

ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

*PARKS AND SEMI-NATURAL OPEN
SPACES IN 21ST CENTURY BRITAIN*



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A Review of Current Thinking

(NB This paper is written in relation to the United Kingdom. Some of the references will, strictly speaking, only apply to certain parts, usually England and Wales. The authors consider that the general principles under discussion apply equally to all four countries, even if particular government and devolved administrations' policies and practices do not.)

1. INTRODUCTION

Parks and other open spaces in our towns and cities are seen by some as anachronistic leftovers and by others as potentially underpinning an urban renaissance. Those responsible for their care and maintenance are assailed by pressures from many different quarters: rural preservationists would cram development on to any urban open space to protect the countryside's greenfield sites; the heritage-minded want municipal parks to be time-warped in a golden age of formalism, regardless of today's needs and opportunities; regeneration agencies surround parks and open spaces with new roads and other barriers, denying access to local people, and those who would sanitise the environment demand that "dangerous" trees are disfigured and pools are drained and filled.

Faced with this welter of conflicting messages and competition for resources from other departments, is it any wonder that local councils, who bear the brunt of managing these places, are either unwilling or unable to commit adequate resources to do so, and that the anti-social amongst us vandalise, deface and abuse these often fading relicts of a gentler age? In addition many of the new breed of countryside rangers try to distance themselves from what they see as out of date "parks departments" and by so doing contribute to fragmentation of thinking and action in relation to the matrix of open spaces in today's towns.

In the midst of this seemingly hopeless desolation and dereliction new thoughts and ideas are emerging which, if they can be harnessed, may help to revive not only parks but public open spaces in general, those places named by Oliver Gilbert as our "urban commons".¹ These thoughts and ideas include:

- a) The Urban Task Force's recommendation that consideration should be given to extending Green Belt provisions to valuable urban open spaces²
- b) The new definition of previously used land ("brownfield sites") in PPG3 Housing which, if, taken at its word, both acknowledges the values of, and removes the threat of development from, many vital greenspaces³
- c) The House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and the Region's recommendation that there should be an Urban Parks and Greenspaces Agency⁴

¹ Gilbert, O.L. 1989. *The Ecology of Urban Habitats*. London, Chapman and Hall

² Urban Task Force. 1999. *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. London, E. & F.N. Spon

³ Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. 2000. *Planning Policy Guidance Note 3: Housing*. The Stationery Office

⁴ Environment, Transport & Regional Affairs Committee. 1999. *Town and Country Parks*. The Stationery Office

- d) The formation of both an Urban Green Spaces Task Force (now within the new Ministry for Transport, Local Government and the Regions) and the Urban Parks Forum
- e) The growing recognition of the multi-functional values of open spaces in urban areas⁵
- f) Recommendations from the UK-MAB Urban Forum and English Nature that there should be standards for access to urban greenspace⁶
- g) Research which demonstrates the benefits to health of just being able to walk into or enjoy the view of an open space with trees and grass⁷.

Add to these the developing concept of sustainable development, with its imperative to integrate economic, social and environmental needs, and suddenly parks and public open spaces become potential assets rather than liabilities, places to nurture not to knock.

This paper attempts to synthesise these ideas and offer a way forward for planners, urban ecologists, landscape and amenity managers, and funders, to take an holistic approach to parks and other open spaces. It is hoped that it will stimulate thought and debate, leading to recognition that these places can, and should, play a key role in the urban renaissance, the achievement of objectives in the Government's Quality of Life Strategy, and spatial planning policy.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

Open spaces in towns and cities are probably as old as cities themselves. The ancient world had the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and in Roman⁸ times gardens were laid out for the public. More natural open spaces were encapsulated in growing European cities like London, with its marshes along the Thames, Prague, with its wooded hillsides, and Luxembourg, built around a gorge where two rivers meet. To complement natural features, like rivers and woods, formal and ornate gardens were laid out. In places such as Vienna, Paris and Rome the state, or the aristocracy, displayed wealth and power through the lavishness of their parks and gardens, and their philanthropy by the extent to which these were available to the general populace.

In Britain the growth of industrial cities in the 19th Century presented new problems and opportunities. Rather than fiefdoms, controlled by powerful families or guilds of merchants, the new cities were “instant” dormitories and workshops for the new industrial workers. Existing cities were affected too: London (which has been continuously occupied for more than 2,000 years) had a population of 900,000 in 1801, 2,363,000 in 1851 and 9,000,000 in 1931⁹.

Unplanned and utilitarian these expanding towns and cities were “often described as dark, vice ridden, diseased and corrupting” with very high death rates. In 1833 an early campaigner for open space, the MP for Shrewsbury, Richard Slaney, called for a Select Committee “to consider the best means of securing open spaces in the immediate vicinity of populous towns, as public walks calculated to promote the health and comfort of the inhabitants”. Slaney’s concern was not solely for the welfare of the people. He reported that “want of recreation generated incipient disease, discontent; which in its turn led to attacks upon the Government”.

⁵ Barker, G.A. 1997. *A Framework For The Future: Green Networks with Multiple Uses in and Around Towns and Cities*. English Nature Research Report No. 265. Peterborough

⁶ Box, J. and Harrison, C. 1993. *Natural Spaces in Urban Places*. *Town & Country Planning* 62(9) 231 to 235

⁷ Rhode, C.L.E. and Kendle, A..D. 1994. *Human Well-being, Natural Landscapes and Wildlife in Urban Areas: A Review*. English Nature Science No. 22.

⁸ Farrar, L. 1998. *Ancient Roman Gardens*. Stroud, Sutton Publishing

⁹ Shirley, P. R. 1996. *Urban Wildlife*. London, Whittet Books

He concluded “public walks would not only promote the health and morality of the people, but would be beneficial to the mere wealth of the country”. In July 1835 it was said in a parliamentary debate that parks were to provide “innocent pleasurable recreation and instruction”¹⁰.

It was not until later in the 19th Century that the rise in municipality, combined with the concerns of rich philanthropists, saw the development and growth of municipal parks. These Victorian parks were mainly designed for walking and promenading and by the end of the Century were established features. Local circumstances and personalities played a major role in defining the area and types of parks, so that “the resulting pattern of open space in each town and city must be seen as being unique to that settlement”¹¹. This Victorian and Edwardian heritage of parks and open spaces has been a key element in the overall structure of our urban areas. Interestingly, in relation to today’s debate about brownfield sites, many of these parks were on “large areas of land which had been left in a derelict state as the result of extractive industries”¹².

The early part of the 20th Century saw the growth of the town planning movement, exemplified by the Garden City Movement created by Ebenezer Howard. This set out to show how urban areas could be made attractive by creating well designed open spaces. Town councils recognised deficiencies in provision and continued to add parks and open spaces to their areas: in Leicester two small ornamental gardens, two playgrounds and a small park were added between 1900 and 1920 (compared to six parks averaging 58 acres between 1850 and 1900).

In the 1930s and 40s concern for the physical and moral welfare of the nation’s youth, coupled with the need to make them “fit to fight” shifted the emphasis to the provision of recreation and sports grounds. The development of sports pitches produced bleak landscapes: they are undoubtedly open space but are more about quantity than quality.

Following the Second World War town planning became a major professional activity in the public services. Rebuilding war-shattered towns and cities involved large-scale clearances and major new housing, commercial and industrial development. Parks were neglected during the war, with some being used to produce food crops, but they were renovated during the 1950s when the workforce returned home, probably reaching their peak in the mid 1960s. After this, however, hard-pressed local authorities gradually withdrew staff and other resources. Changing patterns of social life left parks empty for a lot of the time, whilst neglect, decay and anti-social behaviour from a small minority reinforced the general impression that parks were places to avoid rather than to visit. Many familiar features were lost from parks throughout the country. Handley¹³ found a major loss of features in two parks studied in detail. There was a corresponding decrease in labour input over the two sites from 1508 work days in 1974 to 650 in 1986.

Features Lost 1974 -86	Webster Park, Knowsley (2.3ha)	Wignall Park, Knowsley (5.2 ha)
Ornamental Flower Beds	17	28
Rose Garden	-	1
Rustic Pergola	1	-
Peat Garden	-	1

¹⁰ Hansard July 14 1835

¹¹ Walker & Duffield 1992

¹² Hall, H.M. and Jarvis, P.J. 1997. In Dingsdale, A.. and Van Steen, P.J.H. *The Management of Urban Change in Europe*, pp 161-173. University of Groningen. Groningen.

¹³ Handley, J., and Bulmer, P. 1986 (Draft) *Making the Most of Greenspace*. Report by St. Helens Groundwork Trust to Department of the Environment (Contract PECD7/2/U13-1/83)

Rockery	1	-
Garden for the blind	-	1
Sand Pit	1	-
Paddling Pool	1	1
Tennis Courts	4	8
Crown Bowling Greens	2	2
Putting Greens	1	-

Local authorities often ignored users in the planning, management and access policies of parks. Ken McAnespie of The Institute of Land and Amenity Managers once said that “the parks industry is the only multi-million pound industry in Britain that doesn’t know who its customers are or what they want”.

The new town planners never, to their credit, abandoned the basic principle that densely populated urban areas needed open spaces and parks of all types. It is one thing to have policies to achieve this, it is another, however, to secure the political will and the financial resources to ensure success.

At the beginning of the 21st Century we have, therefore, a generally underused and undervalued resource in our urban parks and open spaces. Since the advent of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT), and the change from local authorities being service providers to being service facilitators, many parks are managed by contractors. They win the contracts by offering the lowest price: their interest is in fulfilling obligations as profitably as possible, not in providing the public with sensitively managed parks and open spaces. Councils have for years been forced by successive Governments to cap their spending, and parks and open space management has been an easy and frequent target for cost-cutting.

The opportunity was rarely taken to specify sensitive management in contractors’ tenders, instead cut-price, simplified, inappropriate management is now obscuring the original designs of, and intentions for, municipal parks. Senior managers now have other responsibilities in addition to parks, and as a result there is no longer a career path linked directly to parks management.

Parks and open spaces provision is a classic example of the public finance problem of knowing, defining and managing costs without being able to assess and define values. At least some attempt is now being made to address this issue through the Best Value process.

3. A REVIEW OF RECENT THINKING

3.1 The Morphet Report (1989)¹⁴

This is an unpublished study on urban open spaces. It was undertaken by Birmingham Polytechnic for the Inner Cities Directorate of the then Department of the Environment. Important observations include:

- a) Over emphasis on open space hierarchies has tended to give priority to large edge of city sites at the expense of small inner city sites more accessible to the populations there.
- b) There is no absolute standard of open space provision that is nationally adopted and it is difficult, therefore, to undertake comparative assessment of provision.

¹⁴ Morphet, J. Unpublished study by Birmingham University for Department of the Environment. 1989

- c) Surveys suggest that the quality of open space is of more concern to its users than its quantity. They want to be able to use it in a variety of ways and there is considerable public dissatisfaction with many public open spaces.
- d) Users give high priority to some visible presence of management of open space.

3.2 The Audit Commission 1993

The Audit Commission produced a four part study¹⁵ designed to encourage local authorities to achieve best value for money in delivering their services. They stressed the need to:

- a) Set down a policy on future provision of parks.
- b) Set up organisation in line with CCT
- c) Decide how to monitor overall performance
- d) Assess consumer demand and satisfaction with the existing service
- e) Determine appropriate standards of maintenance

The Audit Commission argued that many of the shortcomings of local authorities in their delivery of CCT relate to the lack of community involvement in the contract process.

3.3 London Planning Advisory Committee 1992¹⁶. Open Space Planning in London

This report argued for a further banding (from that used in the Greater London Development Plan) of the types of publicly accessible open space relating to the size of the catchment area.. This included:

Band	Size	Characteristics
Regional Parks	400 ha	Catchment up to 3.2 - 8km, contain natural areas of, eg, heathland, downland and woodland, may not be wholly accessible to the public, primarily for informal recreation, car parking at key locations.
Metropolitan Parks	60 Ha	Catchment 3.2kms or more, have natural areas or formal parks providing for active and passive recreation, have adequate car parking.
District Parks	20 ha	Catchment 1.2km, have a variety of natural features, playing fields and children's play areas, have some car parking but accessible on foot and by cycle and short bus trips.
Local Parks	2ha	Catchment about 0.4km, provide court games, children's play areas and sitting out areas, may have some areas of nature conservation value, will have playing fields if large enough, visitors are expected to arrive on foot.
Small Local Parks	up to 2 ha	Catchment about 0.4km, have gardens, children's playgrounds, sitting out areas and specialist areas including nature conservation, visitors are expected to arrive on foot.
Linear Open Spaces	Variable	Include canal towpaths, disused railway lines, footpaths, provide for informal recreation, including nature conservation, accessed on foot.

¹⁵ The Audit Commission. 1993. **Realising the Benefits of Competition**. London. The Stationery Office

¹⁶ London Planning Advisory Committee. 1992. **Open Space Planning in London**.

3.4 Sheffield Parks Regeneration Strategy 1993

In the early 1990s Sheffield City Council became one of the forerunners in reconsidering the approach to management of parks, and indeed to the strategic role of parks in the development of the city. The Sheffield Parks Regeneration Strategy¹⁷ was sponsored by the City Council and Sheffield Wildlife Trust. The report's recommendations included proposals that the City Council should:

- a) Recognise the significance of the green environment to the economic development of the city
- b) Recognise the present and potential contribution of inner city parks towards achieving a better quality of life for those in the most deprived areas, through their accessibility, capacity and the wide range of interests and pursuits they can facilitate
- c) Implement the recommendations of the Sheffield Nature Conservation Strategy
- d) Enable the voluntary sector to contribute more fully to the regeneration of inner city parks by genuine empowerment, coordinating activity and improving the interface with the City Council

3.5 Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal 1995¹⁸

This was a report on an 18-month research project carried out in partnership with 12 local authorities. Right from the start the report identified the problems of low investment, low resources and low priority. It said that “today they (parks) are often an afterthought at the bottom of the political agenda”. The research found that most users walk to parks, and that 40% of them claim to visit their local park at least twice a week.

The strategy advocated by the report for reviving many parks was based on the arguments that:

- a) Not all open space is sacrosanct
- b) There may be many established parks which have lost much of their local residential population, and may have to be developed to suit some more modern purpose or set of needs
- c) It is possible to have too much open space
- d) Parks may make ideal settings for the development and siting of new education, social and cultural facilities – such as nursery schools, interpretation centres, ecology centres, arts centres and museums
- e) The very best will only be achieved by different sectors and interests working together.

3.6 Parks, People and Cities 1996¹⁹

This was a follow-up report produced on behalf of the Department of the Environment. This was based on case studies highlighting good practice on a range of issues, including:

¹⁷ Barber, A.. 1993. *Sheffield Parks Regeneration Strategy*. Cinteract Consultancy Service

¹⁸ Greenhalgh, E. and Worpole, K. 1995

¹⁹ Greenhalgh, E. and Worpole, K. 1996. *People parks & cities. A guide to current good practice in urban parks*, Department of the Environment. London. The Stationery Office

- a) Planning
- b) Integrated management
- c) Effective use of CCT
- d) New forms of partnership including parks trusts,
- e) Maintenance that creates robust places and adaptable spaces
- f) Monitoring the use of parks as much as standards of maintenance
- g) Involving communities
- h) Funding

3.7 The Green Flag Awards: Standards for Parks

Addressing the practical issues raised by these and other research projects, this scheme was launched in 1996. The aim is to raise standards in public parks. This was achieved by providing a benchmark by which the quality of parks and open spaces can be measured. It provides clear goals for parks managers and community groups. The main partners in the awards scheme are The Pesticides Trust, the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM) and English Nature. (This grouping of partners serves to demonstrate the wide range of interests in parks and open spaces.)

There are eight key criteria by which applications for the award are judged:

- a) A welcoming park
- b) A healthy, safe and secure park
- c) A clean and well maintained park
- d) Sustainability
- e) Conservation and heritage
- f) Community involvement
- g) Marketing
- h) Management

This award scheme provided a real quality standard for a large part of the country for the first time. The effect was interesting in that many parks managers requested application packs but did not immediately apply for the award. They waited for one or two years whilst they applied the standard.

The success of this scheme may be judged by it being highlighted in the Urban White Paper²⁰ as an example of good practice which should be developed as a contribution to the called for urban renaissance.

3.8 The Planning and Management of Urban Open Space in Scotland 1999

This report was commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to document the development of Dundee's Public Open Space Strategy and to discuss the implications for planning, management and the protection of urban open space in Scotland.

²⁰ Department of the Environment Transport & Regions. 2000. *Our Towns and Cities: the Future (Urban White Paper)*. London. The Stationery Office

The report presented eleven recommendations for the way forward. They included:

- a) Clarify the terminology and definitions for open space.
- b) Conduct comprehensive open space surveys and inventories
- c) Establish a national monitoring framework for open space.
- d) Review government planning guidance on open space to promote multifunctional open spaces.
- e) Develop an integrated approach to open space planning based on the hierarchy framework and produce guidelines for local authorities on its implementation.
- f) Encourage research on the roles, issues, planning and management of open spaces.
- g) Establish an existing national agency as a champion of urban open space and introduce a responsibility for children's play provision into the remit of an appropriate national agency.

3.9 Recommendations from the UK-MAB Urban Forum and English Nature that there should be standards for access to urban greenspace.

One of the problems those championing open space provision have always had is that there are no generally accepted standards or criteria by which one local authority's provision can be compared to others. To address this the following definition was proposed by Box and Harrison in 1993²¹, together with the standard which was subsequently taken up by English Nature.

Definition of natural greenspace in urban areas: "Land, water and geological features which have been naturally colonised by plants and animals and which are accessible on foot to large numbers of residents."

Proposed standards:

- a) An urban resident should be able to enter an urban greenspace of at least 2 ha within 0.5 kilometres of their home.
- b) Provision should be made for Local Nature Reserves in every urban area at the minimum level of 1 ha per 1,000 population.

In addition there should be:

- a) 1 x 20 ha site within 2 kilometres of all residents
- b) 1 x 100 ha site within 5 kilometres of all residents
- c) 1 x 500 ha site within 10 kilometres of all residents.

There is no doubt that parks can, indeed should, be contributing to the achievement of this standard, together with other components of urban green networks.

In *Accessible Natural Greenspaces in Towns and Cities* 1995,²² which built on the size and distance criteria for natural greenspace developed by Box and Harrison, it was suggested that the minimum distance criteria should be 280 metres rather than 500 metres, this being estimated as about five minutes walk.

²¹ Box, J. and Harrison, C. 1993. *Natural Spaces in Urban Places*. *Town & Country Planning* 62(9) 231 to 235

²² Harrison, C., Burgess, J., Millward, A. and Dawe, G. 1995. *Accessible Natural Greenspace in Towns and Cities: A Review of Size and Distance Criteria*. English Nature Research Report

3.10 The Urban Wildlife Partnership’s (UWP) Position Statement on Parks and Public Open Spaces²³

In this document the UWP sets out a rationale for its involvement in parks, which, after all, can be hostile to wildlife and might, therefore, be thought to be of little interest to a nature conservation organisation. The principle elements of the rationale are:

- a) Sustainability – urban parks can have an important role in ameliorating urban climates and filtering pollution, and providing easily accessible greenspace for people to enjoy.
- b) Ecology – parks may include wildlife habitats or provide opportunities for the creation of naturalistic habitats. They are an important element in the urban green network.
- c) Image and attractiveness – parks and open spaces contribute to the quality of urban life as much as do fine architecture, art galleries or theatres.
- d) History – parks and open spaces are an important element in people’s association with their local neighbourhood. They are part of their heritage, providing an important link to past land-use and history.
- e) Economy – parks contribute to the attractiveness of the location which is reflected in land values and is one element of urban regeneration.
- f) Education – parks are places to explore and enjoy, making excellent outdoor classrooms.
- g) Recreation – parks are freely available for sport, play and recreation.
- h) Health – reviews of research show that there are significant links between health and access to natural landscapes and wildlife in urban areas.
- i) Community – parks provide another focus for community action.

The statement goes on to say “UWP believes parks and public open spaces are a key element in the structure of the sustainable city”.

3.11 The Urban Task Force’s recommendation that consideration should be given to extending Green Belt provisions to valuable urban open spaces.

In their final report (“Towards an Urban Renaissance”²⁴) the government-appointed Urban Task Force, Chaired by Lord Rodgers of Riverside, made 105 recommendations. Amongst these was this:

“Retain the general presumption against development on designated Green Belt. Review whether there is a case for designating valuable urban green space in a similar way”.

The authors are unaware of any action on this point but it does raise interesting possibilities. In the part of the report leading up to the recommendation the Task Force says: “Green Belts have played a vital role over many decades in resisting urban decline ... There is also a need for a more sophisticated approach in protecting and designating urban green space. There are important green buffer zones and strategic gaps both within and between our urban areas that could be given the same weight in development control terms as the Green Belt designation. This would help to protect urban biodiversity and ensure strong urban green space networks.”

²³ Urban Wildlife Partnership. 1994. Unpublished

²⁴ Urban Task Force. 1999. *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. London, E. & F.N. Spon

The first part of this quote is arguable – the Green Belt has not so much been a tool to resist urban decline as one to prevent that decline sprawling over the countryside. The second part of the quote is both more true and potentially innovative. Although land designated as Green Belt occurs remarkably close to urban centres (in the West Midlands there is Green Belt land in the heart of the conurbation within five miles of Birmingham City Centre) it has generally been seen as an urban fringe or rural land-use and planning instrument. To combine the principle of the Green Belt with other initiatives, as discussed below, would start to give formal recognition to the places often loved by their local communities but disregarded by politicians, planners and developers.

Against this promising idea has to be set much else in the Task Force report which supports the notion of building on every available brownfield site in towns and cities to meet arbitrary targets regardless of real need, environmental or social. The previous two recommendations to that under discussions talk of “(Setting) ambitious targets for the proportion of new houses to be developed on recycled land in urban areas...” and “Require local authorities to remove allocations of greenfield land for housing from development plans...”

3.12 The new definition of previously used land (“brownfield sites”) in PPG3 Housing²⁵ which, if, taken at its word, both acknowledges the values of, and removes the threat of development from, many vital greenspaces.

The note says:

“There are various definitions of previously developed land in use. For the purposes of this guidance, such land is defined as below:

Previously developed land is that which is or was occupied by a permanent structure (excluding agricultural or forestry buildings), and associated fixed surface infrastructure. The definition covers the curtilage of the development. Previously developed land may occur in both built-up and rural settings. The definition includes defence buildings, and land used for mineral extraction and waste disposal where provision for restoration has not been made through development control procedures.”

Two of the footnotes to this definition are critical to the debate about brownfield sites, they are:

“The definition excludes land and buildings that have been used for agricultural or forestry purposes, and land in built-up areas which has not been developed previously (e.g. parks, recreation grounds, and allotments - even though these areas may contain certain urban features such as paths, pavilions and other buildings). Also excluded is land that was previously developed but where the remains of any structure or activity have blended into the landscape in the process of time (to the extent that it can reasonably be considered as part of the natural surroundings), and where there is a clear reason that could outweigh the reuse of the site – such as its contribution to nature conservation - or it has subsequently been put to an amenity use and cannot be regarded as requiring redevelopment.

This does not mean that the whole area of the curtilage should therefore be redeveloped. For example, where the footprint of a building only occupies a proportion of a site of which the remainder is open land (such as at an airfield or a hospital) the whole site should not normally be developed to the boundary of the curtilage. The local planning authority should make a judgement about site layout in this context, bearing in mind other planning considerations, such as policies for the protection of open space and playing fields or development in the

²⁵ *op. cit.*

countryside, how the site relates to the surrounding area, and requirements for on-site open space, buffer strips, landscaped areas, etc.

The definition does not in any way supersede or change the policy in respect of major development sites in the Green Belt set out in Annex C to Planning Policy Guidance note 2: Green Belts.”

If this definition is robust enough to stand up to challenges at planning enquiries (it has not yet been tested) then perhaps conservationists need not worry about targets for new housing on brownfield sites. This definition removes from the equation many, if not most, of the places over which they would have concerns. Recognising that regeneration is a necessary process others could be left to argue over the details on land which has little nature conservation potential, or strategic or intrinsic nature conservation value.

This more imaginative approach to the use of land is a welcome contrast to the polarised “brownfield bad – build on it / greenfield good – protect it from development at all cost” level of recent debate. It also harks back to earlier times when, for example, old mineral workings were restored by turning them into parks. Hall and Jarvis note that following the debates in the 1830s referred to above “.... It was some time before parks were provided for the community as a matter of course. This was achieved in many cases when large areas of land which had been left in a derelict state as a result of extractive industries were reclaimed

3.13 The House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and the Regions’s recommendation that there should be an Urban Parks and Greenspaces Agency.

In 1999 the House of Commons published a Departmental Committee Enquiry into Parks²⁶. Amongst the key findings were:

- a) It is essential that adequate research should be undertaken, and accurate records kept, of whether urban greenspace has increased or decreased over the past 30 years, the cost implications of maintaining this land, and whether attractive, low cost regimes, could be used to maintain this land.
- b) Parks are a key feature in the renaissance of our urban areas. They need to be resourced as such by local and central government.
- c) There should be a government initiative to set up an Urban Parks and Greenspaces Agency
- d) Municipal parks should retain their integrity and historic character. However if they are to have an exciting future larger parks should seek to regain their function as places for entertainment and formal and informal games.
- e) City farms and wildlife areas also have an important role to play in our towns, especially in the educational sphere. They need to be looked after and developed alongside municipal parks.
- f) Making parks safe, and making them feel safe, must be a priority for local authorities.
- g) Those setting up the Green Flag Award Scheme are to be congratulated. Its function should, in due course, be coordinated with the work of a national agency.

²⁶ House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee Report. 1999. ***Town and Country Parks***. The Stationery Office. London

3.14 The growing recognition of the multi-functional values of open spaces in urban areas.

In his paper Barker (1997)²⁷ says “Green networks with multiple uses and values in urban areas go beyond the early ideas that they are important simply for recreation (from sport to picnics) and for beauty. They also address the needs of wildlife, flood control, improved water quality, outdoor education, local transport and many other urban infrastructure needs (Searns 1995). Their design and management therefore involves economic, cultural and ecological criteria. Their multiple functions – and multiple problems – demand attention from people having a wide range of skills.”

These green networks comprise a wide variety of formal and informal open spaces that include parks and designated public open space. Their management should take into account the many functions which it is now recognised that they have. Recreation and amenity may have been the original purposes of formal parks, and remain important, but opportunities should be taken to enhance the other, more recently recognised or demonstrated functions. The developing concept of sustainable development demands that economic, social and environmental objectives should be devised and met in all areas of activity. Parks provide a perfect opportunity to achieve this ideal.

Parks’ social value has traditionally been paramount. Whether as areas for exercise, sport and recreation, children’s play, contemplation of natural beauty, as manifested through the horticulturist’s efforts, or places to meet, parks serve a multitude of social needs. The general health of urban populations was one of the drivers of Victorian parks creation. It is interesting that today the health benefits of parks and open spaces are again being promoted (see below).

Their environmental credentials are less well established. Formal flowerbeds, sports pitches and large areas of lawns may increase their aesthetic value to many people (but not all) and have usually been maintained through intensive management. This typically includes liberal applications of herbicides and pesticides and the masking, if not destruction, of natural features and habitats. In periods when resources were short the quality of this type of management suffered, and many parks became little more than gang-mown prairies with ageing trees and derelict infrastructure. On the other hand parks and open spaces provide relief from the built environment in many densely developed towns and cities, and at least limited habitats for wildlife to exploit.

On the face of it, it is more difficult to make an economic case for devoting resources to parks and other open spaces. Direct benefits might include enhanced property values close to attractive and well managed parks, local employment, and increased takings from visitors in local shops and pubs. Indirect economic benefits may be apparent through improved health and feelings of wellbeing. It is perhaps through increasing recognition of the multi-functional aspects of parks that economic benefits will be more frequently recognised. Work done in Durban, South Africa²⁸ attempts to put economic values on 17 functions performed by the natural world and its systems, ostensibly for free. As parts of green networks performing these functions it is theoretically possible to ascribe such values to parks. The seventeen functions include climate amelioration, flood control, waste disposal, pollination, recreation, maintenance of ecosystems and reductions in air pollution.

²⁷ *op. cit.*

²⁸ Constanza, R. *et al* *The Value of the World’s Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital*. *Nature* 387: pp 253-260

3.15 Research which demonstrates the benefits to health of just being able to walk into or enjoy the view of an open space with trees and grass.

At a conference in 1999 (but with many echoes of the debate in early Victorian times) organised by the National Urban Forestry Unit and the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health²⁹ a succession of speakers illustrated the links between general health and the presence of, and access to, good quality urban greenspace. It was pointed out that the World Health Organisation “now defines health not only in terms of disease prevention but also in terms of quality of the environment”. Various speakers highlighted:

- a) The fact that the leaf area of trees is up to 12 times that of the land surface which they cover, thus contributing to their ability to mitigate air pollution
- b) Woodland and groups of trees provide at least limited protection from harmful ultra violet radiation (individual trees can provide a Sun Protection Factor of one-sixth to one-tenth of full sun)
- c) Stress is measurably relieved within three minutes of exposure to living green surroundings
- d) So convincing is the case for faster recuperation from illness and surgery amongst patients with a view of natural surroundings, that Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan has been substantially redesigned to afford patients a view of Central Park and its trees
- e) Participants in healthy walking schemes, such as the Countryside Agency’s scheme aimed at less active individuals, prefer walking in leafy green surroundings than amongst buildings and traffic.

Amongst the “suggested next steps” were:

“Production of a model healthy greening plan for a major urban area, which provides for woodland planting and management on the basis of easy public access, cleaner air and continuously shaded cycle and footpath routes, as suggested in the Urban Task Force report”. It would be difficult to imagine such a model plan being devised without reference to existing urban green spaces and parks, whatever their current state of management.

Further comparative studies under UK conditions to build on existing evidence of the positive link between accessible greenspace and reduced absenteeism, increased work productivity, physical fitness and reduced pharmaceutical use.”

3.16 Rethinking Open Space³⁰

The Scottish Executive, along with a consortium of public private and voluntary sector agencies identified that many Local Authorities were unsure how to rethink their policies on the basis of local considerations despite planning policy guidance (NPPG11, Sport Physical Recreation and Open Space) available since 1996.

The report found:

- a) Ultimately, the long term value and quality of open space depends more on effective management and maintenance, together with strong community support, than the planning system.

²⁹ Trees and Healthy Living, Wolverhampton, 17 November 1999

³⁰ Central Research Unit Scottish Executive. 2001. *Rethinking Open Space*. Development Department Research Programme Research Findings No. 108. Kit Campbell Associates

- b) Open space policies in development should seek to satisfy local needs and assist in the achievement of national and international objectives. They should emphasise promoting sustainable green networks of accessible, high quality green space and, where appropriate, enhancing existing ones rather than requiring specific amounts of open space in new housing developments.
- c) Local authority departments responsible for ensuring the provision and effective management of open space should involve and work in partnership with local communities. Involving rather than simply consulting it should be noted will often require them to transfer some control over assets or resources to them.
- d) Development Plans often ignored the NPPG11 process recommendations, instead relying on simple quantitative standards. The report is clear in its support for NPPG11's recommendations that open space be determined locally.

The reports recommendations included:

- a) Planning policies should give a high priority to ensuring that new green spaces are of sustainable high quality, if necessary at the expense of quantity.
- b) Local authorities should seek to ensure that their Local Plans, Open Space Management Best Value Review, Best Value Performance Plan and Open Space Strategy reinforce each other.
- c) Local authorities and their partners should reflect the importance of open space as a cross cutting issue capable of supporting and assisting the renaissance of urban areas in community plans.

This final point was supported by the report “The Value of Parks and Open Spaces”³¹. The report, mainly consisting of case studies, found that local councils and their communities are increasingly using parks as vehicles to involve and consult people, regenerate communities and contribute to more inclusive communities.

4. NEW DEVELOPMENTS

4.1 From Cheapest to Best Value.

Competitive tendering for Grounds Maintenance³² work paid for by local authorities, required by the Local Government Act of 1988, was in place by 1994. In many areas Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) was heavily criticised for rigid contracts that were based on standard specifications that emphasised the detailed management inputs rather than the outcomes for park users. There was an inflexibility of interpretation³³, so that work needed was not done if it was not in the contract.

The replacement programme to CCT, Best Value, was instigated by the 1999 Local Government Act. It aimed to have a much greater emphasis on the need and outcome for users of any service.

Through Best Value all local authorities are required to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way they exercise their functions having regard to a

³¹ Local Government Association. 2001. *The Value of Parks and Open Spaces: Social Inclusion and Community Regeneration*. London.

³² Audit Commission. 1998. *Competitive Management of Parks and Green Spaces*. London. The Stationery Office

³³ Greenhalgh, L. and Warpole, K. 1996. *People, Parks and Cities*. Department of the Environment. London. The Stationery Office

combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Within the resulting process local authorities are required to challenge, compare, consult and compete.

The challenge requires a review of why a service is being provided and whether it needs to be provided in the way it is at present. Reviews should look outward and reflect the enabling role of authorities in their communities.

Best Value also requires consultation with service users and alternative providers. Support and comment from residents will be essential in the best value review of our parks' services and best value plans identify a range of consultation procedures, not just surveys, forming a process for engaging users and managers.

4.2 Our Towns and Cities: the Future (Urban White Paper) 2000

The Urban White Paper states:

“Well-managed public open space such as greens, squares, parks, children’s play areas, allotments, woodlands and recreational and sporting areas improve the attractiveness of urban areas and help promote healthier life styles... We want everyone to have access to well maintained and safe parks, play areas and other open spaces close to where people live and work.”

The paper identifies a number of areas where action is already being taken to protect parks and improve the way they are being managed. They include:

- a) £96 million from The New Opportunities Fund Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities Programme by 2002
- b) £225 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the Urban Parks Programme by 2002
- c) Raising standards of local services through the Best Value Scheme

The White Paper also proposes a number of new initiatives:

- a) A DETR minister directly responsible for overseeing the development of a vision and proposals for the sorts of parks, play areas and open spaces needed and how they are managed (this minister now within the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister).
- b) There will be an advisory committee, chaired by the minister to:
 1. Review the evidence of the current state of parks
 2. Consider how different types of open space can best meet the needs of people in urban areas
 3. Examine innovation in design, creation and maintenance of open spaces in different areas of this country

The White Paper also commits the government to improving information available, including commissioning research on the way parks are used and by whom, what users want from them and what they currently provide.

4.3 The Urban Wildlife Partnership’s response to the Urban White Paper³⁴

This pointed out that the Government’s vision and approach to the urban environment were both limited, with the uninspirational vision acting, in effect, as a constraint rather than a

³⁴ Shirley, P. R. 2001. *Space, Hope – and Clarity?* The Urban Wildlife Partnership. Newark.

stimulus for the approach. The response identifies a missed opportunity to “.... set a context for places for people which incorporates both formal and informal landscapes, includes nature and natural processes and links townspeople to the ecological processes which underpin their health and wellbeing.”

There is criticism that even where there is obvious relevance, direct references to the natural world and biodiversity are avoided in an almost perverse way. The intention to “..... set in hand a comprehensive programme of work to improve the quality of parks, play areas and open spaces and to make them cleaner, safer and better maintained.” is noted as one missed opportunity to make links to biodiversity. This comment is followed by “Cleaning and tidying are obviously desirable, but may be done with sensitive regard to nature and its processes, or be their destroyer. Too often they have been the latter.”

The announcement in the White Paper of an Advisory Committee to deal with parks, play areas and open spaces is noted, but there is disappointment that none of its members are specialists in urban ecology or nature conservation. The Committee is also considered to be an “inadequate response to the House of Commons Select Committee’s call for a separate agency to deal with parks and open spaces.”

Overall the White Paper is said to be missing “.... evidence that there is any understanding of the role of the natural environment whether from an amenity, economic, recreational, scientific or functional point of view. Overall we do not believe that the White Paper has successfully addressed all of the issues it needed to in relation to the natural environment. A key challenge which remains is to embed ecological thinking and practice into the various mechanisms described in the White Paper.”

4.4 Public Park Assessment 2001³⁵

A partnership between Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the then Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions, and the Countryside Agency initiated a review of the current state of Parks. 405 Local Authorities throughout the UK made returns (85% of those surveyed). The review found that the resource for the UK was a large one with some 27,000 parks covering 143,000 hectares with around £630m being spent on their upkeep.

However, despite their importance to the quality of life and vitality of our communities the last 20 years has seen a dramatic cut in revenue expenditure – estimated to be cumulatively £1.3 billion. Amazingly, with this cut in funding, only 13% of local authorities consider their parks to be in poor condition. Less surprisingly, however, the report found:

- a) The condition of 39% of all parks and open spaces was reported to be declining and there was clear evidence that good parks were getting better and poor parks were getting worse.
- b) Short term savings had led to long term degradation and there was now a need for substantial capital investment.
- c) Parks of historic interest had disproportionately suffered from the reduction in revenue expenditure, even registered Parks of Historic Interest have generally fared no better than any other historic park with only the highest conservation designation (Grade1) offering some protection from decline.
- d) The loss of individual features and facilities traditionally associated with historic parks is widespread and alarming with up to 75% loss of some historic features and

³⁵ Heritage Lottery Fund. 2001. *Public Park Assessment*. Published on the HLF Website

losses in the region of 25% for basic visitor facilities such as toilets and cafes (See also Handley³⁶).

Despite all this the estimated number of visits made annually to all historic parks equates to 296 million with an estimated 1.5 billion to all parks and open spaces.

4.5 Proposed Revision of PPG 17 Sport, Open Space and Recreation

This is distinctly sports biased and pays little regard to the issues discussed in this paper. It continues the Government's confusing terminology and lack of proper definitions of different sorts of open spaces. For example, whilst the White Paper devotes a complete chapter (4) to "Places for People", and within this groups "parks, play areas and open space" together, the consultation draft is on "sport, open space and recreation".

5. ISSUES

Some of the issues raised in this paper include:

- a) There is no generally accepted standard for provision, making it difficult to assess and compare parks and open spaces in different areas. (The Green Flag Awards provide qualitative standards and Box and Harrison (see above) provide quantitative standards, but neither of these are universally implemented.)
- b) Problems with the definition of parks, semi-natural, natural and other open space. (This can sometimes cause needless arguments when the antagonists agree in reality but use different terminology.)
- c) Lack of recognition of the multi-functional nature of greenspaces in general and parks in particular, including their importance as key elements in sustainable green networks.
- d) Senior parks managers being all but extinct following the gradual loss of funding. No management structure or career structure means there is no way to create parks managers with a broad overview.
- e) The priority of making parks safe, and making them feel safe especially for children and other vulnerable people .
- f) The values of parks and open spaces not generally being accorded the same importance as the built environment in regeneration programmes.
- g) Recognising the significance of inner city parks towards achieving a better quality of life for those in the most deprived areas.
- h) Although perceived as such not all open space is sacrosanct, but the most valuable should be protected.
- i) Finding the balance between good quality provision and sufficient provision of parks and open spaces. (Users generally are more concerned about quality than quantity.)
- j) Loss of features, both of historic and amenity value.
- k) Users give high priority to some visible presence of management of open space
- l) The importance of community involvement in the management of parks and open spaces
- m) The need to survey and monitor provision of parks and open spaces.

³⁶ *op. cit.*

- n) The contribution parks and open spaces may make to biodiversity conservation.
- o) The contribution parks and open spaces make to people's health and well-being.
- p) The cross-cutting role of parks and open spaces in building social capital.

Whilst there does seem to be general agreement that parks are key features, able to contribute to the much-vaunted "urban renaissance", they are frequently prey to the cost-savers. These people seem to think that low cost maintenance is a legitimate pursuit. In the past, as we have seen, every opportunity was taken to cut parks' funding - £1.3B lost in 20 years. The comment in the House of Commons Select Committee's report (with reference to the proposal for an Urban Parks and Greenspaces Agency) "... and whether attractive, low cost regimes could be used to maintain this land" is indicative of the, sometimes, negative thinking around the provision, and particularly the maintenance, of parks and open spaces. The question arises that if such places have the values ascribed to them why should their maintenance be "low cost"? . A similar approach in other areas, such as education or health services, would be considered totally unacceptable – the politicians battle to be seen to be offering the most, not the least, in those areas.

It is to be hoped that Best Value will change people's thinking by focusing on value for money rather than cost cutting *per se*. With its emphasis on the four "c"s: – challenge, compare, consult and compete, it could provide a rigorous examination of how parks serve their community. This can only happen if consultation is taken seriously and is more than just a box ticking exercise, if qualitative outcomes are reviewed as well as quantitative outputs, and if appropriate specifications are drawn up. Will the four "c"s be sufficient to overcome custom and practice, or will greater community involvement only serve to reinforce the old ways of doing things? Without due care "consultation" can easily become "confirmation" – superficially people tend to want and expect what they have seen to be the norm.

Outside mainstream provision the National Lottery distributors are offering funding for parks and other open spaces. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has its multi-million pound parks programme, and the New Opportunities Fund has its Sustainable Communities and Green Spaces Programme. In addition the Countryside Agency has both the Local Heritage Initiative and Doorstep Greens. Each of these may help individual sites, although the HLF's narrow view of how parks should be restored is a constraint on realising their full potential. What is lacking is a strategic approach which relates individual parks and open spaces to their localities, examines their actual and potential functions and identifies their wider values. Essentially this means looking out and forward, not in and back.

To assist this process commonly agreed standards would help. As developed by the Green Flag Awards Scheme such standards would act, not as a template to create bland look-a-like parks and open spaces, but as a palette enabling the most appropriate actions to be taken in each case.

Nobody seems quite sure anymore where parks fit in the wide pantheon of public service provision. In many places they have lost their departmental parentage since the days when every council had a "Parks Department", and find themselves fostered by countryside management, technical services, education, leisure, amenity or other modern departments. Whilst all urban open space is not a park, all town and city parks are components of urban open space. Their original functions, as places of amenity and recreation, contributing to the health and well being of people with limited mobility, disposable income and short of other recreational opportunities, are still valid, but should only be part of a much wider range of functions related to modern lifestyles and social, economic and environmental imperatives.

Their physical management is now often divorced from their social management (the former carried out by contractors, the latter by countryside rangers). Their potential to contribute to the urban environment is frequently unrealised, their staff are rarely dedicated to one park, and senior managers responsible for parks usually have a portfolio of other responsibilities as well. It is perhaps ironic that these management portfolios are often the only places that parks are seen as components of an area's open spaces. In almost all other respects they are treated as discrete entities.

The title of this paper was a comment from a manager on parks, probably in both pride and exasperation. Parks and open spaces are again being recognised as an important element in people's quality of life. It is also becoming increasingly accepted that they contribute to the sustainability of our towns and cities. It is essential that this re-found focus is neither lost again, nor used as an excuse to turn parks into late Victorian / early 20th century heritage features, but that it leads to a dynamic reappraisal of the place of parks in the 21st century.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The multi-functional nature of parks and open spaces, together with their contributions to strategic networks of open space provision, should be recognised and acknowledged in government policy and consultation documents.
2. Both quantitative and qualitative standards for the provision and accessibility of open spaces should be included in plans adopted by local planning bodies such as community strategies, local biodiversity action plans, open space strategies, and local plans.
3. People in local communities should be supported and provided with the means to make informed decisions on local parks and open spaces, for example by including relevant issues in community consultations, engagement and capacity building, through the creation of user groups, or through Neighbourhood Renewal Fund activities. To assist these processes best practice should be researched, and case studies illustrating this should be published and widely disseminated amongst the various communities of interest dealing with parks and open spaces.
4. The Government should reconsider its response to the idea of national agencies (promoted amongst others by the House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Urban Green Spaces Task Force) to oversee the provision and management of parks and other open spaces, monitor activities, identify research needs, provide information and advise on training needs.
5. The National Audit Office should take account of these recommendations when examining local authorities performance under the Best Value regime.

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