

An open mind on open space

What has become of our parks; or, perhaps more pertinently, what has become of the professional imperative to manage, maintain and develop them as vital community assets? Aware that it was high time The Leisure Review increased its coverage of parks and open spaces, Jonathan Ives went to talk to Paul Bramhill, chief executive of Green Space, about the state of parks and what the future might hold for green space managers.

For generations parks have been among the most valuable but most under-valued of all community leisure assets. Consistently and continually recognised by the public as important and much-loved aspects of daily life, parks suffered a rapid decline in the 1980s as funding and staff were withdrawn in response to the combined pressures of recession and the privatisation of public services. In the latter part of the 1990s the shocking state of many public parks in towns and cities across the UK became a matter of national policy and investment followed a growing recognition that urban open spaces were an essential element of the public realm. With the economic cycle bringing us back to a point where recession and public service cuts are the dominant themes of public policy, what does this latest economic miasma mean for parks?

It is a question that Paul Bramhill, chief executive of Green Space, has been considering for some time. Green Space was established in 1999 from the Urban Parks Forum, which itself had grown out of the Heritage Lottery Fund's urban parks programme. For the last ten years the organisation has been working to raise awareness of parks and green spaces, involve communities and improve the skills of the parks management sector. The positioning of urban parks within local and national government policy is Green Space's constant concern.

"Over the last ten years or so we've had a government that has generally appreciated the benefit and the value of public open space," Bramhill said, "and has invested in trying to create some of the infrastructure to address some of the decline that we identified in the first public parks assessment in 2001. Over the last ten years I think the quality of certain parks has really improved. We have had an improvement in site quality – although possibly to the detriment of other sites – and that has been encouraged by Green Flag."

Green Flag, the parks quality assessment scheme originally devised and launched by the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM) and the Pesticides Trust, benefitted from the investment of government funds, as did the Urban Parks Forum, which became Green Space, and CABE Space, the division of the government's architectural advisory body dedicated to the promotion of the role of parks within the built environment. The Labour government was persuaded of the value of investment in the public realm and parks became a focal point for local groups keen to be involved in the improvement of their local environments. Friends groups and community groups flourished, bringing a new enthusiasm to local parks. Local authorities responded by taking the needs and opinions of local parks users seriously, shaping their management of local open spaces accordingly. Research put numbers on the simple truths that most people already understood: that local parks were an essential contributory asset to the health of individuals and communities.

With severe public spending cuts already promised, Bramhill acknowledges that this period may come to be viewed as a golden age for parks. "Cuts," he said, "are definitely going to strike at green space services along with other cultural services." The new government has promised to promote green spaces but it is not clear what this might entail. Bio-diversity might get a look in but whether there will be room for investment in urban open spaces is less likely. The issue of where the responsibility for parks sits within government has always been uncertain and, with the departmental structure as yet largely unchanged under the coalition, this uncertainty remains. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has the main parks remit with the Department for the Environment (Defra) maintaining some interest but the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the department that many in the leisure sector would see as its obvious home, is less certain of its role in the shaping and delivery of national policy for parks.

Does this cross-departmental responsibility suggest that parks sit outside the government's understanding of the role and impact of open space? "I think so," Bramhill said. "But it doesn't for people – they don't worry which department is covering it. All the surveys show that high-quality green space is at the heart of what people want. Surveys show percentage figures in the high 80s and 90s saying that they are really important. I think that the DCMS still don't really recognise the value of



Paul Bramhill: facing the future for parks with an awareness of what is behind him

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parks within their cultural remit."

If there is still uncertainty over parks within Whitehall it seems that there is a greater clarity among local communities and local government about the role parks should play in local environments. Bramhill has noticed a change in attitudes and a new understanding of the role of parks. This in turn has brought new challenges for parks managers.

"There's been an acknowledgement that we need high-quality green space systems now, not just individually good sites," he said. "There's a lot more awareness over the last ten years that it's not just about managing the site and not just about horticultural excellence or whatever it might have been. It's not so much about the excellence of what we're managing but are we getting out to people: are people using it; do people appreciate what you're providing; are you providing what they want; what else could this park be offering?"

While research shows that people look to their local parks for an experience of a natural environment, physical activity, a social meeting place, a place to take their kids, there is also a suggestion that children and young people – the video generation – are not as engaged by their parks as their parents might have been. Natural England research suggests that while members of an older generation might have had a wander radius of six miles from their home their grandchildren are now more likely to be restricted to some 300 yards. Bramhill argues that these demographics mean that parks managers must reinvent the way parks are perceived. If museums and galleries can have staff to help visitors get the most out of the facility, why not parks? Might the role of head gardener become that of an outreach officer?

"One of the things that we're not doing very well is basing community engagement people within our parks and looking to the possibilities of programming," he said. "We've lost the connection within our local authorities between the marketing and events group and parks. A lot of the marketing of events was about marketing the parks programme. It is something that they do really well in the US."

As an organisation promoting parks Green Space puts effort into supporting parks professionals and providing advocacy opportunities. Green Space regional forums are established in all the government departments and national parks week, which this year might be the catalyst for 1,000 local events celebrating parks, is now in its fifth year. More community groups are getting involved with Green Flag and awareness of World Parks Day – 18 September – is growing. Such profile for parks provides opportunities for parks managers to engage the public and transform perceptions. However, the extent to which the parks management profession is in a position to respond is a moot point.

"We're trying to create a greenspace movement," Bramhill said. "There's a lot more activism, there's a lot more professional connectivity and, if you went back to ILAM's early days when they had regions and regional activity, we're probably at a similar but slightly better situation in that it is a broader engagement. That's a positive step but we still have quite disparate institutes, which I would say is a weakness at the moment. We are trying to get institutes to work better together and I don't think we've replaced ILAM in its heyday when it brought all those leisure interests together well. We haven't been able to replicate that yet in terms of professional membership of an institute but we've probably ended up with greater engagement across the green space sector through the regional forums. But the issue about deprofessionalising the sector is a huge one."

He pointed to Research from CABE Space and English Heritage from around 2004 showing that a lot of advocacy skills have disappeared in the cultural sector, including the green space sector. "We've lost that focus on being good leaders and good advocates for the service," he said. "We've not had that training and skills base. If we had kept going with a strong institute I think it was up to that institute to recognise that. You could argue that, while membership was good at ILAM, we as members didn't recognise that as part of that organisation's needs."

History does not repeat itself but sometimes the similarities can be striking. With an economic recession, public sector finances under pressure and a government determined to shrink the machinery state, the current political climate strikes a chord with the early 1980s. Some twenty-odd years on from the evident and sometimes shocking decline of public open space, are parks better positioned to survive than they were?

"It depends if people take the opportunities," Bramhill said. "I think we've got a much better evidence base. It is still incomplete but it's much better than it was prior to CCT [compulsory competitive tendering]. We also have with Green Flag the potential to say that we actually have a national quality standard. However, currently only 1% or 2% of parks meets it."

"I think there's going to be a huge trend towards local authorities trying to devolve their parks to other organisations. We'll see a move towards parish and town councils taking these on. There will be more local management but that might not be as well informed. It might be deprofessionalised. What you end up with is a lot of local space locally managed, some of which may be a good standard but not necessarily. I suspect that a lot more people are going to end up managing parks and green spaces who don't know much about it. They might manage a contract but that might put their

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strategic management at risk. All the strategic stuff -- 'What is the replacement strategy for those trees?' -- disappears and that's a major concern. Do we lose people and all that expertise, all that knowledge, with management delivered through a contract?"

But with new times and new governments there are always some grounds for optimism. "The positive side is that there will be new opportunities," Bramhill said. "We don't know what they are yet but there will be. It will be about understanding the opportunities, being fleet of foot and getting in there. The fact that they haven't come in and trashed the old structure, so that the departments are at the moment broadly the same, does provide at least the continuity of remit. At Green Space we are looking to expand over the next year and make sure we've got the resources to make the best of those opportunities. Most people are feeling pretty nervous about the next five years in terms of public service but there are opportunities and we need to help the sector as much as possible. Hopefully people will then see the value of what we are doing."

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