

PARKS NEED PARKFORCE

A report on the people who work in
our urban parks and green spaces

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PARKFORCE

A FORCE FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Imagine a museum without attendants, or a municipal swimming pool without a lifeguard. They don't feel right; something's missing. Parks are no exception. Without visible figures of authority, our parks, gardens and squares can feel uncared for and intimidating. A recent research report showed that 39 per cent of women feel unsafe in London's green spaces. 89 per cent of them said that more staff would make them feel safer.¹

CABE Space believes that putting staff on site is essential to ensure the success of a decade of parks regeneration and turn around problem parks - where they can encourage more people to enjoy using their parks and tackle problems. That's why we've launched Parkforce, a campaign to celebrate the role that park staff – from rangers to neighbourhood wardens, café staff to volunteers - play in the success of local communities. We want to bring public perceptions about park staff right up to date, and to challenge and support public authorities to reinvent the way they manage parks.

CABE Space wants to see on site staff dedicated to caring for every significant urban park in England during daylight hours.

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WHERE HAVE ALL THE PARKIES GONE?

From the early 1980s, for over a decade, the number of full-time staff in England's parks was cut dramatically.

In 1999, a Commons Environment, Transport, and Regional Affairs Select Committee found that, 'By 1996 only a third of parks had dedicated park staff, yet 90 per cent of local authorities experienced vandalism [in parks].'²

The lack of park staff was a symptom of a sustained period of under funding. Between 1981 and 2001, it is estimated that the cumulative cut in revenue expenditure on public parks amounted to £1.3 billion.³ This precipitated a downward spiral of vandalism, litter, neglect, and an increasing reluctance on the part of the public to make use of their parks. The 1999 Select Committee concluded that, 'If the decline of parks is to be arrested and reversed, it is essential that there should be sufficient high-quality staff.'

Since 2001, the crucial role that parks and green spaces play in enhancing people's quality of life is being recognised. In 2002, the government's Urban Green Spaces Taskforce recommended 'bringing park rangers and dedicated gardening staff back into parks,'⁴ and highlighted how site-based staff can break down barriers to greater public use.

Since 1996, the Heritage Lottery Fund has invested more than £400 million in public parks, gardens and squares and will continue to do so with new funding from the Big Lottery Fund from 2006. CABE Space applauds the improvements made to parks as a result of this increased funding, which can include money to kick-start new staffing schemes. The government's commitment to create sustainable communities and the recent Cleaner Safer Greener Communities initiative have also brought public space added resources and political attention. We believe that these improvements must now be made irreversible by ensuring there is long-term support for dedicated park staff to maintain our parks properly and encourage greater public use.

WHAT THE PUBLIC THINKS

There is little statistical evidence that high rates of crime and anti-social behaviour are a particular problem in parks and green spaces,⁵ yet research shows there is a clear public perception that parks are unsafe and poorly maintained. This is matched by strong evidence that people feel safer in parks where there are visible staff.

The Greater London Authority's Women in London report (2004) found that 39 per cent of women and 18 per cent of men feel unsafe in London's green spaces, and that two-thirds of mothers would never allow their children to play in parks unsupervised. Nine out of ten women said, however, that 'regular foot patrols by police, community wardens, or park attendants' would make them feel safer.⁶

A national survey of people who never or rarely use parks revealed that 68 per cent were put off by dog fouling, 57 per cent by vandalism and graffiti, and 44 per cent by poor maintenance.⁷ The presence of park staff has the potential to address all of these problems and encourage infrequent park users back into parks.

Park staff can also encourage the most vulnerable groups to enjoy parks and public spaces. When asked which changes would make them feel safer, elderly and disabled respondents put 'more staff' at the top of their list, while women ranked it second.⁸

A survey carried out by the NSPCC as part of its Safe Open Spaces campaign found that under half of the play areas in local parks and open spaces were described by respondents as 'clean' or 'well maintained'. When asked about the supervision of play areas by park rangers or play supervisors, four out of five respondents said that their play area was not supervised. 'Improved supervision' by park rangers or wardens was most frequently recommended to improve safety.

Clearly, the public values park staff. Strong public respect for park staff was identified in a 2004 MORI poll.⁹ When asked which two or three groups of people they most valued, 'people who work in the community e.g. park keepers, road sweepers, community wardens etc' were ranked immediately below doctors, teachers, police and nurses – all highly respected professions.

- 1 The Greater London Authority Women in London research report (2004), carried out by MORI, surveyed more than 1,000 women about issues related to crime, security, childcare and public transport.
- 2 ADLO 1996 survey, evidence given by Dr Hazel Conway (TCP 36).
- 3 Urban Parks Forum (May 2001): Public Parks Assessment – A Survey of Local Authority Owned Parks Focusing on Parks of Historic Interest.
- 4 Urban Green Spaces Taskforce Working Group 2: Good Practice for Improving Urban Green Spaces (2002).
- 5 CABE Space (May 2005) Decent Parks? Decent Behaviour?: The Link between the Quality of Parks and User Behaviour.
- 6 The Greater London Authority Women in London research report (2004), *ibid*.
- 7 Dunnett, N., Swanwick, C. & Woolley, H. Improving Urban Parks, Play Areas and Green Spaces (May 2002) Department of Landscape, University of Sheffield (research carried out for the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce).
- 8 Dunnett et al *ibid*.
- 9 MORI survey on Public Attitudes to Architecture and Public Space carried out on behalf of CABE (unpublished).
- 10 Dunnett et al *ibid*.

THE MODERN PARKFORCE

Working in parks has changed enormously since the days of the peak-capped parkie. Until the mid-1970s park keepers were employed principally to maintain standards of social order and the physical appearance of parks.

Their contemporary counterparts are required to do much more, including raising funds, engaging with parks users, managing events and developing educational programmes.

Although the national picture shows that a lack of staff is a real problem, the best parks reveal what can be achieved by a skilled modern team. Their parks are staffed by people with a wide range of skills, including horticulturalists, environmentalists, ecologists, security personnel, catering staff, community wardens, rangers, educationalists, event organisers and construction workers. Staff often combine many of these skills and can turn their hand to a huge range of tasks. These dedicated people are the new force in our parks. They're Parkforce.

A full-time park keeper, or park warden might act as a point of liaison with the local community,

helping with sporting and community events and education programmes, as well as litter picking, taking responsibility for some aspects of horticulture and generally policing the park.

This modern role is descended from the traditional parkie, an all-rounder with a permanent presence. By contrast, park rangers are a relatively recent introduction. Like country park rangers, urban park rangers work with visitors to help them understand and make the most of their parks, a role typically requiring a combination of educational, interactive, and environmental skills.

These roles reflect the realisation that park staff must engage with the local community rather than just police it. They also reflect the increasingly diverse ways in which parks are used, to include gardening and sports clubs, community events and even youth careers advice in the case of Mile End Park, East London (see case study, page 22). All play a part in helping to enhance people's enjoyment of their parks and green spaces.

Management of park staff by local authorities has also changed. There are a multitude of approaches to funding, recruitment, and the management of parks, each tailored to address local needs (see case studies, pages 16-25). Creative councils are starting to look beyond departmental boundaries – the make-up of the wider park team is crucial too. It embraces not

only dedicated park staff but also neighbourhood wardens, play workers, café staff, volunteers and park users themselves. The police's increasing numbers of community support officers can include patrols of local parks on their rounds. Many councils see this 'neighbourhood management' approach as the way forward, with a multidisciplinary team working to deliver separate, but coordinated roles across organisational - and park - boundaries. The way in which these individuals work together is critical to the success of the park.

Park staff also have the potential to engage with the community through friends or user groups, or neighbourhood action groups. The community might be involved in decision making and planning, fund-raising and income generation, organising of events and publicity and even, in some cases, practical maintenance.¹⁰

While personalities, skills, roles and management structures may change, the benefits to communities are the same. A regular on-site presence in the form of identifiable and approachable figures of authority increases perceptions of safety, and is fundamental to the creation of popular, safe and beautiful parks.



THE BENEFITS OF PARK STAFF

CABE Space research has shown how the reintroduction of staff can bring a diverse range of benefits for parks.

They can help to reduce cultural and racial tensions, cut down the incidence of anti-social behaviour and encourage the local community to become more involved in parks across the country.¹¹ We concluded that staff who provide a level of authority and a point of community action are one of the key elements contributing to successful parks.

Dedicated park staff create a virtuous circle of improvement – their presence leads to better-maintained parks which are perceived as safe and are better used. In turn, this helps to combat public fears and encourages even more people into parks.

Respect – crime and anti-social behaviour
Creating a ‘culture of respect’ was emphasised by the Prime Minister and was high on the government’s agenda for the new parliament in 2005. With fear of anti-social behaviour a hot topic and headlines about gangs in hoodies, making people feel safer and tackling crime is now seen as a real priority by everyone.

Increasing numbers of park staff can make a significant impact very quickly on crime and anti-social behaviour. In October 2004, the number of thefts in two parks in Solihull was reduced by 23 per cent as a result of park rangers working with police officers on mountain bikes.¹²

Locally led initiatives have a better than average chance of success – our urban streets are increasingly populated by neighbourhood wardens, community police, and ‘bobbies on

the beat’. Green spaces also stand to benefit from park staff who may be included in community policing roles in a similar way to neighbourhood wardens, acting as the eyes and ears of the community in addition to supervising or carrying out the horticultural and other aspects of their work.

Saving and efficiency

The potential benefits of increasing park staff are substantial. For example, the government’s 2003 evaluation of neighbourhood wardens identified savings of £575.5 million over two and a half years due to reduced crime in the areas covered.¹³ Within councils, a vital first step is to identify how money is spent on key park services. This helps match resources with priorities and can demonstrate real outcomes. Where this is done, there is evidence that the introduction of dedicated park staff helps local authorities to achieve higher value, as well as more efficient services. For example, in Sunderland’s parks, the cost of repairs needed because of vandalism decreased from £40,570 in 1993/94 to £2,410 in 1998/99 (see case study, page 11). This was widely attributed to the introduction of a park warden scheme in the intervening years.

Quality of life

In addition, the evaluation of neighbourhood wardens found that they enhanced residents’ quality of life – 27 per cent of residents reported an increased satisfaction with their neighbourhoods. The presence of identifiable figures of authority also improved the local environment, with less litter, graffiti and fly-tipping, reduced the fear of crime, especially among the elderly, and cut down the incidence of anti-social behaviour.

Hitting performance targets

Increasing the numbers of park staff is a way for local authorities to contribute to a range of Public Service Agreement (PSA) objectives –

the targets that express the government’s priorities.¹⁴ Crime reduction, reducing public fear of crime, increasing voluntary community engagement and the delivery of cleaner, safer and greener public spaces are all PSA objectives. Local authority performance targets reflect these priorities and increasingly focus on community needs and improving quality of life. They currently include targets to improve resident satisfaction with parks and open spaces¹⁵ and cleanliness,¹⁶ which park staff can help improve. In Lewisham, park staff numbers were increased in 2000, resulting in a total of 12 dedicated on-site staff. As a result, the number of residents describing parks as ‘good to excellent’ increased from 32 per cent in 1998 to 52 per cent in 2004 – 4 per cent above the London average.¹⁷

Enhancing local authority reputation

Parks and open spaces account for around 14 per cent of the total urban area of the UK,¹⁸ yet the management and maintenance of public parks is not a statutory requirement for local councils. However, they are the shop window for local authorities – well managed and clean parks show that a council takes pride in its work and cares for local residents. Improving ‘street scene and the public realm’ as well as ‘staff responsiveness and accessibility’ were identified by MORI as key to improving the often beleaguered reputation of local government in research for the Local Government Association.¹⁹

CABE Space believes that by rethinking the way in which parks are managed and maintained in the context of the public realm as a whole – parks, streets and open spaces – local authorities can both improve quality of life for their residents, and also demonstrate their effectiveness – all good news if local authorities are serious about improving their reputation.



WAKING UP
TO WILDLIFE



THE RISE AND FALL OF PARK STAFF

THE RISE

- 1840s - parks are introduced to Britain's urban areas, providing free access to horticulture for the first time.
- Dedicated park staff are introduced soon afterwards.
- Early park keepers resemble head gardeners, a well-established and respected profession.
- As well as horticultural competence, staff are expected to safeguard council property, discourage inappropriate behaviour, and protect the public.
- By the end of the 19th century, the security and maintenance roles have been separated.
- The majority of park staff are based in purpose-built premises within parks.
- All wear uniforms.
- Most park superintendents live in a tied cottage.

THE FALL

- Post-war austerity leads to the gradual dismantling of park management.
- From the 1950s, staff cutbacks are compounded by a progressive social policy, proposing the removal of railings and 'keep off the grass' signs.
- The state's commitment to parks becomes less conspicuous.
- 1960s – local authorities begin to give park keepers responsibility for groups of parks.
- 1974 – local authority reorganisation leads to parks departments being swallowed up into larger leisure service departments.
- 1986 – introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) requires local authorities to contract out the management and maintenance of public parks at the lowest price.
- 1998 – Best Value replaces CCT, giving local authorities more freedom to provide services based on local needs.
- Local authorities begin to instigate their own initiatives to reintroduce dedicated on-site park staff – a small movement begins to build momentum.

(The source for much of the material in this section is, Lambert, David, The Park Keeper, English Heritage, 2005)

DELIVERING A NEW PARKFORCE

The public tells us they want safe, beautiful and well-run parks. If this is to happen, CAFE Space believes that every significant urban park needs staff who are:

- Responsible for the park and its users
- Based on site, not in an office
- Contactable by users of the park when they are needed
- Available during daylight hours

They may be wardens, park rangers, play workers, horticulturalists, volunteers, park users or do a mix of many roles. Every park is different and the best solution will depend on the needs of each individual park and its community.

The challenge is to employ staff who address the public's immediate concerns about safety and maintenance, but also do much more. Park staff are there to enhance the public's enjoyment of parks, helping to engage with the community, creating safe, popular and beautiful parks. CAFE Space wants to share this vision of a modern Parkforce so that the public can see what a difference they could make to their local parks.

We are not advocating a one-size-fits-all solution. There is a diverse range of successful approaches to management and funding of park staff. The key is to ensure that staff are visible on site, taking responsibility for the overall well being of the park and its users. The Home Office has pledged to put 25,000 community support officers and wardens on the streets by 2008 – if some can patrol parks as part of their patch it will also help to swell the numbers of staff visible in parks.

Some authorities employ external contractors to manage and maintain their green spaces. Others retain the services in-house. A growing number tailor their approach to suit different parks. We recognise that moving towards site-based, multi skilled staff may need changes to existing contractual arrangements, requiring a considerable degree of re-negotiation.

There is a distinction between static staff – those attached to one site – and peripatetic staff, who look after a number of sites, and there are effective ways of deploying both. In particular, it is important to create an on-site presence even when park staff are not on site all the time, for example by displaying information about who the staff members are and how they can be contacted, as well as encouraging them to engage with park users when they are present in the park. This would help to avoid the situation described by Ken Worpole in the 1999 Select Committee Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs report; he suggested in his evidence to the committee that a park was not made safe by 'two men in a rundown vehicle, and an

Alsatian dog driving through every day at 4 o'clock. The kids left at 3.55pm and came back at 4.05pm and carried on burning'.

Preston and South Ribble Borough councils, for example, co-fund a park ranger to oversee three small parks near the borough boundary. In Southwark, a new three-tier system was launched this summer. Grounds maintenance has been contracted out across the whole borough; enforcement is delivered by four peripatetic teams of community park wardens; and education and community engagement is handled by a multi skilled team of seven across the whole borough.

Where a division of roles has failed – for example, by splitting maintenance and security roles – it is often when it results in the loss of a sense of ownership of the park by its staff. Traditional parkies may have had their limitations, but they were true custodians of the park. A parkie would not have turned his back on vandalism or shoddy maintenance because it wasn't in his job description. The modern Parkforce combines a more empowered role with a parkie's sense of pride in their park. Urban park rangers, for example, are not only concerned with personal safety in parks but also focus on service – principally events and activities, community work, and education.²⁰ In Newcastle, park security contracts were terminated and the money used to create site-based park staff with a much wider remit.

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CHALLENGES

CABE Space recognises that this vision depends on the availability of appropriately skilled staff. A 1993 report on five park warden services found that services varied considerably and ‘the duties actually performed depend on individuals’ skills and training, as well as the actual nature of the wardening service.’²¹

In our report *Parks Need People*,²² recently published by CABE Space, an industry-wide consortium investigated the current lack of skills across the sector, and was concerned about a significant skills gap. A programme to address this is currently underway in partnership with a number of other organisations working in the sector. Lantra, the sector skills council for environmental and land-based industries, is also developing a set of National Occupational Standards which set benchmarks for training of park wardens and keepers.

Calling for an improvement to the staffing in parks soon gives rise to the age-old problem – revenue funding. Staffing of parks is only one among many demands on the resources available to local authorities. There are, however, new sources of funding that may be accessed to help resource increased levels of staffing in parks. Grants from the Heritage Lottery and Big Lottery funds allow for 75 per cent funding for a wide range of park staffing measures for up to five years. The Safer Stronger Communities Fund unites several existing Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and Home Office funding streams focused on crime and disorder, the quality of the local environment and empowering local communities.

CABE Space believes that local authorities can show clearly how improved staffing of local parks and green spaces can satisfy the criteria required for resources from this fund.

Usually, however, improvements must be made with no extra funding. It may sound obvious, but successful local authorities have found that it is vital to identify priorities for improving their parks and then determine whether present spending delivers this in the most effective way. Our research – soon to be published – will demonstrate that many authorities are currently unclear about how much they are spending on running their parks; very few have clear levels of quality that they are aiming to achieve. It is an essential first step. Without knowing the level of resourcing required to achieve a certain quality of park, it is difficult to make a strong case for more money.

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11 CABE Space *Decent Parks? Decent Behaviour?* *ibid*.
12 Green Space media release (November 2004)
13 Research Report 8, Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2003. The report found that, ‘even assuming that only ten per cent of the reduction can be attributed to wardens, there is still an overall saving’.
14 ODPM - PSA8: *Lead the delivery of cleaner, safer and greener public spaces and improvement of the quality of the built environment in deprived areas and across the country, with measurable improvement by 2008*. Home Office - PSA1: *Reduce crime by 15%, and further in high crime areas, by 2007/8*; PSA2: *Reassure the public, reducing the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, and building confidence in the criminal justice system without compromising fairness*; PSA6: *Increase voluntary and community engagement, especially amongst those at risk of social exclusion*.
15 One of several measures included in Best Value Performance Indicator BV119.
16 Best Value Performance Indicator BV199.
17 Quoted in *Spaces & Places* (June 2005, no. 15).
18 Burton, N. *Urban Park Wardening* (1993), The Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management.
19 Local Government Association Reputations initiative, (2005)
20 Holtkott, S. *Urban Park Rangers* (1997), The Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management.
21 Burton *ibid*.
22 CABE Space *Parks Need People Need Parks: The Skills Shortage in Parks, a Summary of Research* (August 2004).



A CALL TO ACTION

CABE Space is calling on local authorities to:

Recognise the value of having staff on-site during day light hours in every significant park in their borough

Commit to finding ways of developing and sustaining investment in people who care for public spaces

View their Parkforce as an integral part of the wider neighbourhood management team who share responsibility for making the community a safe, popular and beautiful place to live

As a local authority, there are 10 things you need to consider when drawing up your green space strategy:

01 Find out what you've got.

Do an audit of existing resources and staff and find out how the money is spent on parks at the moment.

02 Consider what you need.

Work out the needs of each park across the borough and consult with residents.

Is the priority to tackle vandalism, improve maintenance or provide more play areas?

03 Examine other resources

Scope other resources and identify staff who could join the Parkforce, and increase the number of people on site by joining up teams.

Could neighbourhood wardens or community support officers include parks in their remit?

04 Get inspiration.

Look at how other councils run their parks staff.

Join a regional parks forum to share ideas.

05 Make a plan.

Draw up a plan to target your resources towards priorities.

Could you adapt or build on the existing arrangement to meet the challenge of having a team that cares for every park?

The team may be assigned to one park, or move between several smaller parks, and you may need to break down the existing separation of security and maintenance roles.

This could mean changing job structures or renegotiating contracts, and will probably take time.

Could you set goals over a number of years to meet the target?

06 Look for more funding.

As well as savings gained by restructuring services, there may be sources of funding that can help pay for staff in parks.

Consider the Safer Stronger Communities Fund, the Big Lottery and Heritage Lottery funds or funding from regeneration projects or private sources such as BIDS.

A strong green space strategy is essential to secure resources from the EPCS budget.

07 Get the right people in place.

Employ - and encourage contractors to employ - staff who are approachable and can be custodians of the park.

Make the most of friends and community groups.

Staff should be trained to see the whole park and all the users as their responsibility.

08 Make them visible.

Staff should be clearly identifiable and uniformed.

Put up signs in the park with telephone numbers so that staff can be contacted whenever users need them.

09 Measure your success.

Set benchmarks and gather evidence to show how parks staff are helping to improve the management of the park and fulfil community objectives.

Show that maintenance is better and users are happier – this will be your ammunition to get more funds and more staff in place.

10 Tell people about your success.

When things work well make sure the rest of the council and residents know about it, and share successful approaches with other local authorities through parks forums and other networks.

BILL EASTWOOD

KING GEORGE V PARK, MANCHESTER

Fund-raising and organising events for young offenders are not roles typically expected of park wardens. In Manchester, they are just part of the working week

By the early 1990s, King George V Park in Manchester was overrun by crime. The facilities were derelict, the park barely used. In September 2003, Bill Eastwood, 24, one of five mobile park wardens who cover 52 parks in East Manchester, right, was approached by a group of local mothers who wanted to instigate its revival. 'They were unhappy about the quality of the park', says Bill. 'They wanted activities and facilities for their children. So I said, I'll organise a meeting, you get as many of your friends and community members to come along, and you can all tell me your views'. It was the first meeting of the Friends of King George V Park.

'Setting up and supporting Friends groups can be a big part of the job. By attending meetings of local residents, you find out about people's concerns and you get to know the local community's needs, says Bill.

Further consultation followed. Within months, a development plan for King George V Park had emerged, based on residents' wishes. After 12 months, £30,000 of external funds had been secured and Manchester Leisure had agreed to contribute a further £30,000.

Another part of Bill's job involves advising Friends groups on available funding and encouraging them to apply. 'They can access different sources of money for us,' says Bill. The aim is to create local leaders.

This leadership extends to day-to-day monitoring of the park. With so few park wardens spread over such a large area, Bill is able to visit King George V Park only three or four times a week. At other times, a network of Friends groups, street wardens, and sports development officers covers responsibility.

The park wardens also meet the police weekly, and hold fortnightly Local Tasking Meetings (LTMs). 'The LTMs offer council officers opportunities to raise their concerns and report issues to the police. Manchester Leisure contribute to the LTMs through confidential Incident Diaries, notebooks for people to record instances of anti-social behaviour or fly-tipping.

'The idea is to build a record of evidence,' says Bill. 'If there is evidence of increased nuisance behaviour in a particular park, we'll get more bodies in there as a deterrent.'

Bill also works with colleagues to divert persistent young offenders. 'I'll call the area sports development officer and say, "What can we do that's positive with these kids?" Then we'll try to work out a scheme, apply for funding, and organise some events.'

Looking to the future, Bill would like to spend more time with local people: 'I would like to help create more Friends groups, encouraging the community to work with us to help establish our parks and make a positive change.'

'I enjoy my work and the opportunities it gives me. I'm also learning a broad range of skills. People often stop me and ask how they can work for the parks service,' says Bill.

Bill Eastwood won the Raising the Standard award for frontline work at the 2005 Public Servants of the Year Awards.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Manchester City Council has retained all its parks management and maintenance services in-house. The city is divided into four areas. There are five park wardens covering 52 parks and green spaces in East Manchester. Bill Eastwood is responsible for 11 of them, including King George V Park.

'In the summer there are two shifts, from around 9am to 4.30pm and 12.30pm to 8pm. We run a dusk to dawn service. If I'm on a late shift I'll clock in at Debdale Park. Then I'll pick up messages and check e-mails. If I've received a report of damage, I get out to that site. Then I'll contact the department responsible for resolving the problem. If it's a dumping issue, for instance, I'll call the local street environment manager. We'll also look to identify who is responsible and find ways of preventing problems from occurring again.'

'There is an enforcement side to the job. If I find youths breaking bylaws, I might approach them and explain that they shouldn't be drinking here. Most of the time they move on. If people are being very difficult, we do have an instant response team as back-up.'

'There are a lot of meetings to attend, with colleagues, the police, housing officers and residents' groups. I get involved with organising and promoting activities for kids and promoting the variety of sporting and environmental activities that Manchester Leisure organise and deliver. The role has changed and developed over the past three years for the better.'





JOHN ROBINSON GRANGE PARK, PRESTON

In a deprived corner of Preston, a full-time park ranger has raised educational standards and improved the relationship between the police and the local community

One night last summer, a group of 15-year-olds from Ribbleson, Preston, found some boxes of spray paint abandoned in a skip. They went on the rampage. Schools, buses, churches, and shops fronts were all coloured blue. 'I knew who they were,' says John Robinson, 37, left, ranger at Grange Park. 'The next day I found them and said, "What have you done? This is more than graffiti, it's criminal damage."' All they could say was, "We didn't do the park. We didn't do the park.'" It is reasonable to assume that if the boys hadn't respected their park and its ranger, Grange Park would have received the same treatment.

John has lived in Ribbleson, a deprived and predominantly white urban area, all his life. Since 2000 he has been its full time park ranger. Along with gardener John Billsborough, he has overseen its revival from a no-go area dominated by drugs and prostitution to a Green Flag park.

This revival has made Grange once again the 'jewel in the crown' of Preston's parks. Until 1955 the small, roughly circular green space formed the grounds of Ribbleson Hall, a Victorian manor. The house was demolished following a fire, shortly before the nearby M6 opened to traffic. Its footprint is now a feature of the park, opposite the play area, next to the circular bowling green. Grange Park still retains a sense of planned, orderly grandeur, completely out of keeping with the housing estates on either side of it.

The turnaround was instigated by the Friends of Grange Park, of which John was a member. 'We got £500,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund [HLF]. When work began, the council advertised for a park ranger. The council encouraged applications from the local community and I applied, partly to make sure they were doing what they were supposed to be doing. They gave it to a park ranger from Cheltenham. He lasted for three days,' says John.

'Urban park rangership is a very different job to a countryside ranger. You can't spend five days working on a dry stone wall up here. You've got to pick needles up and that sort of thing,' says John, who was invited to re-apply. This time he was selected. 'I didn't know anything about trees or wildlife. I'd spent the previous ten years working for British Gas on a very good salary.'

The majority of the HLF money was spent on the Interpretation Centre, a new stone building with three large rooms on the site of the old potting shed. 'The Friends said that they wanted an educational facility,' says John. It has been put to good use. Each year more than 5,000 school children attend classes at Grange Park. 'We do sessions about bats, owls, recycling, whatever's required,' says John. 'Nobody else offers this kind of service. It's about getting children into the park, encouraging them to take ownership of it and become interested in the natural world.'

The Interpretation Centre has also become a meeting point for the police and local people. 'They had tried meeting at the library, schools and housing office, but it didn't work. This place is neutral,' says John.

Once again, Grange Park has become the pride of Ribbleson, a meeting point for all members of the community.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

'I arrive at 8am, and do a walk round, checking all facilities including the play area for litter and damage. It's an open park, but we lock the gates to stop vehicles getting in. The gardener has usually started by the time I arrive. If he hasn't, I'll open the gates.'

'After that I'll check the phone for messages, which are usually from schools, colleagues, or other council departments. If a school group is coming in, I'll get the Interpretation Centre set up. On average, that happens about once a week.'

'Meetings take up a lot of time. There are also partners to keep in touch with, like the Wildlife Trust and Environment Agency. Last night, we had a PACT [Police and Communities Together] meeting at the Interpretation Centre. Both the police and the community prefer meeting in the park as it is seen as neutral territory.'

'We have team meetings every fortnight. Last time we talked about how the problems would change now that we're into the summer and the park is used more particularly during the evenings.'

'There are certain times of the day when it's important to be seen, especially when the schools close. At all times, I insist on two rules: there is no bullying and no swearing in this park.'

FELIS JENKINS

VICTORIA PARK, BRISTOL

Surveys show that the people of Bristol want dedicated park staff, but the council is unsure how to define their responsibilities.

Could the experience of Felis Jenkins provide the answer?

Alf Havvock of the Victoria Park Action Group (VPAG), moved to the Windmill Hill area of Bristol in 1970. 'Victoria Park was beautiful then, the finest of South Bristol's parks. It was really well cared for. There was a park keeper, and eight members of staff,' he says.

By the early 1990s, there was no longer a staff working presence at Victoria Park, a large green space in the heart of a residential district close to Bristol city centre. Grounds maintenance was carried out by teams of peripatetic contractors. Nobody was on hand to keep an eye on the park and standards had slipped. The situation persisted until May 2005.

The VPAG had been lobbying Bristol City Council to improve levels of maintenance since its formation in 2002. 'It was taking the contractors so long to respond to problems. The park was a mess, and there were no facilities for children. There was no one to take ownership of the park,' says Kerry Chester, secretary of the VPAG.

The VPAG's drive to raise standards dovetailed with the council's own ambitions. 'In recent years, all our public surveys have come back saying, "We want more park staff," to help improve the quality of green spaces, and make them feel safer,' says Graham Evans, parks operations manager. 'But one of the difficulties is not knowing exactly what we want them to do.'

'For a long time we've had a rather clumsy, unsatisfactory relationship with our contractors,' says Peter Wilkinson, parks service manager with Bristol City Council. 'That's something we want to improve.'

It was against this backdrop that the local authority decided to see what difference a on-site park warden would make. Victoria Park was one site chosen for the trial run.

In May, Felis Jenkins, a frontline professional in Bristol's parks for 22 years, was appointed as park keeper for six months. Felis, who lives close to Victoria Park, has responsibilities ranging from tending the rose beds to cleaning the public toilets in the now dilapidated Victorian park

keeper's lodge. She is also on hand to encourage children to pick up litter and tend plants that have outgrown their owner's gardens.

'Since I've been here there is no doubt that crime and anti-social behaviour have decreased, and park use has increased,' says Felis. 'I've got to know local school children and most of them know me by name.' As part of the pilot, Felis is keeping a record of her activities.

The improvements have coincided with the introduction of Park Watch in June, a scheme set up by the VPAG which involves regular park users wearing orange jackets during their daily strolls. 'Most of us are dog owners, or walk in the park regularly, so we thought, "Why not wear a jacket, to increase the level of monitoring?"' says Felis.

An evaluation of Felis' performance will begin in the autumn at the end of her time at Victoria Park. 'We'll be looking to see whether environmental standards have improved. We'll also be analysing her work with local schools,' says Graham Evans. 'The challenge will be trying to match our resources with the delivery of a parks service across the city.'

The VPAG are in no doubt about Felis' effectiveness. 'It's clear that having one individual in the park all the time is much better than loads of teams rushing in and out. There is someone to talk to about problems and things get sorted out really quickly,' says Kerry Chester. 'Felis is a great presence. We're delighted with her and would really like her to stay.'

A DAY IN THE LIFE

'I arrive at 6:30am. Between about 7:30 and 8:15am, I pick up litter – I usually fill two or three bags. Then I'll do a health and safety check, sweeping up broken glass, checking for damage to benches, fixing broken lights, and dealing with overhanging branches. If there's a problem, I'll let my line manager know about it.'

'Every day is different. I might have planned to weed the rose beds, but you never know what you may be asked to do. I'm part social worker, part child minder, and part liaison officer. I'm also an ambassador for both the council parks department, and the contractor.'

'When the schools close, I make sure that I'm around – the VPAG were concerned about the levels of litter.'

'I work a condensed week, Monday to Thursday, leaving Friday free for my voluntary sign [language] work. This means working 37 hours between Monday and Thursday. I finish at 4:15pm, and take half an hour for lunch.'





RAYNE PASSMORE, PETER VINCENT SEAN THOMAS-STEWART & DAVID BAMFORD

MILE END PARK, EAST LONDON

A team of full-time park rangers are the human face of a regenerated East London park, and a point of contact for the local community

Since 1999, more than £26 million has been spent on the renovation of Mile End Park in East London. The overhaul dates back to a public forum in 1995, when local people expressed their support for permanent park rangers.

As a result, the revamped Mile End Park was designed as a staffed park. Areas were created to appeal to different users, including the elderly, children, young people, ecologists, artists and the disabled. The idea was that rangers would be on hand to demonstrate and oversee the diversity of uses. In May 2004, a dedicated team of park rangers arrived.

‘I was paying for patrols by Tower Hamlets’ park wardens. They came every day, but because it was part of a wider parks service, I wasn’t able to direct their activities,’ says Michael Rowan, director of Mile End Park. ‘So I asked the parks department to transfer three of their staff permanently.’

Head ranger Rayne Passmore, and Peter Vincent were formerly park keepers at nearby Victoria Park. Sean Thomas-Stewart, moved from Stepney Green Gardens. In April, they were joined by David Bamford. ‘In an ideal world, I’d like 15 rangers, says Michael Rowan.

‘It was a really different type of job at Victoria Park. There we were park keepers, employed to help with planting and general maintenance,’ says Rayne, a graduate in countryside management and human geography.

‘We had fewer opportunities to engage with people,’ says Peter. ‘Here we have a chance to prove our worth.’

All four are employed as park rangers, a role with a far greater emphasis on education, engagement, and environmental improvements.

‘All of them have different skills, so we try to make the most of that,’ says Michael. ‘Sean is a natural with kids and we try to get the most out of Pete’s theatrical background by getting him to organise our Halloween event and that sort of thing. They really do work as a team.’

Since August, Park Watch, a network of local people, has assisted the rangers. ‘It’s about improving security. All they need is a mobile phone, and a number to ring in case they spot a problem,’ says Michael.

The rangers also have a good relationship with the police, who exercise their horses in the park.

To date, there has been no formal evaluation of the park rangers’ impact. However, the anecdotal feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and anti-social behaviour has decreased.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

At the beginning of the week, Rayne Passmore, head ranger, arranges the rota. ‘I also make sure that everyone is communicating with each other. It is important that messages are passed on between shifts,’ he says.

During the summer, the park is staffed from 10am until 8pm. There are two shifts. Most of the time there are at least two park rangers on duty. Michael Rowan visits almost every day.

The team is responsible for opening and closing all the buildings in the park, including the ecology pavilion and premises for play and art. ‘We also liaise with security guards in the children’s playground, and the grounds maintenance team,’ says Rayne.

Monitoring for graffiti is a daily ritual. ‘We try to deal with it as soon as possible. In the year and a bit since we’ve been here, instances of graffiti and vandalism have definitely gone down.’

Other responsibilities include helping school groups with bulb planting and pond dipping. ‘We also try to make sure that somebody is in the Terrace Garden at lunch times, as that’s where groups of children congregate,’ says Rayne.

‘We’re a tight team,’ says Pete Vincent. ‘We know each other’s strengths and weaknesses. We look out for each other.’

ANTH PURVIS, SEAN LOUGHREY & CARL PRESLEY

LEAZES PARK, NEWCASTLE

In recent years, dedicated park keepers and Lottery funding have given a new lease of life to Newcastle's oldest green space. Over the same period, the job of park keeper has become among the most coveted in the city

By the mid-1990s, Leazes Park was in an advanced state of decline. The Victorian skating lake was bunged up with debris; the once grand promenading terrace was a litter-strewn shadow of its former self. Reports of drug abuse, drinking and prostitution were common. There was no official presence to offer reassurance or raise environmental standards.

In 1998, in response to overwhelming public demand, Newcastle City Council made a commitment to employ more staff in parks. In 1999, a successful Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) bid secured the funds to overhaul the 11-hectare park. The employment of two full-time park keepers was stipulated as a condition of the grant.

'The message we were hearing from user groups was that they wanted people in the park, high visibility individuals to deal with problems,' says Adam Greenwold, who was employed by the HLF to oversee the restoration. One of his responsibilities was to recruit and manage the park keepers. 'We wanted them to fulfil a number of objectives, namely improved maintenance and horticulture, and a security role.'

Anth Purvis, 26, began work in 2001. 'I'd trained as a gardener, but opportunities were hard to come by. Then the park keeper position came up,' says Anth. 'It's a great job. We are trusted to take responsibility for the park, and because we are here all the time, you take pride in the work.'

Last year, Anth was joined by Sean Loughrey, an Irishman with a quite different background. 'I settled in Newcastle in 1990, after a year working with juvenile delinquents in America,' he says. A period with Newcastle social services was followed by six years as a park ranger, in nearby Jesmond Dene. 'It was a more educational and environmental role,' says Sean.

Anth and Sean's collective expertise in horticulture and communication has been used to good effect in Leazes Park. 'Anti-social behaviour and crime have certainly decreased since they've been here. We've also won two Green Flag Awards,' says Adam Greenwold.

Last April, Carl Presley, a trainee park warden joined as a volunteer. 'I really want to work in the parks full time,' he says. 'I'll come in and help at weekends whatever it takes to gain the experience.'

All three might come from different backgrounds, and bring different levels of experience to the job, but they are united by shared enthusiasm for the park, and an awareness of how lucky they are.

'There's a lot of competition for park keeper jobs,' says Anth. 'People get quite jealous. They envy the pay, the flexible hours, working outside and the prospect of job satisfaction. It's a fantastic job.'

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Every day, there is at least one park keeper on duty at Leazes Park. During a typical week, Anth Purvis and Sean Loughrey will cross over for three days and volunteers are sometimes on hand to assist during the summer months.

'The idea is to have staff in the park when people are there,' says Adam Greenwold, Leazes Park manager, who is also based in the park. 'Most park managers are based in council offices, but being here makes a difference. It is much easier and more helpful to be able to meet people and discuss any questions face to face.'

Although the park keepers report to Greenwold, it is up to them to prioritise tasks on a daily basis. They are responsible for all grounds maintenance with the exception of grass cutting, which is done by an external contractor. Leazes Park is a large multifaceted park, including bowling greens, tennis courts, and a lake.

'It is much easier to get big jobs done when both of us are here. It can be frustrating when you've started a job, but get called away to sort a problem out,' says Sean. 'You have to lock all your equipment away and get to the problem. It all takes time.'

Jobs that park wardens may be called to deal with include: asking young people with bikes to be more aware of other park users, picking up needles, and making sure that incidence of anti-social behaviour doesn't escalate. 'Generally, there is more anti-social behaviour at weekends. Drug and alcohol abuse are also problems,' says Sean. 'But we do have to be careful about when to intervene. We also have to make careful judgements regarding our own safety.'

'There's no "typical day," says Anth. 'But overall the job is great. You can get real satisfaction out of it.'





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