

Public space lessons

Improving green space skills



When times are tough, the need for a skilled and adaptable workforce is greatest. This is particularly true of the green space sector, which often fails to compete with other publicly funded services — and which could be about to play a specific role in creating new jobs. If we are to create and maintain high-quality green spaces, investment in green space skills and training must become a priority

Local authorities typically spend less than 1 per cent of their green space staff budgets on training. In the NHS, this figure is about 3 per cent and in the civil service it is around 5 per cent.

Does this matter? The answer, in *Skills to Grow*, the draft green space skills strategy published by CABI Space in late 2008, is an emphatic yes. The strategy reports a 'spiral of decline' in skills in the green space sector, suggesting that a poorly skilled workforce contributes to poor quality green space, which leads to low public aspirations for parks. This, in turn, leads to lower funding for parks, which contributes to low pay and status in the workforce. This leaves the sector unattractive to potential new recruits and so struggles on with an under-skilled and underpaid workforce.

The links between training, the quality of green space and the funding it receives are, of course, complex. A few parks teams manage to create good green spaces despite low levels of training. Often, however, it is not sustainable: for instance, if a key person leaves, the quality of the spaces can decline rapidly. Despite improvements in the quality of many green spaces, research reports — and a lot of anecdotal evidence — make it clear that the lack of investment in training undermines progress. This was highlighted by the urban green spaces taskforce report, *Green spaces, better places*, published in 2002, and reiterated by the National Audit Office's *Enhancing urban green space*, published in 2006.

Since those reports were published, the contribution that well-planned, designed and managed green space can make to adapting to climate change and mitigating its effects — such as absorbing floodwater in urban areas — has been recognised more widely. At the same time, other issues such as reducing obesity and providing high-quality spaces for children's play have risen up the political agenda. While this increasing focus on parks and green spaces as the solution to a range of problems is welcome, creating green spaces that deliver on all these issues will require highly skilled green space managers and staff.

The lack of adequate and appropriate training in the sector is a problem that affects all levels of the workforce. Among those outside doing practical work, the acute shortage of people trained in horticulture is holding back quality improvements. The

research by CABI Space, Lantra and GreenSpace found that 68 per cent of authorities said a lack of horticultural skills was affecting service delivery.

Higher up in local authority structures the people who make it to the very top — and so have large budgets and plenty of influence — rarely come from a parks background as so few parks people gain access to management training. The same survey identified that, in 24 per cent of local authorities questioned, green space managers lacked skills in finance and funding — a real disadvantage both in attracting money into the sector and in allowing parks professionals to rise to positions of power.

The skills gaps in the green space sector have been recognised for many years, but have proved difficult to tackle. One problem is the wide range of people and organisations that contribute to the creation and management of urban green space. From planners to park rangers, through to tree surgeons, the range is so wide that they do not even consider themselves part of the same sector, are all trained by different types of organisation, and are undertaking a vast range of qualifications.

Despite such difficulties, real progress is now being made. To help co-ordinate better training and collaboration across the sector, CABI Space has worked with a range of organisations to put together the national green space skills strategy. The aim is to identify the skills gaps and shortages; to



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Paul Boardman: young apprentice of the year

As a child, Paul Boardman spent his time playing in Victoria Park, Widnes, and he walked through it every day to go to school and then college. It was to make a long-lasting impression on him. In 2008, Paul won the young horticultural apprentice of the year award at the Association for Public Service Excellence.

'I'm a local lad,' says Paul, who now works for Halton Borough Council.

'Using Victoria Park so often, I noticed all the work that people were putting in to making it nice. I remember saying to my friends, "that's what I want to do".'

Paul studied biology and geography at A-level and then spent a while looking around for a job. His opportunity came by chance. 'I saw an ad in the local paper saying that Halton Borough Council wanted to take on apprentices to work in the parks and I got in touch and came along for a taster session.' This convinced him that it was the right thing to do: he applied and was accepted.

As a result, from September 2007 until the summer of 2008

Paul spent one day a week studying for an NVQ level 2 in horticulture and the other four days working in the park and doing the practical part of the course. Having gained his NVQ, the council asked him to stay on for another year and he is now studying for a Royal Horticultural Society level 2 certificate. 'I enjoy the more scientific side of it all, learning about what makes plants work,' he says.

However, he also gets satisfaction from the feedback he gets from park users. 'When people come up to us and say that we are doing a great job, that's the best thing,' he says.

establish what actions can be taken to overcome them; and to agree which organisations will do them and by when. 'It's not simply a CABE strategy,' explains Nicole Collomb, CABE's head of public space management and best practice. 'Our role is to co-ordinate and join up what other partners can do.' These partners include Communities and Local Government, the Local Government Association, GreenSpace, Lantra and the Landscape Institute.

The shortage of skilled people is a problem right across the sector and many of these organisations already have their own skills initiatives. The Landscape Institute, for instance, has developed a website encouraging young people to become landscape architects (see www.iwanttobealandscapearchitect.com). A range of partners, including *Horticulture Week*, the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) the Royal Parks and Lantra support the GROW careers portal, which brings together careers advice and jobs in

horticulture (www.growcareers.info) and includes the whole spectrum of horticultural work. As Simon Thornton-Wood, the RHS director of science and learning explains, within the world of horticulture there can be many different technical specialisms, but presenting the subject in a fragmented way is not helpful when it comes to attracting new entrants. 'People don't perceive barriers between, say, green space horticulture, production horticulture, or green-keeping. What we can do is to bring the different parties

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together.' The GROW website could be particularly useful for young people who are thinking of taking the new land-based diploma but who are not sure what sort of careers it could lead to.

The *Skills to grow* strategy lists seven key priorities:

1. Increase awareness of the sector and opportunities it offers
2. Improve entry routes and career paths in sector occupations
3. Improve the availability and quality of training, including continuing professional development
4. Improve management and leadership skills
5. Increase the sector's overall investment in skills
6. Build capacity for joined-up thinking and working
7. Develop and maintain a strong evidence base.

A draft of the strategy was put out to consultation in the autumn of 2008 and received a large and



Green space skills also include knowing how to work with local people to understand their needs

generally positive response. There was agreement that the seven priorities were the right ones, but people also provided a range of helpful suggestions. 'What's been really great is that so many people now want to join in,' says Collomb. 'For instance, BCTV wants to make a link between volunteering and green space careers, and the Forestry Commission is keen to become part of it too.'

The final version of *Skills to grow* is now being prepared. It will list action points for each priority, state which organisations will be responsible and when it will be done. The delivery plan concentrates on the next two years, although has implications for far longer. Timing is crucial: one of the clearest messages from the feedback was how urgent the need for improved skills has become.

A green new deal?

Many employers might argue that in a recession finding time and money for training is not a high priority. However, it is when times are tough that the need for a skilled

and adaptable workforce is greatest. There are some positive signs. Prime minister Gordon Brown's recent announcement that he intends to create 100,000 new jobs in environment and infrastructure could help stimulate the sector, although details are still unclear. Another possible benefit is that horticulture often attracts mature career changers. Older trainees often bring with them skills learned in other sectors — such as management, finance, marketing and IT, all of which are vital in a successful green space team.

What can green space organisations do?

At a local level, local authorities, other green space organisations and their employees can do much to improve workforce skills.

Running a successful green space service requires the right set of skills across the workforce and working out what is missing in your team can seem a formidable task. How do you know which skills are the most essential, and which are less so?

One way of approaching this methodically is to use the Towards an Excellent Service (TAES) toolkit as the foundation for a skills audit. TAES for parks and green spaces is a free diagnostic tool that allows green space management organisations

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to find out how they are performing against a model of best practice. It provides a framework that allows parks teams to identify their strengths and weaknesses. It can lead to better staff and user satisfaction and can be used to help demonstrate performance for comprehensive area assessment. A key component of TAES is an assessment of the skills and capacity of the parks team. More information about TAES can be found at www.cabe.org.uk/taes.

Include a skills audit in your green space strategy

Going through the TAES process can be a useful way of preparing the foundations for a green space strategy, by identifying strengths and weaknesses and working out priorities. However, according to the recent survey by CABE Space, Lantra and GreenSpace, there is a worrying disconnection between the aims of many green space strategies and recognition of the skills needed to deliver them. Encouragingly, nearly 70 per cent of the respondents to the survey said that they had a green space strategy. Worryingly, though, only 11 per cent of them said the strategy included an assessment of skills. Given the skills shortages identified in the research this means that many councils will struggle to deliver their strategies, unless ensuring adequate staff skills is included as part of the strategy.

GreenSKILL — a strategic approach to skills management

One problem for busy managers can be keeping track of which skills and qualifications members of a team already have and logging who does which training and the qualifications they have gained.

GreenSKILL, a new online skills management system, has been



**Richard Welburn:
parks
manager
focusing on
skills**

'It all started in 2002 as part of a best value review,' recalls Richard Welburn, head of parks and green spaces at Leicester City Council, looking back to the start of the council's drive to improve the skills of its green space workforce.

The review identified three problems that Leicester shared with many other green space departments. Firstly, there was a shortage of traditional skills, such as horticulture. 'As a result of compulsory tendering we had pruning of shrubs with chainsaws, not secateurs,' says Welburn. Secondly, the review identified a need for new skills, including being able to communicate well with park users. And thirdly, many experienced

people in the workforce were close to retirement.

Welburn and his colleagues realised they needed to educate the elected members about the importance of better training for the green space workforce in order to get the funding they needed. 'We did this by raising the profile of the service,' he explains. 'For instance, we made it part of the annual performance review of our managers that they had to submit a number of positive stories about parks to the media, and we actively engaged with the Green Flag scheme.' Efforts such as this resulted in an extra £1.5m going into the parks service in 2003. 'This enabled us to start an apprentice training programme,' he says.

While the apprentice programme has helped increase horticultural skills, Welburn has also been actively bringing in other skills. 'We are very much a customer-facing service. We need people skills, but also business and performance skills. We need to be

able to provide evidence that we are working to a good standard. And we need presentational skills.' Some of the training that Welburn has initiated was paid for by train to gain, a government-funded scheme in which the training company is paid directly so that training is free to the employer and employee.

Welburn wants to attract young people into the green space sector, to replace those soon to retire, and has been working to ensure that Leicester's parks and green spaces are used as 'outdoor classrooms' for the new 14-19 diploma in environment and land-based studies (www.diplomaelbs.co.uk).

Attracting new blood into the sector is vital. 'Today, we are all too aware that if our workforce chooses to retire at the age of 60 or 65, we could lose 40 per cent of full-time workers within the next four years,' reflects Welburn. While many green space departments face a similar problem, Leicester, at least, is working hard to find a solution.

designed to help. A collaboration between the Institute of Parks and Green Space, GreenSpace and Lantra, it records and monitors skills, qualifications and continuing professional development (CPD). GreenSKILL provides a framework to record training and development and a structured approach to staff reviews. Uniquely, it is based on Lantra's national occupational standards and sector-approved job profiles. This means that, for the first time, green space employers around the country can manage and develop their workforce in a consistent way within a national framework. Eventually, as more employers use GreenSKILL, it should help to eradicate the problem of

two jobs with the same title having very different job descriptions and requiring vastly different skills. This, in turn, should help create better career paths within the sector.

GreenSKILL is offered as an annual subscription — more information can be found at www.green-skill.co.uk and a demonstration model of the system can be seen at www.green-skill-demo.co.uk.

National skills pledge and train to gain funding

Another way of formalising your commitment to increasing the skills of your employees is to sign up to the skills pledge. Organised by

the government-funded Learning and Skills Council, it is a voluntary statement that organisations can sign up to in order to demonstrate their seriousness about helping employees gain the skills they need. The skills pledge is part of the government's efforts to encourage better training. Another aspect is train to gain, the national skills service that supports employers of all sizes and in all sectors to improve the skills of their employees as a route to improving their business performance (www.traintogain.gov.uk). Signing up to the skills pledge gives employers access to a skills broker who can help analyse what skills employees need and steer the employer towards the right sort of training. In many



Maurice Feneck: career change to horticulture

'It's freezing today, but in the summertime I'm in my element, not stuck inside,' says Maurice Feneck, a gardener on London's South Bank. Feneck spent 20 years working as a cleaner, but became increasingly bored. He saw an ad for training with Trees for Cities and ended up doing an NVQ level 1 in horticulture with the charity. This enabled him to secure full-time gardening work.

'After I did the NVO, Trees for Cities helped me to explore the various job search websites until I

found an agency that got me this job,' he explains. 'Having the NVQ made a real difference — my boss says most of the people he takes on are starting from scratch, but I knew what to do.' He works as a gardener for the Brompton Hospital as well as the Royal Festival Hall.

Trees for Cities' training activities specifically target long-term unemployed adults. Through funding from the City Parochial Foundation, the charity aims to build people's skills and confidence so that they are able to get back into working life, or train for an alternative career. Many trainees have a history of drug and alcohol abuse, and the charity believes that its intensive 13-week approach provides the right framework within which to develop self-esteem and a range of skills including basic

horticulture, safe use of chainsaws, health and safety and team working. Trees for Cities also helps to build people's pride in their local environment: trainees get involved in community-based projects within their own neighbourhood.

Many of the practical projects Feneck worked on during his NVQ were in places he knew well. 'We did lots of different projects, in schools and council estates. The sites used to look horrible. I really enjoyed making them look better.'

Feneck clearly loves his new job and is full of enthusiasm for horticulture. 'Before I did the NVQ, all the plants I had died,' he admits. 'Now they live. When you plant things and watch them grow you get a certain satisfaction.'

www.treesforcities.org



The links between training, the quality of green space and the funding it receives are complex

instances, train to gain also provides funding for training.

Regional green space forums and benchmarking

Being an active member of your regional green space forum can be a good way of keeping up to date about training issues and opportunities in your region. The London Parks and Green Spaces Forum has a green skills working group that involves local training providers, employers, the Learning and Skills Council as well as the London Development Agency, Lantra and other partners. By working together they have made a significant impact on lobbying and shaping a strategy for funding of green skills in London and have helped develop apprenticeships, a management development programme and foundation degrees. For more information about regional forums see www.green-space.org.uk/regions.

CABE Space leaders programme

Providing training is just one element of creating a skilled and motivated workforce. Giving people a clear sense of where their career might progress to is also important, and is key to developing and retaining the green space managers of the future. The CABE Space leaders programme, now in its fourth year, is an intensive three-day residential course ideal for current and aspiring green space managers. Its unique mixture of problem-solving sessions, site visits, speakers and events ensure delegates' learning is tailored to their own situation and needs. A major benefit of the course is meeting others who are in a similar situation and creating a long-lasting network of colleagues and peers. This year, one of the organisations supporting the course is Natural England. 'Green space is a very cross-cutting agenda and it's important that people

working in it have an appreciation of the broader issues,' says Natural England's Lucy Heath, senior specialist in people and access policy. For more information about the leaders programme see www.cabe.org.uk.

Land-based diplomas and young people

One of the key problems facing the green space sector is that so many of its skilled workers are nearing retirement and it is not clear who will replace them. The situation in the parks team at Leicester (see case study on page 5) is not uncommon: 40 per cent of its full-time green space workforce is likely to retire within four years. Part of the problem has been that, until recently, there has been very little to attract young people into working in the sector. This, however, is starting to change. The new diploma qualifications for 14-19 year olds include a diploma in environmental and land-based studies. The first courses will start in September 2009 and by 2013 the diploma will be available all over England. Much of the training is done on-site and local authorities can become partners in the diploma scheme, encouraging the next generation of park workers and getting to know potential new recruits. Local authorities interested in doing this should contact Lantra for details of how to get involved.

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Sixty eight per cent of local authorities say a lack of horticultural skills affects service delivery

Apprenticeships: overhauled for a new generation

Horticultural apprenticeships have recently been given a thorough overhaul, explains David Winn, Lantra's industry partnership manager. 'In the past, take-up was generally poor. It used to be called "amenity horticulture" and people didn't know what that meant.' The titles, structure and content of the horticultural apprenticeship schemes have now been modernised and a new strand called 'greenspace, parks and gardens' included. Within this, employers can now choose which subjects their apprentices study to ensure that the knowledge they gain is relevant to the spaces in which they will be working. Topics such as customer care and working with volunteers will be available, reflecting the way that jobs in horticulture are more people-focused than in the past. The new horticultural apprenticeships will start from this September.

For more information see: www.cabe.org.uk/skills-to-grow

Green space skills shortages in local authorities

Last year CABI Space, Lantra and GreenSpace organised a survey of local authorities to find out more about the skills shortages in local authority green space teams. Fifty four green space departments responded and their answers have been used to inform *Skills to grow*, the national green space skills strategy.

Key findings include:

- 68 per cent of respondents said that a lack of skills in horticulture was affecting service delivery
- 29 per cent said that at management level they lacked design skills
- 19 per cent reported a lack of marketing skills
- 40 per cent said they were unable to offer apprenticeships due to lack of capacity to deliver them.

The green space sector is suffering from an acute lack of skills, with a shortage of professionals such as landscape architects and green space managers and inadequate training and career development opportunities. This is leading to poor quality green spaces and an under-valued workforce on poor pay. There is a much greater understanding of the many benefits that good green spaces can bring to society, but without investing in the workforce these will not be realised. This briefing explains why better skills are so vital to the sector now, and gives useful tips on what green space organisations can do to improve them.

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The government's advisor
on architecture, urban design
and public space

As a public body, CABE encourages policymakers to create places that work for people. We help local planners apply national design policy and advise developers and architects, persuading them to put people's needs first. We show public sector clients how to commission projects that meet the needs of their users. And we seek to inspire the public to demand more from their buildings and spaces. Advising, influencing and inspiring, we work to create well-designed, welcoming places.

CABE Space is a specialist unit within CABE that aims to bring excellence to the design, management and maintenance of parks and public space in our towns and cities.

Written by Julia Thrift.

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