The transfer of park management from local authorities to other organisations is expected to almost double by 2016. Whilst this can help diversify funding and resourcing, establishing long-term, financially viable, locally based partnerships requires commitment and resources. Budget cuts and the loss of skilled senior managers are hindering and adding risk to this process.

3 Getting communities more involved

Park user groups contribute valuable volunteer time and funding to local parks. There are more than 5,000 such groups in the UK estimated to provide almost a million volunteer days and generating over £30million per year through fundraising. However, they need more support to expand this work. When groups are trained and motivated, they are better able to support park management, and their efforts will be sustained.

4 Collecting and sharing data

To ensure consistency in the provision of good parks across the UK it is essential to collect and compare data between individual cities and local authorities, as in the USA. Regular collection of comparable data between core cities, for example, would highlight poor provision and allow local authorities to benchmark standards and resources.

5 New finance models and rethinking delivery

The future of many parks depends on developing new business and finance models. Time, resources and skills are needed to develop new ideas, test and deliver them. Public and private resources and expertise need to be pooled to stimulate innovation, develop skills and share ideas.

Action

HLF will actively monitor and champion parks projects we have funded to ensure standards are maintained, and will evaluate projects to demonstrate the value of investing in public parks.

HLF will invest up to £24million per annum in public parks and cemeteries until the end of our current strategic framework period in 2018, with the Big Lottery Fund investing an additional £10million per annum in England until the end of 2015.

We call on all local authorities to appoint an elected member to be their parks champion; to report annually how much they spend per resident in caring for their parks; and to commit to the provision of good, accessible parks by adopting an up-to-date parks, green space or green infrastructure strategy.

Action

HLF will use our Parks for People, Start-Up Grants and Rethinking Parks programmes (see 5 below) to support a greater diversity of organisations in managing public parks.

We call on the public, private and voluntary sectors to create innovative new partnerships to fund and manage parks, and provide opportunities for park managers to develop new business skills. Good-practice examples are needed to avoid duplicating effort and negotiating poor deals for the public.

We call on Government and local authorities to provide the support, resources and skills development needed by park friends and user groups who are considering entering into new partnerships to jointly manage parks.

Action

HLF will support people to take a more active role in the parks projects we fund through investing in training, resources and activities to encourage and promote volunteering.

We invite the public and business to support Groundwork's X Marks The Spot campaign and Keep Britain Tidy's Love Parks Week to get more people actively involved through volunteering and fundraising, and making the case for parks in modern life.

We recommend that those using, managing and championing parks actively support the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, a national forum for park friends and user groups, to help them provide a central hub of information and advice for park groups.

Action

HLF will encourage the development of a pilot project to help the UK's top 20 cities compare the quantity, condition and funding of their city parks.

HLF will commission and publish a second *State of UK Public Parks* study in 2016 to monitor changes in the condition, quality and resourcing of the UK's public parks.

We call on Government, the Local Government Association, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and academic organisations to encourage and facilitate the central collection of consistent and comparable data on parks across all local authorities.

Action

HLF, the Big Lottery Fund and Nesta will invest up to £1million through our Rethinking Parks programme to encourage innovation. The funding will support projects to develop creative new approaches to financing and managing parks.

We call on Government to focus their support for innovation and community rights on the delivery and funding of good-quality public parks and green spaces.

We encourage innovators considering new ideas and solutions to evaluate and share their ideas so others can learn from their experiences.

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National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces

Natural England

Newcastle Parks Forum

West Midlands Parks Forum

Heritage Lottery Fund

Using money raised through the National Lottery, HLF sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF was set up in 1994 and is the only heritage body that operates across the whole of the UK. It is administered by the trustees of the National Heritage Memorial Fund.

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#parksmatter @heritagelottery

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