Local Authority Owned Parks

Needs Assessment: Phase 1

DETR
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Heritage Lottery Fund

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Acknowledgements

Background and Introduction

In its Strategic Plan[1], the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) recognised the importance of carrying out needs assessments of the various heritage sectors which its grants support, in order to prioritise grant making and target grants where needs were greatest. The mission of the HLF is:

To improve the quality of life by safeguarding and enhancing the heritage of buildings, objects and the environment, whether man-made or natural, which have been important in the formation of the character and identity of the United Kingdom, in a way which will encourage more sections of society to appreciate and enjoy their heritage and enable them to hand it on in good heart to future generations.

HLF launched the Urban Parks Programme in 1996 as a £50 million grant scheme to run over three years. Demand from local authorities has been such that grant awards to urban parks currently stand at £230 million and the Programme has been extended for the period of the current strategic plan 2002, when its future will be reviewed.

The experience of the Urban Parks Programme provided a weight of evidence of the dilapidated state of many parks. The Programme has received around 500 applications for capital and revenue grants to restore historic parks. To date, at a grant rate of 75%, grants have been awarded to restore 161 parks, at an average of approximately £1.4 million per park. The majority of spend in these grants is for repair of infrastructure (walls, railings, paths, drives, drains, buildings) and replacement of worn-out or missing features and facilities (cafes, playgrounds, toilets, bandstands). A smaller, but still significant, proportion is for refurbishment of the soft landscape and support for new staff posts and better security.

An additional £1,626,000 has been awarded separately for the production of an Historic Landscape Survey and Restoration Plan for each of 135 parks. Though HLF had earmarked a further £30m per year to the Urban Parks Programme over the next two years of its corporate plan, there was concern that the grant sums available may not meet demand and priorities to partially meet the needs of the bids in the pipeline.

It became imperative to try to form a national picture of the state of the nation's parks and their needs. Because no reliable baseline data existed relating to the numbers, extent, distribution and condition of historic parks under local authority control, a preliminary survey was conducted by HLF in conjunction with the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM) in August 1998.

The results of this survey suggested that there were around 5000 parks considered by their managers to be of national or local historic importance, out of a total of around 30,000 urban open spaces used principally for recreation.

The survey also indicated that many parks regarded as being of national historic importance were not included on national lists or registers of parks and gardens of special historic interest. In addition, there was no system of recording the greater number of public parks considered to be of local historic importance. The survey showed that only 12% were felt to be in good condition with 63% described as fair and 25% in poor condition with many continuing to decline.

However, the basic nature and brevity of the preliminary survey meant that the results could not be regarded as definitive or reliable although they did confirm general impressions about the poor and, often, worsening condition of urban parks. More importantly, perhaps, the exercise reinforced concern about the depth and intractability of the information deficit. It was some surprise to discover that many local authorities held, or had access to virtually no relevant data on their park stock.

This lack of centrally gathered and accessible basic information has also caused considerable difficulties for statutory, professional and voluntary agencies concerned with the future well-being of the nation's parks. Widespread agreement had been expressed from different perspectives that public parks were in decline and that their future was becoming increasingly perilous.

Bodies as diverse as the GMB (ex General Municipal Boilermakers Union)[2], the Garden History Society and the Victorian Society[3] and the think-tank Comedia/Demos[4] had issued persuasive reports pointing to a crisis in park management and condition. However, none were able to put figures on what they found at the national scale. Although the Department of the Environment[5] responded to these concerns with the publication of two guides to good practice, neither document contained data on the extent, number or range of type of parks. As a result, discussion and strategic planning has taken place in an information-void leading, inevitably, to ill-informed decision-making and policy positions necessarily predicated on impression and assumption.

The approximate figures obtained in the HLF questionnaire remained the best available. A report by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC)[6] in June 1999 reproduced figures from a variety of sources in an attempt to illustrate the scale of the resource and potential need in the sector. Quoting Audit Commission figures from 1992, they found a UK total of 34,553 parks and open spaces of which 5,516 were described as "formal parks". If formal parks are taken to be equivalent to historic parks, these figures correspond reasonably well with HLF figures. They estimated a further 17,300 parks and gardens in the ownership of private bodies and charitable trusts.

In order to address this information deficit and uncertainty, HLF determined to carry out a more detailed and extensive survey of the state of the nation's parks. By August 1999 HLF had developed a partnership with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and English Heritage (EH). Following further discussions with ILAM, it was agreed to fund a more detailed study of town and country parks and open spaces in local authority ownership. ILAM was subsequently commissioned as contractor to carry out the work.

The report of the DETR Select Committee on Parks[7] expressed shock at the decline of public parks and further emphasised the difficulties caused by the lack of accurate aggregated information on parks and open spaces. In its response, the Government "agreed with the Committee on the need to improve the quality of information and data about our parks and open spaces in urban areas ...... The Government will consider further the Committee's recommendation for research, taking into account emerging results from the HLF survey, as we develop the urban environment aspects of our White Paper on urban policies"[8].

References

1   Heritage Lottery Fund (1999) *Strategic Plan* London: HLF

2   GMB (Undated but 1993) *Grounds for Concern* London: GMB

3   Conway, H and D Lambert (1993) *Public Prospects: Historic Urban Parks Under Threat* London: The Garden History Society and The Victorian Society

4   Comedia and Demos (1995) *Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal* London: Comedia and Demos

5   Department of the Environment (1996) *People, Parks and Cities* and *Greening the City* both London: HMSO

6   PricewaterhouseCoopers (1999) *Landscape Heritage Trust* Unpublished report for the steering group of the Landscape Heritage Trust

7   Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee (1999) *Town and Country Parks* London: Stationery Office

8   Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (2000) *The Government's response to the Twentieth Report from the House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee - Report on Town and Country Parks* London: Stationery Office

Aims and Objectives

The principal aim of the study was to establish need in relation to all public parks, urban and rural, to better inform decision-making on grants made to local authorities by HLF under the Urban Parks Programme. Ideally the study would establish not only need in individual parks and local authority areas, but also allow comparison of need between districts and different economic regions.

Main areas of concern were:

➢ HLF - parks of local or national historic importance in the UK
➢ EH - parks of national importance, both registered or unregistered in England
➢ DETR - urban parks and other urban open space, country parks in England
➢ ILAM - all parks and open space in the UK

Given these overlapping areas of concern, the partners (HLF, DETR and EH) agreed that a survey of all parks and open spaces, wherever they might be and whatever their historic standing, was required. This range of information was felt to be of potential use to the widest range of interested parties, for example the New Opportunities Fund with its emerging Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities scheme and the Countryside Agency's potentially renewed interests in country parks and designed landscapes. Various objectives emerged from discussions in the Steering Group and it was agreed that the best mechanism for achieving these in the short and long terms was to produce:

A comprehensive database covering all local authority owned parks and open spaces.

The wide range of objectives to be met through the database can be summarised as the need to:

➢ establish numbers, size, condition and trends in condition for each council's entire park stock

➢ discover each local authority's policies for parks through strategic documents, for example parks strategies, cultural or leisure strategies, local plan policies etc

➢ identify every individual park considered by the owners to be of national and local historic importance

➢ produce an inventory of what features and facilities each historic park had lost, still contained, were at risk

➢ carry out an assessment of the condition of soft and hard landscape features

➢ document conservation designations relating to each park, including national landscape listings, ancient monuments, listed buildings, conservation areas,

sites of special scientific importance, local nature reserves and other relevant national and local policies

➢ obtain figures on visitor numbers

➢ establish trends in revenue and capital spending for each council's entire park stock and for individual parks over the last twenty years

Commentary

The study as determined by HLF Policy Team was regarded from the start as an internal HLF initiative, which might or might not have incidental wider uses or be of interest to other government and non-government agencies. The partnership with DETR and EH resulted in a widening of the scope of the study and increased the limited funds available. It is largely an accident of timing that the concurrent PWC study and the DETR Environment Select Committee Report have focused further external attention on this study and raised expectations beyond that originally envisaged.

ILAM Services has tried to meet these raised expectations by extending the original time limit, chasing a higher response rate and suggesting the need for further work, but this study was not designed nor expected by HLF to answer all the questions relating to parks which might be raised by government and other interested parties.

Methodology

In order to gather the information identified above, a two-part questionnaire was designed (see **Appendix A**). The first part asked for information on the authority's total holding of parks and public open space. This included information relating to non-historic open space used and managed principally for recreation. This would include playing fields, sports pitches and land used primarily for recreational purposes, but exclude other land managed by the authority, such as road verges and roundabouts, landscaping around housing, car parks and other grounds maintenance contracts.

The second part of the Questionnaire requested specific information relating to individual parks which had been identified by the local authority as being of national or local historic importance.

Questionnaires were distributed in September 1999 to named officers in 475 local authorities which might own and manage parks, with a deadline of December 31. ILAM announced the forthcoming survey in editions of *Leisure Manager* and *Leisure News and Jobs*, its widely read in-house magazines. All non-responding authorities were contacted again by telephone, fax or letter. As further inducement, a letter was sent to all local authority Chief Executives and Chief Leisure Officers by DETR and the due date for returns was extended by two months.   The database was finally closed at the end of April 2000.

The survey results were collated onto a database designed by ILAM to be easily interrogated across all the ranges and combinations of questions.

A second stage of the research programme was to interview officers from selected local authorities and consultants to help validate the findings and to give additional perspectives to the interpretation of the results.

Commentary

In the light of the mixed response to the basic (one page) questionnaire conducted by HLF in 1998, the project partners knew that there would be difficulties in achieving a full response, even though the target was 100% return. This realisation helped set the parameters for the survey forms.

While comprehensive information was sought, it was realised that the more daunting the exercise in terms of time, and particularly in finding obscure information, the lower the response would be. The forms that were produced reflected a careful compromise between the ideal and the feasible. To make the process easier a set of notes were included with the forms, designed to give guidance but, more importantly, encouragement to the officers to whom the job fell. (See **Appendix B**)

The Steering Group was especially aware that gathering accurate financial information would present problems - accounting systems change frequently,

costs are often aggregated across activities and local government reorganisation adds extra complications. Respondees were encouraged to give best estimates where actual figures were not available and to indicate whether this had occurred.

The survey returns

This report is based on the responses of **174 local authorities** (including **11 counties**) and detailed returns submitted in respect of **765 individual historic parks**. The responses received, as set out in the following table, represent **37% of all local authorities**.

Breakdown of returns by region			
Region	Number of local authorities in region	Number of returns received in region	Number of local authorities advising "no park stock"	% of local authorities making a return
East Midlands	45	19	3	44%
East of England	55	22	7	38%
London	32	12	0	38%
North East	25	6	1	24%
North West	48	22	1	46%
Northern Ireland	27	6	0	22%
Scotland	33	9	0	27%
South East	78	32	6	41%
South West	51	15	5	29%
Wales	22	7	0	32%
West Midlands	37	16	0	43%
Yorkshire and The Humber	22	8	4	36%
Total	**475**	**174**	**27**	**37%**

Table 1

Parks are overwhelmingly the responsibility of district, unitary and metropolitan authorities. Many rural districts have no parks of significance and most county councils have no direct responsibility for parks except for the few who run country parks. Some districts devolve responsibility for parks management to parish or town councils. For the sake of simplicity these are shown under the relevant district, who usually retain ownership and strategic planning functions. It should be noted that **27 local authorities (6% of returns) indicated no ownership of public parks.** It is possible that a proportion of the local authorities that did not respond do not own or manage parks and therefore the real response rate would be higher than 37%.

The response rate, for such a demanding survey, is encouraging - reflecting the importance attached to its potential for raising the profile of parks by local authority officers (as expressed to the study team). The results are statistically significant and provide a firm basis for collecting further information.

However, it should be noted that this survey probably suffers from the inherent weakness of its kind - that responses come from those most able or willing to respond. The same information from non-respondees might have been even

more valuable because their inability or unwillingness to complete the survey is likely to indicate deep-seated problems in the managing and monitoring of the councils' parks service.

There are some serious omissions of large urban authorities which may affect the condition and funding profiles of the region in which they are located. Many more non-responding authorities have promised returns in the future if the project can be maintained for a second phase.

Commentary

Although the survey produced a great deal of useful information and the rate of return was acceptable for a postal survey of this kind, the fact remains that **57% of local authorities** did not make a return in time to be included in this stage. It is probable that parks management in the non-responding authorities is more problematical than in those able to respond and that information from these authorities would be most illuminating.

While the results obtained give a very useful picture of conditions in responding local authorities and individual historic parks, the absence of information from local authorities with potentially the most problems limits their use in making comparisons of need between authorities and regions.

Some preliminary comparisons have been made in this report but the results must be treated with caution. Some individual local authorities have large numbers of historic parks, particularly those that include major urban conurbations.

Perhaps the most significant return in terms of illustrating the possible deficiencies in other responses came from Leeds City Council. As a pilot authority for Best Value, Leeds City Council has just completed a huge data-gathering exercise . As a result the Council was able to provide detailed returns on 75 parks of historic importance.

This response, far outstripping any other local authority, appears to have been possible simply because Leeds City Council holds the information. There is no particular reason to suppose that Leeds is mysteriously over-endowed with historic parks in comparison with any other large conurbation. It is suggested, therefore, that the number of historic parks and gardens indicated in the survey results may be seriously underestimated, for want of definitive and accessible information at the local level.

The intention in this report is an objective analysis of data and not to "name and shame". Therefore, **data linked directly to a named local authority will remain confidential and not be publicly available**.

Reasons for not responding

There are a host of reasons why various local authorities have been unable or unwilling to complete the survey forms. It must be remembered that the survey was launched because of the all too evident deficiencies in parks management. Given that background, it is likely that comprehensive and up-to-date information on parks was not readily available to many local authorities. Most local authority parks officers work hard with inadequate resources to deal with a formidable range of problems related to the current management of parks.

Most of those who were able to respond agreed that gathering the information had been a worthwhile exercise with future benefits for the authority in helping them to gear up for the requirements of Best Value.

Some of the reasons given for non-response are:

➢ lack of time to assemble the information (even if it exists in the form required)

➢ management structures that divide parks into areas within the authority

➢ current demands and higher priority of Best Value work

➢ timing of the survey coinciding with the local authority budgetary cycle

➢ local authorities receive many questionnaires and some felt that they could only justify taking the time to complete those that were a statutory requirement

➢ financial information caused particular problems because of successive local government reorganisations and changes in accounting practices

➢ for some authorities the collation of the information constituted a major project for which resources were not available

Outcomes of Survey

A database has been created that provides a snapshot of current conditions relating to the whole parks service of responding local authorities and conditions in individual historic parks, as well as information on trends in condition and spending. The data can be analysed in a variety of ways and provides the basis for a wide range of future research. Data fields relate to the questions contained in the questionnaire and data includes:

➢ Contact names and addresses for all local authorities responding

➢ Names and locations of historic parks of national and local importance, area, status and other conservation designations.

➢ Details of listed buildings associated with individual historic parks with an assessment of condition.

➢ List of other features associated with individual historic parks with assessment of condition

➢ Numbers of features known to have been removed from individual historic parks and numbers of those unusable, abandoned or in need of repair

➢ Perceived condition and trend in condition of parks individually or sorted by authority or region.

➢ Training requirements for individual parks.

➢ Estimated visitor numbers for some parks.

➢ Trends in capital and revenue spending on parks over twenty year period.

The database does allow comparative needs assessments between districts or regions to be made, but with caution. For greater confidence in comparisons, an increase in the response and the inclusion of all key authorities would be necessary.

Need for further work:

➢ *complete the database by encouraging, and assisting if necessary, non-responding authorities to provide the information*

➢ *maintain the database as an on-going record of parks of national and local historic importance and their features and condition*

➢ *seek improved data from all local authorities by direct follow-up and by capturing information compiled for Best Value*

➢ *maintain interest in the project by providing feedback to those who supported the exercise*

➢ *establish methods to promulgate research findings and make the data available to individuals or organisations carrying out research in the future*

Analysis of Data

Definition of Parks

A number of authorities expressed difficulty in defining parks and suggested that there was a need for **nationally recognised definitions** of the various types of open space.

Generally, there appears to be confusion about what constitutes a park, an open space or a recreation ground. The public's perception may be different from that of the management. The public appear to make an important difference between parks and recreation grounds. Parks are generally seen as ornamental and peaceful providing primarily for informal recreation - a quality experience is implied. A recreation ground may be no more than sports pitches or a place to walk the dog. One London Borough has recently renamed a recreation ground as a park, in order to improve the perception of the area and consideration is being given to re-naming other open spaces.

Some local authorities have created their own definitions. For example, five of the parks in Glasgow are defined by the authority as *City* parks that attract visitors and tourists, with twelve defined as *District* parks that also attract visitors willing to travel. Seventeen sites are defined as *Local* parks catering for those living in the immediate vicinity with less need for toilets and car parking.

While most responding authorities were able to report the number and areas of historic parks for which they were responsible, information regarding other areas of recreational open space was not always available. The land types constituting "other recreational open space" differed from authority to authority in the returns.

For example, in some returns golf-courses and cemeteries were included, in others only parks and commons. Similarly, small play areas may or may not be included. Some open space, particularly that owned by county councils, is permissive of public use, rather than for statutory public use. This distinction has not been made in the returns.

There is also confusion between park and countryside management. In some areas parks are included as part of the countryside management service with the different needs of urban parks unrecognised. Funding levels appropriate for maintaining countryside parks may not meet the needs of maintaining the soft and hard landscape elements of a traditional ornamental urban park.

In many local authorities, parks management amounts to little more than grounds maintenance, often carried out by contractors. One notable side effect of this kind of management is that distinctions between levels of care appropriate to sites of different character are lost, with the same maintenance regime applied to all sites, calculated by units of area. The erosion and loss of ornamental detail from traditional parks, a concern raised by the Select Committee, appears to be

a consequence of this management approach.

Parks of Historic Importance

The decision as to which parks were to be regarded as of historic importance was left to the judgement of the local authority, although some guidance was given. The data, gathered from a similar number of local authorities, differed markedly from the 1998 HLF questionnaire in showing far fewer parks considered to be of national or local historic importance - 765 as against 2,500 (estimated as around 1500 against 5000 at the national scale). In the earlier exercise, identifying parks as historically important did not commit the local authority to the completion of long survey forms for each park identified. It seems likely that this fact may have influenced the judgement of officers and account for the much lower numbers reported.

Of the **765 parks of national or local historic importance size was recorded for only 728**. These returns account for 16,741 hectares of public open space, ranging from sites of just .02 of a hectare to Cannock Chase Country Park in Staffordshire at 1,327 hectares.

To assist respondees, guidance notes were provided which defined parks of national historic importance as those on the lists of statutory agencies or any parks felt by the council to merit consideration for national listing status.

It is generally accepted (Select Committee report) that public parks tend to be under represented on statutory lists of historic parks and gardens. In this research, local authorities have submitted returns for **182 parks of national historic importance of which only 80 (44%) are listed.** In some authorities, nearly all identified as of national importance were listed and in others none at all, suggesting strong regional inconsistencies in the criteria for listing.

Listing is felt to be of considerable benefit when attracting funding. Concern was expressed that Scottish National Heritage (SNH) and EH have too few resources to consider additions and upgrading of their national lists. The situation appears to be better in Wales but not known in Northern Ireland.

National listing by external agencies is considered to add status to a park and to help to convince senior officers and members of the importance of these sites and associated buildings and the need to safeguard and preserve them.

A reason for not submitting a park for listing could be because over the years it has deteriorated to the extent that no corporate pride can be taken in its condition. Many historic parks that might have been worthy of listing have suffered from development to provide other public amenities or sold to private interests. In others the decline may be so severe, or the loss of features so decisive, that national agencies will not consider designation until their condition improves.

Parks of local historic importance were loosely defined as those where historic character was visible in the structure, e.g. in the form of ornate gates and railings, memorials and ornamental buildings, mature planting and evidence of deliberate design. Exceptionally, a park's historic associations alone might qualify as local importance. It was recognised that the interpretation of this guidance must necessarily be subjective but it was felt that there was value in obtaining local views of what was considered important. Details were provided for **583 parks of local historic importance**.

The whole question of historic importance, or heritage merit, is loaded with possibilities for misinterpretation and disagreement. Some commentators seem to feel that if a park is described as "historic" or part of our "heritage" it therefore becomes an elitist or minority concern. As this study was led by HLF with its remit for heritage features, it necessarily focuses on heritage interests. However, it is important to note that HLF's interpretation of "historic importance" in relation to public parks stems from an awareness of their popular heritage or cultural value.

While HLF is concerned with the obviously historic urban parks (eg. Battersea Park or Crystal Palace in London, Sefton Park in Liverpool or Heaton Park in Manchester) it is equally interested in the more commonplace Victorian and Edwardian parks to be found in almost every town and city suburb in the country.

Local parks are recognised for their historic importance because:

➢ they exhibit period ornamental design in layout and buildings

➢ they are a long-lasting part of the urban fabric, often remaining constant in changing surroundings, contributing to a sense of place, identity and continuity

➢ they are an essential part of urban childhood memories, often spanning several generations, and are repositories of personal and social meanings

➢ they are historic and current manifestations of civic and municipal pride and a measure and reflection of civic well-being

➢ they frequently contain memorials of profound local significance

➢ in some areas they are the only historic features accessible to the whole population and able to promote social cohesion

This interpretation of heritage, or historic importance, has been reflected in the grants awarded by HLF under the Urban Parks Programme. It is important that readers of this report realise that a focus on historic parks is not a marginal interest, but that it embraces all of the most significant public recreational land, as nearly all of our parks were laid out before World War II. A concern with historic parks is therefore a concern with the majority.

It should be noted that age was not seen to be the only criteria in identifying parks of historic importance. Harlow Town Park is included because it is considered by its owners to be an example of the 1960s landscape movement and representative of a new historical era of municipal park design. Both HLF and EH operate a "30 year rule" in their working definitions of heritage.

Some authorities recognise the importance of certain local parks in the Local Plan. This confers some planning protection and there may be supplementary planning guidance that advises officers on how to deal with these sites.

The following chart indicates the diversity of condition of historic parks.

Condition and Trend in Condition of Historic Parks
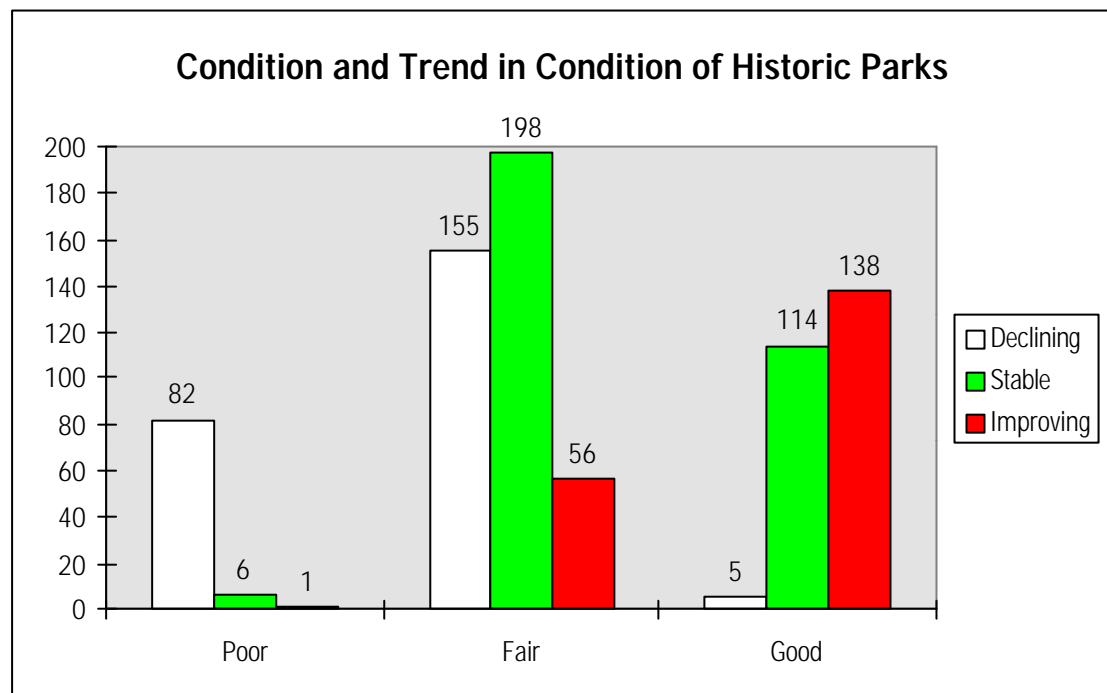
Chart 1

More historic parks are considered to be in good or fair condition than poor. However most of the improvement is occurring in parks which are already in good condition, whereas most of the continuing decline is occurring in parks which are described as fair or already poor, indicating a polarisation in their levels of care.

A similar pattern emerges in the returns provided for individual park features below.
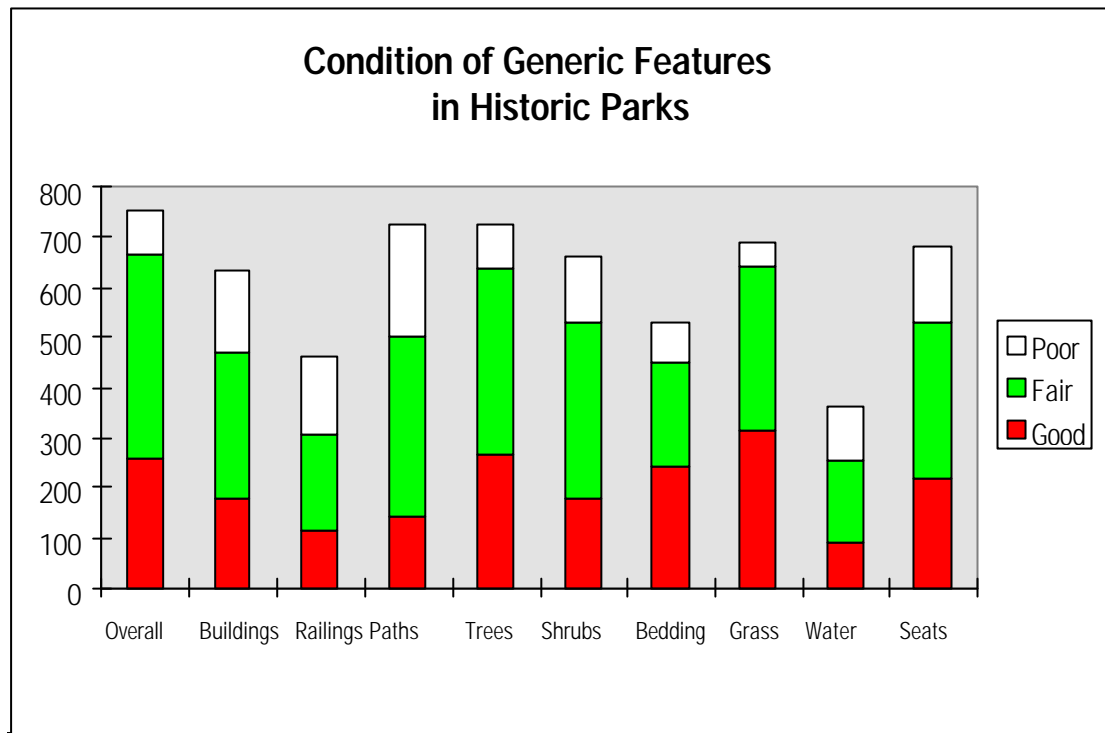
Chart 2

This chart raises the question of expectations and standards. Few objective observers would regard the condition of shrubs and grass as generally satisfactory - the fact that they are indicated thus may point to a decline in horticultural standards with the widespread lack of skilled gardeners following the cessation of council apprenticeships and training.

Respondents were also asked for numerical data on the individual built features which give historic parks their character and sense of place.

The following table amply illustrates the serious erosion of important features from our parks, even allowing for the limits to memory and records available to respondents. It reveals, for example, that 765 historic parks have lost 108 bandstands with another 35 showing serious decline. Large numbers of essential facilities, such as toilets, have been allowed to disappear or become unusable.

Features Listed by 765 Historic Parks and Current Status					
	No. lost	No. in use	No. not used	No. abandoned	No. in need of repair
All weather surfaces	27	149	9	10	16
Aviary/Pets Corner	38	51	0	7	10
Bandstands	108	64	15	7	13
Boathouses	28	33	2	3	11
Bowling Greens	55	514	7	24	20
Bridges	30	331	2	2	83
Café/Tea Bars	50	194	8	4	15
Fountains	60	74	8	26	15
Golf/Putting facilities	65	137	5	9	13
Grass sports pitches	42	685	13	0	66
Grottoes	10	13	1	6	12
Ice-houses	11	7	1	15	2
Lake/pond/boating pools	72	284	5	8	96
Lodges	72	262	11	22	18
Mansion houses	37	86	2	6	17
Memorials/statutes	53	349	2	6	93
Monuments/follies	25	119	2	6	26
Ornamental gates	199	327	9	4	117
Paddling pools	65	40	5	12	14
Playgrounds	29	462	1	5	81
Public glasshouses	129	62	1	19	13
Shelters/pavilions	205	470	10	21	102
Skateboard/BMX ramps	9	49	0	0	4
Temples	2	5	0	2	3
Tennis courts	263	869	17	67	121
Toilets	167	479	21	33	113
Visitor Centres	2	89	3	0	4

Table 2

It is impossible to believe that the decline in these facilities and features reflect the changing preferences of park users, that children no longer want to paddle, that the public is no longer interested in glasshouse plants, that it no longer rains so that there is less need for shelters. The evidence provided by this table alone vindicates the urgent concerns raised in the Select Committee report over the state of the nation's parks and the way parks are less equipped to meet the needs of their users than in the past.

Oddly, some parks where heavy losses of facilities or individual facilities in poor condition were reported were still rated overall as good or fair - a reflection perhaps of the reduced expectations of their managers. It would be interesting in these cases to establish customer satisfaction with the changes that have occurred over time.

The highest proportion of losses relate to built features that require not just routine maintenance, but occasional expensive renovation, such as bandstands, boathouses, ice houses, paddling pools and public glasshouses.   Ornamental gates, monuments and statues also showed a high proportion of losses with many more needing repair. Although the question was not specifically asked, several respondents mention the loss of railings, removed during the Second World War and not replaced.

More recent features lost, perhaps surprisingly, include all-weather surfaces. These have a design life of between seven and twelve years - failure to make budgetary provision for the cost of refurbishment may be one reason for their loss. There were nine listed as usable, but not in use, perhaps because of the development of other indoor and outdoor facilities in the neighbourhood.

Water features are a particular problem.   Lakes, ponds and boating pools, all show some losses, but many more in a poor condition. This situation applies to other features associated with water, such as bridges and grottoes. It is not always appreciated that water needs to be environmentally managed.   Many authorities reported few healthy, attractive and clean areas of water because of an historic lack of environmental management.

Also of numerical significance are children's playgrounds. Whilst some have been lost, there are a greater number in need of repair. The number lost may be an indication of an inability to maintain or repair play equipment to the higher safety standards which now prevail and the risk of litigation in the event of an accident. It is often cheaper to remove play equipment than to repair it.

Major decline is reported in the standard and extent of horticultural displays. A variety of horticultural amenities are listed under "other features" as important attractions to individual parks. These range from 18th Century survivals, such as walled gardens, pergolas and parterres, to more recent concepts such as therapy gardens and gardens for the disabled.

The responses also help as a reminder of the wide variety of the special attractions parks offer.   These include ancient monuments and natural geographical features, farms, zoos, aviaries and industrial centres.   Parks provide popular and convenient venues for events and some have specially designed concert bowls or outdoor theatres. Many features are designed to attract children, such as play houses, model railways and model boats. Opportunities are provided for fitness activities through trim trails and for education through museums and visitor centres. Nature reserves, horticultural displays and environmental features are all recognised as important.

The numbers of losses indicated in the returns may not be historically accurate, in that some authorities recorded no losses at all, but when questioned admitted that the staffing situation was such that there was no historic knowledge within the authority.

Country Parks

Country Parks are slightly anomalous in that they may be laid out on existing historic sites or on agricultural land and may be owned and managed by District or County authorities. The chart below shows that Country Parks, in existence since 1968, are beginning to show similar trends to Urban Parks.
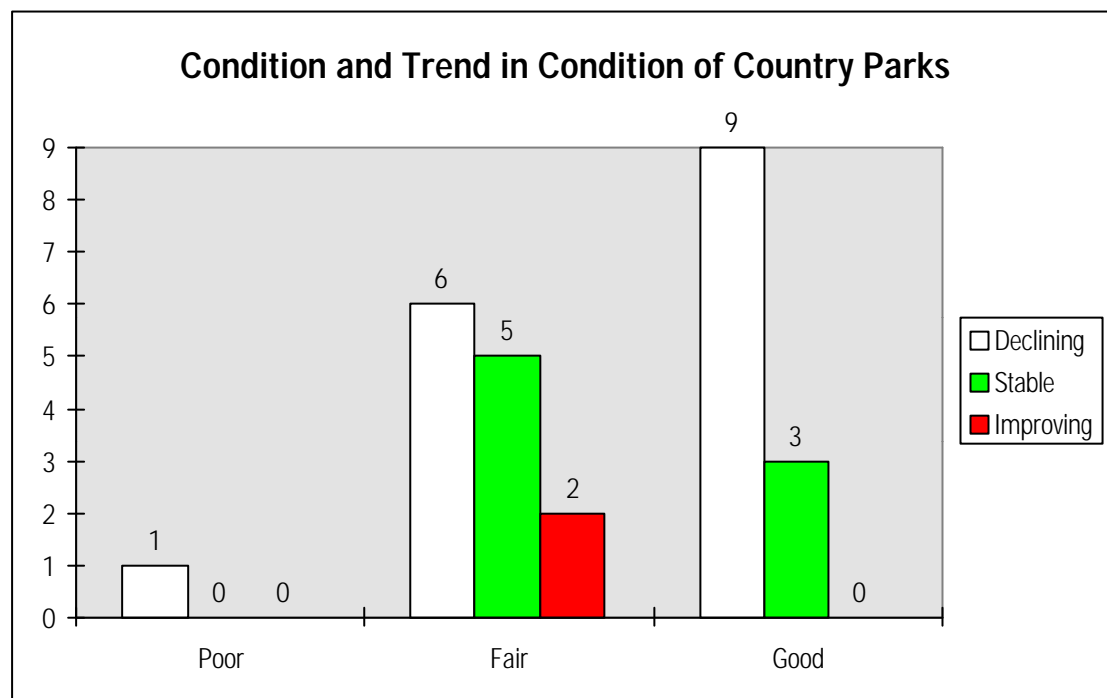
Chart 3

Much of the analysis applying to Urban Parks applies equally to Country Parks.

Commentary

The current condition and trends in condition indicated in the returns are based on the subjective perception of parks managers over a ten year period. While they present a picture of widespread need it should be noted that they summarise the views of those currently responsible for the care of these amenities, not the views of an independent observer. Areas of concern and acceptable levels of care can be different for managers and users. In the absence of nationally approved standards it is not possible to state whether the situation is as reported. Managers can become resigned to persistent difficulties, problems perceived to be beyond their control or budgets to influence and oblivious to other factors which may be obvious to users or outside observers.

The formulation of standards would necessarily rest on nationally recognised definitions of parks. This has been implemented locally in some authorities in the past on the basis of size, of use or of management approach. None of these has proved altogether satisfactory, especially when used as the basis for grounds maintenance prescriptions and expenditure, as they tend to focus on a particular attribute of each site, to the detriment of other aspects of their character and value to users. Parks can provide a wide range of uses and attributes, all of which must be given significance in any definition. The range of "importances" to be considered within any definition include (in no particular order):

➢ size
➢ condition
➢ designations
➢ ease of access
➢ catchment
➢ historic significance
➢ nature conservation value and potential
➢ archaeological record
➢ children's play - formal and informal
➢ sport
➢ exercise
➢ events
➢ educational value and potential
➢ horticultural value and potential
➢ community use
➢ tranquillity
➢ through routes -walking and cycling
➢ deprivation of wards served
➢ neighbourhood regeneration potential
➢ user numbers
➢ user profile

These, and others to be identified, would best be captured in a matrix which could lead to definitions based on scores or similar ranking mechanisms. This type of method would permit definitions to be based on the value of each individual park, particularly useful when it comes to deciding appropriate levels of management and revenue input.

The general decline of parks over the last twenty years and the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) have been accompanied in many authorities by a dismantling of parks departments. As a result, in some authorities operational staff with long experience of the council's parks have gone. The perception of newer, often younger staff completing the questionnaires may not be based on knowledge of the park over a long period.

Greater mobility of labour and the combining of departments reduces the likelihood that an officer with a parks background will reach the status of a first tier officer. In one London Borough, only four out of a department of twenty

survived the restructuring process. In Glasgow, on the other hand, there remains a significant minority of operational staff with over twenty years knowledge of the park service in the area.

These factors must affect the nature of responses where subjective judgements have to be made. Assessment of condition is relative to experience and expectation. Inconsistencies across the data arising from these factors can only be equalised by the production and adoption of objective standards. Performance indicators required under Best Value may be one way of addressing this issue along with the issue of public expectation.

Several authorities indicated that action is being taken to halt a downward trend, in particular those authorities that have secured lottery funding from the Urban Parks Programme.

It is important that best practice is shared and national benchmarks be set for the purpose of comparison between the performance of local authorities.

Need for further work:

➢ *develop, with the appropriate bodies, official and consistent definitions of the various categories of public parks and recreational open space*

➢ *review national lists and registers of historic parks and gardens to ensure that urban parks and gardens are fully represented and that their national historic importance is recognised*

➢ *consider whether action is required to list parks and gardens of local historic importance*

➢ *consider the setting and adoption of national standards for public parks and open space according to their definition*

➢ *provide guidance on benchmarking and performance indicators for Best Value*

➢ *share information on best practice*

➢ *avoid further losses of historic features by securing and directing funding towards restoration and refurbishment, as well as maintenance.*

Regional Variation in Condition of Parks

The number of local authorities in each region varies between 22 in Yorkshire and The Humber and 78 in the South East. The percentage return per region also varies (See Table 1, Page 10). The lowest percentage returns (i.e. below 30%) were from Northern Ireland, Scotland, the North West and the North East. Northern Ireland and the North East have also amongst the smallest numbers of local authorities. All other Regions returned 30% or above with four over 40%.

The decline in the condition of parks has been widespread with no obvious pointer to any particular region being in overwhelmingly greater need than any other.   Need seems to be apparent in all regions, though differences may become clearer with a fuller set of returns.

From the limited data obtained some interesting initial observations can be made:

➢ Parks already in decline are getting worse, whereas good parks are getting better.

➢ Improvement in condition is happening most where parks are already good

➢ In Yorkshire and The Humber and Scotland, no parks are in good condition

➢ In Wales no parks are improving

➢ Six regions/countries report widespread decline in condition

➢ Improvement in condition is most marked in London, Northern Ireland, South East and South West

➢ Condition of parks in the North East is becoming polarised with the same high proportion improving and declining

Commentary

Although the data gathered provides a sound basis for collecting and recording information and the results give some initial pointers to regional differences, it is not considered adequate without a fuller return to provide the basis for decision making aimed at targeting action. Even with a fuller or complete return, it will be necessary to interrogate the data for differences *within* regions in order to identify parks and communities in greatest need of help and links to other social deprivation indicators.

Park Management

Management Structures

It was apparent that the management structure of a local authority influenced whether or not a response was made to the questionnaire. Successive local authority reorganisations have often resulted in the loss of the traditional parks department with responsibility for parks shifting to a variety of different departments with different priorities. Local authorities without a parks department were less interested in taking part in this exercise. Where there is no parks department, parks maintenance may become "standards" based with little developmental work carried out. There is no consistency in the titles of those responsible for the management of parks. This diversity and loss of identity is felt by many in the parks profession to be a weakness in the structure.

In one authority in Scotland, parks are within the Land Services Department with three different elements – Roads, Cleansing and Parks. This is a result of the substantial restructuring of local authorities in Scotland that in Glasgow resulted in twenty-one departments being merged into eleven. The effective Head of Parks is the Parks Operations Manager, a third tier officer. Two officers report to this post, the Operations Manager responsible for the day to day delivery of the service and the Environment Manager filling the function of client officer responsible for asset management and the development of the service. In Bath and North East Somerset Council the parks service was merged under the Cleansing and Parks Manager - a title perhaps giving an unintended negative connotation to the nature of parks management.

The management of parks in many authorities (approximately 50%) has been let to external contractors. There is a perception amongst client officers that external contractors are likely to be less willing to assist in such research, as the current exercise.

In some authorities, the management of parks has been devolved to town and parish councils. For example, the New Forest Council is not responsible for the management of any parks, all parks being under local management. The town and parish councils have their own association, but there appears to be no overview taken by the local authority. This scenario exists in other areas, such as Mid Bedfordshire where fifty town and parish councils are responsible for all recreational land. There is no national information about which town and parish councils have responsibility for parks.

Privately owned and managed parks open to the public are not included in this research, although some privately managed parks may be owned by local authorities. For example, the Painshill Park Trust manages Painshill Park owned by Elmbridge Borough Council.

Strategic Management of Parks

The strategic approach to parks varies from council to council. **Out of 185 (62%) local authorities responding 115 have a dedicated parks strategy, a parks strategy incorporated in a wider strategy or (36) would have a strategy within the next twelve months**. The wider strategies referred to are mainly Leisure/Cultural Strategies, Rural/Countryside Strategies and City/Town/Local Plans.

Of 185 authorities responding, **60 (32%) indicate that their authority does not have a dedicated Parks Strategy**. An additional 10 were unable to respond to the question, suggesting that as many as a third of local authorities do not have a Parks Strategy. However, these authorities tend to be smaller authorities with between 0 and 3 historic parks. The notable exception is Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council which, despite the lack of a Strategy, reports that its parks are fair and improving.

The lack of a Strategy may or may not be indicative of a low priority for parks in these authorities. It could be the result of a lack of staff resources in smaller organisations or funds to employ external consultants, or a perception that the parks are fine.

The London Borough of Newham is an authority that takes a strategic approach and attaches a high priority to its parks and park service. Its parks are seen as an important means of improving the area and making it a place people wish to visit, work and live. Good parks encourage commercial investment in the area and increase the value of neighbouring property. Newham is a small area with a high density of population, the majority of whom are classified as deprived, with the highest unemployment and mortality rates in the country. The Borough has a large and mixed ethnic population. As an amenity that is free to all, the use of parks in Newham is promoted by the Council as part of its social inclusion policy. The Council interviewee suggested that there was a need to make central government more aware of the benefits of high quality parks in urban areas.

In Glasgow the need has been identified for recognition of the role of parks in the economic and social regeneration of city areas. Glasgow has 8000 acres of parkland and 1500 hectares of derelict land. It has a declining population and needs to attract both people and businesses to the city. The quality of the environment is seen as a major factor and it is recognised that investment needs to be made to improve the landscape framework of the city. The comment is made that the authority's own park strategy is weakened by the lack of a national park strategy to which it can be related.

Although not a question posed to participants, a number of respondents voluntarily expressed support for a dedicated Parks Agency, as it was considered that such an agency would develop a much needed national policy framework.

On-site management of parks

One of the reasons put forward for a decline in the condition of parks is lack of a systematic rebuilding and refurbishment programme. Whilst parks within areas may have been improved, the improvement to one park may have been at the expense of others in the area. The same applies to improvement of key features within a park - other parts of the park may suffer as a result. Where repairs and restoration work are carried out on a priority basis, other areas are often required to wait and in consequence deteriorate further.

One deteriorating feature has a detrimental effect on the whole park and can encourage vandalism. Some authorities admit that once a park has reached a low point, it is difficult to generate the enthusiasm to provide a high standard of care.

Neglect is the parent of vandalism, and long-term neglect can lead to persistent vandalism. However, it is not a new problem and becomes intractable only where the effects of petty damage are permitted to accumulate. Where standards have declined there can be problems with drinking, drug taking and other forms of anti-social behaviour which deter people fro m using the parks, feeding a downward spiral. The problem tends to be worse in areas associated with declining housing stock.

Anti-social behaviour can usually be linked directly to reduced levels of staffing. It is clear from the experiences of the last twenty years that unstaffed or inadequately staffed parks invite problems. Poorly maintained buildings and equipment are more susceptible to vandalism. It would be a mistake to think that hooliganism is a new problem. The Victorian and Edwardian park designers consequently built on a grand scale in robust materials and employed sufficient staff to discourage vandals and to deal quickly with the damage they caused, before the effects could become cumulative.

These issues can only be addressed through improved management, but it should be recognised that extra effort might be needed initially to "win parks back" from the abusers for the benefit of the whole community. In extreme cases this might require extraordinary measures such as the introduction of close-circuit television (CCTV) as well as the generally preferable reintroduction of dedicated staff.

Many authorities have poor records relating to parks and some records have been lost or destroyed under successive reorganisations. Whilst the need to hold data and undertake on-going monitoring and recording is recognised, many departments do not have even basic computer technology to assist them. To achieve better records requires resources to allow a substantial amount of information to be collected. Without this it is impossible to show the value of parks to their users.

Continuously updated and comprehensive records are essential to monitor how well parks are performing and how well management is achieving sustainability of the asset and acceptable levels of customer satisfaction.

Effects of CCT and possibilities of Best Value

Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) is considered by respondents to have had a detrimental effect on the standard of maintenance in parks. By separating management from maintenance the sense of ownership of park-keepers, gardeners and groundsmen was lost. An holistic and responsible attitude to care was not fostered in contractors working to a price. The redeployment of staff led to many trained gardeners undertaking menial tasks, such as cleaning and litter picking.

The resultant low staff morale and motivation led to experienced and qualified staff leaving the parks service. Park management became fragmented and remote. Different teams carried out only their contracted tasks and accepted no responsibility for the multitude of undefined jobs which crop up in all land management.

Ironically, the cost-driven approach and the use of external agents made parks management *more* vulnerable to cost cutting exercises. The consequent decline in standards of care and reduction in staff under CCT led to poor supervision and a public perception that parks were becoming increasingly unsafe.

The promotion of financial competitiveness at the heart of the culture of CCT resulted in the reduction of the unit cost of maintenance of parks. Labour costs became a target of cuts leading to a short term maintenance culture at the expense of horticultural excellence and development.

While CCT did achieve cost effectiveness in mechanistic maintenance functions the financial savings produced were rarely reinvested in the park service. The best value regime should provide the opportunity to examine aspects of quality as well as cost, in an assessment of the success of park provision, especially from the point of view of users of the service. Best value is seen as giving potential for more scope for developmental roles, as long as the exercise is not restricted by inflexible fiscal constraints.

In Glasgow the role of client inspectors who acted as clerks of works to ensure the contractor delivered a quality service has been expanded and the title of the post changed to Parks Development Officer with a remit to liaise with community groups and where appropriate establish Friends organisations.   Parks Development Officers are expected to provide an interface between the operational staff and the users.

Best value should also have positive effects in requiring local authorities to improve their information bases, to cultivate good community relations and to develop partnerships with commercial organisations, including contractors,

sponsors and events promoters.

Training Needs

The questionnaire asked managers to identify the training needs of staff in individual historic parks. Whilst not all responded to the question, the 599 (78%) that did respond indicated the following needs:
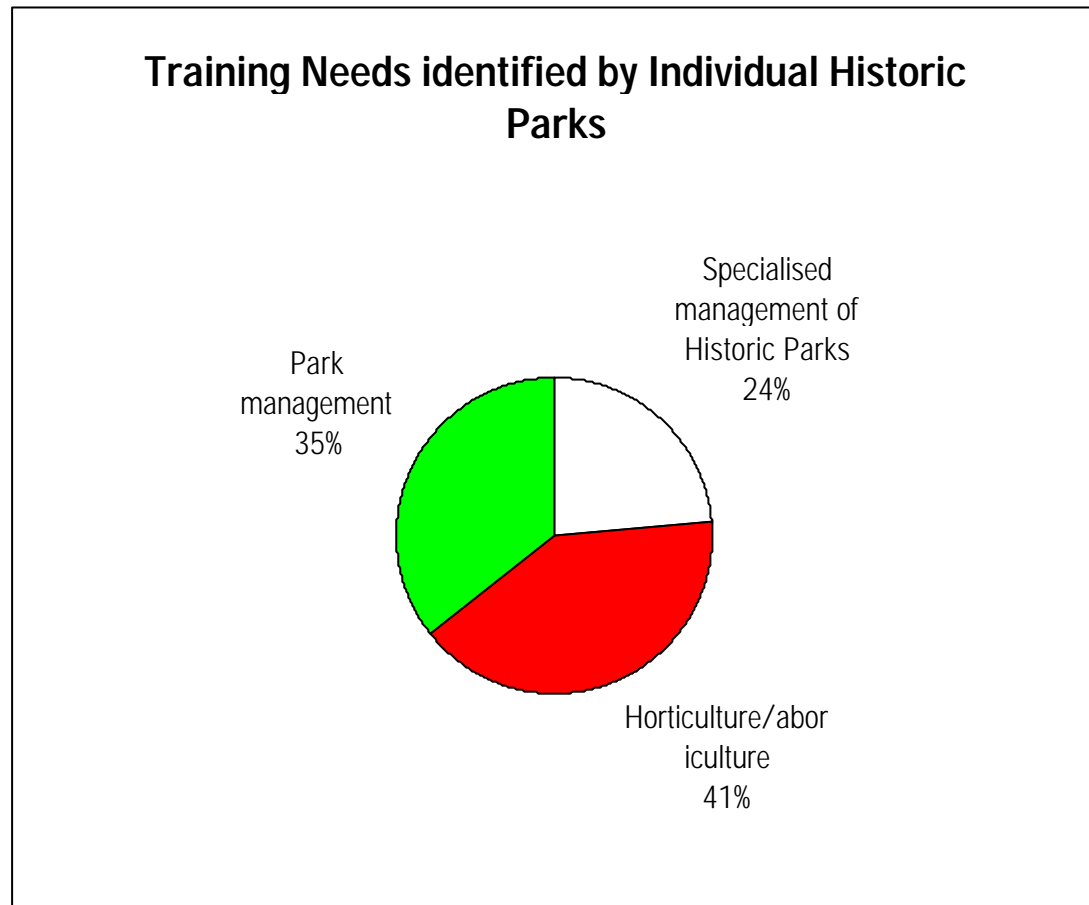
Training Needs identified by Individual Historic Parks

Specialised management of Historic Parks
24%

Park management
35%

Horticulture/abor iculture
41%

Chart 4

The majority of the other training requirements identified were for specialist areas, including the management of fishing lakes, heathland, ponds and green-keeping. There is some interest in generic subjects, such as community development, consultation and the procurement of resources. Training relevant to parks rangers is identified as a need in 18 parks.

Some authorities indicated a de-skilling of horticultural staff following CCT and no budget provision for training for many years.

Need for further work:

➢ *identify all organisations responsible for the management of public parks*

➢ *identify and promote the most successful management models*

➢ *encourage all authorities with responsibility for parks to develop dedicated parks strategies*

➢ *advocate a National Strategy for public parks to which local strategies can relate*

➢ *achieve central government recognition of the value of good parks and support for their development*

➢ *review and improve training opportunities to ensure they meet the requirements indicated*

➢ *develop commercial and community partnerships to deliver best value in parks*

Public Consultation and Involvement

A requirement of best value is increased and more responsive public consultation, via user surveys, public meetings, focus groups and friends groups. Effective community participation has always been recognised as presenting greater difficulty in deprived areas where people tend to have more pressing personal priorities and expect the council to run the park properly.

However, park managers recognise the importance of involving users, potential users and local residents in the development of parks. Best value will hopefully encourage local authorities to view the provision of good parks as a contribution to social inclusion and economic regeneration policies, meeting some of the needs of the disadvantaged, isolated and immobile members of society, regardless of the nature of their social exclusion - age, status, ability, gender or race.

User numbers and user profiles

Local authorities have not traditionally collated or maintained records about park users. Competitive bidding for grants from SRB or Lottery sources has encouraged the provision of user numbers, either as informed estimates or as the result of visitor surveys. The traditional desultory approach to users is reflected in the survey returns which show that **user numbers are available for only 347 of 765 parks (45%)**. Most of these returns are estimates, not reliable figures. It is perhaps disappointing that local authorities know so little about the customers served by parks but hardly surprising when it is considered that some authorities do not even seem to know how many parks they manage. The figures in the following chart show the range of visitor numbers where these are available.
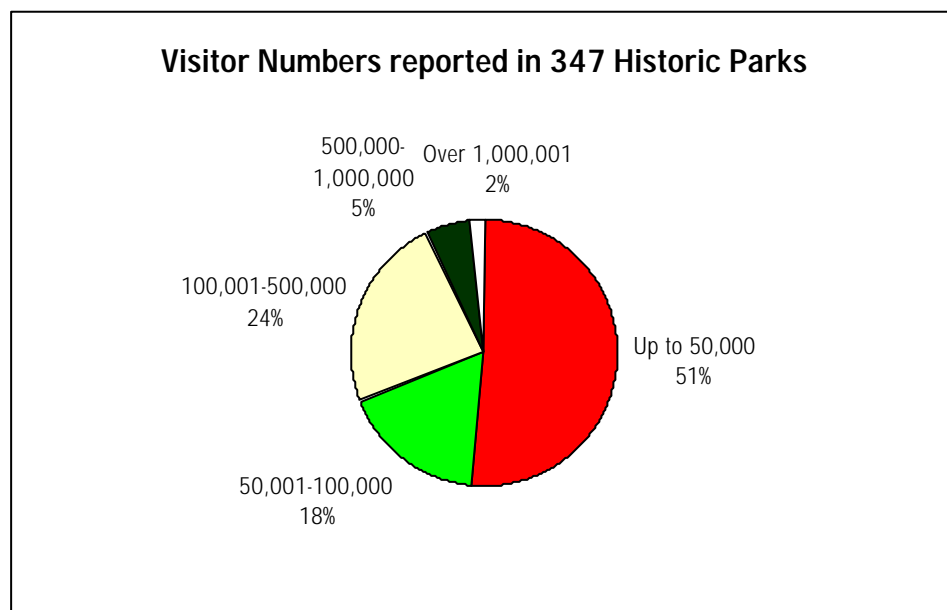

Visitor Numbers reported in 347 Historic Parks

- Over 1,000,001: 2%
- 500,000-1,000,000: 5%
- 100,001-500,000: 24%
- Up to 50,000: 51%
- 50,001-100,000: 18%

Chart 5

As there is no standard formula for calculating usage and most parks base their figures on user surveys or on surveys of a random section of the population the accuracy of the resulting statistics is variable. Despite these shortcomings, the visitor numbers show heavy usage compared to similar local authority provision, for example leisure centres, museums and galleries.

The level of use of parks generally is massively above the visitor numbers achieved by paying attractions, suggesting a continuing social need and appreciation despite the often indifferent condition of provision. It would be helpful to parks managers if there were a system of placing a nominal value to the users of each visit to enable the value of parks to be quantified and appreciated.

The survey did not address the question of user identity, but it is likely that awareness of who uses the parks will be lower even than number of users.

Given the financial constraints on the running of parks, it is not surprising that the cost of acquiring this visitor information is an important factor in deterring local authorities from undertaking such exercises.

User satisfaction surveys have been carried out for 224 of 765 parks (29%). It appears that most authorities have not consulted at all over the past ten years. Where consultation has occurred this has tended to be with user groups alone, or about particular facilities, such as a new play area. Whilst the parks surveyed include a cross section of differing areas, some interviewees admit that wealthy neighbourhoods may be treated better in this respect than poorer areas because there is more pressure from residents in these areas.

Consultation most commonly takes place when the condition of parks becomes a political issue or when the public reacts to a realisation that the park is at risk through decline or through development plans.

Effective consultation also needs feedback mechanisms. Some authorities include parks in their annual reviews but this provides low-level information. There may be a case for each park with more than a certain number of visitors to produce an annual report, linked perhaps to best value monitoring.

Best value may increase the commitment of local authorities to wider public consultation and this may result in the transfer of some resources to the benefit of poorer areas, as social inclusion policies increase community involvement. The London Borough of Newham, a best value pilot authority, is already targeting the most deprived areas for improvement.

In Glasgow, public consultation indicates that the prime need of parks users has moved from sport and physical activity to an appreciation of the peace, quiet and beauty to be found in parks. This may be linked to increased provision of good indoor sports facilities and dedicated outdoor sports facilities unconnected with parks or a re-emergence of forgotten core values and provisions. There is a

continuing demand for events and for high quality and safe children's play areas.

Newham, with its changing population profile, has been particularly active in public consultation. User surveys consistently show a need for better toilets, more children's play facilities, catering facilities and improved security, again pointing to the need to improve the standard of fundamental provision and respect the core values of the users.

It has been found that some parks have had to adapt to provide for non traditional sports and activities and events. In many areas, parks need to meet the different needs of a multi-cultural community.

Need for further work:

➢ *develop a standard formula for calculating visitor numbers, visitor profiles and the way people use parks to establish core values*

➢ *explore the potential for a system of quantifying the value to the user of park visits*

➢ *develop guidance for a park service adapting to changes in the user profile and needs*

➢ *institute and provide access to centrally held statistical information on park use*

➢ *develop standards or guidance in reporting park performance to local residents*

➢ *promote the formation of an umbrella group for Parks Friends Groups to provide support and disseminate and encourage best practice*

Financing Parks

It is significant that **22% of respondents were unable to provide any financial data** relating to the parks service and a greater number were unable to provide detailed data relating to individual historic parks.

However, there were sufficient responses containing financial data to determine, with confidence, trends in funding.

Revenue Expenditure

Over the twenty years that have been researched, there has been no significant change in the *sources* of revenue funding available to public parks. They remain overwhelmingly a local authority provision, paid for by the public from the community charge with some help from revenue raising activities. Parks are not an explicit element within the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) but are included with other leisure provision, to be disbursed according to perceived local priorities.

The influences affecting park funding over the past twenty years are therefore related to local policy decisions, structural reorganisation of local government, the emergence of a financial management culture relating to park provision and general economic pressures on local authorities.

The fall in expenditure on all parks and open spaces over twenty years was 18%, after allowing for inflation but not for increases or decreases in the areas of open space. Significantly, **expenditure on historic parks in the same period fell by 26%,** suggesting that they suffered disproportionately.

The period during which expenditure fell the most sharply was between 1989/90 and 1994/95 - on all parks and open spaces by 7%, but on historic parks by 18%. This five year period included the full impact of CCT and although no evidence has been gathered to support the conclusion, it is likely that the concentrated fall in funding of the maintenance of historic parks is a consequence of CCT. CCT tended to lead to similar management specifications and costs being calculated by units of area and applied to all grounds maintenance irrespective of site complexity, history or particular needs. This standardisation of costing almost certainly fuelled a mechanistic approach to parks maintenance and therefore had a significant detrimental effect on the more specialist needs of heritage parks.

The percentage fall in expenditure on historic parks, during the period 1994/95 to 1999/2000, exceeds that on all parks and open spaces for the same period, suggesting a continuation of the consequences of CCT. The general trend in expenditure is reversed for historic parks during the period 1984/85 to 1989/90 during which period expenditure increased by 5%. This apparent increase is

related to the effect of two major projects at Crystal Palace Park in the London Borough of Bromley and Battersea Park in the London Borough of Wandsworth. This growth in expenditure in the context of the research is significant and masks a larger reduction in total expenditure on all parks.

The table below sets out the trend in expenditure after allowing for inflation, on all parks and historic parks over the past twenty years. This was a staged calculation based on the returns of 63 local authorities were able to provide a full set of figures, 77 who could provide four, 118 who could provide three and 237 who could provide the two most recent figures.

Trends in Revenue Expenditure		
	All Parks %	Heritage parks %
1979/80-1984/85	-7	-6
1984/85-1989/90	-3	+5
1989/90-1994/95	-7	-18
1994/95-1999/00	-1	-7

Table 3

The decline in revenue expenditure, after taking account of inflation, is, for all parks 18% and in respect of heritage parks 26%.

Capital Expenditure

In contrast to sources of revenue funding, there have been significant changes in the potential sources of capital funding. In the past twenty years, there have been a variety of regulations affecting both the volume of potential capital funding that an authority has at its disposal and how and to which services it may be applied. As well as capital receipts there has also been a proliferation of external funding sources including the private sector, Landfill Tax receipts, SRB, Lottery, European and other challenge funding.

The returns indicate a significant real growth in the rate of capital investment over the past twenty years. In order to fund large projects, it is increasingly necessary to bring together a number of different funding sources, with the private sector wishing to be associated with prominent and prestigious projects. Whilst individual parks have benefited, the nil returns for others, combined with comment made by officers, suggest that in many there has been no capital expenditure over same period.

There is evidence of a relatively small number of parks benefiting from significant capital funding, having a dramatic effect in some areas. 65 parks in the survey were reported to be in the receipt of lottery funding. The difference between this figure and HLF's figure of 142 major grant awards may be explained by the survey rate of return, or a reflection of the time it takes for lottery grants to be implemented and take effect.

The criteria for lottery funding has helped authorities invest in the sustainability of the park through the pressure from HLF to create new staff posts and to produce a management plan, to show how the park will be run and to implement the restoration plan. Local communities are often given a lift by successful lottery bids, the councils being required by HLF to provide evidence of effective public consultation and involvement. This helps to form a bond between the authority and the community.

Of 765 returns, 619 (81%) reported no external funding.

Compared with more "routine" capital investment, funding from external sources particularly the Lottery, often involves large one-off amounts, distorting the picture of total capital expenditure. This factor and the fact that the reporting years in this survey are five years apart combine to make it difficult to identify trends. The existence of external sources of capital funding has changed the funding relationship of local authorities with their parks. Agencies may now take the lead in capital expenditure with the council providing matching funding. While a welcome injection of capital, it could be argued that grant-led investment undermines local democracy as councils have to follow the agendas of external bodies.

The identification of trends in capital investment over a twenty year period are further complicated by the variations and developments in local authority capital accounting, far more so than in the case of accounting for revenue expenditure. Capital expenditure in the earlier period was treated differently and more often pooled than in recent years, making it difficult to determine the emphasis of expenditure.

Despite a considerable number of returns, therefore, the combination of the effect of capital regulations, accounting practices and the ad hoc development of other sources of capital funding, the information gathered does not permit the identification of definitive trends in capital expenditure on parks.

Although trends in capital investment are important indicators, to be meaningful they need to be analysed on a year by year basis, categorising expenditure by size of scheme and source of funding so that underlying local authority investment can be identified.

Notwithstanding the lottery success, the low profile and under-resourcing of the parks service makes it generally less able to compete with other services for internal and external capital funding. There needs to be greater awareness of the environmental and social importance of parks to local communities in central and local government, and this awareness should be acknowledged in the form of meaningful support.

Need for further work:

➢ *consider imposing a statutory duty to return revenue and capital expenditure on parks*

➢ *monitor the effect of external funding on park development and local authority investment*

➢ *establish Government support for a capital investment programme for parks*

➢ *monitor capital and revenue trends on the total park service and on historic parks*

Conclusions

The survey has established successfully a database capable of recording and interrogating the range of facts necessary for the refinement of understanding relating to the nation's stock of parks and open spaces. The only outstanding weakness is the lack of a complete set of returns. If this could be remedied there would be, for the first time, sufficient data to inform the policies and strategies of local and central government and of grant giving bodies not only in relation to parks but also in informing wider social policies concerned with social inclusion, with economic and social regeneration, with the welfare of children and young people, with health, sport, exercise and education.

It is clear from the analysis of the data compiled from the local authority survey returns that the condition of the nation's parks has generally declined over the last twenty years and that in many places they are maintained at a lower standard or continuing to decline. In some areas parks are described as good and it is the good parks which are most frequently improving. The clearest picture to emerge from the data is the continuing polarisation of the standard of parks, with the good often getting better and the poor often getting worse.

The data also details the ongoing reduction in revenue expenditure over the last twenty years, biting deepest on historic parks compared to other recreational open spaces.

However it is also clear that the trends identified are not a regional phenomenon - every region shows evidence of poor parks remaining poor or getting worse. The problem faced by parks are widespread and, where they occur, similar in nature. The picture of widespread decline is punctuated with some bright spots and it may be that lessons can be learnt from these beacons. Even these may have to be treated with caution because, until best value scrutiny becomes uniform, there has been no objective or independent assessment of condition or trends.

It is also clear from the study that the incompleteness of the data means that it may conceal in the worst areas more than it reveals in the best areas about the problems facing parks and park managers.

For these reasons the overwhelming need at this stage is to bring the data collection and the database to a state of completion and to make provision for its regular updating and monitoring.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been drawn from the needs identified through the questionnaire responses, interviews and discussions carried out with local authority staff during both this and the previous ILAM study. They are re-presented here as short, medium and long term proposals to stimulate further debate by government and non-government organisations in developing a national approach to improving parks and open spaces.

Short-term: Year 1

➤ *complete the database by encouraging, and assisting if necessary, non-responding authorities to provide the information*

➤ *identify all organisations responsible for the management of public parks*

➤ *maintain interest in the project by providing feedback to those who supported the exercise*

➤ *establish methods to promulgate research findings and make the data available to individuals or organisations carrying out research in the future*

Medium-term: Years 2-3

➤ *maintain the database as an on-going record of parks of national and local historic importance and their features and condition*

➤ *develop, with the appropriate bodies, official and consistent definitions of the various categories of public parks and recreational open space*

➤ *develop national standards for public parks and open space according to their definition*

➤ *provide guidance on benchmarking and performance indicators for Best Value*

➤ *review national lists and registers of historic parks and gardens to ensure that urban parks and gardens are fully represented and that their national historic importance is recognised*

➤ *consider whether action is required to identify and record parks and gardens of local historic importance*

➤ *share information on best practice*

➤ *encourage all authorities with responsibility for parks to develop dedicated*

parks strategies

➢ *advocate a National Strategy for public parks to which local strategies can relate*

➢ *review and improve training and career development opportunities in the care and management of parks to ensure they meet the requirements indicated*

➢ *develop a standard formula for calculating visitor numbers, visitor profiles and the way people use parks*

➢ *identify and promote successful management models*

➢ *seek improved data from all local authorities by capturing information compiled for Best Value and up-dating database*

➢ *provide public access to centrally held statistical information on park*

➢ *promote the formation of an umbrella group for Parks Friends' Groups to provide support and disseminate and encourage best practice*

Long-term: Year 4+

➢ *achieve central government recognition of the value of good parks for stimulating economic regeneration, encouraging social inclusion and developing healthy communities*

➢ *avoid further losses of historic features by securing and directing funding towards maintenance and repair, as well as restoration and refurbishment*

➢ *encourage innovative commercial and community partnerships to deliver best value in parks*

➢ *develop guidance for a park service which can adapt to changes in community profile and needs*

➢ *develop standards or guidance in reporting park performance to local residents*

➢ *explore the potential for a system of quantifying value to both the individual and the community of park visits*

➢ *introduce a requirement to return comprehensive revenue and capital expenditure figures on parks, which identify all activities within the park including leisure and sport, as a part of the best value process*

➢ *monitor the effect of external funding on park development and local authority investment*

➢ *establish long term support for a comprehensive investment programme for parks*

➢ *monitor capital and revenue trends on the total park service and on historic parks*