



State of UK Public Parks 2014

Research Report to the Heritage Lottery Fund
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Image: Heritage Lottery Fund

Victoria Gardens, Neath, purchased for public use in 1856 and restored in 2011

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CONTENTS

Introduction and executive summary	<i>page 4</i>
1.0 Establishing the state of the UK's public parks	<i>page 10</i>
1.1 Reviewing existing data	
1.2 Building the evidence base	
1.3 Commissioning new surveys	
2.0 A nation of park makers	<i>page 21</i>
2.1 A catalyst for economic development	
2.2 A means to improve public health	
2.3 A tool in urban planning	
2.4 A period of decline and neglect	
2.5 A change in fortune	
3.0 Present challenges facing public parks	<i>page 28</i>
3.1 The number of parks	
3.2 The current use parks	
3.3 The current condition of parks	
3.4 The current funding for parks services	
3.5 The current staffing and management of parks services	
3.6 The role of local communities and partnerships	
4.0 Analysing the trends and impacts of change	<i>page 42</i>
4.1 Increasing social value of parks	
4.2 Declining public funding for parks	
4.3 Changing quality and condition of parks	
4.4 Competing local priorities for parks	
4.5 Continuing importance of parks in urban areas	
4.6 Growing community participation in parks	
5.0 Why we should continue to invest in public parks	<i>page 62</i>
5.1 Supporting economic growth	
5.2 Improving health and wellbeing	
5.3 Enhancing natural systems	
6.0 Sustaining public parks in the future	<i>page 70</i>
6.1 Key conclusions	
6.2 Building the future evidence base	
6.3 The way forward	
References and notes	<i>page 82</i>

INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Image: L LDA Design, Photograph © Robin Forster

Clissold Park, Hackney, opened to the public in 1889 and extensively restored in 2012

For centuries public parks have played an important part in the social and civic life of communities. From pocket parks in local neighbourhoods, country parks on the periphery of towns, to large civic parks at the heart of city centres, public parks are deeply rooted in the physical fabric, spirit and identity of thousands of places across the UK. Each and every one can tell its own unique story. Some have flourished over many generations whilst others have faced long periods of neglect that has made them incapable of properly serving the communities for which they were first created.

As this research report and accompanying summary report will show, this is a heritage that can easily get overlooked. Public parks have faced mixed fortunes in recent decades and during much of the 1980s and 90s many went through a protracted spiral of decline and under investment. Maintenance budgets were slashed and staffing levels cut to such an extent that many parks appeared abandoned and became places to deliberately avoid. After vociferous campaigning, research by think-tanks, a government select committee, a dedicated task force and considerable investment, public parks have been experiencing a renaissance over the past decade. Innovative and ambitious new parks have been created to regenerate neglected urban districts whilst hundreds of existing parks have been restored to their former glory. This has come about through the concerted effort of local communities and national agencies including the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) that has awarded grants of over £620m across the UK through the Parks for People programme supported by a further £80m from the Big Lottery Fund for projects in England.



Image: Heritage Lottery Fund

Duthie Park, Aberdeen, celebrating its restoration in 2013

In Aberdeen, Duthie Park, that was generously gifted to the city in the early 1880s, has reopened after a major restoration programme financed by the City Council and HLF. In Liverpool Sefton Park, built in the heyday of the industrial revolution, has recently been promoted to the country's highest Grade I registration. Whilst far south in the heart of Cornwall, Tuckingmill Valley Park has transformed a polluted and derelict mining area over the past ten years, recently receiving recognition for its innovation under the Green Flag Award Scheme. Such achievements, amongst many others, demonstrate the care and concern that communities and councils across the UK have for the health and wellbeing of their local parks.

But now communities, councils and those working across the parks sector are again becoming increasingly concerned about the future condition of their local parks, warning that many are under serious threat. The impact that significant, protracted, and in some cases disproportionate cuts in public spending will have on the long term health and condition of public parks across the UK has received attention in both the national and professional press. One of the first assessments, undertaken by GreenSpace in 2011¹, found that only a fifth of council managers expected they would be able to maintain their parks to current standards, with a similar proportion considering that these standards would fall significantly.

Staffing levels are also in steep decline. The London Parks and Green Spaces Forum (LPGSF)² have found that a quarter of senior posts at head of service level have been lost across the 33 London Boroughs³ in just 18 months to February 2012. By November 2013 this loss had risen to a third across the capital. A survey on the delivery of public parks services by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)⁴ in 2012 suggests that reducing resources has affected parks disproportionately and that capital and revenue spending will continue to decrease over the next five years. Over three quarters of park management teams agree that a reduction in funding has resulted in the withdrawal of maintenance and an increase in the 'natural' areas of parks.

This State of the UK's Public Parks research report has been commissioned by HLF to emphasise the value and importance of public parks, establish a clearer picture of their current condition using existing and new data and identify particular challenges facing the sector over the next few years. Whilst reliable and up to date information on public parks can be difficult to access and is notoriously fragmented, this study has brought together and reviewed much of the existing evidence base. In addition, to provide a more accurate picture of the current situation, three new surveys have been commissioned with local authority park managers, friends and park user groups and the general public to gain a more detailed and rounded understanding of the current issues facing public parks and park services across the UK.

Structure of this research report

This report has six main sections and is accompanied by a concise summary report.

1 Establishing the state of the UK's public parks

This reviews the existing data available for public parks, summarises the challenges of building the current evidence base and describes the approach and methodology adopted for undertaking three new surveys for this study.

2 A nation of park makers

This sets the context to this study by summarising the origins and motives behind the UK's public park movement, describes the early role of parks in economic development, public health and urban planning, and their changing fortunes in recent years.

3 Present challenges facing public parks

This presents the main findings of the UK-wide surveys including a review of the existing levels of park use; their current condition; present and future levels of funding and the growing supporting role of friends and community groups.

4 Analysing the trends and impacts of change

This provides a wider analysis of the survey findings highlighting the social value of parks and their role in family life, the changing patterns of their funding and condition, competing priorities for councils, increasing community participation, and particular regional variations in the survey data across the UK.

5 Why we should continue to invest in public parks

This summarises evidence for the multiple benefits and values that parks are able to provide for the economy, communities and the wider environment.

6 Sustaining public parks in the future

This draws a number of key observations from the findings of the study. It highlights the risks facing improving parks, the large loss of park staff and a rising issue of inequality in provision. It sets out a number of recommendations to improve data collection in the UK and concludes with a set of opportunities that provide a way forward to continue to invest in public parks in the future.



Image: Peter Neal

Newsham Park, Liverpool, opened in 1868, Grade II listed and on the Heritage at Risk Register 2013

The key findings

The findings of this research report offer both good and bad news. It is encouraging to find that since the last UK-wide survey presented in the 2001 Public Parks Assessment (PPA) managers state that a much larger proportion of their parks are improving and are now considered to be in a good condition. Parks remain a very popular resource and it is estimated that more than half of the UK population visits their local park regularly - which is once a month or more. In recent years parks have benefitted from increasing support of local communities and it is reported that both visitor numbers and levels of satisfaction for the key parks that local authorities manage are on the rise.

At the same time this study provides clear evidence that public parks are at a point of transition and are now facing many significant challenges. As public spending has fallen parks have faced large cuts in their funding and staffing over the last three years, and these cuts are expected to continue over much of the rest of this decade. It is also alarming to find that the proportion of park managers now expecting their parks to be declining in condition over the next three years is identical to that recorded in 2001 following a considerable period of neglect and disinvestment.

- **Regeneration at risk**

When comparing results from this study with results from the PPA the condition of parks has improved significantly with 59% of park managers reporting that their parks are in good condition compared to just 18% of park managers reporting this in 2001. Just under 2% of managers presently report their parks are in poor condition compared to 13% in 2001. 41% of managers also report their parks are improving in condition and just 17% report their parks have been declining over the last three years. In 2001 this was 29% and 37% respectively.

However, when asked about their future condition only 21% of park managers expect their parks to still be improving over the next three years and 37% expect them to be declining. This is the same proportion as the 37% of managers who in 2001 reported that their parks had been declining in condition over the previous ten years. There is clear concern that the improvements and benefits delivered through major investment for more than a decade may now be at serious risk.

- **Pressure on budgets**

There have been considerable cuts to park funding over the last three years and this is expected to continue at the same or at an even higher level over the next three years. 86% of park managers have had their revenue cut with 32% of managers having faced cuts of over 20%. Over the next three years 87% of managers expect revenue to be cut further. For capital funding, 54% of managers have had their funding cut, with 29% facing cuts of over 20%. Over the next three years 63% of managers expect capital to be cut further.

Taking a benchmark from the Audit Commission that calculates government funding to local authorities has reduced by an average of almost 20% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2013-14, many park departments have faced a higher percentage of cuts than this national average. It has been reported that the poorest councils in the ten most deprived areas of England have experienced cumulative cuts that will average 25% by 2016⁵ and council budgets are expected to continue to fall for the rest of the decade. The decline in spending on public parks is potentially greater and more rapid than that faced during the late 1970s to early 1990s.

- **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 such facilities as sports pitches, car parks, allotments and the hire of grounds or buildings for private events. A similar number intend to increase fees in the next three years.

Planning gain still provides the largest source of additional income for parks services with almost 90% of park managers having benefitted from this resource. However with changes to planning gain and the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy just over 60% of managers expect to continue to receive funding through this source in the future. This projects a potential 30% cut to this important source of funding for parks.

- **Sale of parks and green spaces**

A significant number of authorities are considering selling or transferring management of some of their parks and green spaces over the next three years. The Park Managers Survey found that 45% of local authorities are considering disposing of some green spaces and 19% of local authorities are specifically considering disposing of parks.

It is clear that management and maintenance arrangements for parks will continue to change. To date just under 20% of councils have transferred the management of individual parks to other organisations. Going forwards, just over 20% state that they plan to transfer the management of specific parks to community groups over the next three years.

- **Loss of staff and skills**

There has been a significant reduction in staffing over the last three years. 77% of park managers report cuts to operational or front-line staff, of which 23% of councils have lost 20% or more staff. There has been an even higher loss of management staff. 81% of councils report cuts to management staff, with 41% - almost twice as many councils - losing staff at a level of 20% or more.

Across England there are also marked differences in the proportion of operational and management staff lost with higher percentages of cuts being recorded in the north of the country. Staffing levels in urban authorities have also fallen more significantly than other types of council. Unitary and Metropolitan authorities have faced a greater loss of staff, and in particular management staff.

- **Regional inequalities**

There are clear regional differences in changes to funding and staffing over the last three years. It appears that park managers in the North West, North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and the West Midlands have generally faced higher percentages of cuts to revenue budgets and staff. Not surprisingly, a higher proportion of managers in these regions also expect their parks to be declining in condition over the next three years.

The Park Managers Survey highlights that the largest proportion of good parks are to be found in London and the East Midlands and the largest proportion of parks reported by park managers to have improved over the last three years is in London and the East of England. At the same time the largest proportion of parks reported to be declining are in Scotland, Wales and the North West of England. In terms of funding, park managers in the North West of England are reporting the highest proportion of cuts to revenue budgets over the last three years and are also expecting the highest cuts to both revenue and capital over the next three years.

- **Increasing numbers and role of park friends groups**

There has been a significant rise in the number and membership of park friends groups with park managers reporting a 30% increase in groups over the last three years. Friends groups responding to the survey demonstrate that they can play an important role in the resourcing of parks. Collectively they have raised over £6.6m in funding over the last three years which equates to over £30m annually across the UK. On average groups provide 183 volunteer days to support their local park each year. The economic equivalent of this equates to £45.7m of time given in-kind by all friends groups in the UK.

It is almost two decades since HLF established their first Urban Parks Programme. Since that time a significant amount of public money and time has been invested by many organisations in creating, restoring and improving public parks. Parks have experienced a considerable change in their fortunes, enjoying a steady renaissance since the start of the century. But now this renaissance is at risk and more than a decade of public investment is under threat and could be lost.

1.0 ESTABLISHING THE STATE OF THE UK'S PUBLIC PARKS



Image: Heritage Lottery Fund

MacRosty Park, Crieff, gifted to the town in 1902 and fully restored in 2011

This study reviews the state of the UK's public parks and undertakes an assessment and analysis of the key issues and challenges that public parks are currently facing. It identifies particular trends in the condition, funding, use and staff resource that is currently involved in managing and maintaining parks across the UK. The remit of the study is wide and, by definition, focusses specifically on urban and country parks that are freely accessible to the general public. This also includes formal and ornamental landscapes that have been laid out for leisure and recreation along with more informal natural areas that are open to the public and managed for the benefit of both people and nature. Where possible it also takes account of seafront gardens and green squares in towns and cities but generally omits cemeteries, allotments, stand-alone recreation grounds and commons and greens, although these may at times be included in more generic assessments of green space.

Compiling a good evidence base on which to make these assessments is a complex task. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that there is currently no information regularly collected in a standard format for parks across the whole of the UK. Past and present data is fragmented and generally of mixed and variable quality, it can be difficult to access and analyse and has often been gathered in different and often incompatible ways using a variety of methodologies.

Making the best use of the time and resources available the study has reviewed past data, compiled information from current studies undertaken by a variety of organisations, and commissioned a set of new surveys to establish a rounded view of the condition and trends currently facing public parks. The study acknowledges its limitations but aims to establish a better understanding and clearer overview of the key issues at present. It is hoped that this can provide a useful foundation on which further and more regular studies can be undertaken in the future.

1.1 Reviewing existing data

This research was preceded by a scoping study⁶ that reviewed the extent of existing literature, information and baseline data produced over the last 20 years on the UK's green spaces and in particular urban and country parks. In addition, interviews were held with park managers, academic institutions and representatives of national organisations and agencies operating in the sector to identify specific themes and issues that have complimented research and survey work within this report.

The literature review included a bibliography of around 110 documents of which 70 were considered to be of either direct or associated benefit for the study. Whilst this appears to be a significant resource, a detailed scrutiny at the start of this study found that many references were outdated and offered limited value. Continuity is a key problem; there are many one-off surveys and very few longitudinal studies to identify specific park trends over time. Where there have been regular surveys in the past, many have been discontinued. For example, the Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI), introduced in 2000 to measure trends in the quality of local neighbourhoods and satisfaction in public services including parks, was replaced by the Place Survey in 2008 and then discontinued in 2010.

Fragmentation and the limited geographic coverage of data are further problems and a number of studies, including the State of Scotland's Greenspace⁷, focus exclusively on particular urban areas. Information on council spending for culture, sport and recreation is collected each year by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), but this provides data for only a limited number of authorities and the selection varies each year. In its conclusions, the scoping study noted that 'the data evidence supporting the decline in the quality of parks is constrained by the lack of comparable data sets across the UK. National data sets are not consistent or geographically comprehensive'.

This shortage and patchiness of data is a recurring problem that has afflicted the parks sector for decades. The 1999 Government Select Committee into Town and Country Parks⁸ found that 'discussions were informative but largely took place in a statistical vacuum' and the final report dedicated an entire section to 'the information deficit'. Three years later, the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce⁹ emphasised the pressing need for better information, noting that 'we have been greatly concerned by the lack of adequate information, both nationally and locally, about urban parks and green spaces. Even the most basic data is missing: how many there are, their total area, the uses they receive'.

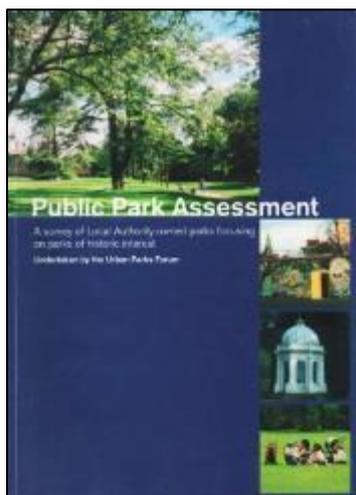
This problem has again been highlighted in the recent *Park Land*¹⁰ report by the Policy Exchange, one of the UK's leading think tanks, which undertook detailed analysis of this shortage of readily accessible information on parks and green spaces. It notes in its conclusion that despite improvements in recent years, the sector remains under-resourced and under-supported and 'the single most important step that can be taken to help remedy this is the provision of accurate and detailed urban green space data'.

Through the involvement in this study of Peter Harnik, Director of the Center for City Park Excellence, part of the Trust for Public Land in Washington DC, the last section of this report will look to make recommendations on how to improve the collection of parks data in the future. Work by his team across the United States has developed an established and

tested methodology for compiling an extensive set of comparative information on park investment and facilities for the top 100 cities in the country. These have been published as a series of annual City Park Facts¹¹ over several years.

1.2 Building the evidence base

In acknowledging this inconsistency and incompleteness of data, the following three studies offer an important point of reference for this research:



Public Parks Assessment

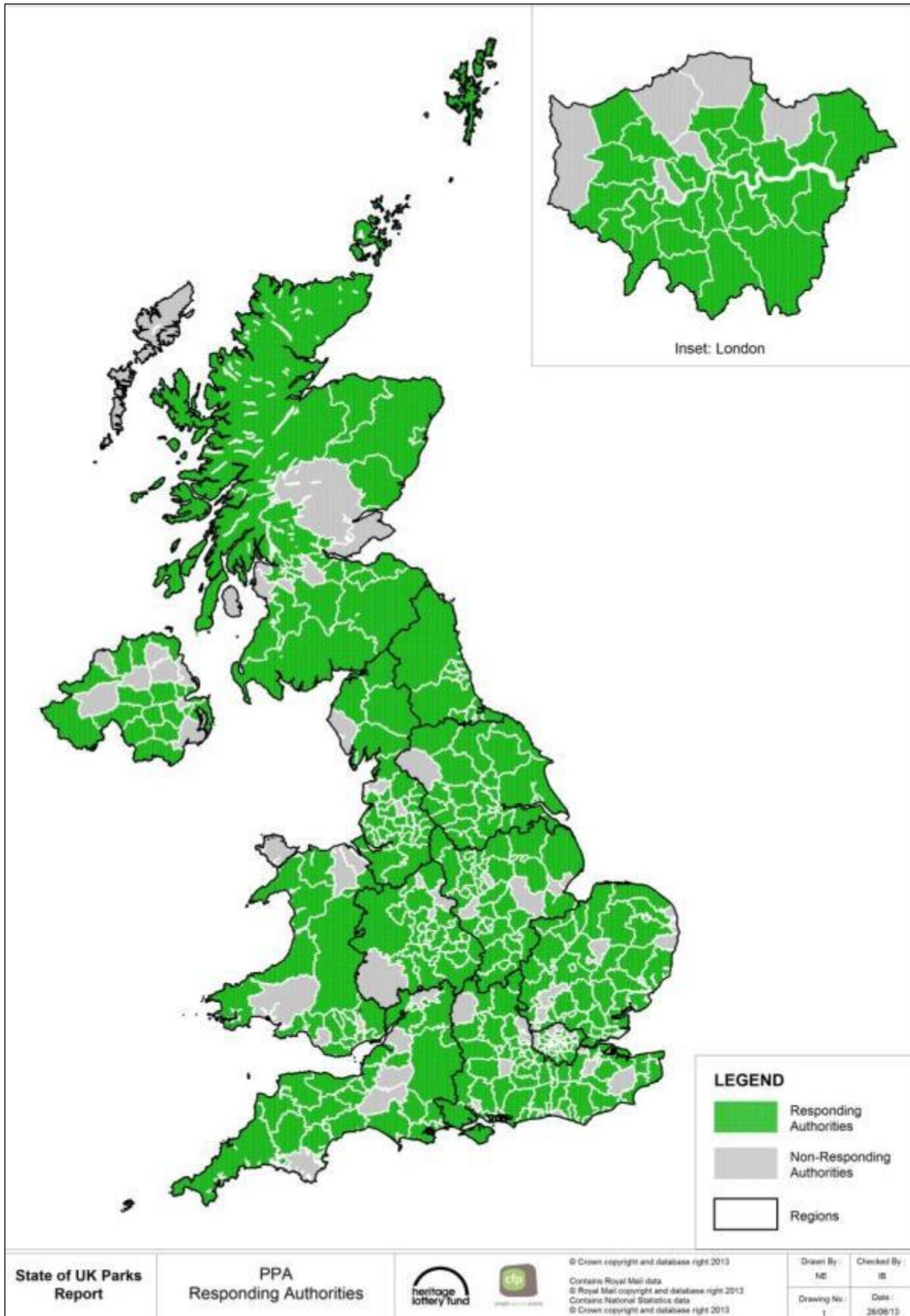


Enhancing Urban Green Space



Urban Green Nation

- **Public Parks Assessment (PPA)**¹² was published by the Urban Parks Forum in 2001 and undertaken with park managers. This is the only previous attempt to survey the condition of parks across the whole of the UK. The first phase of this 18 month project undertook a needs assessment and received a 37% return rate whilst the second phase achieved an 85% return rate from 405 local authorities across the UK, although many of the replies were part-complete. The final report provides the most valuable benchmark for this study although it was not possible to access the original set of PPA survey data.
- **Enhancing Urban Green Space**¹³ was published by the National Audit Office (NAO) in 2006. This updated the PPA but narrowed its focus to 154 urban authorities in England. It received returns from 93 authorities covering 914 parks in total and included a survey on the condition of urban green spaces in 2005 and the trends over the previous five years.
- **Urban Green Nation**¹⁴ was published by CABE Space in 2010. This also focused on urban authorities in England and offered a more sophisticated understanding of the state of urban green spaces. It looked at 70 major data sources and assembled an inventory of more than 16,000 publically owned and managed green spaces in an attempt to understand their condition and the number of people that were employed for their maintenance. It was also not possible to access this dataset for this study.



Map: Community First Partnership

Figure 1.1 Distribution of Local Authority Respondents to the Public Parks Assessment 2001

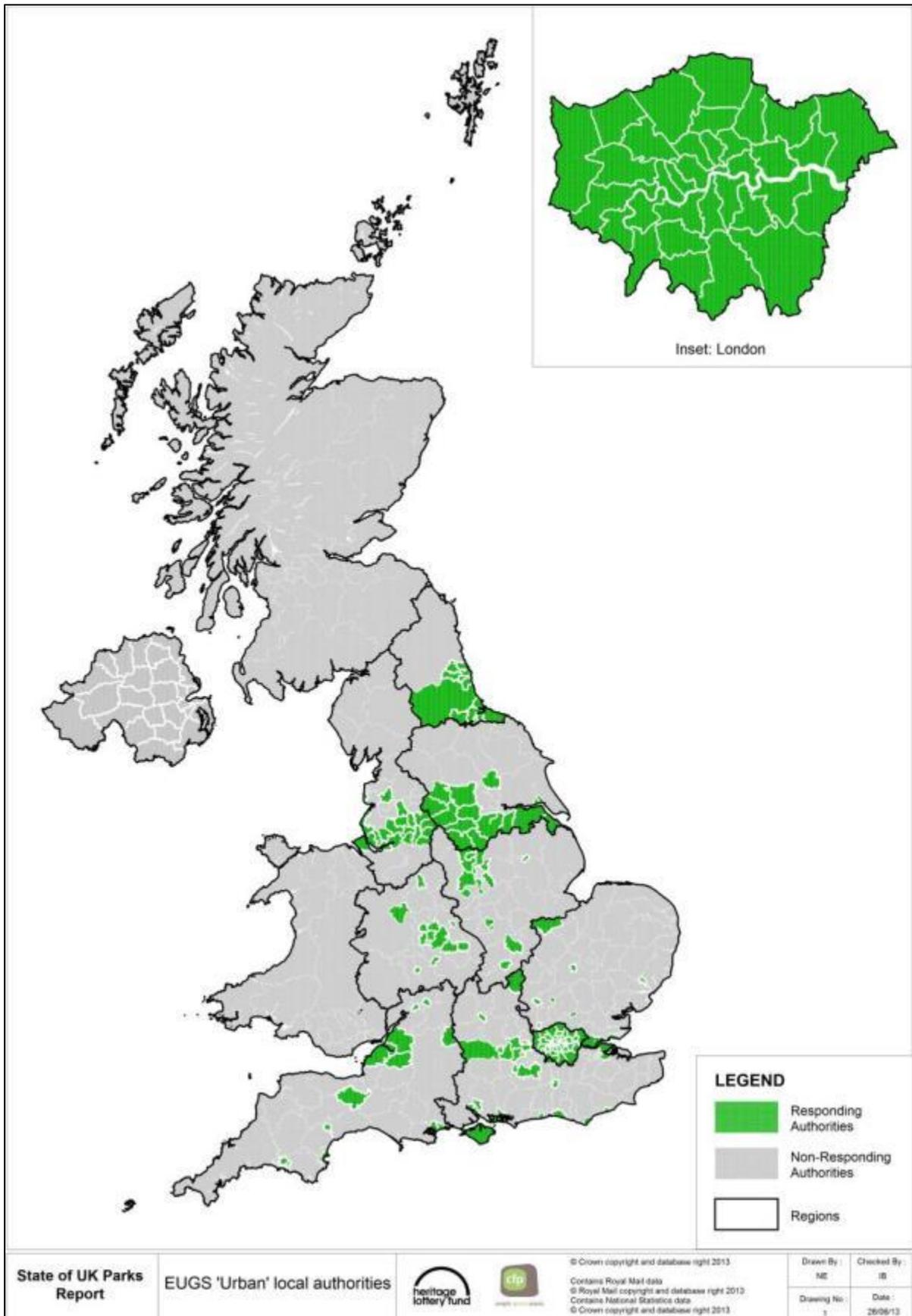
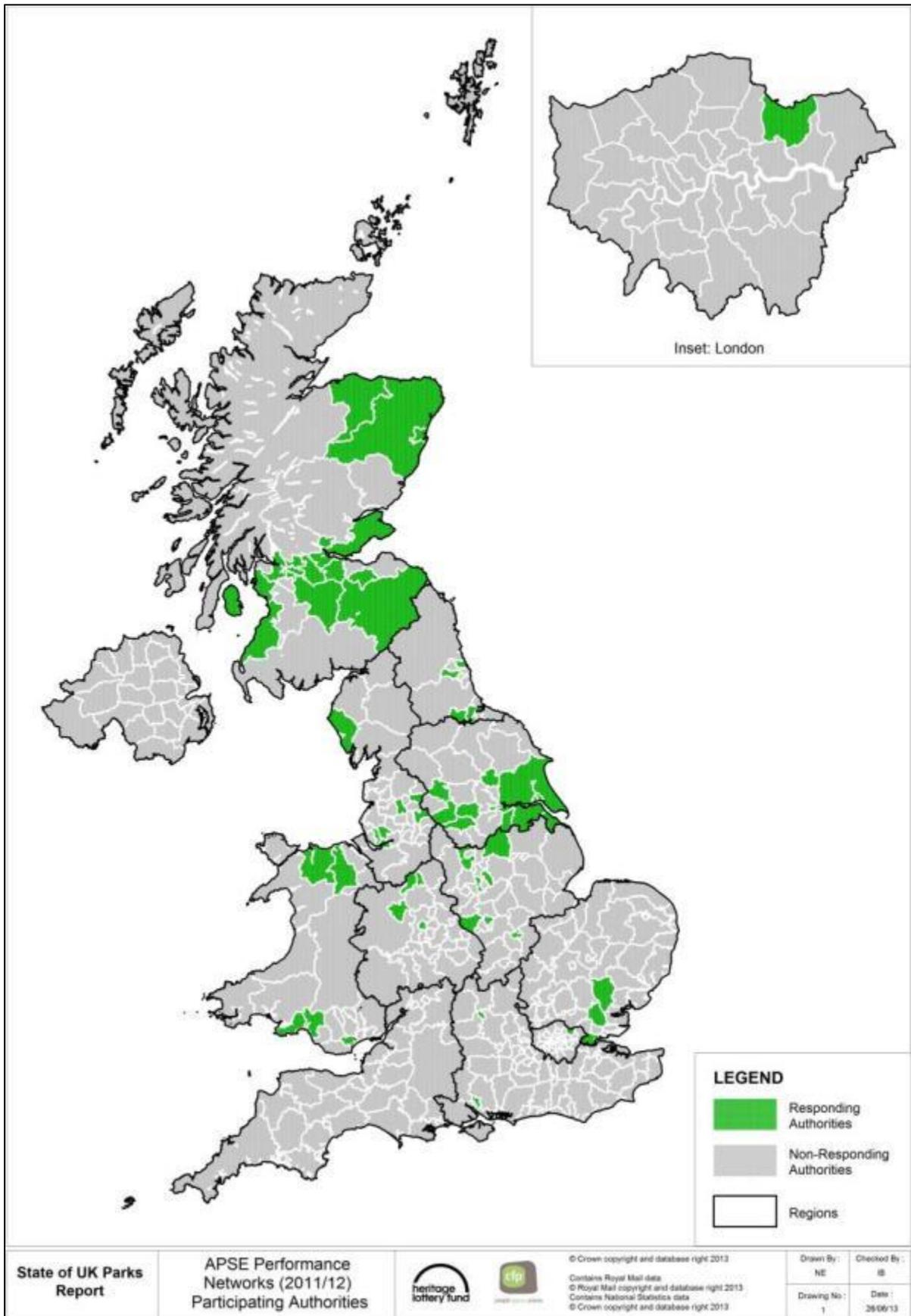


Figure 1.2 Distribution of Local Authority Respondents to Enhancing Urban Green Space 2006



Map: Community First Partnership

Figure 1.3 Distribution of Local Authority Respondents to the APSE Performance Networks 2011-12

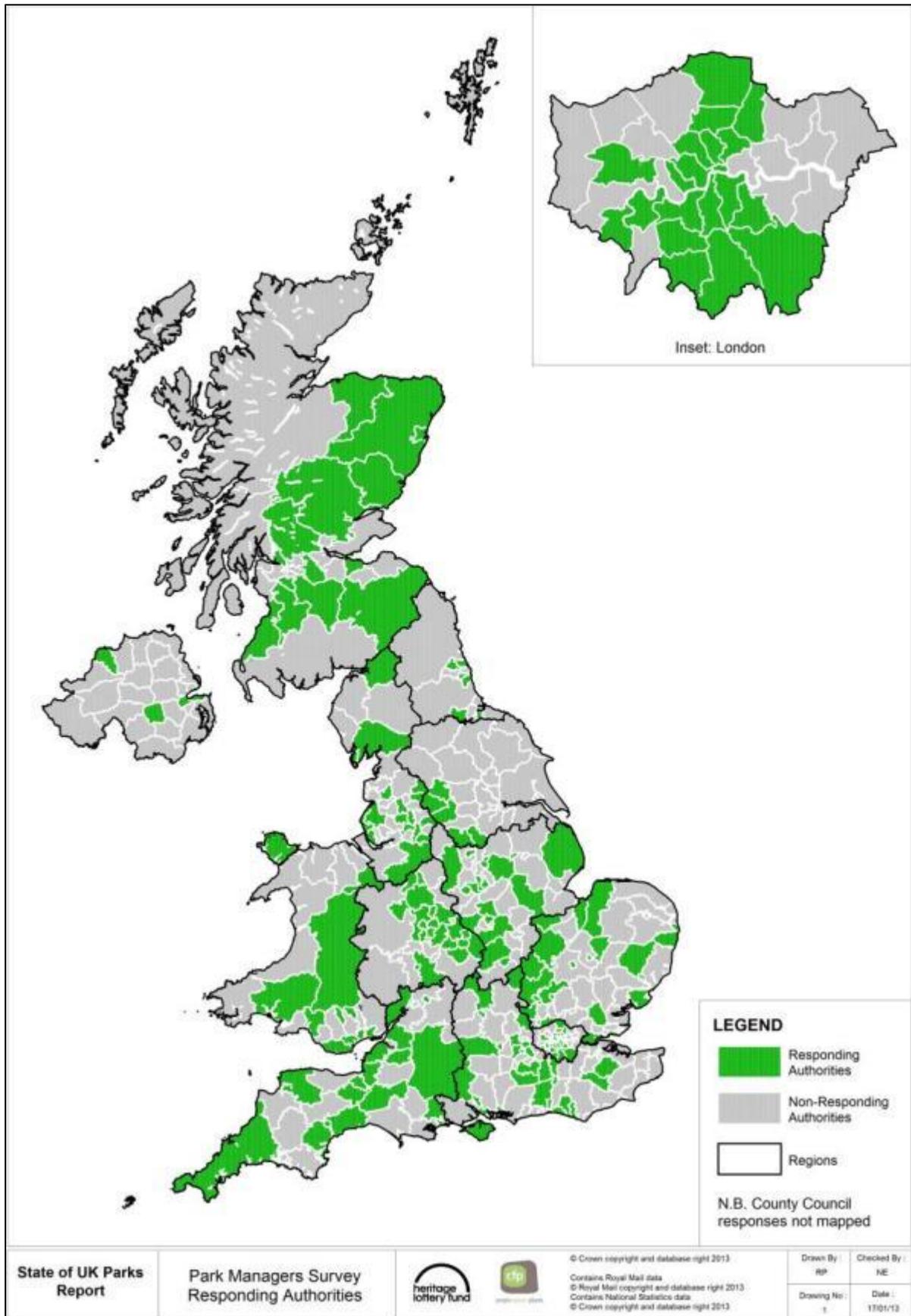
In addition to these past studies, two current benchmarking projects offer data that can be used to compare and compliment the findings of this study. These are:

- **Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) Performance Networks¹⁵** which provides the largest voluntary public sector benchmarking service in the UK and has been collecting data on key service indicators since 1999. The Parks, Open Spaces and Horticultural Services Network has 38 individual indicators providing data for maintenance costs, hectares maintained, charge per hectare, playgrounds/play value scores and environmental practices. The group currently includes 63 local authorities that are able to subscribe to different sets of indicators. APSE publishes state of the market surveys, trend analysis briefing papers and summary reports.
- **Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE)¹⁶** which is a survey funded by Natural England, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Forestry Commission provides data on how people use the natural environment in England. Over 800 people are interviewed each week generating a cumulative sample set of around 45,000 respondents annually. The first data was collected in March 2009 and the survey is now in its fourth year, providing a useful opportunity to measure trends. The survey covers a wide variety of open spaces and includes those in and around towns and cities. It measures visitor numbers, destinations, activities, motives for using open space and levels of appreciation and enjoyment.

In addition, this study considered other current data including the Green Flag Award Scheme¹⁷ that was launched in 1996 and provides the most commonly used and long-running method to measure the quality of specific parks across the UK. The scheme has been managed by a number of different organisations during its existence which has led to a fragmentation of the data making it difficult to analyse in its entirety. GreenSTAT, a visitor survey system developed by GreenSpace¹⁸ was adopted by around 80 local authorities from across the UK and recorded details and views of park and green space users. Unfortunately it was not possible to access this data to inform this study as GreenSpace went into receivership in spring 2013.

1.3 Commissioning new surveys

With the limited value of existing and past data offering only partial coverage of the UK, three new UK-wide surveys were undertaken to build an improved and broader evidence base. This was considered to be the most cost and time-effective way to understand the current condition of public parks and gain a clearer picture of the issues presently facing the sector.



Map: Community First Partnership

Figure 1.4 Distribution of Local Authority Respondents to the Park Managers Survey 2013

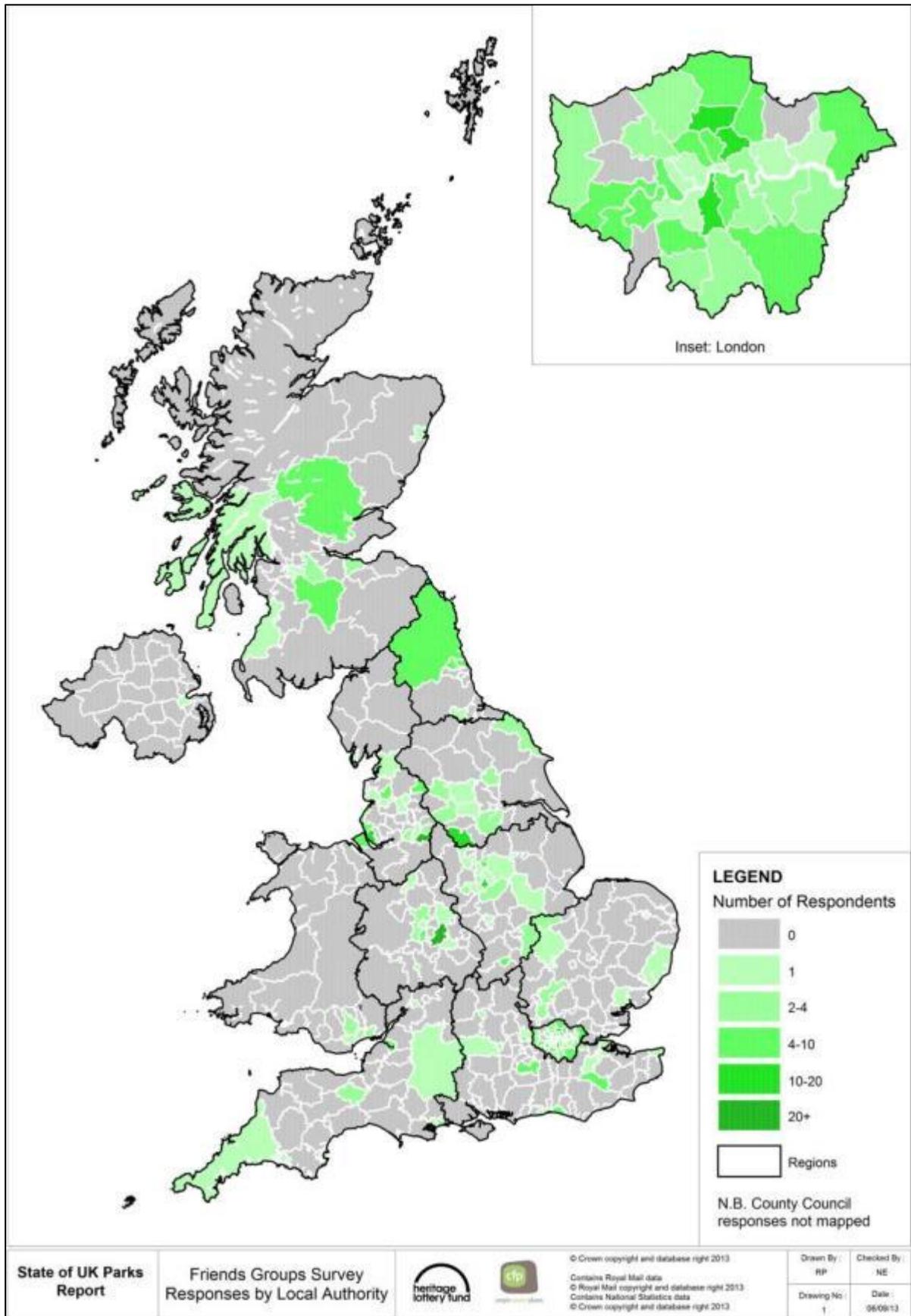


Figure 1.5 Distribution of Respondents to the Friends and Park User Group Survey 2013

- **The Park Managers Survey** used an online questionnaire sent to all 433 local authority park managers and park departments in the UK with over 800 individual recipients. The survey was conducted between 29 August and 8 October 2013. The survey included 62 questions that addressed issues of finance and resourcing; the quantity and quality of parks being managed; organisational arrangements for maintenance; information on park visitors and volunteers; and, issues of strategic policy.

A total of 184 replies were received including 178 local authorities, three trusts and three other organisations responsible for parks and green spaces. When compared to the total number of 433 authorities in the UK this represents a local authority return rate of 41% (178/433 – 41.1%). The combined population of the 178 local authorities who responded totals 31.6m people which equates to around half of the UK population. Over 90% of respondents are classified as urban authorities (157/169 – 92.9%) and the distribution by authority type is as follows:

Type of Authority	Total number in UK	Number of authorities responding to the survey	Proportion of authorities responding to the survey	Proportion of respondents per type of UK authority
Unitary	56	32	18.0%	57.1%
District	201	70	39.3%	34.7%
County Council	27	5	2.8%	18.5%
Metropolitan	36	22	12.4%	61.1%
London Borough	33	20	11.2%	62.5%
Northern Ireland Unitary	26	4	2.2%	15.4%
Scotland Unitary	32	15	8.4%	46.9%
Wales Unitary	22	10	5.7%	45.5%
Total	433	178	100%	-

Table 1.1 - Analysis of Park Managers Survey respondents by type of authority

- **The Friends and User Groups Survey** was issued in parallel with the Park Managers Survey and was conducted between 29 August and 27 September 2013. The survey included 19 questions that looked at the size and structure of the group; issues of funding and resourcing; the quality and condition of their individual park; the level of support the group receives; and, the range of work the group is involved with.

It was widely circulated through promotion by CFP, regional forums, Greenspace Scotland and the Greater London Authority. It received 436 replies with a good distribution across the UK. These covered 123 local authorities, representing approximately 30% of all local authorities, and a combined membership of all the friends groups totalling 27,802 individuals. There were particular clusters around Birmingham and Stockport and a good return rate from the London Boroughs. The responses included 285 for public parks (65.4%) and 45 for country parks (10.3%). The full distribution is illustrated in the following table:

How would you classify your park(s) / open space(s)?	Sample Size (n=)	Proportion of sample to total number of respondents
	n	%
Public Park	285	65.4%
Natural and Semi-Natural Greenspace	146	33.5%
Outdoor Sports Facility	71	16.3%
Amenity Greenspace	67	15.4%
Public Garden	54	12.4%
Green Corridor	53	12.2%
Country Park	45	10.3%
Allotment, Community Garden or Urban Farm	22	5.0%
Cemetery or Burial Ground	8	1.8%
Total	436*	-

*Total number completing survey with some groups representing several types of open space

Table 1.2 - Distribution of Friends Groups Survey by type of green space

- The Public Opinions Survey** was undertaken by independent researchers Ipsos MORI who surveyed a representative sample of 1,037 adults aged 15+ living in the UK, 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 purpose of this concise survey was to measure the general public's use of parks and to understand: how important parks are to the public's quality of life; what they consider to be the current condition of their local park; the trend in that condition; the level of concern they may have, if any, in relation to reducing local council budgets for parks; and, what they think should be the priorities for spending on parks in the future in light of this squeeze on budgets.

Individual questions in each survey were purposely structured to address specific issues identified during the scoping study. A number of questions were directly set to provide a cross-reference to past surveys. For example, questions on the current condition of parks and future trend in condition were identical to the questions asked to park managers originally by the PPA in 2001. However it should be noted that due to the modal effect of using different methodologies in past and present park surveys the identified trends over time should be considered indicative. The results of the surveys are presented and analysed in subsequent sections of this report.

2.0 A NATION OF PARK MAKERS



Image: Peter Neal

Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London, completed in 2012 and fully opened to the public in 2014

The construction of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park for London 2012 provided the UK with a rare opportunity to create a brand new public park. Providing the setting for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, it was admired and enjoyed by millions who came to watch the Games both at the venues and on the large screens within the park. Having been through a pre-planned period of transformation, the park is now at the heart of an emerging green city district. This new twenty-first century park is just a short distance from Victoria Park, London's first public park that was built in the nineteenth century. Both parks neatly frame the UK's long tradition of park-making, with one named after Queen Victoria, the nation's first monarch to celebrate a diamond jubilee and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park named after the nation's only other monarch to celebrate a diamond jubilee.

The public park is deeply rooted in Britain's industrial revolution and Queen Victoria's reign witnessed an intense park-making period on a scale that has never been seen since. The second half of the nineteenth century saw an ambitious era of investment in the infrastructure and social fabric of towns and cities. Great engineers including Brunel, Telford and Bazalgette built railways, canals, aqueducts and sewers that radically improved the transport, wealth and public health of the nation. In parallel prominent landscape architects, including Kemp, Milner and Paxton, were designing and constructing many of the great Victorian public parks of the time - Gateshead's Saltwell Park, People's Park in Halifax and the celebrated Birkenhead Park in the Wirral to name but a few. All remain as a testament to this period of immense and creative civic investment for the public good. One need only turn to Hazel Conway's detailed study of *People's Parks*¹⁹ that documents the design and development of Victorian parks in Britain or George Chadwick's *The Park and the Town*²⁰ for an in-depth history of the public park movement of the time.



Image: Peter Neal

Victoria Park, London, initially funded through adjacent housing development and opened in 1845

2.1 A catalyst for economic development

The public park emerged as an economic force for real estate development at the start of the nineteenth century. London's Regent's Park was the trigger for this revolution: a project built on the simple premise that significantly more economic value could be gained from the existing grazing land through the creation of a large park and new buildings, needed to house the growing population of central London. Construction began in 1811 and by the time it was complete the park became widely recognised as the most beautiful estate in London and to this day it remains one of the most popular parks in the capital.

This economic relationship is described by John Crompton²¹ as 'the proximate principle' where the capitalisation of a park's value can be captured in surrounding, or proximate, properties. Despite early setbacks with higher establishment costs and lower incomes, the subsequent years saw good return on Regent's Park's initial investment and provided the financial model that was adopted by both private and public developers across the country. Importantly, it gave Parliament the confidence in 1841 to lend up to £10,000 for the development of urban parks to local communities provided they match it with a similar sum. It became government policy²² to require local councils to purchase residential land that was then let out as building plots with the income being used to pay for the cost of the park. The front runners of this movement included Prince's Park in Liverpool, opened in 1842 and now registered as Grade II*, and Victoria Park in London, built on crown land and opened in 1845. Birkenhead Park followed closely after and was the first park to transfer these economic principles to the public sector, becoming the first publically funded public park in the country, providing a much needed impetus and rationale for developing public parks across the UK.



Image: Peter Neal

Derby Arboretum, gifted to the city in 1840, credited to be the UK's first public park, fully restored in 2005

2.2 A means to improve public health

As the industrial revolution gained pace, existing commons and fragments of countryside were swallowed up by new factories and homes for the fast expanding cities. Public parks were seen as a means to address the environmental and public health impacts of this rapid growth. The social reformers of the day including The Earl of Shaftesbury and Octavia Hill, who co-founded the National Trust, demanded better public access to open spaces that offered peace and spaciousness to improve the health and social welfare of factory workers confined to overcrowded tenements.

The government at the time formally recognised this need in the 1833 Select Committee on Public Walks. This urged towns and cities to develop public parks with legislation to support the purchase and dedication of land for this purpose. Whilst the Committee expected that most of the funding should come first from private sources, it acknowledged that 'it should be the duty of the Government to assist in providing for the health of the people'²³. As towns and cities continued to grow the Public Health Act of 1875 was passed by government to combat chronically poor living conditions and limit the spread of diseases through better sanitation. It provided the much needed impetus for building public parks by giving local authorities the ability to raise government loans to buy land for recreation.



Image: Heritage Lottery Fund

Roberts Park, Saltaire, opened in 1871 and pictured at its reopening after its regeneration in 2010

2.3 A tool in urban planning

Enlightened industrialists began to enlist the help of architects and town planners to bring better order and structure to the development of rapidly expanding city districts. This saw the creation of model communities such as Saltaire in Bradford and Port Sunlight in the Wirral. All included good provision of parks and open spaces to improve the amenity, health and wellbeing of residents. Saltaire is perhaps one of the most celebrated Victorian examples and included Saltaire Park, now known as Roberts Park, that was opened in 1871 and is now registered as Grade II*. Fully restored through funding from HLF and Big Lottery Fund in 2010, the park is a current winner of a Green Flag Award.

At the turn of the twentieth century a radical new approach to town planning emerged through the vision of Ebenezer Howard and his garden cities that incorporated the benefits of both town and country. The first, Letchworth Garden City, was formed in 1903 and included good provision of green space and public parks. Howard Park and Gardens was established as Letchworth's Central Park and has recently undergone a complete lottery-funded restoration and is also a Green Flag Award winning park. Welwyn Garden City followed in 1920 and the urban planning model provided a template for many of Britain's post-war new towns.

Most were planned with generous allocation of parks and open spaces that have faced mixed fortunes in recent years. In Stevenage, the first of the new towns, the Town Centre Gardens has also benefited from lottery funding, with the restoration proposals winning a

Heritage and Conservation Award from the Landscape Institute in 2011. Milton Keynes, designated in 1967 as the last of the new towns, was planned with the largest collection of parks and green spaces that, with farsighted provision, included a dedicated and independently funded organisation to care for these in perpetuity. The success of the Milton Keynes Parks Trust offers an important lesson after more than a century of park-making across the UK. For while most public parks have been created for public benefit through the enlightened speculation of landowners, the generosity of benefactors and the vision of local councils, many have failed to safeguard the necessary resources for their long-term management and maintenance.

This is a fundamental issue that has made public parks increasingly vulnerable to changing patterns of public funding and contributed significantly to their decline in the last decades of the twentieth century. There is growing interest in identifying ways to expand the resource base for managing parks to make them more sustainable and this can include the use of endowments, property assets and investment portfolios. Endowments may take the form of a lump sum transferred to a management company through planning gain or other means. It is a model that has stood the test of time for more than a century with the National Trust and, depending on the asset and investment base of the trust, generally offers a reliable economic foundation for running both individual parks and larger park networks. It is interesting to note that most independent park trusts have been able to weather the recent financial crisis in better condition when compared to their local authority counterparts.

2.4 A period of decline and neglect

From the late 1960s public parks embarked on a long spiral of decline. The Countryside Act of 1968 set up the Countryside Commission and led to the creation of a large number of country parks to meet the growing demand for countryside recreation from an increasing number of car owners. With grant aid made available from government for country parks, countryside rangers and amenity tree-planting schemes, local authorities progressively shifted their focus for investment in recreation towards country parks and away from their urban counterparts. The reorganisation of local government in 1974 recommended by the Bains report²⁴ placed parks departments within wider leisure services and by the 1980s urban parks faced increasing financial pressures from year-on-year budget cuts. Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), introduced in an attempt to bring greater efficiencies to local government, saw many parks managed by external contractors, with low tenders delivering even lower standards of maintenance. CCT diluted management expertise and ‘the emphasis on economy rather than on quality squeezed budgets for in-house training’²⁵.

‘Urban Parks in Crisis’ ran the headline of an article in the *Landscape Design Journal*²⁶ in 1984 illustrating the growing professional concern for the declining condition of many public parks. By the start of the 1990s parks were increasingly being seen as a liability rather than asset, making them vulnerable to part-development or even sold off in their entirety. Stuart Harding²⁷, who set up the first Urban Parks Programme at HLF, observed that “those all-important signals of ‘conspicuous care’ disappeared – the neatly trimmed lawn edges, the litter and weed-free flowerbeds, the band concerts, the flowing fountains. By the time the full effects of progressive reductions in capital and revenue spending became clear, parks began to look as if they had been abandoned”.

The 1999 House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee inquiry into Town and Country Parks marked an important milestone. It took over 60 separate items of evidence from individuals and organisations working across the sector and its final conclusions provided a frank assessment of the challenges. “We are shocked at the weight of evidence, far beyond our expectations, about the extent of the problems parks have faced in the last 30 years.” The Urban Parks Forum was established the same year following a workshop at the University of York and was followed a year later by the Government’s Urban White Paper, *Our Towns and Cities: the future*³³. This picked up many of the themes of the Select Committee acknowledging that ‘we must lead and develop a shared vision for the future of our parks, play areas and open spaces’. One practical action saw the formation of an Urban Green Spaces Taskforce that recommended in its final report³⁴ the formation of a national agency for urban green spaces.

A year later in 2003 CABI Space was launched as a dedicated unit within the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABI). It led a programme of research, best practice and enabling to improve the planning, design and management of parks and public spaces. At the same time the Urban Parks Forum was officially relaunched as GreenSpace, providing a national network supporting park managers and community groups, and Greenspace Scotland was established by Scottish Natural Heritage and partners. The Welsh Parks Forum made tentative moves to establish Greenspace Wales and in Northern Ireland a local authority network looked at the potential to develop a regional forum over a number of years.

This current decade has again seen a shift in the fortunes of public parks. Following changes to CABI’s funding in 2011, the organisation was downsized and transferred to the Design Council, marking the end of a dedicated and properly resourced national public space programme. Two years on, GreenSpace has been forced to close through a significant reduction in its income and grant funding. Whilst The Parks Alliance has been established by the sector to act as a national advocate, public parks currently no longer have a fully funded and dedicated organisation supported by government with the resources and capacity to act either as a national champion or representative of the professional sector. Greenspace Scotland continues to actively champion the importance of parks and urban green spaces in an increasingly competitive environment for funding. Greenspace Wales operates as a formal network of around half the park managers in the country whilst Northern Ireland has yet to fully establish an official organisation to support the work of their parks sector.

With renewed cuts in public funding and an increasing number of staff and skills being lost across the sector it is now a critical time to take stock of the current challenges facing public parks. This concise research into the state of the UK’s public parks attempts to both highlight and quantify the current impact of these challenges and changes facing parks. It also aims to build a better understanding of the longer term effect these changes may have on public parks during the rest of this decade. By using past data and new information compiled through surveys undertaken for this study it will be possible to start building a better national picture of the resourcing, funding and condition of public parks. It is recommended that this should become a regular exercise to measure more accurately and reliably public park trends across the UK over the coming years.

3.0 PRESENT CHALLENGES FACING PUBLIC PARKS



Image: Peter Neal

Parsloes Park, Barking and Dagenham, a local friends group has been campaigning for its restoration

This section looks at the key findings from the three surveys commissioned for this study and focuses particularly on levels of use, the current condition of public parks across the UK and the trends in their condition. It also reviews the levels of funding and resourcing for parks, changes in budgets over the last three years and projections for future budgets. Changes in staffing looks at both front-line operational staff and management staff and the section concludes with a review of the contribution made by friends groups and the level of volunteering that currently benefit parks.

3.1 The number of public parks

Calculating the total number of parks in the UK is a complex exercise that has challenged many organisations in recent years. There is yet to be a definitive answer as there is no standardized UK-wide definition or typology for the different forms of parks and recent simplification of planning policy has removed one established system. Furthermore, there is no UK-wide land-use plan that can be used to accurately locate all parks and open spaces and individual local authorities map and count their parks and green spaces in a variety of different ways which makes it extremely difficult to compile a comprehensive schedule.

The best benchmark for the UK is the PPA (2001) that estimated total number of all parks and recreational open spaces to exceed 27,000 of which more than 2,500 are parks of historic interest. This calculation was based on an average projection from 85% survey returns from individual local authorities. From this, the total area of parks in the UK was calculated to be in excess of 143,000 hectares, the equivalent of over 90% of the total area of Greater London.

A subsequent assessment, published in Urban Green Nation³⁵ calculated that there were approximately 12,000 parks and recreational spaces within the 154 urban authorities in England, totalling around 66,000 hectares. These figures were compared with the PPA data set and considered to be compatible with the PPA figures for the whole of the UK.

Figures compiled from the Park Managers Survey varied considerably across the returns which were not unexpected. However more than 1 in 6 local authorities do not know the number of parks they manage (30/177 - 16.9%) and over a third do not know the total area of their parks (62/174 - 35.6%). Based on the 178 returns received from local authorities, it can be estimated that local authorities are managing on average approximately 50 public parks and country parks that in total equates to around 835 hectares. An indicative and conservative estimate of the total number of public parks and country parks in the UK suggest the total may be in the region of 21,500³⁶. While this figure appears lower than the 27,000 calculated by the PPA, it should be noted that the higher figure also included all recreational open space that would add significantly to this estimate.

Future acquisition and disposal

Whilst it may be difficult to estimate the total number of parks, the Park Managers Survey highlighted that these numbers are likely to change in the next few years alongside the number of parks that councils will be responsible for managing. Although over half of local authority park managers expect the number of parks and green spaces they manage to stay the same (100/176 - 56.8%), almost twice as many expect this to increase slightly or a lot (49/176 - 27.9%) compared to those that expect the number to decrease slightly or a lot (27/176 - 15.3%).

When local authority park managers were asked whether local councils are looking to dispose of green spaces and parks in particular over the next three years, they report that:

- Almost half are considering disposing some of their green spaces (78/174 - 44.8%)
- Almost one in five are specifically considering the disposal of parks (31/162 - 19.1%)
- Almost a third are considering purchasing or acquiring green spaces (57/175 - 32.6%)

It is clear that there will be changes to the net number and distribution of parks and green spaces across the UK in the next three years as councils consider both disposals and acquisitions. Further analysis of the Park Managers Survey³⁷ found significant proportion of disposals will focus on the loss of amenity and natural or semi-natural green space. While 31 local authorities stated that they were considering the disposal of parks within the next three years the majority of these disposals include the partial sale of sites and the transfer of park land to an alternative management organisation such as a town or parish council, a community group or voluntary sector organisation rather than a direct loss to development. The management of outdoor sports facilities are particularly being targeted for transfer to local sports clubs. Acquisitions mainly relate to local councils taking on additional land and management responsibilities from a developer through the planning process.

APSE³⁸ finds a similar if not higher trend with 34% of local authorities expecting the number of their formal parks (including playgrounds) to decrease slightly or a lot and 27% expecting to generate income through land sales. Whilst there is limited evidence of the

disposal of public parks in recent years, campaigners have been fighting proposals to sell a proportion of Reddish Vale Country Park³⁹ in Stockport. Liverpool City Council is progressing with the planned disposal of Sefton Park Meadows⁴⁰ adjacent to the Grade 1 listed Sefton Park, whilst a decision on the sale of up to 38 parks and open spaces in Bristol⁴¹ has been deferred to allow for further consultation with local community groups.

Some parks services are looking to dispose of specific assets within parks. Oldham, for example, is proceeding with the sale of the Grade II listed North Lodge in Alexandra Park for conversion to office or residential use. Oxford City Council put the stables block and depot in Bury Knowle Park up for sale for new housing whilst the City of Edinburgh Council stepped back from the proposed sale of a depot in Inverleith Park⁴² following a determined campaign from the Friends of the Park.

3.2 The current use of parks

Parks have been shown to be one of the most heavily used public services and there are many surveys that record how they are regularly visited by a wide cross-section of society. The Public Opinions Survey undertaken for this study found that:

- Over 1 in 10 people typically use, visit or pass through their local park almost every day (12%)
- Over half use, visit, or pass through their local park at least once a month or more (54%)
- Age can be a defining factor, with over 7 in 10 adults aged between 25 and 44 visiting parks at least once a month by comparison (72%)
- Parks are clearly important for families too, with over 8 in 10 people with children aged under 10 in the household using parks at least once a month (82%)

People living in urban areas use parks more regularly than those in rural areas. 63% of the UK public living in urban areas typically use, visit or pass through their local park at least monthly compared to 41% of those living in rural areas. Furthermore, over three-quarters of people living in urban areas have visited their local park within the last year (76%) compared to just over half of people living in rural areas (54%).

Increasing visitor numbers and visitor satisfaction

The Park Managers Survey records increasing visitor numbers and increasing visitor satisfaction for parks across the UK. For principal parks, generally referred to as the key sites councils manage, 70% have recorded an increase in visitor numbers (54/77 - 70.1%) with only 5% of managers registering a fall in visitor numbers (4/77 - 5.2%) over the last year. At the same time 50% of park managers state that there has been an increase in visitor satisfaction (62/122 - 50.8%), with just under 5% of respondents recording decreasing levels of satisfaction (6/122 - 4.9%) over the last three years.

With just over 1 in 10 local authorities stating they measure visitor numbers for all their parks (20/176 - 11.4%) there is limited data on authority-wide visitor trends. However, from the 19 responses received for this section of the Park Managers Survey, almost half of authorities record an increase in visitor numbers (9/19 - 47.4%), whilst just 10% record a fall in visitor numbers (2/19 - 10.5%) over the last year. This suggests that whilst the

majority of all public parks have seen rising numbers of visitors, this has been particularly marked for the key parks that local authorities manage.

3.3 The current condition of parks

There is clear evidence that the condition of parks across the UK has improved considerably over the past decade. The primary source of baseline data for this is the PPA 2001 survey of park managers that measured both the current condition of parks as either 'Good, Fair or Poor', and the trend in condition as either 'Improving, Stable or Declining'. The same questions using identical descriptions of condition have been used for all three surveys undertaken for this study to provide a comparison with the PPA results although, as noted, the different survey methodologies provide only indicative trends in condition.

The following table indicates that there are a significantly greater proportion of parks rated as good in 2013 compared with 2001. All three recent surveys draw similar conclusions. When compared to PPA data, there are a much higher proportion of parks rated good. This ranges from exactly 50% recorded for the general public by the Public Opinions Survey to almost 60% of Park Managers stating that the parks in their authority were in a good condition. It is also interesting to note that the proportion of parks rated as poor remains similar when comparing 2001 data with the Friends Group Survey and the Public Opinions Survey. However, there are a far smaller proportion of local authority park managers reporting their parks are in a poor condition in comparison to 2001.

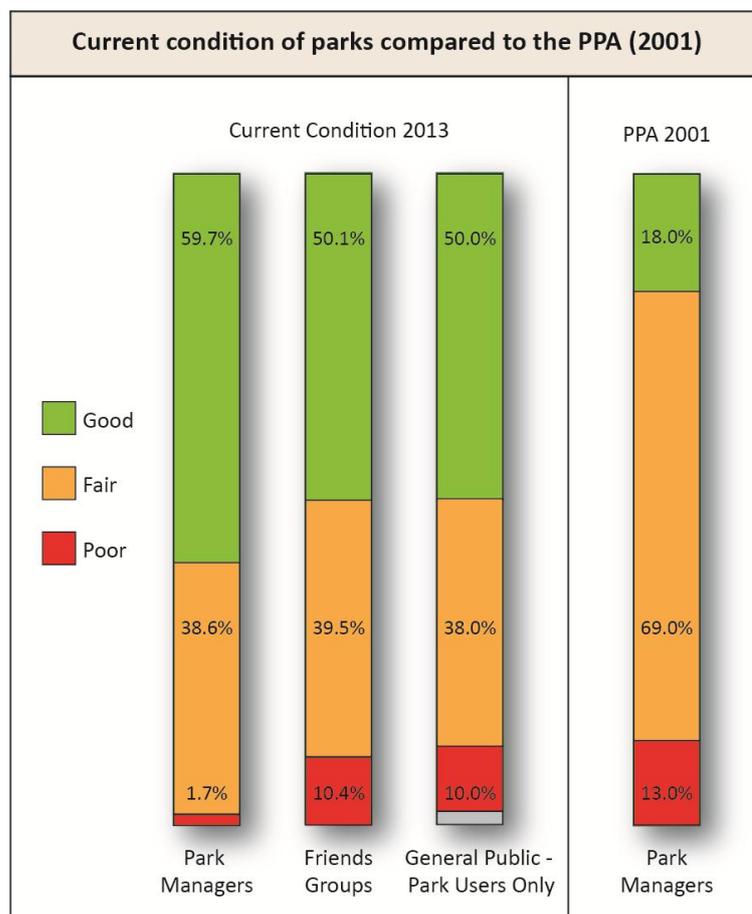


Figure 3.1 Chart illustrating comparison of the condition of parks between 2013 and 2001



Image: Peter Neal

Burslem Park, Stoke, first opened in 1894 and fully restored in 2012

Current Condition of Public Parks	HLF 2013						UPF 2001	
	Park Managers Survey		Friends of Parks Survey		Public Opinions Survey*		Public Parks Assessment survey of Park Managers	
	n		n		n		n	
Good	105	59.7%	174	50.1%	407	50%	61	18.0%
Fair	68	38.6%	137	39.5%	314	38%	234	69.0 %
Poor	3	1.7%	36	10.4%	81	10%	44	13.0%
Don't Know**					14	2%		
Total	176	100%	347	100%	816	100%	339	100%

*Ipsos MORI weighted survey figures for park-going public – people who reported they have used, visited or passed through their local park. ** It should be noted that the Ipsos MORI survey was the only survey to include 'Don't Know' as an answer option.

Table 3.1 Comparison of the current condition of parks between this study and the PPA

3.4 The current funding for parks services

A number of studies have found that it can be very difficult to obtain and compile robust and comparable figures for local authority spending on individual parks and wider parks services. The Park Managers Survey found that over a quarter of local authorities responding to this section of the survey were unable to state their overall budgets (51/178 - 28.7%). Just over 40% of authorities were able to provide figures for both revenue and capital (74/178 - 41.6%), only one in four (45/178 - 25.3%) were only able to provide figures

for annual revenue budgets and just under 1 in 20 were only able to provide figures for capital budgets (8/178 - 4.5%).

Some were unable to provide separate figures for capital and revenue expenditure and as most hold their budgets at a strategic level only around 1 in 5 councils were able to provide separate figures for public parks and country parks. In total 86 individual authorities were able to provide information on current revenue budgets which represents 48% of respondents and 20% of all local authorities in the UK.

From this data the following table summarises current revenue and capital expenditure from the survey:

	All Publicly Accessible Green Space	Public Parks	Country Parks
Current Annual Revenue Budget for 2013/14			
	Sample (n=86)	Sample (n=19)	Sample (n=7)
Minimum	£300,000	£107,000	£11,596
Maximum	£16,700,000	£5,252,000	£1,151,000
Average	£3,145,135	£1,715,914	£499,729
Total	£270,481,619	£32,602,359	£3,498,100
Current Annual Capital Budget for 2013/14			
	Sample (n=56)	Sample (n=5)	Sample (n=5)
Minimum	£0	£0	£30,000
Maximum	£8,150,000	£80,000	£120,000
Average	£784,493	£41,215	£71,000
Total	£43,931,626	£206,077	£355,000

Table 3.2 Current annual revenue and capital expenditure for parks and green spaces

While it was not possible to make a more detailed analysis of what costs were specifically included in the revenue budgets, it was found that most contain figures for grounds maintenance operations (111/116 - 95.7%), grounds maintenance staffing (94/116 - 81.0%) and client or management costs (90/116 - 77.6%). A smaller proportion also included ranger and other development team costs (78/116 - 67.2%) and central recharge or core costs (76/116 - 65.5%). Whilst these figures provide a good indication of the total budgets for the operational staffing and maintenance activities for parks, approximately 25 - 35% of respondents did not include core costs associated with management staffing and overheads that are charged centrally. To assist in the future benchmarking and comparison of budgets across different authorities there would be clear advantage in developing a more standardised framework for budget setting and accounting.

Trends in the budgets for parks services

In looking back at funding over the last three years, parks departments of local authorities have faced significant cuts in budgets for both capital and revenue funding.

- Over 8 in 10 have faced a reduction in their revenue budgets (140/162 - 86.4%)
- Over half have faced a reduction in their capital budgets (65/120 - 54.2%)

Where authorities stated that there has been no change in their budget it was found that 26 authorities reported having no capital budget for parks which had the effect of reducing the total proportion of capital reductions. By illustration, a survey respondent noted that “I cannot see the capital budget being returned for the next 5 or more years”.

Approximately 3 in 10 park managers have faced reductions of 20% or more for both their revenue (52/162 - 32.1%) and capital budgets (35/120 - 29.2%). 15% of managers have had cuts of over 30%, two recorded that they have had reductions in revenue of 50% or more. 18% of managers have faced cuts of over 30% and nine managers have faced reductions in capital of 50% or more. One park manager noted that “we have been told to expect another 35% of cuts to revenue budgets over the next 3 years. Most of our capital is externally funded from grants (Defra, Landfill tax & Lottery) and match funding for capital projects is no longer available.”

Looking forward it appears that these levels of reductions are set to continue:

- Over 8 in 10 will face further cuts in revenue budgets (134/154 - 87.0%)
- Of which, over 3 in 10 are again facing cuts of 20% or more (50/154 - 32.5%)
- Over 6 in 10 will face further cuts in their capital funding (63/99 - 63.6%)
- Of which, almost 4 in 10 will face cuts of 20% or more (37/99 - 37.4%)

The following table provides a comparison of these figures.

	Changes in budgets over the last three years (2010-12)			
	Revenue Budgets		Capital Budgets	
	Sample (n =)	%	Sample (n =)	%
Increased	11	6.8%	29	24.2%
Unchanged	11	6.8%	26	21.7%
Decreased by less than 10%	40	24.7%	12	10.0%
Decreased by between 10% - 20%	48	29.6%	18	15.0%
Decreased by more than 20%	52	32.1%	35	29.2%
Total	162		120	

	Changes in budgets in the next three years (2014-16)			
	Revenue Budgets		Capital Budgets	
	Sample (n =)	%	Sample (n =)	%
Increased	6	3.9%	15	15.2%
Unchanged	14	9.1%	21	21.2%
Decreased by less than 10%	26	16.9%	13	13.1%
Decreased by between 10% - 20%	58	37.7%	13	13.1%
Decreased by more than 20%	50	32.5%	37	37.4%
Total	154		99	

Table 3.3 Past and future changes in revenue and capital budgets for parks and green spaces



Figure 3.3 Word Cloud of Park Manager responses when questioned about ‘What fees and charges do you intend to increase over the next three years (2014-16)’

These findings align closely with the 2013 APSE survey which found over 80% of authorities are generating income from sports pitch lettings and over 60% from festivals and events, allotments, concessions and bowling greens. Over 70% (71.9%) intend to increase fees and charges over the next two to three years to meet efficiency pressures.

Income from other sources

Raising funding from charging for wider services has increased significantly in the last three years and has been adopted by almost 70% of all park managers (114/168 - 67.9%). Planning gain still provides the largest source of additional income with almost 90% of park managers using Section 106, Section 75 and the new Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) as the most important source of capital (150/168 - 89.3%). Several park managers highlighted the importance of this funding. “Capital budgets are based solely on s106 funds which have been fairly consistent” and “the capital programme has been funded from s106 developers contributions as there has been no core capital funding for some time”.

	Additional sources of funding secured by Local Authorities in the last three years (2010-12)	
	Sample (n=)	% of authorities
Funding from other council departments and services	86	51.2%
Funding from planning including s106, s75 and CIL	150	89.3%
Funding from the National Lottery - HLF, Big Lottery Fund, etc.	111	66.1%
Funding from charging for services	114	67.9%
Funding from commercial services	65	38.7%
Funding from gifts and fundraising	54	32.1%
Total respondents	168	-

Table 3.4 Proportion of local authorities generating additional funding from other sources

Funding from a variety of National Lottery programmes, including HLF and Big Lottery Fund’s Parks for People, is used by two thirds of local authorities (111/168 - 66.1%), 51% access funding from other council departments and a third generate additional resources from gifts and fundraising (54/168 - 32.1%). From the individual responses, funding from HLF grants programmes is seen as a key source of capital and revenue for park investment with one park manager noting that the “increase in capital is due to one large HLF funded project” and another stating that “all the benefits to the budget are due to HLF projects. If the HLF projects were taken out of the equation overall revenue spend would be down due to staffing efficiencies”.

It is clear that planning gain provides a key source of additional funding for parks but changes to this legislation are expected to have a direct impact on the future level of income generated from this source. Whilst almost 90% of local authorities receive some level of funding through Sections 106 and 75, just over 60% of authorities expect to continue to receive funding through CIL in the future (102/163 - 62.6%). “A risk to capital investment will be the move to CIL funding programmes, where parks and green spaces may struggle to gain significance against schools, hospital and housing projects”, was noted by one park manager, whilst another succinctly summarised this situation as “capital has been buoyant, but in the next 24 months will dry up as we move from s106 to CIL”.

3.5 The current staffing and management of parks services

Changes in staffing have followed a similar pattern to funding over the last three years with a significant reduction in both operational and management staff for parks services across the UK. Responses from the Park Managers Survey indicate that over three quarters of local authorities have reduced staff with the numbers of management staff being cut the most. Over three quarters of authorities have lost operational staff (113/146 - 77.4%) and 1 in 5 authorities have lost more than 20% of their operational staff (34/146 - 23.3%). As an example, one respondent noted that “last year the Park Ranger service took a 50% cut and lost its manager and I now manage them as well. The rangers have gone from a team of 32 to 10 in the last 3 years”.

For management staff, 4 in 5 authorities have faced a reduction in staff numbers (113/139 – 81.3%) and, in comparison to operational staff, there have been almost twice as many staff lost at a level of 20% or more (58/139 - 41.7%). The full break down of these changes is set out in the following table.

% change	Change in staffing levels over last three years (2010-12)			
	Sample (n=)	Operational Staff	Sample (n=)	Management Staff
Reduction of 20% or more	34	23.3%	58	41.7%
Reduction of 1% to 19%	79	54.1%	55	39.6%
No change	27	18.5%	21	15.1%
Increase of 1% to 19%	6	4.1%	4	2.9%
Increase of 20% or more	0	0.0%	1	0.7%
Total sample	146	100%	139	100%

Table 3.5 Change in staffing levels over the last three years (2010-12)

This data indicates a higher level of job losses compared to the APSE State of the Market Surveys for 2012 and 2013. For 2014, the APSE data expects staff reductions to continue with over half of authorities losing staff (57.4%) and 1 in 5 expecting staff reductions of 11% or more (20.2%). Of these, 25% are expected to be through compulsory redundancy. By illustration, Birmingham City Council undertook an extensive public consultation on making substantial cuts to its budget that are expected to continue until 2018. The final report⁴⁴ on the consultation noted that 'parks were a new and large concern this year with many people saying that staff cuts should not be as large as proposed as this would have a devastating impact on the city's parks and would also undermine the huge volunteering effort'.

Initially Birmingham was committed to saving £2.1m in 2014/15 from the total Parks, Rangers and Woodland Team which would have significant impact on the service. It had already lost 43 posts in 2010 and absorbed 30% cuts to the service over the past three years. Following the consultation exercise which recorded substantial public concern about the impact this would have on the service, the current level of savings have been reduced to £700,000 with just 3 posts scheduled to be lost from the Woodland Team in 2014/15. Neighbouring Walsall Council⁴⁵ has been reported to have lost more than half their park rangers. Whilst in Sheffield, as the council looks to make £1m in savings over the next three years, the parks management team will be reduced and traditional approaches to maintenance will be switched to more natural and lower cost land-management practices.

In-house and contracted-out maintenance

The Park Managers Survey found that over half of authorities currently maintain their parks through in-house services (98/176 - 55.7%) compared to just under a quarter that have contracted this out (41/176 - 23.3%) whilst most of the remaining authorities have a combined approach of in-house and contracted-out (33/176 - 18.8%). In comparison, data from APSE for 2013 found most councils use in-house teams for maintenance (82.7%) although this is expected to fall in 2014 to a similar level recorded in the Park Managers Survey (58.2%). In two to three years it is expected that there will be a greater mix of service delivery models including external trusts and partnerships with other organisations.

When asked about changes in management over the next three years over a quarter of park managers currently do not know or are unsure whether the existing arrangements will change (51/176 - 28.6%). To date just under 20% of authorities have transferred the management of individual parks to other organisations and in particular either a town or parish council or a trust (34/172 - 19.8%). Whilst a smaller proportion have already transferred the management of some individual parks to community groups (22/175 - 12.6%) it is significant that this number is expected to almost double in the next three years (37/170 - 21.8%).

One park manager noted that 'small areas of open space land have been transferred or long-term leased to Town or Community Councils' and with the pressure to meet saving targets another stated that there is an increasing need to empower and engage the community to take on more responsibility. A London authority is actively promoting Friends Groups and Community Partners to play a greater role in the management and maintenance of their Parks whilst the voluntary and community sector in one city in Yorkshire and the Humber has been assisting in green space management for over 10 years.

3.6 The role of local communities and partnerships

It is clear from both the Park Managers and Friends Group surveys that the role of community groups in championing and supporting their local parks is already important and greatly valued and this is projected to grow in value in the future. Only 5% of park managers stated that they do not have any active friends groups (9/174 - 5.2%) and although the highest number recorded for a local authority was 146 groups, the current average is 11 groups. Three years ago the largest number of groups a local authority had was 60, with an average of 9 groups. Over half of park managers expect the number of friends or user groups to increase (94/176 - 53.4%) over the next three years.

Results from the Friends Group Survey also record a growth in numbers with almost 50% of groups recording an increase in membership in the last three years (163/346 - 47.1%). This represents a larger increase in membership compared to the 38% rise recorded by the Community Networking Project (CNP)⁴⁶ published in 2011. Over 7 in 10 Friends Groups are in a wider network (249/347 - 71.8%) with a similar proportion being part of a local authority-wide group (176/243 - 72.4%). A third are affiliated to a regional group (82/243 - 33.7%). These figures are again higher than those recorded by the CNP.

Over three quarters of Friends Groups are actively involved in the management of their parks (268/341 - 78.6%) in a variety of ways. Of these groups involved in management:

- almost 8 in 10 help promote and encourage the use of their park (211/267 - 79.0%)
- three quarters organise events (200/267 - 74.9%)
- a similar number help with maintenance (196/267 - 73.4%)
- over 6 in 10 are involved in fundraising (167/267 - 62.5%)

The CNP recorded similar levels of participation with 85% promoting the site, 76% organising events, and 71% fundraising for the site.

Support from local authorities

When asked what support friends groups received from their local authorities by far the highest proportion of responses were staff time (247/325 - 76.0%) and advice (240/325 - 73.8%). In addition councils provided meeting spaces for 43% of groups, grant funding for 35% and office space for 24% of groups. It is clear through both the Friends Group Survey and results from the CNP that officer's staff time and advice continue to be the greatest contribution that local authorities make to the work of friends groups.

Looking forward friends groups were also asked what new and additional support would they like to receive that they don't already have from their local authority. From the total returns to the survey:

- 54% would like to receive grant funding (129/238 - 54.2%)
- 32% would benefit from staff time (75/238 - 31.5%)
- 30% would appreciate training (71/238 - 29.8%)

When asked whether they received support from other organisations over half (178/340 - 52.4%) stated they had. Whilst the majority of groups stated 'other' organisations, around 20% of groups received support from a local Wildlife Trust, the Trust for Conservation Volunteers, HLF and Groundwork.

Fundraising and volunteering

In total the community groups responding to the survey have helped to generate over £6.6m in direct fundraising over the past three years. Whilst the average for individual groups was £20,862 over three years, 8% of groups raised more than £100,000. According to the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces there are over 5,000 friends groups operating throughout the UK which suggests that when combined the potential fundraising for all groups over the last three years may total over £100m. From the survey data the following graph illustrates this distribution of fundraising:

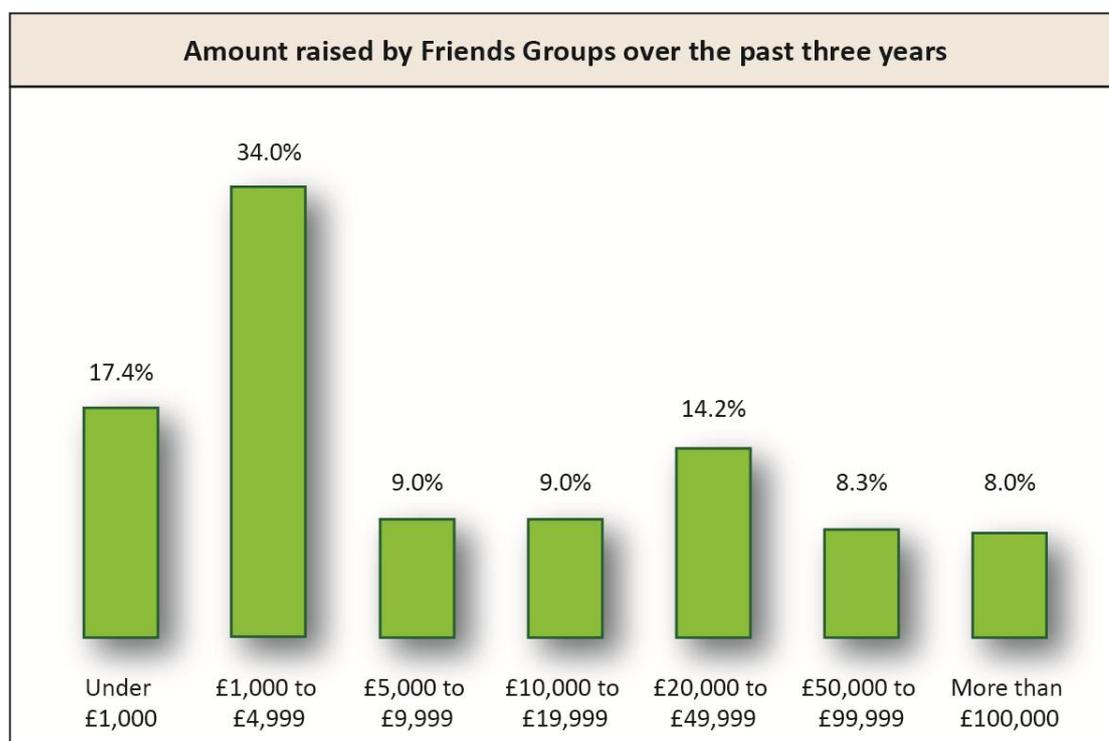


Figure 3.4 Levels of funding raised by Park Friends Groups in the last three years (2010-12)

When the Friends Groups were asked to estimate how many hours they had given to their park over the past 12 months, the total for respondents was 56,489 days with an average of 183 days. This represents a significant in-kind contribution to the support and management of local parks. HLF considers that this in-kind value equates to £50 per volunteer day rate, representing an average of £9,150 of volunteer time given by individual friends groups responding to the survey. If this value is projected for the entire 5,000 groups that are estimated to be operating throughout the UK the total in-kind contribution of time could represent around 915,000 volunteering days and £45.7m in total per year. Using higher hourly rates set out by Volunteering England⁴⁷ that are based on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings the gross equivalent economic value of this contribution could be more than double this figure.



Image: Heritage Lottery Fund

Friends groups and local volunteers are playing an increasing role in supporting their local parks

The Park Managers Survey also asked how many volunteer days are contributed to public parks. The 63 responses to the question totalled 84,405 volunteer days providing an average of 1,340 days per authority. This figure would include volunteering across a variety of parks and green spaces managed by a local authority and the involvement of a variety of different organisations volunteering their time. If multiplied by the total number of authorities in the UK, this represents over half a million volunteer days per year. Using the HLF day rate of £50, this represents a value of £67,000 per authority that multiplied by the total number of authorities would project a total value of £29m per year for the UK. Again this figure could more than double if higher ONS hourly rates are used.

In summary, this analysis highlights the very high rates of park use across the UK and how these spaces have significantly improved in condition over the past decade when compared to similar data from the PPA in 2001. However the revenue and capital budgets for parks services have fallen considerably during the last three years and are set to be reduced further over the next three years. Likewise, staffing levels have also fallen significantly and are expected to decline further in the next few years. The wider impact of these changes and particular regional variations are explored in further detail in the following section.

4.0 ANALYSING THE TRENDS AND IMPACTS OF CHANGE



Image: Heritage Lottery Fund

Castle Gardens, was gifted to Lisburn, Northern Ireland, in 1903 and its restoration was completed in 2008

Having reviewed the primary UK-wide findings from the surveys for public parks in relation to levels of use, condition, funding, staffing and community participation, this section sets these findings within a wider context. It explores the importance of parks in supporting the social life and cohesion of communities, both nationally and regionally, examining trends in funding and condition within the context of increasing competition for local authority resources. With parks playing an important role in the wellbeing of urban communities it looks in further detail on the impact of these changes on urban authorities and patterns of community support across the UK.

4.1 Increasing social value of parks

The evidence is clear that parks are a popular and regularly used local resource. They are often valued by people simply for their physical presence in local neighbourhoods whether they are actually visited or not and provide an important social network for many communities. A number of surveys have tracked increasing levels of use. Whilst not directly comparable, a MORI survey referenced by *Park Life*⁴⁸ in 1992 when parks were facing significant neglect recorded that 45% of the population used parks regularly. Over a decade later and with parks improving in condition a BVPI survey for England found in 2006 that 78% of respondents had visited a local park or green space within the last six months and 86% within the last year.

The Public Opinions Survey found that 83% of the park-going public (i.e. people who reported that they have used, visited or passed through their local park) had visited within the past six months and 89% within the past year.

Greenspace Scotland offers further detail on trends through their tracker survey that has been undertaken every two years since 2005 providing the most regular data set for use of

green space in a particular region. For urban districts in Scotland, 82% of respondents visited green spaces at least once or twice a year in 2005, rising to 89% in 2009 and 88% in 2011. More recently in Scotland there has been a declining trend in regular use for those visiting at least once a week from 63% in 2009 to 54% in 2011 and a less marked fall from 80% to 75% for those visiting once a month.

Results from a recent BBC Opinion Poll⁴⁹ suggest that parks and open spaces are the third most frequently used public service for 78% of respondents compared to 86% using hospitals and 90% using GP surgeries.

Data from the MENE survey highlights that walking through parks and green spaces on route to other places is the most frequent outdoor activity in England after relaxing in gardens.

The value for children and families

The importance of parks for children and families comes across clearly in the Public Opinions Survey. Over 8 in 10 people with young children under 10 in the household use their local park monthly or more (82%). Early childhood memories include visits to local parks and anecdotal evidence from the blog *Bristol Mum*⁵⁰ illustrates this value. One particular review notes that “Canford Park, a beautiful Victorian park ... is a park that my parents used to take me when I was little. It feels good to now take my own kids there”. A large number of postings on Mumsnet⁵¹, the UK’s biggest network for parents, regularly share tips on the best local parks for children with postings drawing attention to ‘11 Birmingham parks that have won Green Flag Awards’ and ‘good parks and playgrounds in Fife’.

The importance of public parks for children has been emphasised by *Making Britain Great for Children and Families*, a manifesto⁵² launched by 4Children, the national charity working towards a more integrated approach to children’s services. In seeking to develop a new commitment to families in Britain the manifesto sets out clear ways to create good places for children to grow up in with a stronger ‘family commitment to all aspects of the local community, including planning, public spaces and parks, transport and policing’. The value of parks for the wider community is also well documented. *Parks and squares: who cares?*⁵³ is clear that ‘good parks give a sense of community’ and can be considered as the number one public space issue for individuals and organisations. Furthermore *Community Green*⁵⁴ emphasised that ‘green space has been proven to reduce the impact of deprivation, deliver better health and wellbeing and create a strong community’.

Research from Natural England⁵⁵ is clear 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’. An example from Chicago suggests that parks can actively promote ‘inter-community relations in a way which is almost unique in urban life’. A Joseph Rowntree report into social cohesion in the UK⁵⁶ notes that as communities across the UK become increasingly mixed and diverse the value of 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, for poor quality parks can have a detrimental effect on cohesion.

Public concern on the impact of cuts

In addition to levels of use and views on the condition of parks the Public Opinions Survey asked respondents how concerned they were that reductions in council budgets could have a negative impact on the condition of their local park. For the park-going public, 63% stated that they were fairly concerned or very concerned. For those park-going members of the public with children aged under 10 in their household this figure increased to 72%.

Concern was also higher amongst those members of the park-going public who stated that their parks are already in a poor condition (74% were fairly or very concerned) and amongst those who consider visiting their local park to be important to their quality of life (79%). This high level of public concern is a growing issue for local authorities and councillors as they look to find savings and balance their budgets for 2014/15. In Weymouth and Portland⁵⁷ for example, it has been reported that cuts threaten the closure of Victoria and Easton Gardens. Councillors are demanding that 'these gardens be kept open and that a budget for the maintenance of the gardens is maintained'.

The total number of park visits

Whilst the physical nature of parks and open spaces makes visitor numbers difficult to calculate accurately, the PPA estimated in 2001 that there were in the region of 1.5 to 2 billion park visits per year. In 2006 the NAO drew similar conclusions, estimating that there were over 2 billion visits to urban parks and green spaces in England⁵⁸. Using figures on the frequency of park visits from the Public Opinions Survey and projecting them for current population figures in the UK⁵⁹, it is possible to estimate the total number of people using, visiting or passing through parks each year. This suggests that there may be at least 2.6 billion park visits per year across the UK⁶⁰ which offers a comparable figure to the NAO assessment for England. A further breakdown of the data estimates that:

- 34 million people use parks once a month or more (54%)
- 44 million use parks at least once a year (69%)
- Almost 600 million visits annually are made by households with children under 15

The cost of a park visit

The PPA also made an indicative estimate of the cost per park visit at around 42 pence, which in current terms would be almost 60 pence. Taking an average parks department revenue and capital budget of £3.93m⁶¹ (including all green spaces) an indicative cost of 64 pence per visit⁶² can be projected that compares closely with the PPA estimate. If one only takes average figures for the combined capital and revenue budgets for public parks and country parks provided in the Park Managers Survey the average total budget falls to £2.33m. This projects a lower cost of just under 40 pence per visit. It can be suggested that with increasing visitor numbers and reducing parks budgets the cost per visit to public parks may now be estimated to be in the region of 40 to 50 pence. This compares favourably to indicative prices charged for council run swimming pools at £3.50 and gyms and fitness centres at £6.00 per adult visit.

Regional variation in the use of parks

The Public Opinions Survey also provides some indicative regional figures for use. Whilst sample sizes for some regions and countries are too small to generate reliable average figures, the survey suggests parks in London and the North West receive a higher percentage of visits per year from the public than other regions (85% of Londoners and 79% of people living in the North West have visited their local park at least once in the last year compared to 69% of the UK public). Yet, when looking at data for only those people who use parks, figures for annual use is similar across almost all regions.

Region	Results for All Respondents to Ipsos MORI Public Opinions Survey - Oct 2013				Results for Only Park Users to Ipsos MORI Public Opinions Survey - Oct 2013			
	Sample n=1037	Once a week or more	Once a month or more	Within the last year	Sample n=809	Once a week or more	Once a month or more	Within the last year
North West	125	29%	56%	79%	106	34%	65%	91%
North*	33*	26%	31%	43%	19*	48%	57%	79%
Yorkshire & the Humber	99	29%	50%	72%	85	33%	57%	83%
West Midlands	85	36%	54%	62%	57	54%	81%	92%
East Midlands	91	46%	56%	67%	72	58%	71%	85%
East Anglia	93	41%	54%	71%	73	53%	69%	91%
London	125	45%	71%	85%	114	49%	78%	93%
South West	98	22%	41%	60%	62	34%	62%	93%
South East	108	34%	53%	66%	84	44%	69%	85%
England	857	34%	53%	69%	672	44%	69%	88%
Northern Ireland*	30*	63%	63%	70%	43*	86%	86%	95%
Scotland	97	35%	55%	68%	72	48%	75%	92%
Wales	53	28%	53%	70%	22*	33%	62%	82%
Total	1,037	35%	54%	69%	809	45%	69%	89%

* Sample size too small to generate reliable average figure

Note the regional boundaries presented here vary from the recognised Government Regions in England

Only Park Users includes only those who reported that they have used, visited or passed through their local park.

Table 4.1 Regional variations in park use recorded by the Ipsos MORI Public Opinions Survey for all respondents and for only those that use parks



Hanley Park, Stoke, first opened to the public in 1897 and now the focus of a restoration plan

4.2 Declining public funding for parks

It can be very difficult to compile and compare financial data on running parks services between different authorities and across years. By example, a CABI Space research project⁶³ looking at the relationship between expenditure on parks and their quality found that of the eight councils interviewed 'most of them didn't have comprehensive figures showing how much they were spending on their parks'. When analysing expenditure on parks in 2001, the PPA was only able to draw on a small reliable sample size of 24 authorities, which represented just 6% of the total survey returns. More recent figures compiled by various technical groups including APSE and the London Parks Benchmarking Group (LPBG) provide some data on which to make indicative comparisons.

The Park Managers Survey estimated the average revenue spend for an individual authority is £3.15m for all publicly accessible green space in 2013/14. This compares closely with past figures from the NAO for the 154 urban authorities in England⁶⁴ where almost £700m was spent on urban green space in 2004/05. Of this, £481.5m was from council sources, averaging £3.13m per authority. When factoring in inflation, this would equate to an average budget of just over £4m for authorities in real terms by 2012.

Figures from the APSE benchmarking study⁶⁵ provide average annual net costs of parks services which in 2010/11 were £4.97m, falling to £4.19m in 2011/12, although these figures are drawn from different sample sets to the NAO and the Park Managers Survey and may include additional central costs. These APSE figures suggest average budgets have fallen in the region of up to £1m or around 25% over the past two to three years. Limited data precludes drawing firm conclusions but does align with figures for budget reductions over the last three years recorded for around a third of respondents to the Park Managers Survey. There is a clear downward trend for budgets in the past four years and it is likely these reductions have accelerated in the past two years.



Sefton Park, Liverpool. Parks in the North West report some of the highest budget cuts in the UK

Changing costs of management per hectare

Estimates for costs per hectare for maintaining green spaces can be made by comparing average figures for total revenue expenditure with average figures for the total area of parks and green spaces recorded by the Park Managers Survey. The average revenue spend is calculated to be £6,410 per hectare for 2013/14. This compares closely to 2011 figures from the LPBG of an average £6,252 per hectare, although there is a considerable difference between rates for inner and outer London. The APSE figures⁶⁶ are also comparable and indicate a fall in recent years from £6,521 in 2009/10, to £6,260 in 2010/11 and £5,957 in 2011/12.

Past data from the PPA calculated average annual revenue expenditure per hectare to be £4,424 in 1999/00. When factoring in inflation⁶⁷ over the past 13 years, this equates to £6,492 in 2012. This is an almost identical figure to the current rate from the Park Managers Survey and whilst there are too many variables to draw any firm conclusions, it suggests that average revenue budgets per hectare may be returning to those recorded by the PPA in the 1990s. At this time a significant proportion of public parks across the UK were declining in condition. There is clear concern that the current levels of funding and resourcing for parks are now falling back towards those measured at the start of the twentieth century when public parks had been facing a protracted period of neglect.

Regional variations in budget cuts

An assessment of the regional variations in budgets makes it clear that some parts of the UK are now facing far greater reductions than others, although the small sample size for some regions limits firm conclusions. For revenue budgets over the last three years the North West appears to have lost on average around a quarter of its funding whilst the

majority of other English regions have seen similar levels of reduction that are around 10 - 15%. Reductions in capital budgets appear on average to be lower although it has already been noted that a number of these have remained at zero in the last three years and are likely to under-play the extent of the reductions. The following table provides a summary of the regional data:

Region	Total Authorities	Past Changes to Revenue Budgets (2010-12)		Past Changes to Capital Budgets (2010-12)	
		Sample (n=)	Average Cuts	Sample (n=)	Average Cuts
North West	41	15	-26.5%	12	-10.9%
North East*	12	6*	-10.5%	4*	+16.3%
Yorkshire & Humber*	22	5*	-13.2%	4*	-25.0%
West Midlands	33	21	-13.0%	13	-4.8%
East Midlands	45	16	-12.0%	11	-6.5%
East	52	19	-10.7%	13	-16.2%
London	33	20	-11.9%	16	-9.1%
South West	41	14	-14.4%	12	-3.9%
South East	74	21	-12.4%	15	+0.9%
England	353	137	-13.8%	100	-6.9%
Northern Ireland*	26	3*	+0.3%	3*	+4.3%
Scotland	32	13	-15.3%	11	-9.5%
Wales	22	9*	-6.8%	6*	-17.5%

* Sample size too small to generate reliable average figure

Table 4.2 Regional changes to revenue and capital budgets over the past three years.

In looking at future budgets, the North West continues to project a significant reduction in revenue budgets of over 20%, whilst other English regions average between 9% and 16%. Similar figures are noted for changes in capital funding with again the North West projecting the highest reduction in capital expenditure.

Region	Total Authorities	Expected Changes to Revenue Budgets (2014-16)		Expected Changes to Capital Budgets (2014-16)	
		Sample (n=)	Average Cuts	Sample (n=)	Average Cuts
North West	41	15	-21.3%	11	-22.6%
North East*	12	6*	-21.2%	4*	-28.8%
Yorkshire & Humber*	22	5*	-22.0%	4*	-25.0%
West Midlands	33	20	-16.0%	11	-16.2%
East Midlands	45	14	-14.4%	13	-16.6%
East	52	18	-10.8%	12	-16.8%
London	33	17	-9.5%	10	-9.4%
South West	41	17	-12.5%	7	+1.4%
South East	74	19	-9.9%	12	-5.8%
England	353	131	-14.0%	84	-14.5%
Northern Ireland*	26	1*	+2.0%	2*	+2.5%
Scotland	32	14	-9.9%	9	-8.2%
Wales*	22	8*	-14.4%	4*	-12.5%

* Sample size too small to generate reliable average figure

Table 4.3 Expected regional changes to revenue and capital budgets over the next three years.

Priorities for spending on parks in the future

With reducing budgets, local councils are having to make difficult choices on what should be prioritised for spending. To gauge public view on this the Public Opinions Survey asked respondents what they thought were the most important things about their local park their council should continue funding as a priority in the future, given the need to prioritise local spending. For the park-going public, providing facilities for children and young people was the most important feature for councils to continue funding, selected by 61%. This is not surprising when it is known that a high proportion of park users have children under the age of 10 in their household. This priority was closely followed by the need to preserve standards of general cleanliness (selected by 58% of the park-going public), and ensuring that parks are safe to use by tacking anti-social behaviour and vandalism (selected by 57% of the park-going public).

4.3 Changing quality and condition of parks

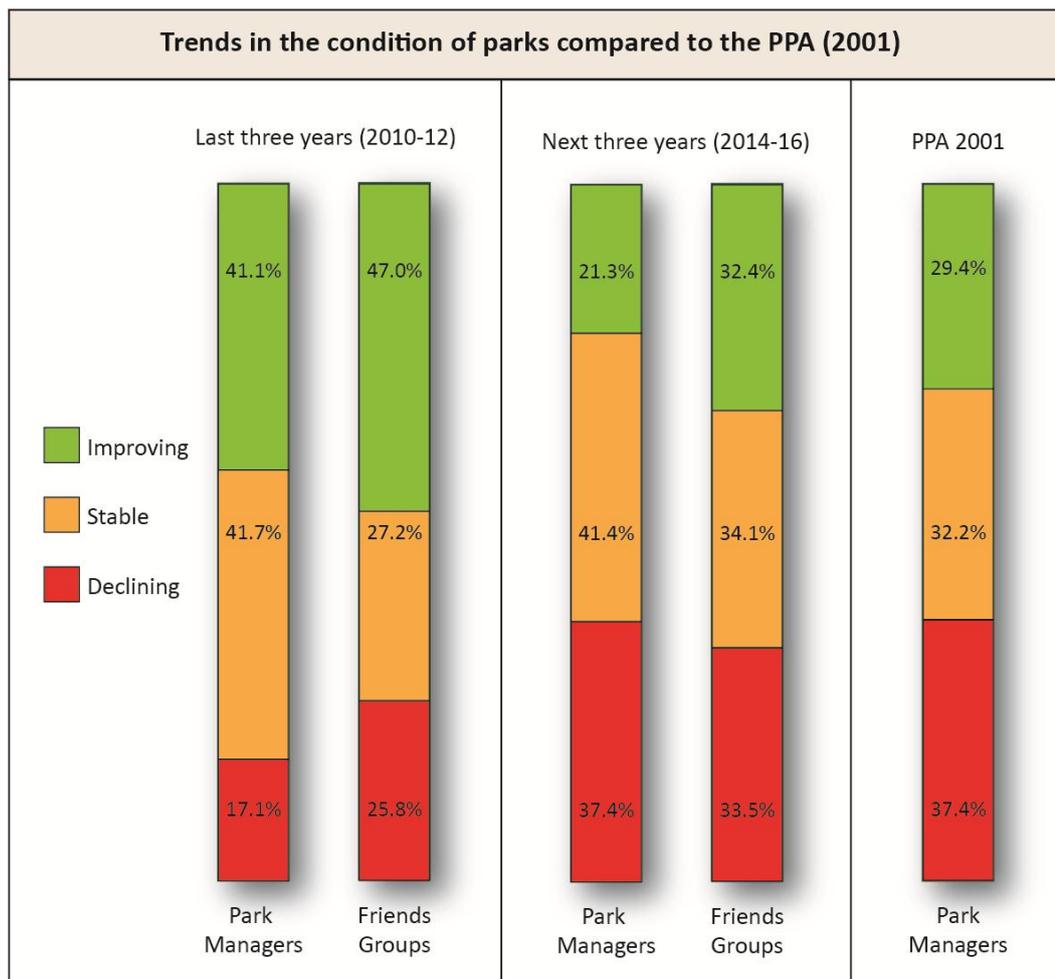


Figure 4.1 Trends in the condition of parks comparing the Park Managers and the Friends Group Surveys with the PPA in 2001.



Image: © LUC

Myatt's Fields Park in Lambeth, London. First opened in 1889 and fully restored and reopened in 2010

The results of the Park Managers and Friends Group surveys identify some clear trends in their opinions of the condition of public parks when related to comparable past data from the PPA's 2001 survey of park managers:

- 41% of park managers and 47% of friends groups report their parks have been improving in condition over the past three years. In 2001 29% of park managers reported an improving condition in their parks over the previous 10 years
- 17% of park managers and 26% of friends groups report their parks have been declining in condition over the past three years. In 2001 37% of park managers reported a declining condition in their parks over the previous 10 years

However when reviewing the expected trend in condition over the next three years:

- 21% of park managers and 32% of friends groups anticipate that their parks will be improving. The figure for 2001 was 29%
- 37% of park managers and 33% of friends groups anticipate that their parks will be declining. The figure for 2001 was 37%

It is very concerning that the anticipated trend in condition for public parks over the next three years is very similar if not identical to that recorded in 2001 for the 1990s when parks had been facing more than two decades of considerable neglect.

UK-wide trend in Condition over	HLF 2013				HLF 2013				UPF 2001	
	Park Managers Survey		Friends Group Survey		Park Managers Survey		Friends Group Survey		Public Parks Assessment	
	Last three years				Next three years				Last ten years	
	n		n		n		n		n	
Improving	72	41.1%	162	47.0%	37	21.3%	112	32.4%	98	29.4%
Stable	73	41.7%	94	27.2%	72	41.4%	118	34.1%	111	33.2%
Declining	30	17.1%	89	25.8%	65	37.4%	116	33.5%	125	37.4%
Total	175	100%	345	100%	174	100%	346	100%	334	100%

Table 4.4 Comparison in the trend in condition of parks between 2013 and the PPA in 2001

Regional variations in quality

The Park Managers Survey also provides data on regional variations in the condition of parks, although the small number of returns for the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and Northern Ireland preclude drawing firm conclusions across the entire UK. The results enable some indicative comparisons to be made. London and the East Midlands are reporting the largest proportion of parks that are in good condition at the current time whilst the South West has the largest proportion of parks in a fair condition.

Region	Total Authorities	Current Condition of Public Parks			
		Sample (n=)	Good	Fair	Poor
North West	41	17	64.7%	35.3%	-
North East*	12	6*	33.3%	66.7%	-
Yorkshire & the Humber*	22	5*	20.0%	80.0%	-
West Midlands	33	22	59.1%	40.9%	-
East Midlands	45	16	75.0%	25.0%	-
East	52	20	60.0%	40.0%	-
London	33	20	85.0%	15.0%	-
South West	41	18	33.3%	61.1%	5.6%
South East	74	24	58.3%	33.3%	8.3%
England	353	148	59.6%	38.4%	2.0%
Northern Ireland*	26	4*	75%	25%	-
Scotland	32	14	64.3%	35.7%	-
Wales	22	10	50.0%	50.0%	-

* Sample size too small to generate reliable average figure

Table 4.5 Regional variations in the current condition of parks

The regional trends in condition over the last three years suggest that London and the East show the largest proportion of park managers who reported that their parks have been improving. At the same time, Scotland, Wales and the North West recorded the largest proportion of park managers who reported that their parks have been declining in condition. Looking forward over the next three years the anticipated change in condition suggests that those parks in the East Midlands, East, London and the South East are expected to continue to be improving whereas a far larger proportion of parks are expected to be declining. A large proportion of responding parks managers from the North West, Scotland and Wales report that their parks are likely to be declining in condition over the next three years.

Region	Total Authorities	Change in Condition over last three years (2010-12)			Anticipated Change in Condition over next three years (2014-16)				
		Sample (n=)	Improving	Stable	Declining	Sample (n=)	Improving	Stable	Declining
North West	41	17	17.6%	58.8%	23.5%	17	11.8%	41.2%	47.1%
North East*	12	5*	60.0%	-	40.0%	6*	33.3%	16.7%	50.0%
Yorkshire & Humber*	22	5*	20.0%	80.0%	-	5*	-	20.0%	80.0%
West Midlands	33	22	36.4%	45.5%	18.2%	22	18.2%	45.5%	36.4%
East Midlands	45	16	56.3%	31.3%	12.5%	16	25.0%	50.0%	25.0%
East	52	20	60.0%	30.0%	10.0%	19	26.3%	47.4%	26.3%
London	33	20	60.0%	40.0%	-	20	25.0%	55.0%	20.0%
South West	41	18	22.2%	61.1%	16.7%	18	16.7%	50.0%	33.3%
South East	74	24	37.5%	41.7%	20.8%	24	25.0%	41.7%	33.3%
England	353	147	41.5%	43.5%	15.0%	147	21.1%	44.9%	34.0%
Northern Ireland*	26	4*	75%	25%	-	3*	66.7%	33.3%	-
Scotland	32	14	28.6%	35.7%	35.7%	14	14.3%	28.8%	57.1%
Wales	22	10	40.0%	30.0%	30.0%	10	20.0%	10.0%	70.0%

* Sample size too small to generate reliable average figure

Table 4.6 Regional variations in the trend in condition over the past and next three years

4.4 Competing local priorities for parks

The *Future funding outlook for councils*, published by the Local Government Association (LGA)⁶⁸ for England highlights the increasing constraints that non-statutory services will face over this decade. Whilst government funding is yet to be set for the last years of this decade the LGA projects that there could be a funding gap of £14.4bn in total by 2020, the equivalent of a 27% fall in real terms over this period. 'With social care and waste spending absorbing a rising proportion of the resources available to councils, funding for other council services drops by 46% in cash terms by the end of the decade'. For a number of discretionary services, including public parks, it is projected that these will face the equivalent of a 60% cash cut after commitments on social care, waste management, street

cleansing, concessionary fares (council funded subsidised travel) and capital financing (the interest rates and the cost of council secured loans) are met.

Earlier projections made by the LGA in 2012 suggested that this cumulative 60% cut could even rise to as much as 90% for some services by the end of the decade. These average figures for local authorities in England also mask marked variations across the regions and in particular those serving more deprived communities. A recent analysis⁶⁹ of the change in council budgets suggest that those in northern urban cities, along with a number of London Boroughs with high levels of deprivation, have seen their budgets cut by almost 10 times more than mostly rural councils in the south of England. As it has been shown, data from the Park Managers Survey indicate that the level of cuts that park services are facing vary considerably across different regions and individual councils. Many of these differences will be influenced directly by the level of corporate and political support enjoyed by parks and park services within individual local authorities.

The benefit of corporate and political support

In the face of these increasing budget cuts 59.2% of park managers still consider their parks and green spaces to be a corporate priority for their authority. In addition almost 70% of councils have an elected member who acts as a champion for parks and green spaces (122/175 - 69.7%). Evidence for this can be found in corporate strategies, plans and policies along with party manifestos that include commitments to increase the number of Green Flag Award parks. Park managers noted that “councillors see parks as essential local services and a priority for voters”. “Green Space seen as important for social, environment and health benefits and as such is one of several key elements of the Core Strategy with certain green spaces mentioned specifically”. These views align with CABI Space research⁷⁰ that found that if people are satisfied with local parks, they are generally satisfied with their council. ‘There is a strong link between people’s satisfaction with their local parks and their satisfaction with their neighbourhood’ and ‘in places where local authorities spend more on parks and open space, satisfaction is higher’.

A number of park managers specifically highlighted the value of green space strategies as evidence of a corporate commitment to parks with one manager stating that “due to our Green Space Strategy being agreed, additional funding has been forthcoming from the council to improve our green spaces and parks”. Over three quarters of all councils have a strategy (134/176 – 76.1%) and over two thirds are up to date (108/160 – 67.5%). They can take a variety of forms of which a green or open space strategy is the most common for over 75% of all authorities followed by a dedicated parks strategy, 28%, or a green infrastructure strategy, 22%.

When undertaking an analysis of the value of these strategies it was found that local authorities were more likely to have parks in a good condition (86/134 - 64.2%) compared to those that did not (19/42 - 45.2%). In addition the presence of a strategy suggests that authorities are more likely to have parks that have improved over the last three years (61/133 - 45.9%) compared to those that do not have a strategy (11/42 - 26.2%). Those authorities that do not have a strategy are far more likely to have parks that have been declining in condition.

	What do you consider to be the current condition of your public parks?				What is the trend in condition of your public parks over the last three years (2010-12)?			
	Sample	Good	Fair	Poor	Sample	Improving	Stable	Declining
Strategy	134	64.2%	34.3%	1.5%	133	45.9%	40.6%	13.5%
No Strategy	42	45.2%	52.4%	2.4%	42	26.2%	45.2%	28.6%

Table 4.7 Comparison of the condition and trend in condition of parks with the presence of a parks strategy

Where parks are considered to be a corporate priority it is more likely that they will have been stable or improving over the past three years. In addition, it is expected that their condition will remain in a stable or improving condition and less likely to decline over the next three years compared to authorities who do not consider parks to be a priority.

	What is the trend in condition of your public parks over the last three years (2010-12)?				What is the trend in condition of your public parks likely to be over the next three years (2014-16)?			
	Sample	Improving	Stable	Declining	Sample	Improving	Stable	Declining
Priority	102	46.1%	42.2%	11.8%	101	23.8%	47.5%	28.7%
Not a Priority	71	33.8%	40.8%	25.4%	71	18.3%	32.4%	49.3%

Table 4.8 Comparison of the condition and trend in condition of parks where they are a corporate priority

Competing financial priorities

There has been a growing concern that public parks have faced a greater reduction in budgets compared to other council spending. When asked whether ‘the squeeze on public sector resources is affecting parks disproportionately to other service areas’ over twice as many councils participating in the APSE benchmarking programme agreed or agreed strongly compared to those that disagreed (Data for 2013 - 30.9% Disagree, 30.9% Agree, and 34.5% Agree Strongly). Responses to the same question in the previous year showed an even higher proportion of councils considered parks had been treated disproportionately to other services.

An analysis of the Park Managers Survey found that almost half of councils report that their parks budgets have fallen by the same amount as other services (81/166 - 48.8%) whilst a quarter consider parks budgets have fallen more (42/166 - 25.3%). As public parks are a discretionary service there is growing concern that with annual budget cuts expected to continue through much of this decade it is likely parks will face an increasingly disproportionate level of cuts in comparison to other statutory services.

Regional Variations in Priorities

When looking regionally at this issue, it appears that the majority of park managers consider budgets are generally falling by the same amount as other services, although the North West records that a higher proportion of local authority budgets have fallen in comparison to other services.

		In comparison to other council environmental and cultural services budgets, has your parks budget:					
Region	Total Authorities	Sample (n=)	Fallen more than other services	Fallen by the same amount as other services	Stayed the same as other services	Increased more than other services	Increased by the same amount as other services
North West	41	17	41.2%	41.7%	5.9%	5.9%	-
North East*	12	5*	20.0%	60.0%	20.0%	-	-
Yorkshire & Humber*	22	5*	20.0%	80.0%	-	-	-
West Midlands	33	22	27.3%	45.5%	22.7%	4.5%	-
East Midlands	45	16	18.8%	50.0%	25.0%	6.3%	-
East	52	20	30.0%	40.0%	30.0%	-	-
London	33	19	5.3%	63.2%	5.3%	26.3%	-
South West	41	17	29.4%	41.2%	29.4%	-	-
South East	74	20	20.0%	50.0%	15.0%	5.0%	10.0%
England	353	141	24.1%	49.7%	18.4%	6.4%	1.4%
Northern Ireland*	26	3*	33.3%	-	-	66.6%	-
Scotland	32	13	38.5%	53.8%	7.7%	-	-
Wales	22	9	22.2%	44.4%	22.2%	11.1%	-

* Sample size too small to generate reliable average figure

Table 4.9 Regional differences in the change in park budgets compared with other corporate services

4.5 Continuing importance for parks in urban areas

Around 80% of the UK population lives in urban areas⁷¹ which will become denser in the future as almost 300,000 new homes are needed each year up to 2031⁷². Parks are set to become an increasingly important resource in urban areas to mitigate the environmental impact of this development and maintain local amenity and wellbeing. A strategy first embraced during the Victorian municipal park movement in the 1900s.

Results from the Public Opinions Survey highlight more regular use of local parks among those people living in urban areas compared to sub-urban or rural locations:

- 63% of people living in urban areas use their local park monthly or more compared to 41% for those living in rural areas.
- For those living in the urban conurbation of Greater London this proportion of regular use rises to 71%.
- 71% of park users in urban areas also consider spending time in their local park to be important or essential to their quality of life compared to just 57% of park users living in rural areas.

Annual results from Natural England’s MENE study⁷³ for England provides further evidence of the importance of parks in urban areas. In 2012/13 there was a fall in visits taken to the countryside and a significant increase in the proportion of visits to green spaces within towns and cities. ‘Parks in towns and cities continued to be the most visited type of destination, and were included in a quarter of all visits’.

Variation in budget changes for urban authorities

Taking budget data from the Park Managers Survey for changes to past and future budgets it is possible to look at the relative impact for urban authorities. Although the sample size is relatively small it can be seen that urban councils, including unitary and metropolitan authorities and the London boroughs, have faced the highest level of revenue budget reductions over the past three years. In the next three years this bias towards urban authorities is set to become more marked. For unitary authorities projected cuts are close to 20% and for metropolitan authorities this is set to be almost 30%. The following two tables provide detail on these reductions for all types of authorities.

Type of Authority	Total number	Authorities who supplied a revenue figure	Sample as % of UK Authorities	Average revenue budget	Average revenue % change in budget
Unitary in England	56	10	17.9%	£3,249,828	-23.9%
District	202	38	18.8%	£1,467,472	-11.7%
County Council*	27	1	3.7%	£318,000	N/A*
Metropolitan	36	9	25.0%	£6,183,879	-17.8%
London Borough	32	10	31.3%	£4,691,372	-16.7%
Northern Ireland Unitary*	26	1	3.8%	£1,215,800	N/A*
Scotland Unitary	32	9	28.1%	£6,043,094	-18.2%
Wales Unitary	22	3	13.6%	£1,136,263	-5.7%
Total	433	81	18.7%	£3,088,411	-15.7%

* Small sample size does not allow average changes in budgets to be drawn

Table 4.10 Revenue budget reductions in last three years (2010-12) by type of authority

Type of Authority	Total number	Authorities who supplied a revenue figure	Sample as % of UK Authorities	Average revenue budget	Average revenue % change in budget
Unitary in England	56	12	21.4%	£3,249,828	-19.9%
District	202	37	18.3%	£1,443,022	-9.8%
County Council*	27	1	3.7%	£318,000	N/A*
Metropolitan	36	9	25.0%	£6,183,879	-29.2%
London Borough	32	10	31.3%	£4,691,372	-14.3%
Northern Ireland Unitary*	26	1	3.8%	£1,215,800	N/A*
Scotland Unitary	32	10	31.3%	£6,043,094	-10.8%
Wales Unitary	22	3	13.6%	£1,136,263	-13.3%
Total	433	83	19.2%	£3,199,400	-16.2%

* Small sample size does not allow average changes in budgets to be drawn

Table 4.11 Expected revenue budget reductions in next three years (2014-16) by type of authority

Change to staffing levels by region and type of authority

There have been marked differences in the changes to both operational and management staffing across the regions in the past three years. The South East, East and Wales recorded the lowest levels of operational staff cuts, whilst the highest levels are in the North West. Although the samples size is small, the North East also records a high percentage of operational staff cuts. For management staff, again the smallest loss is in the East and the highest cuts are recorded in the North West and the West Midlands. The data also indicates a high percentage of staff loss in the North East.

Region	Total Authorities	Operational Staff		Management Staff	
		Sample (n =)	Average Change	Sample (n =)	Average Change
North West	41	16	-19.4%	15	-26.3%
North East*	12	5	-22.0%	6	-21.7%
Yorkshire & the Humber*	22	5	-14.2%	4	-17.0%
West Midlands	33	17	-11.1%	18	-20.6%
East Midlands	45	14	-11.1%	13	-17.5%
East	52	17	-8.5%	15	-7.3%
London	33	17	-10.6%	19	-12.5%
South West	41	14	-10.5%	13	-17.3%
South East	74	18	-5.8%	13	-13.8%
England	353	123	-11.5%	116	-16.7%
Northern Ireland*	26	2	0.5%	2	3.0%
Scotland	32	13	-10.4%	14	-18.7%
Wales	22	8	-8.0%	7	-17.9%

*Sample size too small to generate reliable average figure

Table 4.12 Regional changes in staffing over the last three years (2010-12)

Staffing levels in urban authorities have also fallen more significantly than other types of council. Unitary and Metropolitan authorities have faced a greater loss of staff, and particularly management staff. In Northern Ireland a reform programme for the numbers of local authorities is currently under way which will see a reduction from the current 26 councils to just 11. This reform is scheduled to be completed by April 2015 and is likely to have a further impact on the number of parks staff employed in the combined authorities. In Wales, there are also initial proposals to reduce the number of authorities from the current 22 to between 10 and 12 councils. Although these plans are less advanced, changes may be expected to affect the distribution and number of park staff employed across the country in the medium term.

Type of Authority	Total authorities	Operational Staff		Management Staff	
		Sample (n =)	Average Change	Sample (n =)	Average Change
Unitary	56	26	-15.2%	22	-21.0%
District	202	56	-8.1%	52	-13.4%
County Council*	27	4*	-13.0%	4*	-16.3%
Metropolitan	36	20	-16.7%	19	-25.3%
London Borough	32	17	-10.6%	19	-12.5%
Northern Ireland*	26	2*	+0.5%	2*	+3.0%
Scotland	32	13	-10.4%	14	-18.7%
Wales	22	8	-8.0%	7	17.9%
Total	433	146	-11.0%	139	-16.7%

* Small sample size does not allow firm conclusions to be drawn

Table 4.13 Analysis of staffing reductions by type of authority

4.6 Growing community participation in parks

A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation⁷⁴ assessing the scale and pattern of cuts in spending on local government in England and Scotland since 2010 highlights a changing relationship between councils and the local communities that they serve. As the funding gap between statutory and non-statutory services grows a ‘redefinition in the relationship between citizens and local councils’ is starting to take place. The report suggests that it is increasingly likely that local government may be forced to withdraw from providing a number of services and transfer responsibilities to other agencies, sectors and partnerships - ‘citizens will be expected to take greater responsibility for their own wellbeing, as well as for quality of life within their neighbourhoods’.

While there is not yet evidence that councils have started to withdraw their entire support from parks services that is a predicted scenario in the Rowntree report, this could become a reality by the end of the decade. In looking to save £840m by 2017, Sir Albert Bore, the leader of Birmingham City Council suggests that the authority is ‘very close’ to decommissioning some services⁷⁵. In West Lancashire it has been suggested that “within 10 years, the local authority will be unable to fund adult social services and some children's services, libraries, parks and leisure services”⁷⁶. In response, findings from this study and

other research demonstrate that councils are increasingly looking to diversify their responsibility for funding and co-managing parks and green spaces by setting up new partnerships with a variety of community groups and local organisations.



Image: Heritage Lottery Fund

Battersea Park, Wandsworth. Parks are increasingly developing partnerships to support management

The Park Managers Survey records that just over 1 in 10 local authorities have already transferred the management of at least one of their parks to a community group (22/175 – 12.6%) and 1 in 5 managers state that they have transferred the management of at least one park to another organisation (34/172 – 19.8%). However, almost 8 in 10 local authorities have stated that they do not plan to transfer the management of any of their parks to community groups over the next three years (133/170 – 78.2%). With the reduction in management staff anticipated to continue over the next three years local authorities may be less likely to have the resources available to support the process of diversifying the management responsibilities for a proportion of their parks to local organisations, communities and other partners.

The Park Managers Survey calculates that there has been a 31% increase in friends groups in the last three years (1,468 increasing to 1,930 groups). APSE records that nearly all respondents have friends groups operating in their districts (95.5%) with volunteers contributing to environmental improvement projects (68.2%), specific renovation projects (64.8%) and horticultural work (40.9%). However, when asked by APSE if there is a limit to the extent to which volunteers can be involved in delivering parks services, the vast majority agreed or agreed strongly (Data for 2013 – 7.2% Disagree, 31.5% Agree, and 59.5% Agree Strongly).

Regional variations in impact of friends groups

Whilst the regional sample size from the Park Managers Survey is relatively small the location of respondents indicated a good distribution of friends groups across the UK. An analysis of data by the type of local authority shows that the urban councils including the English metropolitan and unitary authorities and the London boroughs have proportionately the largest number of groups. This represents almost 70% of all friends groups within 42% of all authorities (sample 73/174 – 42.0%, total number of groups 1,328/1,930 - 68.8%).

In looking at regional distribution, London, West Midlands and the North West are reporting the largest average number of friends groups. An assessment of the average number of volunteer days is harder to compare across the regions with the sample size available, although a calculation of the total number of days volunteered can be made. This again suggests that the West Midlands and London have the most active friends groups giving the largest proportion of volunteer days to their local parks.

Region	Total Authorities	Number of Friends Groups Per Region			Volunteer contributions by region		
		Sample (n=)	Average number of groups	Total number of groups	Sample (n=)*	Average Number of volunteer days per year	Total number of volunteer days per year
North West	41	16	16	252	6	694	4,163
North East*	12	6*	9	54	3	468	1,404
Yorkshire & the Humber*	22	5*	17	83	1	5,000	5,000
West Midlands	33	22	17	365	10	2,370	23,699
East Midlands	45	16	8	127	6	1,492	8,954
East	52	20	5	106	6	825	4,949
London	33	19	23	434	5	3,937	19,686
South West	41	18	8	144	5	838	4,189
South East	74	24	7	162	12	849	10,185
England	353	146	12	1727	54	1,522	82,229
Northern Ireland*	26	4*	4	17	1	400	400
Scotland	32	14	10	134	5	271	1,356
Wales	22	10	5	52	3	140	420
Totals	433	174	11	1,930	63	1,340	84,405

* Sample size too small to generate reliable average figure

Table 4.14 Regional variations on the average number of friends groups and the number of days they volunteer per year

Summary of regional trends

While the main objective of the three surveys has been to establish a national picture of the state of the UK's public parks, a regional analysis of the data does identify some emerging trends and clear challenges for particular areas of the country. The data suggests that parks within urban authorities and in particular those in the Midlands and in the North of England have generally faced the greatest reductions in revenue funding and staffing, although regional conclusions are limited by small sample sizes. However returns from park managers in the North West, North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and the West Midlands indicate they have generally faced a higher percentage of revenue cuts than other English regions and expect this situation to continue over the next three years. Unsurprisingly a high proportion of park managers in these regions also expect the condition of their parks to be declining over the next three years.

With the data available it is difficult to draw firm conclusions on the relative impact of cuts for all four countries in the UK. An overview of the survey results indicate parks and park services in each country have been affected by cuts in different ways. Returns from park managers in Scotland indicate they have faced a higher percentage of revenue cuts than the other countries with a higher proportion of budgets falling more than other council services. Park managers in Wales also report that they expect the highest proportion of revenue cuts over the next three years and anticipate having a higher proportion of parks that will be declining in condition over this period.

Whilst a more comprehensive sample set and more regular surveying would assist in clarifying this initial regional assessment, many of these findings do align with other research on the geographical impact of public spending cuts. It is becoming clearer that urban councils and in particular those with the highest levels of deprivation are facing a higher proportion of cuts and therefore face some of the hardest choices in where to prioritise the funding of public services over the next few years.

For parks services this raises particular concerns as it is often these areas that rely heavily on their public parks. Historically they are often the places where some of the UK's earliest and greatest municipal parks were built in the heyday of the industrial revolution. It is important to note that whilst London has the greatest number of registered historic parks the North West has the second largest collection which is likely to be placed at greater risk from the higher proportion of cuts being faced by this region. In an increasingly competitive funding environment it is becoming more and more important for park managers to demonstrate the wider value and benefit that is gained from continuing to invest in their public parks. This is the subject of the following section.

5.0 WHY WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO INVEST IN PUBLIC PARKS



Image: Peter Neal

City Park, Eastside. Opened in 2012 as the first city centre park in Birmingham for more than 130 years

With increasing budget pressures and an ongoing drive to cut costs there is a growing need for public services to provide stronger and more quantifiable evidence of the benefits they provide as a means to demonstrate the return on their annual funding. Parks departments need to build a more detailed and direct evidence-base of the benefits that parks deliver. For some services this can be more easily done than others. For cultural services, where parks are often located, it is often seen as a far simpler exercise to measure the use and benefits of sports centres and art galleries in comparison to parks. For example, it can be relatively straight forward for swimming pools to record detailed information on activities and the level of use to demonstrate the health benefits for visitors. For parks and green spaces this can be logistically far harder to quantify. As a result it can be easier to overlook and under-report the many social, economic and environmental benefits that parks provide. This problem can be made harder when investment continues to be cut as the benefits from reducing investment are likely to diminish leading to a growing spiral of neglect from which recovery may take many years and incur considerable additional expense.

Public parks play an important part in the social and environmental infrastructure of communities, making neighbourhoods more attractive, healthy and enjoyable places to live. They are a fundamental element of sustainable development, providing a home for nature, improving air quality, moderating high temperatures, absorbing floodwater and storing carbon. 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. 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. The challenge is that the value of many of these 'soft services' that parks deliver can be hard to measure and quantify.

Fortunately there is a growing evidence base, with increasingly sophisticated techniques that can be used to assess and quantify the benefits that parks provide. Key references include *Your Parks, The benefits of parks and greenspace*⁷⁷, *The Value of Public Space*⁷⁸ and most recently, *The Benefits of Urban Parks* that was commissioned by the International Federation of Parks and Recreation Administration (IPFRA)⁷⁹.



Image: Peter Neal

Chavasse Park, Liverpool, completed in 2008 and now the centrepiece of Liverpool One

5.1 Supporting economic growth

With an increasing focus on economic growth and promoting greater prosperity there is renewed interest in the role that parks can play in economic development. Ever since the Prince Regent commissioned Nash to transform Regent's Park in the early nineteenth century, land owners, developers and planning authorities have used public parks as an effective catalyst for development and a way to promote inward investment. Contemporary examples of this model include the construction of the Thames Barrier Park as a means to draw regeneration and private investment south from London's Royal Docks. In Liverpool, Chavasse Park provides the centrepiece of Liverpool One, the new shopping, residential and leisure district of the city that is also the first park of its type in the UK to receive a Green Flag Award. While in Birmingham Eastside's City Park in has been planned as the centrepiece of a new residential, academic and cultural hub for the city.

DEFRA and Natural England⁸⁰ completed a review of the contribution of green infrastructure to economic growth using a set of case studies in the UK and abroad to assess the economic return on parks and green space investment. The study found that for inward investment 'the evidence shows clearly that increasing the attractiveness of an area through investment in high-quality parks increases inward investment and property values in proximity'. Most recently Natural England has published an updated compendium of research on the microeconomic benefits of investing in the environment⁸¹ which includes direct examples of research for public parks along with the wider natural environment.

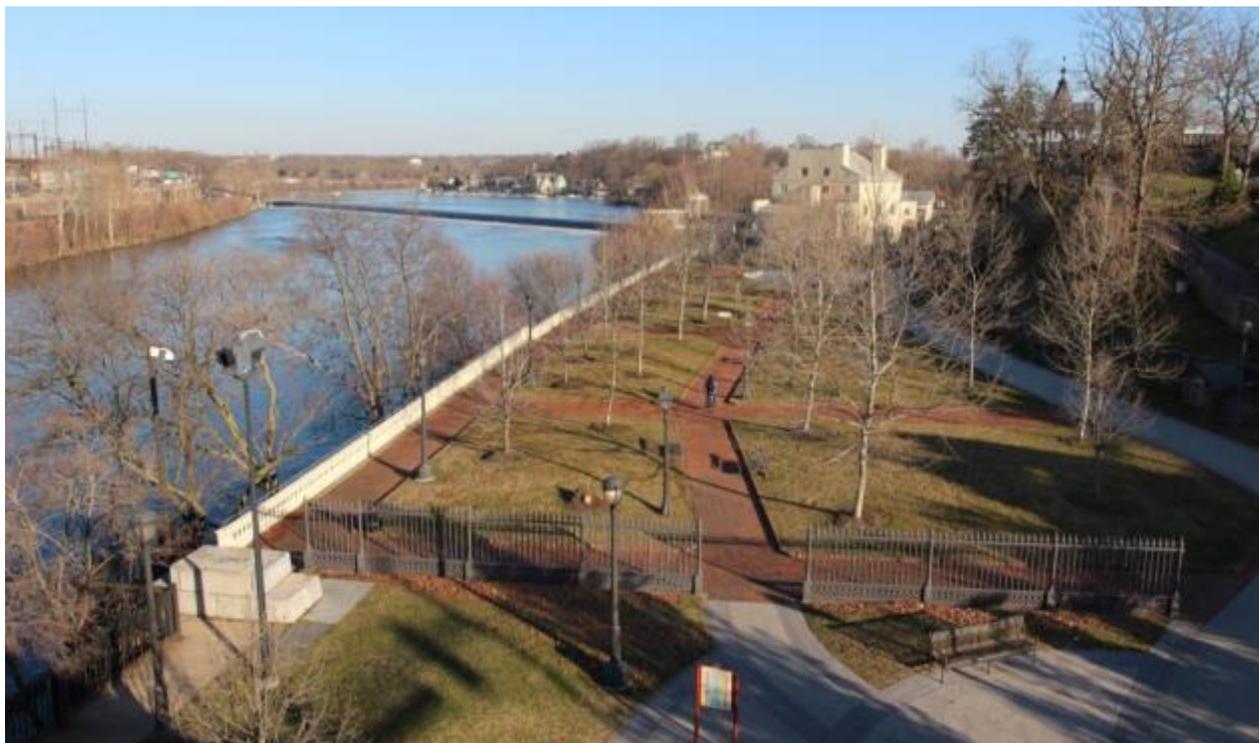


Image: Peter Neal

Fairmount Park, part of an extensive municipal park system in the heart of Philadelphia

In the United States the Trust for Public Land and the Centre for City Park Excellence has compiled evidence and developed a number of analytical models for assessing the value of parks and park systems including *The Benefits of Parks*⁸² and *Measuring the Economic Value of a City Park System*⁸³. These models have then been applied to specific cities including Boston⁸⁴ and Philadelphia⁸⁵ that calculate the total return on investment in their public parks and recreation systems.

Capturing property and land value

The evidence on the impact parks and green spaces can have on land and property value is well documented. *Does Money Grow on Trees?*⁸⁶ reported 'wide variations in the results with uplift in property values of up to 34%; properties adjacent to the park clustered at around a 5% to 7% premium over an identical property in the same market area, but outside of the influence of the park'. *Valuing Greenness*⁸⁷ draws similar conclusions, suggesting that each hectare of park space in London within 1km of housing increases house prices by 0.08%. In addition, 'the presence of a regional or metropolitan park within 600 metres was found to add between 1.9% and 2.9% to total house value'. Whilst a study of house prices in Aberdeen⁸⁸ showed 'property located on the edge of a park could potentially attract a premium of between 0.44% and 19%'.

While it can be argued that much of this value is only gained directly by the individual property owner, wider public benefit is captured through higher banding of local council taxes and stamp duties raised during resale. In the United States this increase in taxable value has been calculated by the Trust for Public Land (TPL) which found that the public parks in Washington DC secured almost \$7m (£4.2m) in additional property tax for the city in 2006, whilst for Philadelphia in 2008 this was calculated to be over \$18m (£10.8m).

Contributing to the tourist economy

Across the UK, parks can provide a significant draw on the tourist economy. Visit Britain⁸⁹ completed three large studies that all indicate that Britain's parks, gardens and natural beauty are a valuable tourism asset. Of the 31 million tourists coming to Britain in 2012, around a third (11.1 million) enjoy visiting a park or garden, confirming this as one of the most popular activities of visitors, ranking above visiting a museum, castle, historic house or art gallery. Expenditure figures from the MENE study calculate that of the £21.1bn spent on outdoor visits, £8.6bn is spent within towns and cities. With urban parks being the most popular destination a significant proportion of this expenditure can be attributed to parks. By example, Harrogate's green infrastructure guide⁹⁰ includes a specific priority for its parks and green spaces to improve the attractiveness of the area for tourism and investment.

Additional work by the TPL has calculated the benefit that parks generate for the tourism economy either directly as a destination for visitors, or as a venue for events and festivals. Calculating this contribution accurately requires data on visitor numbers and spending patterns which were used to measure spending by tourists who came to San Diego on account of their parks. It was calculated that in 2007 the total park-derived tourist spending came to \$114.3m, generating tax revenue to the city of over \$8.5m and a collective increase in wealth from park-based tourism of over \$40m.

Attracting inward investment

With rapid growth in information and communication technology and the continuing transition from heavy industry to knowledge-based, and people intensive industries the quality and character of places are becoming an increasingly important factor in choosing where to locate and invest. Research into the clustering of creative economies for example has been shown to have a strong bias to attractive and well-connected places that have high quality public spaces and a good mix of local facilities.

*Blue Sky Green Space*⁹¹ references a small body of research that places emphasis on the role of good quality parks and green spaces in attracting and retaining businesses. In the United States the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* published in the late 1990s 'An empirical study of the role of recreation, parks and open space in companies' (re)location decisions'⁹². This emphasised the value that small companies placed on quality of life criteria when making locational decisions. With a growing importance of small companies in economic development the findings suggested that 'in some contexts, recreation/parks/open space may have a substantially greater role to play in a community's level of economic development than has heretofore been recognized'.

This emphasis on quality of life as an important driver for inward investment has been highlighted in a study on improving the competitiveness of England's Core Cities⁹³. 'It is equally clear that soft location factors (that include the quality of the local environment) are becoming an increasingly important part of economic decision-making' and are needed to attract and retain skilled workers. Competing European cities know that for skilled employees 'the quality of life for themselves and their families is an increasingly important factor' of location. Cities with good environmental assets and access to natural amenities are working at preserving and improving them.



Image: LDA Design, Photograph © Sally Prothero

Herschel Park, Slough, was laid out in 1842 and reopened after extensive refurbishment in 2011

5.2 Improving health and wellbeing

Parks have a key role to play in the health and wellbeing of communities. Public policy at the national and local level considers that improving standards of public health and the quality of life for communities is becoming an increasing priority. *Healthy Lives Healthy People*⁹⁴, the white paper for public health, devotes a chapter to 'Health and wellbeing throughout life', whilst in policy guidance on sustainable development published by DEFRA⁹⁵, wellbeing is seen to be as important personally for individuals as it is for society, the economy and wider environment.

At the end of 2013 the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) published their *City Health Check*⁹⁶. In referencing research that associated the number of parks and sports grounds in an area with increased levels of cycling and walking, it undertook a health analysis of nine of the largest cities in England. It found the 'healthiest' cities with the highest levels of activity and lower levels of obesity had a far higher proportion of green space concluding that 'the most healthy areas have 20% more green space than the least healthy areas'.

Enhancing quality of life

Recent research emphasises the positive effect that parks can have on individuals' wellbeing and their wider neighbourhoods. Over nine out of ten people believe that parks and public spaces improve their quality of life according to a MORI survey⁹⁷ commissioned by CABE. *Community Green*⁹⁸ explores this relationship between parks and local green

spaces with individual's quality of life in further detail, finding statistically significant relationships between both satisfaction with green space and better overall quality of life and higher levels of social wellbeing.

Increasing neighbourhood quality

A study undertaken by DEFRA⁹⁹ into creating sustainable communities used green space as an indicator of wellbeing and found that people place great importance on having parks as part of their wider neighbourhood. The vast majority of people (95%) thought that it was very or fairly important to have green spaces near to where they live. A similar figure was recorded by Groundwork in a recent Ipsos MORI Survey¹⁰⁰ which found that 'nine out of 10 adults (93%) identify parks, playgrounds and green spaces as important in making somewhere a good place to live or work'.

Detailed research undertaken by the University of Exeter's European Centre for Environment and Human Health and published by the Association for Psychological Science¹⁰¹ provides strong empirical evidence of this. It reveals that people who live in urban areas with more green space tend to report greater wellbeing than city dwellers without nearby parks, gardens, or other green space.

Promoting active lifestyles

Obesity in the UK is on the increase. The *State of the Nation's Waistline*¹⁰² recently published by the National Obesity Forum highlights that over a quarter of adults in England are considered obese and this is expected to rise to at least half the UK population by 2050. The report leads with a stark warning that 'obesity is one of the biggest threats to the UK, not only in terms of individual and collective health, but in terms of financial cost and societal impact'. In recent years the emphasis on tackling this growing epidemic has been to focus on healthy eating rather than healthy living. Whilst diet and calorie intake remains a key issue, there is clear evidence that the UK population is failing to lead what would be described as a healthy lifestyle. Just over a third of adults take just one 30 minute session of moderate exercise a week - the recommended level is five sessions.

The need to increase physical activity is set to play a far more prominent role in public health strategies going forward and there is now a growing evidence base from the UK and abroad on the impact parks can have on public health. Parks, gardens and any accessible green areas can be seen to provide 'vital health resources'¹⁰³ that play a key role in supporting healthy populations. A report by the Centre for Public Health at the Liverpool John Moores University on *Returning urban parks to their public health roots*¹⁰⁴ emphasises that 'urban parks have the potential to contribute greatly to the improvement of the public's health through improving the physical, mental and social well-being of park users'.

The government's call to action on obesity in England¹⁰⁵ looks to establish 'the widest possible access to opportunities to be physically active through the use of parks and other outdoor spaces'. The *Change 4 Life*¹⁰⁶ programme encourages people to adopt more healthy lifestyles and specifically recommends a large number of activities in local parks. The *Walking for Health*¹⁰⁷ programme initially set up by Natural England and now run by the Ramblers and Macmillan Cancer Support signposts individuals to over 600 schemes offering short, free, local health walks, a large proportion of which are undertaken in public

parks. The Broxbourne Health Walks¹⁰⁸ for example 'take place in a variety of locations including two of our award-winning Green Flag parks'.

Restoring mental health

There is increasing interest in the relationship between mental health and ready access to parks and green space. The Cross-Government Mental Health Outcomes Strategy¹⁰⁹ records a significant rise in the economic impact of mental health problems and it has calculated that these are costing the economy in England a massive £105bn each year and 'treatment costs are expected to double in the next 20 years'. Greenspace Scotland's extensive literature review on the links between greenspace and health¹¹⁰ highlights research from Sweden¹¹¹ that clearly demonstrates the relationship between levels of stress and access to urban green space, noting 'those people who visited urban green spaces more frequently reported fewer stress related illnesses'.

Recent research published in the *Journal of Psychological Science*¹¹² concludes that people are happier when living in urban areas with greater amounts of green space compared to those with less green space. Significantly the study showed lower mental distress and much higher levels of wellbeing. This was picked up by the *Daily Mail*¹¹³ in a January 2014 article on 'Why living near a park can help keep the blues at bay'. It noted the benefits that parks and green spaces can play in improving mental wellbeing stating that 'not only does moving to a greener area improve mental health, but the effect continues long after you have moved'. In concluding, the authors from the University of Exeter suggest that these health benefits for the wider community should be an important consideration in strategic policies aimed at protecting and promoting urban green spaces for wellbeing.

5.3 Enhancing natural systems

Increasingly the wider value of parks is being framed in terms of their contribution to networks and systems of green space that make up the green infrastructure of our towns and cities. For many, this form of soft infrastructure is considered to be as important as those for water, energy, transport and waste. A recent briefing paper on Green Infrastructure prepared for the Houses of Parliament¹¹⁴ provides a concise overview of multiple benefits that this provides for urban areas. There is also a growing literature on the economic value of these green networks and the ecosystem services that they provide. This includes the *Benefits of Green Infrastructure*¹¹⁵ and the *UK National Ecosystems Assessment*¹¹⁶ (UKNEA). The Urban chapter of the UKNEA explores the value of public parks and other green spaces in some detail and places particular emphasis on their benefit to urban biodiversity, providing more sustainable systems for urban drainage, moderating air temperatures and filtering of pollutants. In addition, the *Economic Benefits of Greenspace*¹¹⁷ provides a useful economic appraisal and direct reference to the environmental services parks perform.

Supporting biodiversity

As urban areas expand, increasing the fragmentation of natural habitats, parks are becoming more and more important as refuges and clusters for biodiversity. The *State of*

*Nature*¹¹⁸ highlights that from the data available in urban areas, '59% of urban species have declined and 35% have declined strongly. Invertebrates are doing particularly poorly in urban environments with 42% showing strong declines'. A recent survey undertaken by the Greater London Authority¹¹⁹ on biodiversity and green infrastructure received a large number of responses that emphasised the value of parks in protecting the natural capital of the city. Its conclusions note the increasing pressure from development, reduced maintenance and financial constraints as the main negative changes to green spaces in London.

The IPFRA study on the benefits of urban parks concludes that there is strong evidence that parks are acting as 'biodiversity hotspots in the cityscape, being the most species-rich types of urban green spaces for all species groups that have been studied'. Within 14 studies into the levels of species richness in urban parks compared to other types of green space, over 60% identified urban parks as the richest form of urban green space. It has also been shown, unsurprisingly, that the larger, less urbanised and more diverse parks are home to more native species of birds, bees, ants, beetles, butterflies and vascular plants. However, when parks become isolated, this richness of biodiversity declines.

Responding to climate change

Projections of the short and long-term impact of climate change offer both challenges and opportunities for public parks with the increasing need to create more resilient environments that can absorb and adapt to greater climatic extremes. The UK Climate Impact Programme¹²⁰ (UKCIP) offers environmental projections into the future that anticipate higher temperatures, wetter winters and more intense patterns of weather. Parks and green spaces have a central role to play in helping urban areas to adapt to these changes and help mitigate climate change. In London the refurbishments of Sutcliffe Park and Mayesbrook Park were part funded specifically to improve their capacity to manage the increasing risk of local flooding.

The IPFRA study highlights that although the strength of evidence is currently limited, research is increasingly showing that parks help to improve air quality, store carbon, provide water management systems and cool temperatures to regulate extremes of climate. Urban trees, and particularly parkland trees, can help the sequestration of carbon and contribute to mitigating climate change with larger trees helping to reduce carbon emissions in the atmosphere by 2-3%¹²¹.

There is also strong and well documented evidence on the ability of parks to help cool urban areas and moderate extreme summer temperatures. A research note published by the Forestry Commission¹²² has compiled data on air temperature regulation by parks and other green infrastructure. 'The surface temperature within a green space may be 15–20 °C lower than that of the surrounding urban areas, giving rise to 2–8 °C cooler air temperatures and a cooling effect that extends out in to the surrounding area'. It has been shown that parks of significant size can reduce noon-time air temperatures by up to 1.5 °C up to a kilometre away. In the future, the ecosystem services and ameliorating effect on climate that parks provide in urban areas is likely to be in increasing demand. The ability of parks to improve climate resilience is already acknowledged and being used by many international cities including Berlin, Copenhagen and New York.

6.0 SUSTAINING PUBLIC PARKS IN THE FUTURE



Image: Heritage Lottery Fund

Albert Park, Middlesbrough, first opened in 1868 and completed an extensive refurbishment in 2004

6.1 Key Conclusions

A number of clear conclusions can be drawn from this study into the state of the UK's public parks. There is good evidence that for more than a decade many parks have been enjoying a growing renaissance. They are used regularly by a large proportion of the UK's population, the number of visitors is up, the numbers of friends groups are increasing and park managers have been reporting rising levels of satisfaction amongst park users.

It can be suggested that this turning point was marked in 1999 by the Government Select Committee into Town and Country Parks. In addition the concerted effort of many individuals and organisations through much of the 1990s played a key role in this revival. Significant public investment from many sources including over £700m from HLF and Big Lottery Fund Parks for People programme has made good progress in repairing much of the damage caused by a protracted period of neglect and disinvestment that began in the 1970s and continued through to the late 1990s.

But all of this appears to be changing.

Significant cuts in public spending have had a major impact on parks budgets and staffing levels over the last three years. This is expected to continue and likely to worsen over the rest of the decade. The condition of parks looks set to decline rapidly and the viability of some parks services could soon be in doubt. There are already marked differences in the level of cuts faced by different regions which inevitably will lead to increasing inequalities in the condition of parks across the UK over the next few years.

In summary this study has found that:

Improving parks are now at risk

The condition of public parks has been seen to have improved considerably over the past decade. This is the collective view of park managers, friends groups and the general public. For park managers, 59% report their parks to be in a good condition compared to just 18% at the end of the 1990s. 82% of park managers also report that their parks have been stable or improving in condition over the last three years. However in looking forward the immediate concern is that the condition of many of these parks is expected to decline significantly. It is alarming to find that over the next three years the proportion of park managers expecting that their parks to be declining exactly matches that recorded by the PPA in 2001.

Large reductions in parks staff

More than three quarters of local authorities have cut parks staff over the last three years and it is anticipated that these losses are set to continue for at least half of all councils. The cuts in front-line operational staff have been lower than management staff although the loss of horticultural skills is likely to impact the quality of park maintenance in the future. The high levels of management staff cuts, and in particular senior management recorded by the London Parks and Green Spaces Forum, will have an increasing impact on the vitality and leadership of the service. This will also limit the expertise needed for innovation and the resources required to support the work of friends groups and help diversify services by building new partnerships that are likely to assist the management of parks in the future.

Rising charges, reallocation and the threat of disposal

The cost of using park facilities is on the rise with over 80% of local authorities having increased charges in parks over the past three years. According to the Park Managers Survey, even more are considering further increases over the next three years. Just under half of all councils are planning to dispose of some of their green spaces with 19% specifically considering the disposal of parks. At the same time almost a third are considering the acquisition of additional green spaces indicating there will be a reallocation of spaces with an overall net loss of green space. Other research confirms councils are expecting the number of their parks to fall alongside the removal of playgrounds and play equipment and the sale of facilities including park lodges, plant nurseries and depots.

Growing regional inequalities

Some parts of the UK are facing more significant cuts to budgets and staff than others. Urban authorities, where most people live and where parks services are used the most are facing higher cuts and losing a larger proportion of staff. The North West and the West Midlands record some of the highest levels of cuts and expect this to continue over the next three years. The North East and Yorkshire and the Humber also have some of the highest levels of cuts but the sample size of the survey precludes drawing definitive conclusions. It is therefore no surprise that these regions have the largest proportion of parks managers reporting their parks will be declining in the future. For the North West this will come at a significant cost as it has consistently ranked as one of the leading regions for the total number of Green Flag Awards and also has the highest proportion of registered historic parks after London.

The viability of some parks services may be in doubt

This decade has brought significant reductions in spending on many public services. The Audit Commission¹²³ has reported that 'from 2010/11 to 2013/14, government funding to councils reduced by £6.0 billion (19.6 per cent) in real terms'. The Park Managers Survey records even higher levels of cuts in some locations with more than 3 in 10 reporting that their budgets have been reduced by more than 20%. A quarter of park managers surveyed report that their budgets have been cut more than other services and the major concern is that these cuts are expected to continue at the same level over the next three years. By the middle of the decade at least half of all parks services are likely to have faced a cumulative cut in their budgets by up to 40% and for over 3 in 10 this may be more than 40%. This fall aligns closely with the LGA's future funding outlook for councils published in 2013. It is projected that by the end of the decade reductions in budgets for non-statutory services will have fallen by 60%. This suggests that some parks services may not be able to continue to operate in their current form by 2020.

Lack of data remains a major problem

The parks sector continues to face the ongoing problem of fragmented and poor quality data. Whilst this study enjoyed a good level of returns to the surveys, the ability to undertake more detailed analysis was limited by some inconsistencies and small sample sizes for some regions and countries. Little progress seems to have been made on improving the quantity and quality of parks data since the Government Select Committee highlighted this information deficit and the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce expressed great concern about the lack of adequate information at both a national and local scale. Park managers and local councils urgently need robust and comparable information on the costs and benefits of park services to be able to defend existing budgets and if necessary make wise decisions on where best to make savings in the future. In drawing on the expertise of the Center for City Park Excellence in the United States, this next section provides observations and key recommendations on how this may be done over the next few years.

6.2 Building the future evidence base

By Peter Harnik, Center for City Park Excellence, The Trust for Public Land



Image: Peter Neal

Boston Common, dating from 1634, it is the oldest city park in the United States

In the early twenty-first century in both the UK and the United States, local parks are teetering politically between a broad-scale renaissance or an erosion of support and a barren demise. Since the forces at work are grand and the outcome is not a foregone conclusion, the most important tool in the park advocates' arsenal is a robust machinery for data collection.

The power of data

Data leads to knowledge, and knowledge leads power. During the nadir years of the American city park movement, approximately 1970-2000, since there was no methodical information collection, there was almost no national overview of what was happening in this important component of urban life. That began to change in 2000, and over the past decade, many of the urban park systems in the United States – as well as the overarching parks support and advocacy movement – have made notable gains. Rundown parks have been rehabilitated, new parks have been created, public-private partnerships have been established, park funding measures have been passed at the polls by voters, and public-public partnerships have been developed by park agencies with school systems, water

authorities, transportation departments and health agencies. The urban park movement has been developing its muscle, and one mechanism for doing so has been through the collection of a considerable amount of information on almost every aspect of urban park and recreation systems.

City Park Facts

The leader in this information gathering has been The Trust for Public Land (TPL) which now publishes an annual *City Park Facts* booklet and stores additional data on its publicly available website. TPL annually surveys and studies the 100 most populous U.S. cities (ranging from New York at the top down to places with a population of just over 200,000), collecting information on park acreage, spending, revenue, employment, number of park units, planning, and support organizations, as well as on numerous different specific facilities ranging from tennis courts to recreation centers, basketball hoops to marinas, food facilities to dog parks, and more.

The report's data helps city residents and leaders understand how their park systems excel and also how they might be improved. (Advocates and managers often cite the importance of *City Park Facts* in spurring park improvement efforts.) Taken in the aggregate, the data is also helpful to managers and academics in recognizing median rates in situations where there are wide disparities and often confusing outlier values.

In nearly all cases, TPL acquires its information directly from the park agencies themselves as there is no other source of the data. Exceptions to this are for three major details: municipal population and land area, procured from the United States Census Bureau, and the percent-of-population-within-a-half-mile-of-a-park measurement which the Trust calculates using computerized maps and algorithms that few park agencies have. (Population and area are crucially important, obviously, in determining 'per person' and 'per acre' comparables; TPL must be rigorous in inserting these numbers since, in the U.S., there is often considerable confusion about 'city' versus 'metropolitan' statistics. There are also cities, such as Los Angeles and Dallas, that are located within much larger counties with the same name, resulting in additional confusion.)

The TPL has an expansive definition of 'park' when it comes to the physical land form but a relatively rigorous definition as to ownership. In other words, to be counted as a park it must be publicly owned and/or publicly managed by some kind of park agency, and it must be equitably open to all. (The organization does not count private golf or other clubs, nor does it count parks in gated communities.) Having passed that threshold, parks for TPL include the full diversity of facilities, such as marshes and wetlands, sports fields, forests, cobblestone or brick plazas with only the occasional tree, linear greenways, gardens, public golf courses, waterfront promenades, roundabouts, and more. Moreover, the Trust counts parks of every kind of agency ownership within the city boundary, including federal, state, county, regional, and municipal parks. For TPL the perspective for the data's importance is the from the standpoint of the average urban resident, not from the park agency employee.

The key components of park data

The most commonly produced (and requested) TPL reports include the following:

Park Acreage, Distribution, and Size

- Largest City Parks in the U.S.
- Largest Municipal Park by Major City Agency
- Most Visited City Park by Major City Agency
- Most Visited City Parks in the U.S.
- Natural and Designed Parkland by City
- New Acres Acquired by Agency
- Oldest City Park by Major City Agency
- Oldest City Parks in the U.S.
- Park Units per 10,000 Residents by City
- Parkland as Percentage of City Area
- Parkland by City and Agency
- Parkland Outside City Limits by Major City Agency
- Parkland per 1,000 Daytime Occupants by City
- Parkland per 1,000 Residents by City
- Population Density
- Walkable Park Access by City

Spending and Staffing

- Employees per 10,000 Residents by Major City Agency
- Spending on Parks and Recreation Adjusted for Price of Living
- Spending on Parks and Recreation per Resident
- Spending on Parks and Recreation per Resident by Agency

Facilities

- Ball Diamonds per 10,000 Residents by City
- Basketball Hoops per 10,000 Residents by City
- Beaches per 100,000 Residents by City
- Community Garden Plots per 10,000 Residents by City
- Disc Golf Courses per 10,000 Residents by City
- Dog Parks per 100,000 Residents by City
- Golf Courses per 100,000 Residents by City
- Ice Skating Rinks per 100,000 Residents by City
- Marina Slips per 100,000 Residents by City
- Nature Centers per 100,000 Residents by City
- Park Playgrounds per 10,000 Residents by City
- Recreation and Senior Centers per 20,000 Residents by City
- Skateboard Parks per 100,000 Residents by City
- Swimming Pools per 100,000 Residents by City
- Tennis Courts per 10,000 Residents by City

Naturally, two of the most important sets of metrics refer to revenue and spending, and TPL devotes particular attention to understanding the flow of money relating to parks. Thus, definitionally, the Trust distinguishes between 'operational spending' (year-in, year-out work such as landscape and tree maintenance, facility maintenance, trash removal, recreational programming, planning, administration, policing, lighting, marketing, etc.) and 'capital spending' (one-time items such as land acquisition, construction, and major road or structural repairs). (Typically, year over year, capital expenses show more fluctuation than operating expenses.)

As for collecting revenue data, TPL's rationale is two-fold: first, to ascertain the relative role of municipal tax support against other sources (such as fees or donations) for the system; second as a double-check that expenses are being accurately reported, since revenue should essentially equal spending each year. (Note that in order to provide greater uniformity between agencies, the Trust eliminates expenses and revenue associated with zoos, aquariums, professional sports stadiums, museums, and cemeteries, which exist in some cities' parks but not others'.)

Observations for park data collection in the UK

In relation to the UK, here are some observations about the United States data collection experience.

1. Population numbers

An accurate population count is essential – particularly to establish exactly which jurisdiction (authority) being measured. As mentioned, in the United States there is often public ambiguity between 'city' and 'metropolitan', which frequently throws off a useful conversation about needs and solutions.

2. Land areas

Similarly, the underlying land area (hectares) of each jurisdiction (authority) must be accurate, so as to accurately overlay park acreage facts. Recently, TPL has decided to calculate and excise the acreage of any airports and railyards within the municipal boundary under the rationale that these large facilities have no residents and do not need to provide any parkland. (For many places the impact of this change is very small, but for a few, such as Denver, with a monumental new airport within the city's boundary, it makes a significant statistical difference that can affect planning.

3. Ownership

There should be clarity as to the ownership of parkland within each jurisdiction. TPL has learned that the majority of cities contain parks operated not only by the lead municipal agency but also by one, two or more other agencies – a county, a regional entity, a state, the National Park Service, a water agency, etc. Generally speaking the different governmental agencies have little or no communication with each other and it is up to citizen organizations to try to provide coordination.

4. Ornamental and ecological parks

It is useful to be aware of the amount of parkland that is 'designed' and the amount that is 'natural'. TPL treats designed as parklands that have been created, constructed, planted, and managed primarily for human use. They include playgrounds, neighborhood parks, mini-parks, picnic meadows, sports fields, plazas, boulevards, and all areas served by roadways, parking lots and service buildings and facilities'. TPL treats 'natural' as 'either pristine or reclaimed lands left largely undisturbed and managed for their conservation and ecological value (i.e., wetlands, forests, deserts).

While they may have trails and occasional benches, they are not developed for any recreation activities beyond walking, running and cycling'. In addition, TPL asks each agency how much parkland it has that is 'undeveloped', by which is meant 'owned by a public agency but not yet been developed for public use, not managed or patrolled, and not legally open to public use (even if some people do illegally use it)'. Knowing the designed/natural split is helpful since managing designed parkland is much more expensive and labour-intensive than managing natural areas. Not separating the two can result in many unwitting 'apples and oranges' comparisons, particularly when juxtaposing different jurisdictions.

5. Visitor numbers

Usership numbers are extremely valuable, yet getting them is too expensive for most park departments. TPL carefully monitors and records all references to usership numbers for individual parks, but of course this tends to be only a small number of signature parks. In the ideal situation, park departments can arrange for local college and high school students to get credit for designing and carrying out a park user counting protocol, preferably on a system-wide basis.

6. Accessibility

Determining good park access (measured by the percent of residents who are within a half-mile of a park) can be accomplished using GIS (computerized mapping) technologies. However, this is something that TPL currently does itself (at the cost of approximately \$5,000 per city) rather than assuming each jurisdiction has the capability to do it itself. (This may change in the future when the technology becomes more widespread.) Normally TPL does fundraising to pay for the GIS computation.

7. Facilities

In TPL's experience, it is not particularly difficult to get information by way of an electronic survey to park agencies on many kinds of specific facilities. The relatively easy numbers to obtain include park playgrounds, swimming pools, tennis courts, basketball courts (we ask for 'hoops' rather than courts since some places provide only half-courts), dog parks, skate parks, golf courses, nature centers, beaches and marinas. Somewhat more difficult are restrooms (which need definitions regarding male/female and also portable potty units), miles of trails (which has real definitional challenges regarding sidewalks, etc.), ballfields (some of which are official, many others informal), community gardens (which need definitions about individual plots versus 'garden-fuls of plots)', and food (restaurants vs. kiosks vs. pushcarts, etc.) Getting the number of workers requires a clear distinction between full-time year-round with part-time and with seasonal.

8. Funding

As for spending and funding, this extremely important metric is generally the most difficult. TPL notes that all financial information collected consists of actuals, not budgeted amounts. (This puts the Trust a year behind in reporting, but results in much more accurate results since so many budgets never get completed the way they are written.) TPL breaks its financials into two different factors: Revenue and Expenditures.

Revenue consists of all the money that comes into the agency for its park work. The largest amount usually is general tax receipts programmed annually for operations. Some places also receive automatic tax money, such as a fixed property-tax surcharge mandated in the city charter and not controlled by the elected city council. Most places also get some funds from fee payments for sports like golf. A few get operating grants from the federal government, or from the state, such as state lottery money. TPL then also collects data on capital revenue for big-ticket one-time items (like paved trails, buildings, major facilities, etc.) Lastly, we ask about private contributions.

Expenditures consists of all the money that the authority spends on its parks, broken down by park maintenance, general maintenance (such as trash and graffiti removal, roadway sweeping, etc.), recreational programming, administration (such as central office functions and also electricity, etc.), debt service (if any), and then the two capital expenditures: physical construction and land acquisition.

The process of collecting data

And finally, some reflections on the actual process of collecting data. Aside from population and land acreage, very little of the data is publically available. In other words, TPL must do primary rather than secondary research, utilizing a written survey instrument (originally paper, now internet-based). The questionnaire is custom made (bespoke) and has gradually evolved over the years since 2000. There are actually two different questionnaires: a standard, lengthier one for the primary municipal park agency in each city and an alternative, shorter one for the other subsidiary agencies (many of which have only one or a few parks and much smaller, simpler budgets). The standard survey now involves approximately 120 questions, and TPL has found that most park agencies must break the document into pieces and circulate it internally to different divisions (i.e., Finance, Human Resources, Park Planning, Recreation, etc.) to answer the parts they are familiar with. Generally the full process (100 cities) takes about 4 months because many cities require several follow-up phone calls to first complete the questionnaire and to then make corrections to sections that TPL identifies as likely incorrect.

Over a year's period, TPL's staffing involves approximately 1/3 time for one staff person, 1/4 time for an intern, 1/20 time for the Center for City Park Excellence director, and several weeks work each for a report designer and a computer programmer. Should HLF wish to attempt something similar, it might be good to 'pilot' this in the first year with a restricted number of councils, say the 20 largest cities. We would not, however, recommend reducing the schedule to every two years. There are so many important lessons revealed through this process in the beginning few years that it is important to keep everyone current and to build up institutional memory and competence through repetition.



Image: LDA Design, Photograph © Robin Forster

Victoria Park, Tower Hamlets, known locally as the People's Park, opened in 1845 and restored in 2012

6.3 The way forward

This decade has clearly brought considerable challenges for the parks sector but there are also a number of trends and opportunities to suggest that parks and park services can be equipped to tackle many of these issues. Most of the objectives and motives that inspired the original Victorian park movement remain as valid today as when they were first conceived. History has shown that from the earliest model villages to the garden cities and new towns of the twentieth century, parks and green spaces have made a central contribution to the viability and vitality of places.

Parks originally helped to mitigate many of the social and environmental impacts of the industrial revolution. They should continue to play a key role in the health and wellbeing of communities to improve the quality of life for those living in increasingly dense urban areas. This research identifies five key actions offering a constructive way to meet these challenges. These are described in further detail in the accompanying summary report.

Local authority commitment

Local authorities' ongoing and renewed commitment to fund, staff and manage parks is essential. Parks should not simply be considered a costly liability, for it has been shown that there is a strong link between people's satisfaction with their local parks and their satisfaction with their neighbourhood. In places where local authorities spend more on parks and open space, this satisfaction is higher.

This research demonstrates, as have several previous studies, that parks are one of the most heavily used public services. They are particularly valued by families and young children and can represent an important local priority for voters. It is also clear through both historic precedent and recent research that careful and considered investment in public parks can deliver many economic, social and public health returns. With the vast majority of parks remaining in public ownership the ongoing need for local authorities to properly fund, staff and manage their parks is essential.

New partnerships

As the transfer of management for individual parks from local authorities to other organisations will potentially double over the next three years this has the ability to increasingly diversify the funding and resourcing of many park management services. Local voluntary and environmental organisations are now playing an increasingly important role in the resourcing, care and upkeep of their local parks but they need good support from councils to make the most of this contribution. Establishing long-term, financially viable, locally based partnerships requires commitment and resources. Budget cuts and the loss of skilled senior managers will both hinder and add risk to this process.

Getting communities involved

Friends and user groups contribute valuable volunteer time and money to local parks. With more than 5,000 such groups in the UK they represent a powerful force that can and already do play in supporting the upkeep and quality of local neighbourhood parks. One of the greatest contributions communities can make is to act as advocates and champions of local parks. This can help maintain an assurance from councillors and senior officers to continue to properly invest in their parks.

It has been estimated that in total these groups offer almost a million volunteer days to local parks each year and friends groups have the potential to generate over £30m through fundraising for parks annually. To be effective, groups need support to continue this work. It has been shown that when groups are trained and rewarded, they are better equipped to assist in park management, and their efforts will be sustained.

Collecting and sharing data

The ability to collect and compare data between individual cities and local authorities across the UK, as demonstrated by the United States, will be key to ensuring consistency in good park provision. As the preceding section has emphasised, there is clear need to establish more intelligent and sophisticated techniques that can quantify and compare the resources and values of parks and park systems.

Regular collection of comparable data between core cities, for example, would make poor levels of provision obvious and allow local authorities to benchmark standards and resources. Despite being one of the most heavily used public service after hospitals and GP surgeries, no comprehensive and comparable data on the quantity, location, quality or cost of parks is available across the UK. This statistical vacuum needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

New finance models and rethinking delivery

The future health and vitality of parks services will be dependent on developing new business models for management to complement those that currently exist. Time, resources and skills are needed to develop new ideas, test them and scale them up. Funding and expertise is also needed to stimulate innovation, develop skills and share ideas via a central knowledge hub.

This process of rethinking and redesigning business and delivery models should be seen as a collaborative process that should pool the talent and expertise from many sources including local communities, businesses, entrepreneurs and environmental specialists. Nesta has recently launched their Rethinking Parks programme¹²⁴ that is jointly funded by HLF and Big Lottery Fund to specifically support and promote future innovation within the parks sector.

To conclude, this study into the State of the UK's Public Parks delivers both good and bad news. Public parks, wherever they are located, provide an important, popular and heavily used asset for local communities.

At the start of this century the Government Select Committee into Town and Country Parks frankly observed that "we have inherited an infrastructure of parks of priceless value and their documented and visible decline represents a wasted opportunity of tragic proportions". Followed shortly after, the Public Parks Assessment took stock of the condition of parks across the UK. Since that time this study shows that much has improved. Parks are in better condition, many more now have Green Flag Awards, the lottery with others have invested hundreds of millions of pounds of public money in restoring numerous historic parks and there has been a considerable increase in the number of friends groups that are playing a growing role in the care and upkeep of their local parks.

But alarmingly, individual parks and the wider parks services that are responsible for their upkeep appear to be entering a new era of decline. The question that must now be asked is whether the UK is prepared to waste more than a decade of investment and improvement? Hopefully it will find the courage, commitment and innovation needed to continue to properly invest in the nation's wealth of public parks for the benefit of current communities and to protect this great living heritage for future generations to enjoy.

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