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RETHINKING GREEN SPACES – WHAT’S HAPPENING TO OUR PUBLIC PARKS?

In November 2015 the National Lottery will be twenty-one years of age after being established by Prime Minister John Major in 1994. One of the greatest beneficiaries of the money raised through the National Lottery for good causes has been the unique heritage of the UK. To date over six point one billion pounds have been awarded by distributor the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to over thirty-seven thousand projects across all parts of the UK. In Scotland alone grants totalling over six hundred and seventy-eight million pounds have been awarded to three thousand five hundred projects to support museums, historic collections, cultural traditions, historic buildings, wildlife and natural heritage as well as natural, semi-natural and designed landscapes. This article describes the actions HLF is taking to safeguard our past investment in public parks and to support the parks and green spaces sector more widely.

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has always taken a very broad view of heritage as demonstrated by the amazing array of projects supported. While a large majority of HLF funding has been directed to restoring and conserving historic buildings and landscapes, it has always believed that local people and communities must also be fully engaged in learning about, caring for and managing our heritage to ensure it has a sustainable future. While twenty-one years ago that was a fairly novel concept, today it is the norm and accepted that all the projects HLF supports are about both conservation and people. In fact HLF's current strategic framework is entitled *A lasting difference for heritage and people*.

Of the six hundred and seventy-eight million pounds awarded by HLF in Scotland, around seventeen per cent or one hundred and fourteen million pounds has been awarded to projects focused on landscapes and natural heritage. As elsewhere in the UK, one of our most popular grant funding programmes has been our investment in public parks through the Parks for People programme. Introduced across the UK in 1996, the programme responded to years of underinvestment in many of our most treasured public parks. A series of reports by the Garden History Society and others charted the appalling state of many of our parks following years of neglect through the 1980s and early 1990s.¹ Loss of heritage features, lack of appreciation and understanding, and years of neglect had taken their toll with many of our greatest parks becoming utilitarian no-go areas devoid of heritage and people. But now, after twenty years work and forty-five million pounds of HLF investment in Scotland alone, the fortune of many of our most important historic parks has changed (Figures 1 and 2).

There are numerous wonderful public parks and many have now benefited from National Lottery investment. In a recent survey undertaken by HLF, sixty per cent of park managers across the UK described the current condition of their parks as good.² A comparable study undertaken in 2001 found only eighteen per cent of park managers then thought their parks were in good condition.³ Across the UK a renaissance has taken

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Figure 1. Roberts Park, Bradford, in the Saltaire World Heritage Site, was restored with a three point two million pound grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and Big Lottery Fund. All photos/images: © HLF



Figure 2. Funding from HLF, the Carnegie Dunfermline Trust and Fife Council is transforming Pittencrieff Park, Dunfermline, helping everyone to learn more about its heritage

place over the last twenty years. People now treasure their local parks more than ever as they provide ‘free’ places to meet friends, for children to play and for everyone from whatever background to come together to enjoy sport and recreation. We also know from recent research by Ipsos MORI funded by HLF that thirty-five per cent of people in Scotland use public parks once a week or more.⁴ Results from a BBC Opinion Poll suggest that public parks and open spaces are the third most frequently used public service for seventy-eight per cent of respondents compared with eighty-six per cent using hospitals and ninety per cent using general practitioner surgeries.⁵

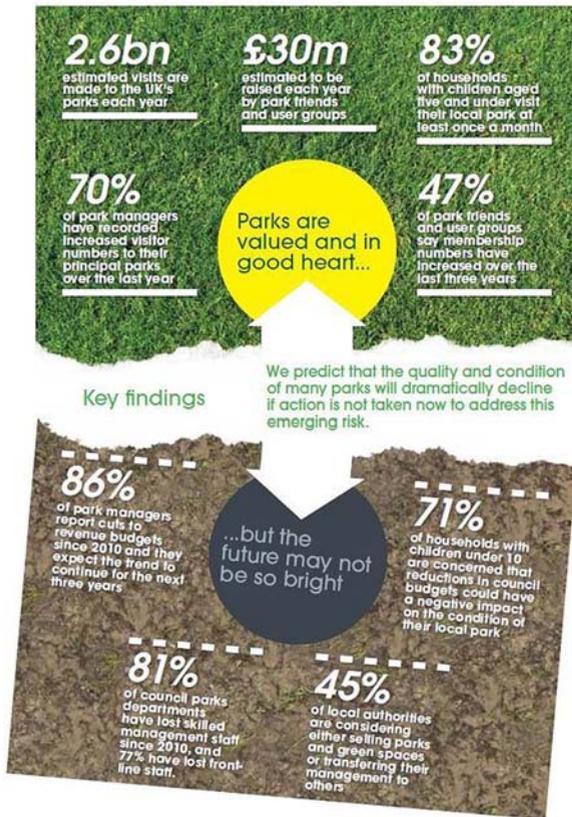


Figure 3. Key data from the HLF's *State of UK Public Parks 2014: Renaissance to Risk?* (2014), p. 3

But all is not well in the world of parks and green spaces. No one will have escaped noticing the severe budget constraints under which all local authorities are now required to work. With the vast majority of public parks owned and managed by local authorities, public parks are in the frontline when it comes to finding savings or ways of reducing local authority spending. This year we will reach a tipping point. Available funding from local authorities will not meet all net expenditure needed for maintenance and the continued enhancement of our public parks and green spaces. As a non-statutory service the management of parks and green spaces is likely to be hit hard. For HLF, with over seven hundred million pounds of Good Cause Lottery funding invested in over seven hundred public parks, this could present a considerable risk.

In June 2014 HLF launched the *State of UK Public Parks 2014* report.⁶ Based on UK-wide surveys of local authority park managers and friends groups, including an Ipsos MORI public opinion poll of the park-going public, this has established the state of the UK's public parks. The research produced some startling statistics. The good news is that two point six billion visits are made to the UK's parks each year, with seventy per cent of park managers recording increased visitor numbers to their principal parks (Figure 3). The bad news is that eighty-six per cent of park managers report cuts to revenue budgets since 2010 and they expect the trend to continue for the next three years. Forty-five per cent of local authorities also report they are considering either selling their parks and green spaces or transferring management to others such as wildlife trusts or community groups. This is all the more worrying as eighty-one per cent of council parks departments reported they have lost skilled management staff since 2010 and that seventy-seven per cent have lost frontline staff.

After two decades of investment and improvement we appear to have reached a tipping point, although many people seem oblivious to this impending crisis. Unlike the closing of a swimming pool or shutting of a library, reductions in park maintenance often go unnoticed, but without skilled maintenance parks become underused, neglected and vandalized. The immense social and environmental capital of public parks can be rapidly eroded and they easily become a costly liability for those that own and manage them.

The aim of *State of UK Public Parks 2014* is to provide the evidence needed to persuade decision-makers that reducing investment in parks is a false economy. It is also acknowledged that resources are urgently needed to develop new ways to manage and finance parks and green spaces in future. Parks and green spaces cannot simply be passed to others or communities to manage; their future needs careful consideration and resources to ensure they remain of a high useable quality. The report ends with a series of ‘calls to action’ as there is much that needs to be done.

As a grant-giver there is only so much that HLF can do to help avert a future crisis. Collecting and presenting accurate data to demonstrate potential problems ahead is one approach. But HLF also wants to do more both through the projects it continues to support and also for the benefit of all parks and green spaces across the UK. It has therefore developed a plan to help the parks and green spaces sector and would encourage as many people as possible to join in and make use of these valuable resources.

SUPPORT FOR HLF PROJECTS POST-COMPLETION

In 2013 HLF appointed an expert parks adviser with experience in local authority park management to review many of the projects funded in the past. It appears so far that HLF investment in public parks is standing up well with a minority of sites needing additional support and encouragement. Through targeted prearranged visits as well as unannounced inspections HLF has looked at over one hundred and twenty parks previously funded. This has allowed comparison of results with the annual Green Flag Awards as well as helping those sites deemed to be struggling to maintain standards and redouble their efforts. In virtually all cases HLF’s renewed focus has been welcomed by parks managers and community groups alike. One of our greatest problems has been loss of corporate memory as high staff turnover within local authorities has resulted in much lost knowledge and experience. It has also been noticed that many past-funded projects seem to have mislaid crucial documents such as conservation and maintenance plans developed through earlier regeneration projects. Visiting past-funded projects has allowed HLF to gather a wealth of knowledge and good practice that can usefully be shared with others.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS WITHIN THE PARKS WORLD

To help those working in the sector to share good practice and seek advice from others, HLF has created a new parks online community.⁷ It is still early days as the community has only been running a few months and for it to be a success people need to join in and contribute their experiences.

SHARING GOOD PRACTICE

Learning from others is essential to saving time, making best use of resources and to inspiring people to try new ideas. HLF, Big Lottery Fund and The Land Trust have created the Prosperous Parks website that brings new ideas together for sharing.⁸



Figure 4. After a two point two million pound investment by HLF and Big Lottery Fund, a regenerated Burslem Park in Stoke-on-Trent is once again fully open to visitors

STIMULATING INNOVATION

Those working in parks and green spaces stimulate new ideas and creative ways of working, however, as economic pressure increases the time to innovate and trialling new ideas becomes more challenging. People needing space to innovate often require extra resources to maintain the day job whilst providing expertise and support to allow innovation to take place. Working with innovation charity Nesta, HLF and Big Lottery Fund have developed a one million pound grant programme called Rethinking Parks that aims to stimulate creative ways of managing and financing public parks by rethinking how services could be delivered and funded.

Eleven projects have so far been supported which will run until December 2015. The projects focus on trialling new ideas for financing public parks and all have committed to sharing their learning and experiences widely once completed (Figure 5). One of the eleven projects is My Park Scotland led by park and green space charity GreenSpace Scotland. The project aims to find new sources of funding for parks and green spaces through crowdsource funding and providing a way for people to give to parks via a recognized charity rather than via the local authority. In the past it has been found that people are less likely to give to a local authority but are keen and willing to give to a local treasured park providing they know how the funding might be used. HLF research for *State of UK Public Parks 2014* showed that an estimated thirty million pounds is raised each year by park friends and user groups.

CONTINUED INVESTMENT IN PUBLIC PARKS

HLF in the UK and Big Lottery Fund in England are committed to supporting more park regeneration projects in future. In December 2014 HLF announced another investment of twenty point six million pounds in seven public parks. While it is appreciated that resources to develop applications are under immense pressure, HLF is still eager to see new projects come forward under the Parks for People grant programme, which offers



Figure 5. The Reading Room Café in Rowntree Park, York, is an innovative new park café that also provides book lending as well as free wifi

grants of between one hundred thousand and five million pounds to public parks that fit the programme criteria.⁹

THE FUTURE

In 2016 HLF will repeat the State of UK Public Parks survey to see how parks are faring but would also value input from those regularly visiting public parks that have benefitted from National Lottery funding so that any failures in maintenance standards can be investigated.

State of UK Public Parks 2014 includes a series of five key actions that HLF and others need to achieve if we are to ensure future generations benefit from our legacy of public parks. From renewed commitment to funding parks by local authorities to supporting people to get more involved and promoting innovation, the actions outlined are essential to avoid a repeat of the major decline in parks experienced in the 1970s and 1980s. A previous failure to maintain investment in parks meant that many historic parks lost unique heritage features or slipped in to major long-term decline. Having invested so much in making parks fabulous again, it would be a tragedy if standards once again declined.

REFERENCES

¹ Hazel Conway and David Lambert, *Public Prospects: Historic Urban Parks Under Threat* (London: Garden History Society and Victorian Society, 1993); GMBH, *Grounds for Concern* (London: GMBH, 1993); updated by M. Bramah and D. Bevan, *More Grounds for Concern: A Report on the State of Public Parks, Gardens and Open Spaces* (1994); Proceedings of the symposium 'The Future of

Our Urban Parks', December 1994, pp. 9–16.

² Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), *State of UK Public Parks 2014: Renaissance to Risk?* (London: HLF, 2014). Originally produced in hard copy as an advocacy document, it is now available for download at: <http://www.hlf.org.uk/state-uk-public-parks/>. Hard copies are also available from the author upon request (email: drewb@hlf.org.uk).

³ Urban Parks Forum, *Public Parks Assessment* (2001), funded by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, HLF, Countryside Agency and English Heritage.

⁴ Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), *State of UK Public Parks 2014*. Research Report of the HLF, June (London: HLF, 2014), p. 45. This research report, only published online (<http://www.hlf.org.uk/state-uk-public-parks/>), formed the research base upon which the advocacy report (noted in note 2) was written.

⁵ Mark Easton, 'Public service cuts – did we notice?', BBC News (available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-24454006>); a bailout anniversary poll undertaken by ICM, 27–29 September 2013.

⁶ See note 2.

⁷ See <http://www.hlf.org.uk/forum>. If you have an example of good practice or a question for experts working in the parks' sector, please join the community.

⁸ See <http://www.prosperousparks.com/>. Anyone with creative new ideas for funding and managing parks and green spaces should consider adding them to the website as a priority.

⁹ If you think your local park could benefit from a Parks for People grant, please look at our application guidance to see if your park might be eligible (<http://www.hlf.org.uk/looking-funding/our-grant-programmes/parks-people>). For further information on this and other HLF projects, contact the author by email (drewb@hlf.org.uk) or on twitter (@drewbennellick)