



# State of UK Public Parks

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2016

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

**Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, Chair, ukactive**



## Foreword by Ros Kerslake OBE

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**Thanks to National Lottery players, over £850million has been invested by the Heritage Lottery Fund – and more recently also Big Lottery Fund in regenerating the UK's public parks.**

Used regularly by over 37 million people each year, good quality parks are the places where we can tackle many of today's greatest challenges, from childhood obesity to our changing climate. Parks provide places for people to play and get fit, to volunteer and to reconnect with nature and the seasons, as well as with each other. In creating many of our greatest public parks, our Victorian ancestors understood they were not a luxury, and today parks are even more essential in our increasingly urban lives.

It has been two years since our last State of UK Public Parks report. Sadly the downward trend in the condition of parks we predicted then looks set to continue and there is a danger that many parks and green spaces may fall back to a state of decline and neglect. Whilst we are working hard to help those parks where we have invested, our fear is that many of the UK's parks and green spaces face an increasingly uncertain future.

Over the last 20 years we have learnt a lot about the value of parks to local people. A substantial network of friends and user groups now exists and their contribution to both funding and volunteering continues to grow. Local and vocal, these groups are essential to the future of our parks, and they have a key role to play in

deciding how local parks should be funded, managed and used.

Our research shows that over the last five years, cost-saving and efficiency measures have been implemented, so park managers are increasingly seeking to diversify income including commercial approaches. For many this requires a considerable shift in approach and learning new skills at a time when resources are limited. The scale of the task ahead is daunting. Support is needed to develop new blended funding approaches for parks and green spaces, and to implement and learn lessons from programmes such as Nesta and the National Lottery's Rethinking Parks.

We realise the great value that parks bring to people – our research shows that our investing in parks is something that 79% of the public support. This report highlights the opportunities and emerging ideas for new ways to fund and manage parks, as well as reporting on the current situation. For our part, HLF commits to continue to fund and support capital projects to regenerate historic parks, as well as to collaborate in finding creative ways to support those charged with funding, managing and protecting our parks and green spaces. Our aim is to ensure our park heritage, whether cultural or natural, continues to thrive and bloom for people and communities all across the UK. ■

**Ros Kerslake OBE**

Chief Executive, Heritage Lottery Fund

# The State of Parks overview

**Public parks make a significant contribution to the social and physical fabric of towns and cities across the UK.**

From the farsighted Victorian park movement that breathed life into industrialised and polluted cities to the garden suburbs and post-war new towns, we can quite justifiably claim to be a nation of great park-makers. This legacy has shaped the cultural heritage of communities and continues to enrich countless personal lives, relationships and experiences.

**“ We can quite justifiably claim to be a nation of great park-makers. ”**

Today, parks continue to add character, identity and value to neighbourhoods, making them more attractive, healthy and resilient places to live. They also provide an important home to nature, improving sustainability and providing much needed green space within our increasingly dense urban districts. Considerable pressure on public finances is making it much harder to properly manage, maintain and safeguard this great cultural and environmental resource.

## **This research**

This second State of UK Public Parks report has been commissioned by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and follows our first, published in 2014. We have completed a new set of UK-wide surveys with park

managers, park friends and user groups, park trusts, and the general public. These have been commissioned to understand the particular pressures parks are currently facing, what has changed over the past two years and how parks and park services are adapting to meet these challenges. This summary report is accompanied by a more detailed research report that is available at

[www.hlf.org.uk/parksmatter](http://www.hlf.org.uk/parksmatter)

## **SECTION 1: What we have found**

Many of the results follow trends established by the last study and this adds confidence and continuity to our conclusions. We know people use their local parks frequently and this appears to be on the rise. Households with children, people living in urban areas and those from black and minority ethnic communities use their parks the most. At the same time, an increasing proportion of park managers report their maintenance budgets are continuing to fall. The number of park staff continues to be cut and fewer park managers report that their parks have been improving in the past three years. It is clear that there is a growing deficit between the rising use of parks and the declining resources that are available to manage them. This gap does not bode well for the future condition and health of the nation's public parks.

## **SECTION 2: Rising to the challenge**

Our research indicates that some local authorities and organisations are responding to the challenges ahead. However it is early days and more needs to be done to share and test potential new approaches.

## **SECTION 3: What next?**

Action is clearly needed to avert a crisis that will undermine more than two decades of investment in our parks and we welcome the Select Committee's decision to hold an inquiry into public parks. This report concludes with a renewed call to action that takes forward the key themes from the first study:

- Continuing local authority leadership
- Promoting active partnerships
- Supporting communities to play a more active role
- Developing new models of management and funding
- Compiling, coordinating and updating data

No single organisation is capable of tackling this considerable challenge alone; it needs a collaborative effort and proactive partnerships to ensure parks continue to serve their surrounding neighbourhoods and communities now and into the future. ■

## Parks are valued by the communities that use them

**£50m**

estimated to be raised by park friends groups each year.  
↑ £20m from 2014

**57%**

of adults use their parks at least once a month or more.  
↑ 3% from 2014

**5,900**

estimated number of park friends and user groups across UK.  
↑ 1,100 from 2014

**90%**

of households with children under five visit their local park at least once a month or more.  
↑ 7% from 2014

**£70m**

estimated value of volunteering hours given by park friends and user groups each year.  
↑ £30m from 2014

## ... but their future may not be so bright

**27%**

of park managers report their parks have been improving over the past three years.  
↓ 14% from 2014

**53%**

of park managers report their parks to be in a good condition.  
↓ 7% from 2014

**92%**

of park managers report cuts to their revenue budgets over the past three years.  
↑ 6% from 2014

**95%**

of park managers expect their revenue budget to be cut over the next three years.  
↑ 8% from 2014

**55%**

of park managers expect their park revenue budget to be cut by 10-20% over the next three years.  
↑ 17% from 2014



## City perspective

### **Nottingham:** Aiming to become cost neutral

Nottingham City Council has faced a £150million reduction in its budget over the last five years. The parks service faces on-going pressure and is required to find a further £400,000 in savings this year. It has focused on protecting its staff who provide the skills and expertise needed to drive the service forward and promote innovation. A key approach has been to pool funding and work hard to increase other sources of income. The service has now set a target to balance income and expenditure by 2020 and to operate on a cost-neutral basis. ■



# SECTION 1

## What we have found

### Top ten findings

“Parks are fundamental to our social fabric, providing unrivalled opportunities for people to come together, relax and play. We are proud to work alongside Heritage Lottery Fund and Nesta to support Parks for People and Rethinking Parks. With more than half of the UK population using their local park at least once a month, these programmes help protect our green spaces and enable them to thrive for people and communities.”

Dawn Austwick, Chief Executive, Big Lottery Fund

### How we undertook this research

We commissioned four primary surveys for this report of:

- local authority park managers;
- park friends and user groups;
- independent park trusts; and
- the general public  
(conducted by BritainThinks).

We ran a day workshop with the West Midlands Park Forum, representing the largest urban conurbation outside London and contributed to a Greenspace Scotland Park Managers Forum.

We have also met with park managers in several of the UK's core cities including Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield.

In total, 193 individual local authorities replied to the park managers' survey that ran from 4 April to 6 May 2016. This was a higher number than the last study and represents 46% of all local authorities. These are responsible for around 35 million residents.

The park friends and user groups' survey received 441 responses from within 119 different local authority areas located across the UK. This was also a higher number of returns than the last survey and the returns represent almost 40,000 individual members.

The park trust survey was a new addition to this study and was completed by 19 different independent organisations between 4 and 27 May 2016. Whilst this is a small sector, they include new trusts and those that have been operating for more than a century.

The survey of the general public was completed by 2,130 adults aged 16 and above, providing a representative sample of the UK population. The survey was undertaken between 27 and 31 May 2016 and used an established online survey methodology. ■



# 1

## People use their parks regularly and visitor numbers are increasing

**Parks are used frequently and more than half of the UK population, 57%, visit their local parks at least once a month or more often.**

Some of the most regular park users are those between 25 and 34 years of age; 70% use their local park at least once a month. Parks are clearly important for families and households with children under the age of five; over half, 54%, of them use their local parks at least once a week and 90% about once a month or more.

For those living in urban areas, 61% use their parks at least once a month, which is 10% higher than residents in rural areas. Black and minority ethnic residents are also frequent park users; 71% of

them use their local park monthly or more compared to 56% of white residents. It also appears that the condition of parks may influence the level of use; 76% of those who consider their local park to be improving use it at least once a month, compared to 57% of those who consider it to be declining.

The frequency of use appears to be on the rise, with three quarters of park managers reporting that visitor numbers have been increasing over the past three years. Research from Natural England supports this view. Their five-year MENE<sup>1</sup> study on how people use the natural environment shows that visits to urban parks have been increasing and parks in towns are the most frequently visited location. ▶

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

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





## Park maintenance budgets continue to fall

**92% of park managers report their maintenance budgets have reduced in the past three years and 95% expect their funding will continue to reduce.**

In 2014, 86% of park managers reported a fall in their revenue budgets over the previous three years; this has now increased to 92%. Over the next three years, 95% of park managers expect their budgets will continue to fall and over half, 55%, expect this will be by 10-20%.

In the last survey, 38% of park managers expected their budget would fall by this much. Whilst a higher proportion of park managers expect their budgets to continue to reduce overall, fewer local authorities are expecting cuts of more than 20% over the next three years compared to the last survey. This is now 21% of managers compared to 32% in 2014.

Over the past three years, 25% of park managers consider the level of cuts they have faced to have been worse than they were expecting. A recent State of the Market report from the Association of Public Service Excellence<sup>2</sup> (APSE) found that 78% of local authorities agree or agree strongly that 'the squeeze on public sector resources is affecting parks and green spaces disproportionately to other service areas'.

The level of cuts varies across the UK. It appears that councils in urban areas, the unitary and metropolitan local authorities, and those in the East Midlands and the North of England expect to have higher than average reductions in their budgets over the next three years. Park managers expect the impact of this to include a decline in quality, skills, morale, support to park friends and user groups, volunteer recruitment and the staffing of events. At the same time, fees and charges, complaints, the transfer or disposal of assets and the closure of facilities are anticipated to rise. ▶

**In the past three years (2013-15), what would you say the changes in your revenue budgets has been?**

	2016 (n=168)	2014 (n=163)
<b>Budget increased</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>6.8%</b>
<b>Not changed</b>	<b>8.3%</b>	<b>6.8%</b>
<b>Decreased by less than 10%</b>	<b>23.2%</b>	<b>24.7%</b>
<b>Decreased by between 10% and 20%</b>	<b>35.7%</b>	<b>29.6%</b>
<b>Decreased by more than 20%</b>	<b>32.7%</b>	<b>32.1%</b>

**Table 1** Change in park revenue budgets in the past three years (2013, 2014 and 2015)

**In the next three years (2017-19), what would you say the changes in your revenue budgets will be?**

	2016 (n=173)	2014 (n=163)
<b>Budget increased</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>3.9%</b>
<b>Not changed</b>	<b>5.2%</b>	<b>9.1%</b>
<b>Decreased by less than 10%</b>	<b>19.1%</b>	<b>16.9%</b>
<b>Decreased by between 10% and 20%</b>	<b>54.9%</b>	<b>37.7%</b>
<b>Decreased by more than 20%</b>	<b>20.8%</b>	<b>32.5%</b>

**Table 2** Expected change in park revenue budgets in next three years (2017, 2018 and 2019)

# 3

## Staff and skills are being lost

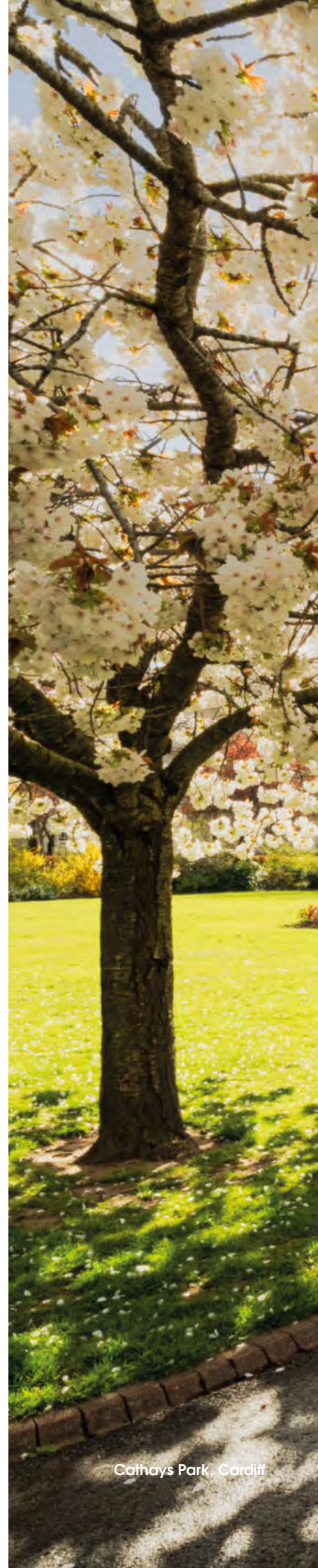
**Three quarters of park managers report a reduction in staff and, in the next three years, no local authorities expect to increase the size of their parks' workforce.**

Three quarters of local authorities have reduced their parks management teams over the past three years and this is expected to continue over the next three years.

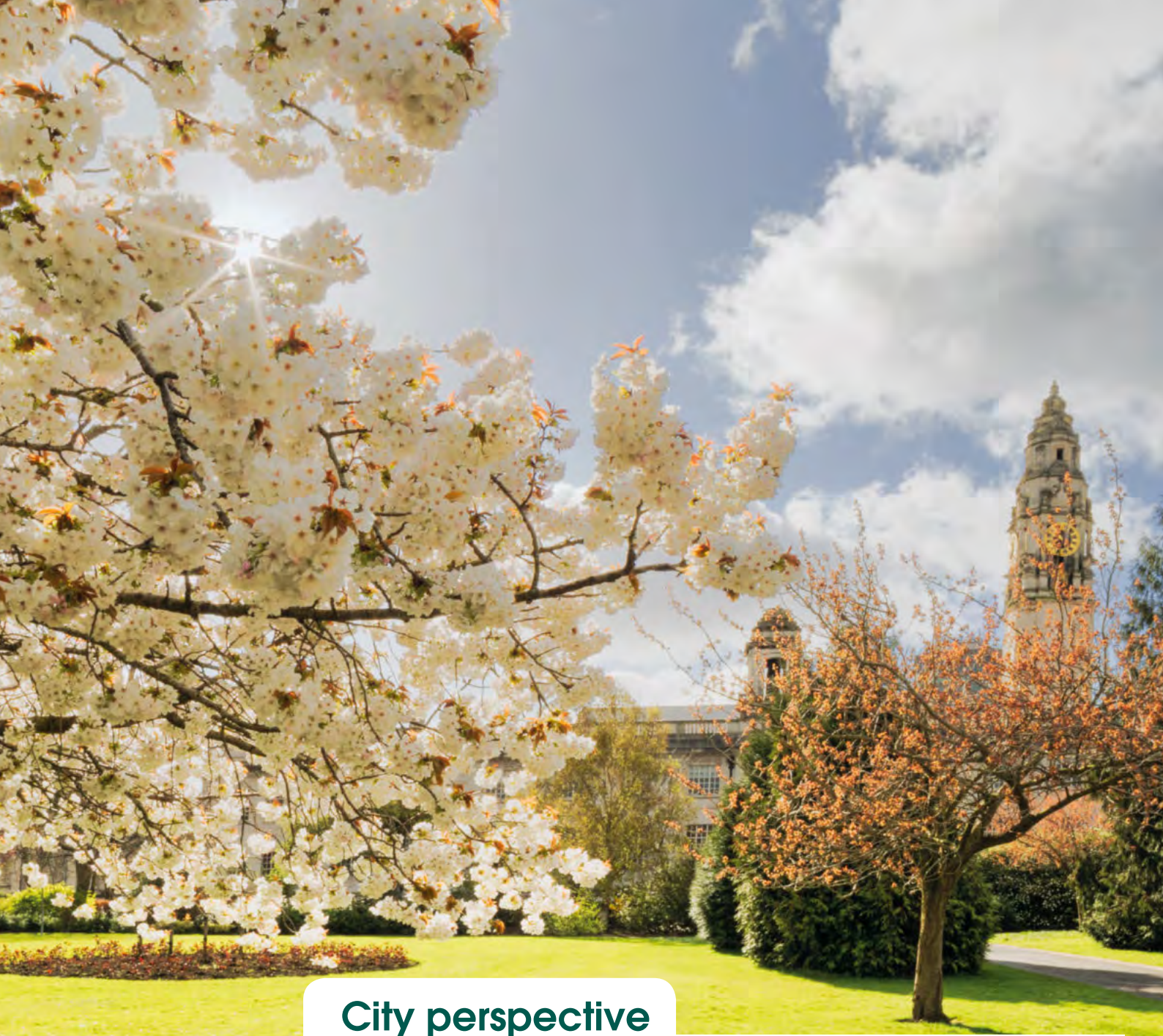
**“ 41% of park managers report horticultural skills have fallen over the past three years. ”**

This year, our survey looked at changes in skills in more detail to understand how specific park service skills are changing. The most distinctive trend is the decline in frontline skills: 41% of park managers report horticultural skills have fallen over the past three years. Managers also report that landscape design (28%) and ecological expertise (21%) has declined.

We also asked park managers what they think will be the most important skills for the future of the service. It is clear there is an increasing priority for financial and partnership skills that focus on funding and resources. Almost all local authorities, 95%, stated that financial management will be important or extremely important and more than 90% also stated that sourcing external funding and partnership working will be important. These new skills will be crucial for the future, but skills such as horticulture, landscape design and ecology are equally important and should not be lost. ▶



Cathays Park, Cardiff



## City perspective

### Cardiff: More collaborative ways of working

The city's park budget has fallen by around £2.3million, or a third over the past decade. The council is finding it increasingly difficult to protect frontline services owing to budget reductions. The parks service is active in creating alternative delivery models for aspects of the service, in particular outdoor sport, which secure continuity of service provision. It is developing a more commercial approach in areas such as tree management, grounds maintenance and plant production. Strong relationships with park friends groups/ community groups exist, which generated volunteer hours in excess of 25,000 in 2015/16. There is also a strong commitment from the council and service in a 'People Programme' that has seen a year-on-year increase in apprenticeships/trainee schemes and work experience opportunities for school leavers, individuals with learning difficulties and the long-term unemployed. ■



# 4

## The quality of parks is expected to decline

Whilst around half of all respondents report their parks are currently in a good condition, the proportion of parks declining in condition is expected to rise.

The number of park managers reporting that parks are currently in a good condition has fallen since 2014, but is still much higher than when first surveyed by the Public Parks Assessment<sup>3</sup> (PPA) in 2001. However, there has been a slight increase of 5% since 2014, in the proportion of

the public who consider their local parks to be in a good condition. This may be due to a combination of factors such as park managers effectively papering over the cracks to hide the effects of reduced long-term maintenance, the 2016 survey undertaken in spring as opposed to the autumn survey of 2014, or simply that the public are less inclined to notice the declining maintenance to features such as buildings, woodlands and lakes.

What do you consider to be the current condition of your public parks?

	2016 Park Managers (n=189)	2014 Park Managers (n=176)	2001 PPA <sup>1</sup> (n=339)
Good	52.9%	59.7%	18%
Fair	45.5%	38.6%	69%
Poor	1.6%	1.7%	13%

Notes <sup>1</sup>Public Parks Assessment asked the trend in condition over the last 10 years

Table 3 Current condition of parks recorded by park managers in 2016, 2014 and 2001

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

Mark Camley, Chair, The Parks Alliance

**“The renaissance of our public parks that has been underway for the past 15 years is fast coming to an end.”**

A particularly concerning trend is the expected change in the condition of parks going forward. Fewer park managers, park friends groups and park trusts expect their parks to be in an improving condition over the next three years compared to the past three years. At the same time, more park managers and park friends groups expect their parks to

be declining during this period. This reinforces the conclusion of our last report that suggested ‘the renaissance of our public parks that has been underway for the past 15 years is fast coming to an end’. It appears that the condition of many parks has now reached a tipping-point when they are expected to fall back into a state of decline and neglect. ▶

**What do you consider to be the trend in condition of your public parks over the last three years?**

	2013 -15 Park Managers (n=189)	2013 -15 Friends Groups (n=360)	2013 -15 Park Trusts (n=19)	2001 PPA <sup>1</sup> (n=334)
<b>Improving</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>42.2%</b>	<b>63.2%</b>	<b>29.4%</b>
<b>Stable</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>26.9%</b>	<b>21.1%</b>	<b>33.2%</b>
<b>Declining</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>30.8%</b>	<b>15.8%</b>	<b>37.4%</b>

**Notes** <sup>1</sup>Public Parks Assessment asked the trend in condition over the last 10 years

**Table 4** Trend in condition of parks recorded by park managers, friends groups and park trusts for the past three years (2013, 2014 and 2015)

**What do you consider to be the trend in condition of your public parks over the next three years?**

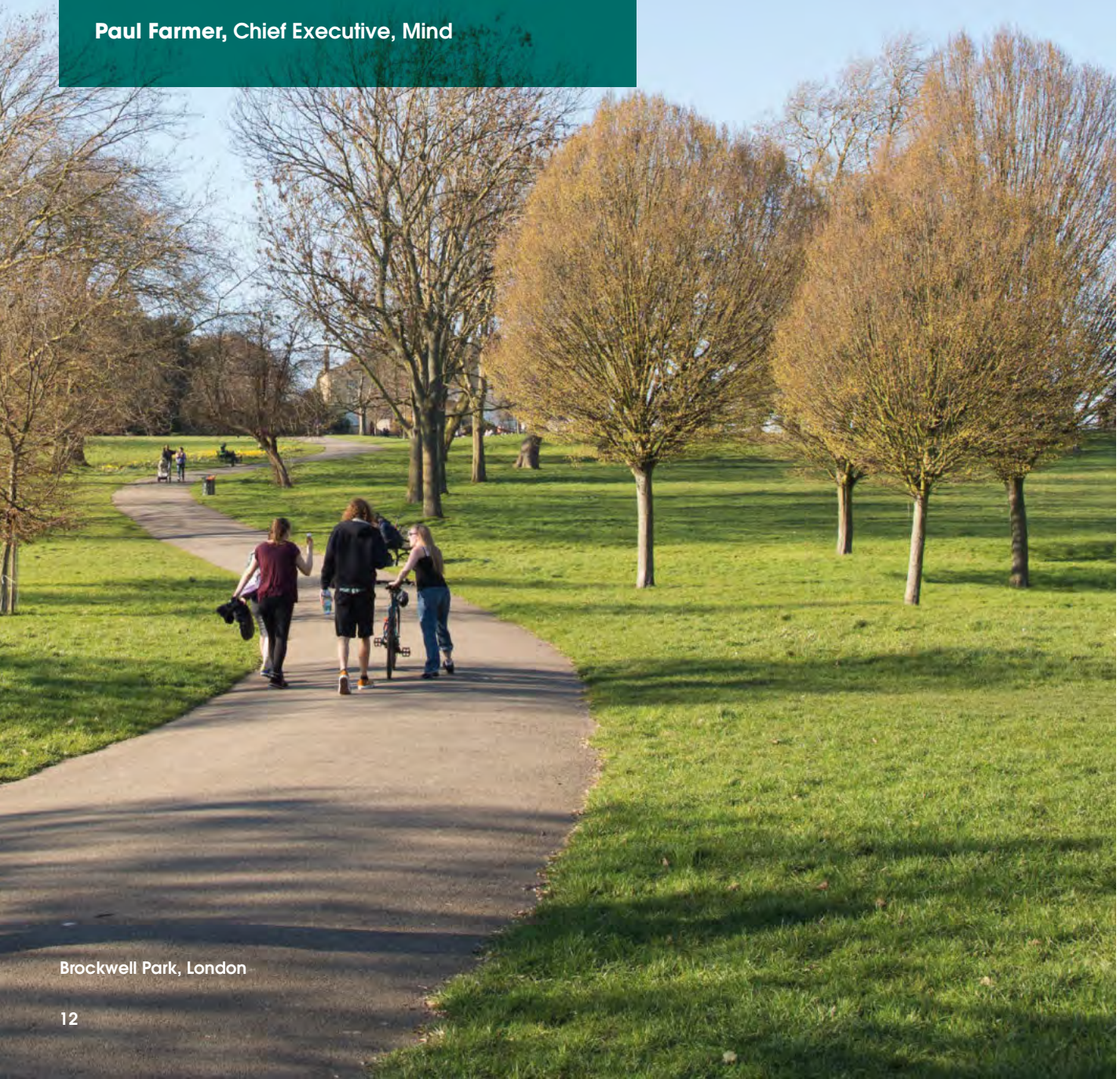
	2017 -19 Park Managers (n=189)	2017 -19 Friends Groups (n=359)	2017 -19 Park Trusts (n=19)	2001 PPA <sup>1</sup> (n=334)
<b>Improving</b>	<b>19.6%</b>	<b>32.9%</b>	<b>57.9%</b>	<b>29.4%</b>
<b>Stable</b>	<b>41.8%</b>	<b>29.2%</b>	<b>26.3%</b>	<b>33.2%</b>
<b>Declining</b>	<b>38.6%</b>	<b>37.9%</b>	<b>15.8%</b>	<b>37.4%</b>

**Notes** <sup>1</sup>Public Parks Assessment asked the trend in condition over the last 10 years

**Table 5** Trend in condition of parks recorded by park managers, friends groups and park trusts for the next three years (2017, 2018 and 2019)

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

**Paul Farmer, Chief Executive, Mind**



# Park services are facing increasing inequality

**Parks and park services have been affected more by cuts in some parts of the UK than others, with the Northern and Midlands regions of England hit hardest.**

Several studies on the impact of austerity on public services across the UK suggest more deprived urban authorities face higher levels of cuts. The Government's Natural Environment White Paper<sup>4</sup> acknowledges that 'while many people enjoy pleasant green spaces near where they live, this is not the case for everyone. People in deprived areas are nearly six times less likely than

those in affluent ones to describe their area as "green"'.

We have looked at regional variations in the impact of cuts and in particular the effect on revenue budgets, staffing levels and the proportion of declining parks expected in the next three years. Whilst sample sizes are relatively small, a cumulative ranking of these factors indicates that the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the North West expect to be affected the most. These regions are followed by the Midlands, the South West and the East

whilst London and the South East appear proportionately less affected.

Variations across individual countries are less definitive, although Northern Ireland expects the highest proportion of revenue cuts. Wales is anticipating the highest percentage reduction to staff as well as the greatest proportion of declining parks. No park managers in Wales, the North West and the South West expect to have parks that are improving in condition over the next three years. ▶

Region	% Average revenue cuts	Rank	% Average staffing cuts	Rank	% Average declining parks	Rank	Total	Rank
North East	-19.3%	3	-19.8%	1	62.5%	1	5	1
Yorkshire & the Humber	-17.8%	4	-14.3%	5	58.3%	2	11	2
North West	-20.5%	2	-11.5%	7	55%	3	12	3
West Midlands	-15.1%	5	-15.4%	3	41.7%	5	13	4
East Midlands	-23.2%	1	-7.4%	9	26.7%	6	16	5
South West	-14.8%	6	-12%	6	42.9%	4	16	5
East	-13.7%	7	-16.9%	2	26.3%	7	16	5
South East	-10.7%	9	-14.8%	4	10%	9	22	8
London	-11.8%	8	-11.2%	8	22.2%	8	24	9
Wales	-22.2%	2	-15.6%	1	70%	1	4	1
England	-15.9%	3	-13.3%	2	36%	3	8	2
Northern Ireland	-23%	1	-10.5%	3	0%	4	8	2
Scotland	-10.3%	4	-9.3%	4	50%	2	10	4
<b>Averages</b>	<b>-15.9%</b>		<b>-13%</b>		<b>38.6%</b>			

**Table 6** Combined cumulative ranking of revenue cuts, staffing cuts and declining parks expected in the next three years (2017, 2018 and 2019) compared across the UK (Park Managers' survey)



# Park management will be much more varied in the future

**The proportion of local authorities that are planning to dispose of or transfer the management of green spaces to other organisations is set to increase.**

Our last study found that 45% of local authorities were considering either selling parks and green spaces or transferring their management to others. This time 50% report having done this over the past three years and this is expected to increase to 59% over the next three years.

Looking at parks specifically, very few authorities, just 0.5%, report having sold an entire site, although this is expected to increase to over 2% of councils over the next three years. Just under 5% of park managers report having sold

part of a park in the past three years and this is expected to increase slightly to 6% in the next three years. The most common sites to be disposed of over the next three years are amenity green spaces and natural or semi-natural spaces.

It is much more likely that responsibility for the management of parks and other green spaces will be transferred to other organisations. Over the past three years, 50% of local authorities have transferred outdoor sports facilities to community groups and a similar proportion, 53%, expect to continue to do this. Around a third of councils, 30%, are considering transferring parks to community groups. ▶

**“The most common sites to be disposed of over the next three years are amenity green spaces and natural or semi-natural spaces.”**

Over the current and next three years (2017–19) are you considering disposing of / transferring the management or ownership of any green space? (n=189)	Sold entire site	Sold part of site	Transfer to community group	Transfer to voluntary sector	Transfer to a trust	Other	Total
Public parks and gardens	5	12	24	14	13	11	79
Outdoor sports facilities	3	5	52	20	12	6	98
Amenity green space	18	20	26	12	9	14	99
Natural/semi-natural green space	12	7	28	18	12	10	87
Provision for children and young people	2	1	17	6	6	8	40
Other type of space	4	3	7	3	2	4	23

**Notes** Numbers of authorities stating they have disposed of or transferred spaces

**Table 7** Local authority disposal or transfer of management of different types of green spaces that is being considered in the current and next three years (2017, 2018 and 2019)





## Sources of external income are on the rise

**More than half of local authorities, 56%, benefit from National Lottery grants for regeneration projects.**

**Local authorities report increasing levels of park funding from external sources with planning gain remaining the most important contributor.**

Having exhausted most opportunities to make savings and efficiencies, councils are increasingly turning to raising income in other ways. Currently, just under a quarter, 22.5%, of funding for parks comes from external sources and this is expected to increase to almost a third, 29%, in the next three years.

In the last survey, income from planning and development secured through Section 106 planning agreements had been used to fund parks by 89% of councils but this has fallen slightly to 81% of councils in this new survey. This gap appears to be filled by income from the

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). More than half of local authorities, 56%, benefit from National Lottery grants for regeneration projects, whilst 67% of councils have secured funding through charging for services.

To understand what the public thinks about different forms of funding for parks, we asked a specific question in the public opinion poll. It is clear that increased charges for using park facilities has the least support from the public. However, 60% supported more commercial use of parks (such as through ticketed events and fairs). Funding from the National Lottery received the greatest support, followed closely by more sponsorship from businesses and funding from planning gain. ▶

Ways to supplement the funding of parks (n = 2,130)	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support or oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	NET support
Greater funding from the National Lottery	39%	40%	15%	1%	1%	79%
More sponsorship of parks by businesses (e.g. funding of planting areas, features and facilities)	30%	45%	17%	2%	1%	75%
More funding from planning and local development (e.g. developer contributions from new housing)	32%	42%	18%	2%	2%	74%
Greater fundraising by local communities and park user groups	19%	46%	27%	3%	1%	65%
More commercial use of parks (e.g. ticketed events, fairs and shows)	18%	41%	25%	8%	3%	59%
Increasing charges for using park facilities (e.g. tennis courts or car parks)	4%	16%	23%	29%	24%	20%

Table 8 Public opinions on options to supplement funding for parks. N.B. excludes those answering "don't know" (May 2016)



## City perspective

### **Edinburgh:** Capturing the value of living landscapes

In 2011 Edinburgh City Council began to implement a three-year £90million programme of savings, which included budget and staff reductions to their parks service. The loss of a £1million annual capital fund is beginning to negatively affect park infrastructure. To improve the efficiency of park management, the city established a Living Landscapes Programme in 2012, run in partnership with the Scottish Wildlife Trust. The project has mapped living landscape features to provide a framework and management tool for developing more healthy and diverse ecosystems. The city has undertaken a detailed analysis of the social return on investment that its parks provide, finding that, for every £1 invested in parks, approximately £12 of benefits are delivered. The city also realises the value of park friends groups and has worked hard to expand the number to over 50. ■





# 8

## Communities are doing more for their parks

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**The number of friends groups and members per group has increased, however, communities are generally reluctant to take on a more formal responsibility for managing sites.**

Our last report highlighted the significant contribution park friends and user groups make to their local parks and green spaces. This is even more apparent in this year's survey where 78% of groups now help with maintenance activities, slightly up on the 73% recorded in the last survey. There are also increases in the proportion of groups that undertake fundraising, operate facilities and contribute to site security.

Park managers and friends groups also report the level of volunteering by friends groups is increasing. Previously, using figures from the park managers' survey, this was estimated to represent the equivalent of £30million in volunteering time per year. Now the estimated value of volunteering may be at least £70million per year. Friends groups also record higher levels of fundraising. The average raised per group was previously calculated to be almost £7,000, now it is over £9,000 representing a cumulative estimate of around £50million that is raised across the UK each year.

However, when friends groups were asked whether they would be interested in taking on a more active role in the management of their green space, 32% said they were, whilst 41% said they were not. Furthermore, less than 10% stated that they would consider taking on formal and long-term responsibilities for the management and maintenance of their site through full asset transfer. ▶



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# Park trusts appear to be coping better through austerity

**An additional survey suggests that park trusts have performed better in terms of funding, staffing and quality than many of their local authority counterparts.**

Whilst the number of park trusts across the UK is relatively small and our survey results are therefore only indicative, they do provide a useful perspective on how these independent park management organisations have fared in recent years. Since 2013, six trusts (representing 37% of our sample), report they have increased their budgets and four (representing 27%), expect this to continue over the next three

years. 11 trusts (representing 61%), also expect to have a capital budget going forwards in comparison to fewer than half of local authorities, 47%, who expect this to be the case.

A higher proportion of trusts, 13 (68%), report their parks to be in a good condition compared to 53% of local authorities. A large number, 11 (58%), also expect their parks to be improving over the next three years, whilst just 20% of local authorities are reporting this. Trends for staffing also appear more positive – whereas no local authorities expect to increase staff numbers, around a quarter

of trusts plan to grow their teams. These initial findings suggest that, on average, park trusts appear to be performing well through austerity and provide one useful model for the future management of some parks. However, a more detailed analysis of the sector, based on a more comprehensive sample, is needed before drawing firm conclusions. ▶

**“Whereas no local authorities expect to increase staff numbers, around a quarter of trusts plan to grow their teams.”**

# Local authority commitment to parks does make a difference

**Councils that consider their parks to be a priority, have a parks strategy in place, and an elected member as a parks champion tend to have better parks.**

It was apparent from the last study that a higher proportion of local authorities with an up-to-date parks strategy also report their parks to be in both a good and an improving condition. The impact of strategies is still present but is now less marked and we also find a smaller proportion of councils have a strategy in place – in

2014 this was 76% of authorities, it has now fallen to 48%. Those authorities that have a strategy are more likely to expect their parks will be improving and less likely to expect their parks will be declining over the next three years.

There is also a distinct difference in the trend in condition of parks where parks are also considered to be a corporate priority. Over the past three years, only 18% of councils that report their parks are not a corporate priority have

improving parks, in comparison to 82% of councils who report both improving parks and that their parks are a corporate priority. This percentage difference is very similar when looking forward to the next three years and this is also the case for those councils with an elected parks champion. The proportion of local authorities reporting both an elected champion and parks that have been improving in the past three years is 80% compared to just 20% for those without a champion. ■



“ 78% of local authorities agree or agree strongly that the squeeze on public sector resources is affecting parks and green spaces disproportionately to other service areas.”



“ When friends groups were asked whether they would be interested in taking on a more active role in the management of their green space, 32% said they were, whilst 41% said they were not.”





“ It appears that the condition of many parks has now reached a tipping-point when they are expected to fall back into a state of decline and neglect. ”

“ Over the past three years, 25% of park managers consider the level of cuts they have faced to have been worse than they were expecting. ”





## SECTION 2

# Rising to the challenge

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Our research shows that parks and park services are currently facing immense challenges. A higher proportion of local authorities are facing budget cuts since the last survey and, over the next three years, none plan to increase revenue funding for parks. As a direct consequence, the number of parks staff will continue to decline and the loss of development type skills will make it much harder to innovate and engage with local communities, new partners and potential funders.

However, travel the length and breadth of the UK and you can still visit many great parks that are well managed and continue to be immensely popular, evidenced in part by the continuing rise in Green Flag Awards. There is a concern that austerity may increasingly polarise park services between fewer better maintained flagship parks and local neighbourhood parks that may be starved of resources. However our study and wider research indicates that some local authorities and organisations working across the sector are responding to these challenges to achieve positive change during this time of austerity.



## Rethinking parks

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Over the past 18 months, the most prominent opportunity for innovation has been the Rethinking Parks Programme<sup>5</sup> run by Nesta, HLF and BLF England. This was a key action in our last report and has helped test and develop new business models for

individual parks and wider park services. The main lessons have been written up and provide useful learning on ways to resource park services and reshape parks to make them more sustainable and resilient in the future.

## Funding parks

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Adequate funding remains the most critical issue and there are no simple solutions. Public parks are provided for public benefit and logic and history dictates they will continue to need public funding to properly serve their surrounding communities. However our research shows that the proportion of external funding is increasing and parks are becoming more adept at leveraging a variety of additional financial and in-kind resources.

Park services are starting to grow their commercial activities by, for example, establishing trading companies and adding a retail dimension to their nursery production. Parks are increasingly working

with businesses through direct sponsorship and corporate volunteering.

In London, for example, the Bloomsbury Squared<sup>6</sup> Rethinking Parks project has explored the potential of a Parks Improvement District through charging a levy on local businesses.

Parks have been testing various approaches to fundraising, crowdsourcing and subscriptions. Such examples include: The Bournemouth Parks Foundation<sup>7</sup>; Heeley People's Park Subscription developed by Sheffield's Heeley Development Trust<sup>8</sup>; and, MyParkScotland<sup>9</sup> developed by Greenspace Scotland – all Rethinking Parks projects.

## Active parks

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With increasing rates of physical inactivity and obesity, there is growing commitment from Sport England, and the sports and health sectors, to use parks as a means to promote more active and healthy lifestyles. Initiatives to encourage greater participation in sport and promote more regular and active use of parks are on the increase. Nottingham, for example, has been working with Nottingham Forest Football Club to introduce a Sports Zone at The Forest Recreation Ground, taking young people off the streets and contributing to a fall in antisocial behaviour.

We found that over 20% of park managers receive funding from health organisations and parks are becoming directly engaged in delivering tangible and direct health benefits. These include green gyms, health walks, pram-active and fitness classes. Birmingham runs an extensive Active Parks Programme<sup>10</sup> across almost 40 of its parks whilst Leeds has invested heavily in its Country Parks and Green Gateways<sup>11</sup> programme to improve its network of recreational footpaths, cycle ways and trails. ▶

## Partnering parks

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The management and maintenance of parks is expected to be much more mixed in the future. This trend is clear from both our study and focused research by the University of Sheffield<sup>12</sup> into local authority maintenance of parks and green spaces. Forging productive partnerships is one key to success and, whilst they take time and effort to work, they can be valuable ways to share resources and expertise. Sheffield, through Rethinking Parks, has worked with the National Trust to explore the potential to establish an endowment to fund the management of parks in the future. The Land Trust, Wildlife Trusts and Groundwork have been working in partnership with local authorities to take on the direct management of parks and green spaces.

Friends groups and other community organisations are taking an increasing role in supporting their local parks. Our research estimates that friends and user groups could be contributing around £120million each year through fundraising and volunteering.

Two Rethinking Parks projects looked to develop this in a more structured way. The Bristol Parks Forum has co-led ParkWork<sup>13</sup> a practical training and work experience programme for volunteers and the long-term unemployed to support the maintenance of the city's parks. The Land Trust is working with Liverpool City Council and the Friends of Everton Park<sup>14</sup> to formalise the structure of the group and support their capacity to take on a more regular management role.

Whilst friends groups are playing an important role in individual parks, there are limits to their capacity. Our survey also found that only a third of groups express an interest in taking a more active role and most want this to be on an informal annual arrangement. Local authorities responding to APSE's recent State of the Market Survey<sup>15</sup> share this view, where 92% agree or agree strongly that 'there's a limit to the extent to which volunteers can be involved in delivering parks and green space services'.

## Changing parks

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Many park services are changing their approach to maintaining parks and green spaces. Whilst the threat of disposal or part sale of individual parks is limited, 6% of local authorities are considering selling entire parks over the next three years. Managers also report they expect to acquire new parks and green spaces in some form.

Many councils are looking to rationalise and naturalise some management activities and, in particular, the maintenance of grasslands. Much of this is driven by the desire to increase urban biodiversity, enhance the natural capital of sites and capture more functional and productive ecosystem services. Some cities are developing natural capital accounts for their parks to financially quantify the environmental, social and economic benefits that parks deliver. The Greater

London Authority, National Trust and HLF have commissioned a natural capital account for London's parks and green spaces.

Green Estates, a Sheffield based social enterprise has pioneered the development of pictorial meadows in their management of the 24 hectare Manor Fields Park<sup>16</sup> in partnership with the University of Sheffield. Edinburgh's Living Landscapes<sup>17</sup> programme is working with the Scottish Wildlife Trust to increase biodiversity and create healthier ecosystems in its parks by changing its approach to land management. Burnley's 'Go to the Park' Rethinking Parks project<sup>18</sup> has developed a new management approach to the town's heritage parks. It is generating timber products from woodlands and moving away from annual bedding displays to a greater use of perennials.

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

**Stephanie Hilborne OBE,**  
Chief Executive, The Wildlife Trusts



## Positioning parks

Parks cannot thrive in isolation. To capture greater benefits, individual parks and wider park systems need to be fully integrated within the council's strategic and corporate objectives. Our research indicates that, where parks are considered a priority, they are much more likely to be improving and less likely to be declining. Whilst the survey sample size is relatively small, those councils that have an elected champion for their parks appear to be 50% more likely to report their parks are improving.

It is concerning that there has been a 25% fall in the number of local authorities that have a park

and green space strategy and not all strategies are up to date.

Our last survey showed strategies have a positive influence on the condition of parks. Falkirk Council has consulted extensively on their open spaces strategy<sup>19</sup> that proactively addresses issues of commercial use, promoting community involvement and identifying spaces that may now be surplus to requirements. Manchester has recently completed a detailed consultation to inform a comprehensive update to their parks strategy and Birmingham's Green Living Spaces<sup>20</sup> plan repositions their parks as a strategic asset within the city's green vision. ■

## SECTION

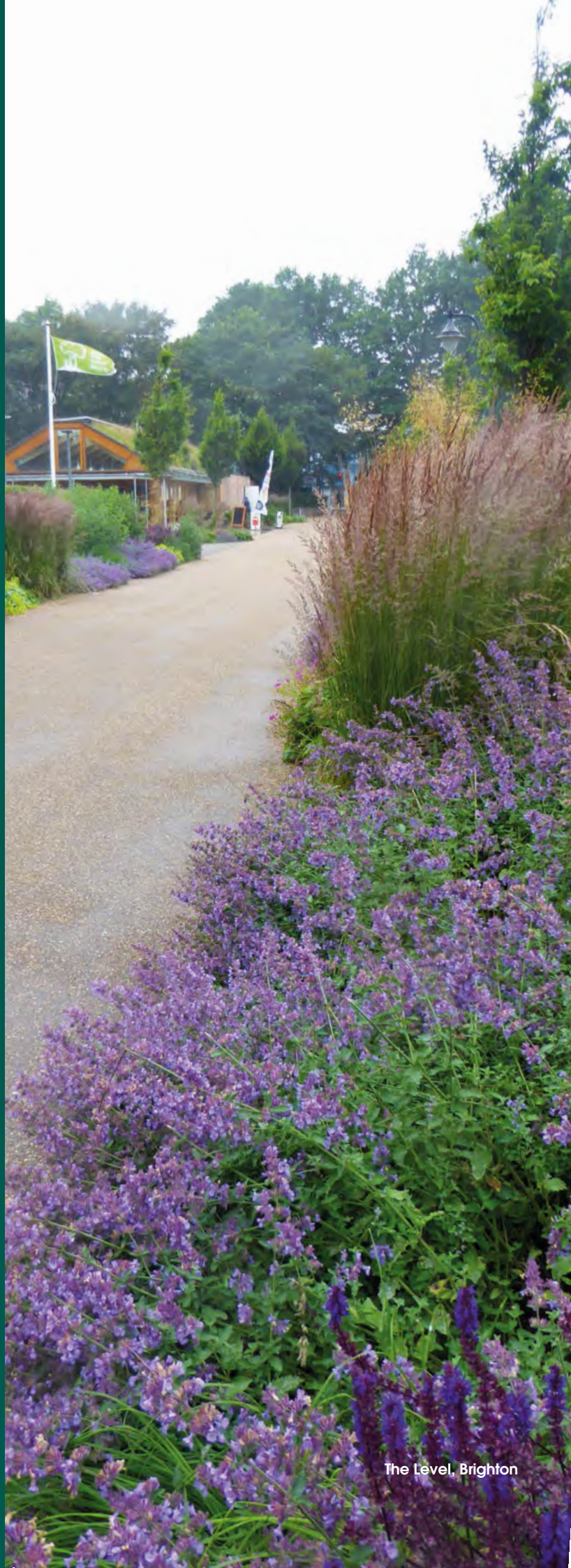
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# What next?

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Our public parks and green spaces continue to be a vital and popular public resource, but they face growing challenges. The deficit between increasing use and declining funding is growing and HLF is concerned that this is placing two decades of public and National Lottery investment at increasing risk. Whilst HLF will continue to fund projects to regenerate historic parks, encourage innovation and support the sector, HLF is unable to provide funding for the on-going maintenance of the UK's public parks.

For our public parks and green spaces to remain in good heart to serve both current and future generations, we recommend therefore that the Government, local authorities, charities, funders, business and the park-using public need to work collaboratively to address the following five key themes of activity.



The Level, Brighton

# 1. Continuing local authority leadership

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As the owners of most public parks and green spaces, logic and history dictates that local authorities have a pivotal role in ensuring the continued provision of quality parks and green spaces. Our research shows that local authorities should:



## Park strategies

Consider the benefits of up to date park/ green space strategies to guide investment and address funding, staffing, skills, community engagement and future management challenges.



## Elected champions

Embed parks and green spaces within corporate strategies and appoint a local elected parks champion as it is shown to have a positive effect on the condition of parks.



## Financial information

Compile and maintain robust data and more detailed financial information for their parks to demonstrate the value for money that parks represent and to aid future business planning.

# 2. Promoting active partnerships

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With the increasing diversity of organisations responsible for managing parks, greater collaboration and coordination is needed between partners to share funding and expertise to maximise the efficient use of limited resources. Our research shows that:



## Local networks

Groups like those in Scotland, West Midlands and London, are best at sharing current learning and that there is a need to continue to support these groups as well as to establish and fund forum in those areas where they don't currently exist.



## Park trusts

Further research and exploration of park trusts is needed to understand their structure, funding, operation and potential benefits.



## Parish and town councils

These are increasing their role in green space management, but there is a need to understand if greater diversity in those responsible for parks could make it more difficult to deliver large-scale strategic environmental objectives in the future. ▶

# 3. Supporting communities to play a more active role

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



## Skills and training

There should be more opportunities to develop the skills and formal qualifications of all volunteers involved in supporting parks and green spaces.



## Organisational structures

Information about formal business structures and local authority processes should be made more widely available and appropriate for use by community groups.



## Sharing responsibilities

Thought should be given to local authorities retaining responsibility and funding for complex aspects of park management such as insurance, health and safety, and financial administration to help fairly share obligations with local community groups.



Volunteers Matt, Tom and Patricia at Burslem Park in the Potteries, Stoke-on-Trent

## 4. Developing new models of management and funding

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

**A**

### Alternative models

Research and case studies are needed to understand the strengths and weaknesses of different park service management models, including local authority trading companies, public/private partnerships, social enterprises, cooperatives, mutuals and trusts.

**B**

### Income generation

The Rethinking Parks programme provided an opportunity to explore new funding and management models for parks but more opportunities are needed to test and trial additional income generating and management opportunities.

**C**

### Endowments

These could provide an alternative model for parks but support is needed to understand this approach further and develop the skills associated with fundraising, creating, investing and using endowments.

## 5. Compiling, coordinating and updating data

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Robust data is at the heart of all good planning and decision making. Whilst there have been some improvements in the collection of information, including the development of the long-awaited national green space map, many local authorities still have a limited understating of the detailed workings of their parks service. Our research shows that:

**A**

### Asset management

The release of the national green space map should significantly improve the capture of green space data, however pilot projects need to demonstrate how this new resource can best be utilised by local authorities and others when it becomes available in 2017.

**B**

### Benchmarking

There are clear benefits to providing publicly accessible and comparable data on the scope, extent and costs of park services. The robustness, regular collection, coordination and sharing of US-style 'City Park Facts', referenced in our 2014 report, should be developed.

**C**

### Valuation

There are direct advantages in calculating and capturing the economic, social and environmental value of parks through natural capital accounts. Pilot studies and UK-wide agreed methodologies need to be developed and funded. ■

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

**Dr Mike Clarke, Chief Executive, RSPB**





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# Heritage Lottery Fund

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

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

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

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

**Dame Helen Ghosh, Director-General, National Trust**