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## Coming soon: the state of UK parks revealed

Invited to attend a recent meeting of the APSE parks, horticulture and grounds maintenance advisory group, the Leisure Review was offered a brief glimpse into the background of the HLF State of UK Parks report that is currently being prepared for publication. Jonathan Ives reports.

In June the Heritage Lottery Fund will publish a report on the state of parks within the UK. Within the parks sector this is a keenly anticipated document but it will also mark a significant milestone in the HLF's long involvement with parks management.

Speaking at recent meeting of the APSE parks, horticulture and grounds maintenance advisory group, Lucy Hares, manager of the HLF's Parks for People programme, reminded us that Parks for People was the successor of the Urban Parks Programme, launched as long ago as 1996. Freed by the passage of time from any need to be overly coy about the HLF's early history, Hares explained that parks had been seized upon in the wake of some decisions by trustees that had provoked public disquiet about how lottery largesse was being allocated. In the aftermath of paying £12.5 million to the Churchill family for an archive of Sir Winston's papers in 1995, the HLF was looking for a cause that would prove popular and steadfastly uncontroversial. When the issue of public parks was drawn to trustees' attention they seized it gratefully and the Urban Parks Programme was created.

Some 18 years later the HLF has awarded £700 million to more than 700 parks and, although they have recently launched new strategic frameworks in response to requests from the parks sector to simplify the application procedures, not a great deal has changed since the Urban Parks Programme was launched. The HLF has committed to continuing its support for parks until at least 2018 and they remain open to suggestions regarding how lottery funding can be most effectively spent. By way of example, Hares explained that cemeteries had recently been added to the list of landscapes eligible within the Parks for People guidelines.

The essence of the Parks for People criteria lies in existing designed landscapes. "We look for a masterplan approach," Hares said. "It can be phased but trustees will look for a rounded project and vision. We can fund capital works and activities, and we want to see local community involvement. We also want to see that the local community are involved in the future management of the park."

Other requirements include a ten-year maintenance plan and Green Flag awards. Grants between £100,000 and £5 million are made with a total of £30 million a year available. Although the fund is oversubscribed, Hares assured her audience that the Parks for People programme was worth thinking about when considering major schemes. Other HLF programmes might also offer funding options for open space projects, not least the Heritage Grants programme, which has £400 million available and could be applicable to large landscape schemes. For smaller projects, the Our Heritage programme offers grants of between £10,000 and £100,000 with a rolling application process, no match-funding requirements and an eight-week turn round. This, Hares suggested, might be a good starting point for smaller projects.

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Working with fellow lottery distributor Nesta, the HLF has also launched the Rethinking Parks programme. Launched just before Christmas and offering grants up to £100,000, this initiative is dedicated to encouraging parks services to think about how their service could be run differently in the future. Workshops held in January attracted more than 300 interested individuals, suggesting that there is still plenty of interest in securing both funding and know-how within the sector. Only £1 million of grants are available but the HLF hopes that the programme will play a role in testing new ideas for management, financial models and different approaches that will lead to a range of case studies of innovation in parks.

Although the HLF has been adopting something of a more prominent role in the parks sector following the demise of Greenspace, Hares was careful to emphasise that the HLF cannot campaign for or lobby on behalf of parks. Although it was happy to be part of the Horticulture Week round table, the HLF could not sign up as a member of the Parks Alliance. However, she suggested that the launch of the Prosperous Parks website was one indication of the HLF's commitment to the future of parks and the promotion of best practice within parks management.

Ian Baggott is a long-standing stalwart of the parks sector and has been closely involved with the data collection and data analysis for the State of UK Parks report. He admitted that it has not been as easy as it might have been.

"When it comes to parks we're still really bad at gathering data," he said. "We still can't work out the economic impact of parks. While there are lots of statistics on the potential economic impact of parks, there is next to nothing on actual value."

The research process involved a review of existing data sets. Natural England were very helpful and had a very good dataset but given their focus on natural environments they have limited information on parks. Progress was made with Greenspace and Greenspace Scotland was curtailed when Greenspace was closed. Consequently, Baggott and his colleagues have found data limited, which, along with a lack of longitudinal studies, has made a study of parks something of a struggle.

However, efforts to engage parks managers, what Baggott termed "the informed parks user" and the general public have yielded results. Parks managers and community groups have been surveyed, links have been made to the 2001 Public Parks Assessment and Mori was commissioned to produce a survey of public attitudes and experiences.

Consequently, Baggott was confident that the State of UK Parks will be a valuable contribution to the debate regarding the current condition and the future role of public parks. "The report to be published in June and there will be lot of good information for lobbying," he said. "We are currently looking at how data can be made available to people for use, especially professional managers."

While no data from the report could be made available ahead of publication, Baggott was able to discuss the findings of the impact research for the HLF Parks for People programme. Data has been aggregated from the 135 projects funded since 2006 with 76 projects taking part in a detailed survey. The data reveals that almost 75% of HLF funding has gone, via local authorities, to communities identified within the two most deprived social sectors. Asked to gather visitor numbers for parks, the projects were able to show an increase of 3.7 million visits with predictions for growth in excess of seven million visits.

Other figures include: 2,000 volunteers trained, with the biggest delivery of training in the most deprived areas; 83% of sites had no management plan before engagement with Parks for People; 67% projects are now

employing more staff; 96% are engaging more volunteers; and the biggest satisfaction indicators are found in the most deprived areas.

For all these positive indicators, Baggott was adamant that there needs to be greater attention paid to data for parks. "We're still struggling to capture data regarding the range of the audience," he said. "Is it different people or more of the same, for example? We're still bad about measuring outcomes."

**Jonathan Ives is the editor of the Leisure Review and currently spends most of his time in a park.**

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