

Urban parks

Do you know what you're getting for your money?

We asked people like [REDACTED] and his team at [REDACTED] Council, but they didn't really know. Do you?

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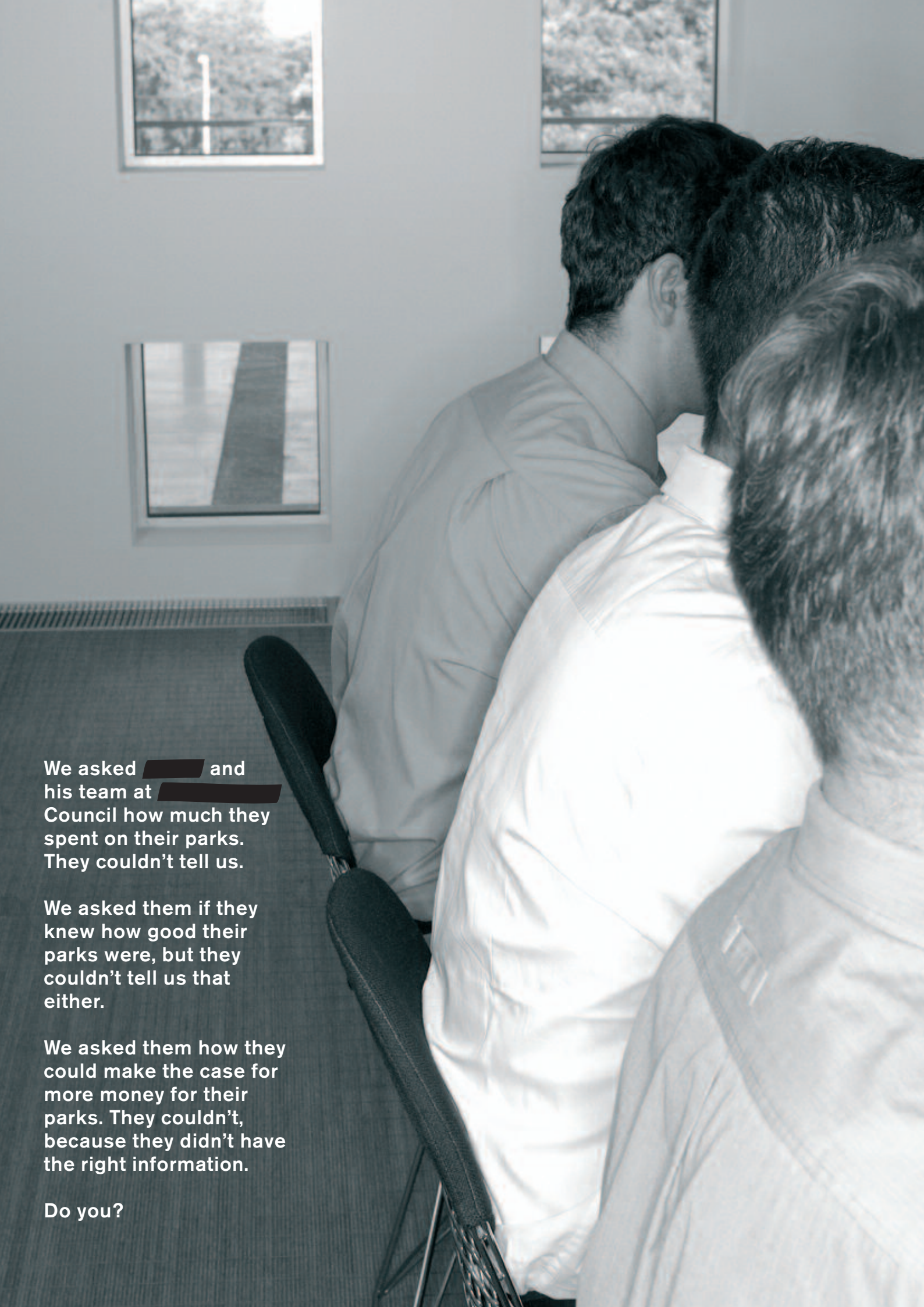
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We asked [REDACTED] and his team at [REDACTED] Council how much they spent on their parks. They couldn't tell us.

We asked them if they knew how good their parks were, but they couldn't tell us that either.

We asked them how they could make the case for more money for their parks. They couldn't, because they didn't have the right information.

Do you?

In parks, as in most things, you get what you pay for. Or do you?

For decades, parks were deprived of investment. Their quality declined. Now, more resources are being ploughed back into parks and urban green spaces. And quality seems to be improving.

But is it really that simple? Does more money guarantee better parks? Would a 10 per cent increase in funding lead to a 10 per cent increase in quality? Do some councils deliver better parks for their money than others?

We set to find out. We commissioned a research project among eight local authorities. The results, detailed over the following pages, were interesting but inconclusive.

Hardly anyone could answer our questions. And the patchy results we gathered didn't link the amount spent on parks with the quality of parks.

We knew that many local authorities give their green space a low priority. We hadn't realised that, because of this, some don't even keep useful records of their expenditure and its outcome. With no helpful data, they're unable to make the case for more resources or allocate the resources they have in a proper, strategic way.

Although we only surveyed eight local authorities, the findings matched our experience of working closely with dozens of others. We're not naming the eight local authorities concerned. Our aim was to gather facts, not to name and shame.

By publishing the research findings, we hope to provoke a debate about the way parks are funded and what the funds actually achieve. Does more income mean a better outcome? Please read the report and join the debate.

01 Why we did this research and what we discovered

Parks and green spaces are an essential element of liveable cities and towns – 91 per cent of people think that they contribute to their quality of life. Good quality parks and green spaces help to give towns and cities their special identity, enhancing their attraction to residents and visitors alike. However, poor quality, run-down parks and green spaces can bring down the image of an area and attract anti-social behaviour.

During the 1980s and 1990s the amount of money spent on urban parks and green spaces declined dramatically – and, as a result, many urban parks got into a terrible state. However, since the late 1990s the government has recognised the negative impact of this long-term decline on people's quality of life. Now, improving the quality of parks and urban green spaces is a national priority. A range of initiatives have been developed, including the establishment of CAGE Space in 2003 as the national champion for better parks and public spaces, and most recently the development of the cross government 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' communities agenda. Co-ordinated by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' reflects the fact that people want high quality local environments and puts particular emphasis on improving the physical fabric and infrastructure of places, including creating attractive and welcoming parks.

Despite the increased status of parks and green spaces at a national level, park managers often say that the major obstacle to improving the quality of poor spaces is simply a lack of money – both capital, to invest in improvement, and revenue, to pay for ongoing maintenance. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that long-term under-investment was a significant reason for the decline in quality of our parks.

However, lack of money is not the only thing that caused the decline of urban parks and green spaces. The Urban Green Spaces Taskforce, established by the government in 2002 to investigate the decline in England's green space quality, highlighted a range of causes including the fact that parks services were no longer seen as being important within many local authorities, that there was a lack of training for people who worked in parks departments and that often the changing needs and demands of urban populations were not met by those delivering parks.

The Taskforce also identified that a lack of reliable data about urban parks and green spaces had contributed to this decline in quality. Without

baseline data about the quantity of parks in any area, their quality, and how much they cost to run, it is very difficult to make a convincing case for spending more money on them – either at a local level or nationally.

One of the Taskforce's recommendations was that research should be commissioned to begin to address this lack of data. Specifically in relation to the issue of resources, the Taskforce recommended that research be commissioned which elaborated and quantified the *'...links between local authority expenditure on green space services...and the quality of individual spaces'*

What we tried to find out

Against a backdrop of calls for more resources for green spaces, CAGE Space set out to establish whether simply providing more resources would automatically improve green space quality. Anecdotal evidence suggested that some local authorities are better than others at using the money they've got to deliver good parks. In other words, it seemed to us that some local authorities were more efficient than others – an important factor at a time when the government is focusing on making sure public services deliver good value for money. We wanted to understand how local authorities spend their resources in relation to parks and green spaces and the subsequent impact of this expenditure on urban green space quality.

Given the many variables that influence the delivery of parks across a local authority – including the authority's size, the amount of green space it has, the type of population, its income – we decided to look in depth at a few local authorities, rather than do a superficial survey of many. We chose just eight local authorities, all very different.

The Department of Landscape at the University of Sheffield, GreenSpace and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance (CIPFA) were commissioned to address the following:

- to define and understand the relationship between local authority spending decisions and priorities and the consequent quality of parks and urban green spaces;
- to identify the potential ways of optimising existing resources to deliver high quality green spaces;
- to identify priority needs for additional resource allocation that will contribute greatest added value to parks and urban green spaces and green space quality.

High quality is not always the result of high spending as illustrated by this low-cost, low-maintenance wildflower meadow.



What we actually found out

The findings were surprising. Although only eight local authorities were examined, a strong theme emerged. Most of them didn't have comprehensive figures showing how much they were spending on their parks and few of them had a clear idea of what quality they were trying to achieve. Without this information it's impossible to take a strategic approach to improving the quality of the service delivered to local people. It's impossible to know if the service is run efficiently or whether the public money spent on the service is being well spent. It also suggests that parks and green space – valuable public assets – are not being managed to increase public value.

In other words, we weren't able to learn much about the link between the amount spent on parks services and the quality of parks that are delivered. The reason we couldn't find this out was because most of the local authorities couldn't answer our questions.

But what we did find out – the fact that many local authorities don't appear to have robust management data about their parks – is very important. The lessons learnt will be relevant to all with responsibility for the management and funding of urban green spaces. This includes local politicians, directors of resources and accountants as well as head of parks services and green space managers. It will inform those making decisions about green space resource allocation and expenditure as to the benefits of taking a strategic approach to setting green space priorities and allocating resources.

Understanding how efficiently resources are used to improve parks and urban green space quality is particularly important given the recent Gershon Review of efficiency in the public sector. This review emphasised the fact that service cuts are not the same as efficiency gains. In other words, simply spending less money on a service does not indicate efficiency – efficiency can only be measured if the quality of the service or outcome is included in the equation.

If ██████████ Council separated expenditure on parks from other service delivery areas, ██████████ would have been able to provide the information we were looking for.



02 Challenges in assessing the quality of parks

Assessing the quality of a park or green space isn't straightforward. For instance, a traditional 19th century park will probably require a high standard of horticulture and intensive maintenance in order to be in tip-top condition. In contrast, a wild nature reserve will need a completely different maintenance regime and, if properly maintained, may well look scruffy and unkempt to the untrained eye. A simple spend per hectare assessment will not pick up this difference. An understanding of the original design, character and current use of the space is therefore needed to assess its quality properly. Add to this the fact that different communities want different things from their spaces, and it becomes very difficult to set 'objective' and measurable standards.

Not surprisingly, then, among those involved in setting standards, there's an increasing emphasis on perceptions of the space – what local people think of it – and feeding this into locally devised standards and indicators. At local authority level, Planning Policy Guidance 17, the relevant planning policy guidance for parks, encourages each local authority to set its own standards, as part of creating a green space strategy.

At site level, the criteria for the Green Flag Award (see below) are cleverly structured so that the quality of different types of space can all be assessed – what judges look for in a nature reserve will be different from what they look for in a traditional 19th century park.

There's a lot we can learn from other countries about setting quality frameworks for a range of spaces and using these to help inform resource allocation. Parks Victoria in Melbourne Australia, for example, has successfully developed a quality framework for managing its parks and green spaces.

How is the quality of parks and urban green spaces defined in England?

Currently there's no statutory national quality standard for parks and urban green spaces. However, there is a collection of indicators relating to the quality of individual sites or the service as a whole. These are:

Green Flag Award

The Green Flag Award recognises the quality of individual sites (not the quality of service delivery as a whole). Although the Green Flag standard is now generally recognised as the national standard for parks and green spaces, it's voluntary not statutory. In 2005/06 420 applications for awards were received in England and Wales, of which 322 were thought to be of a high enough standard to win a Green Flag Award. The key Green Flag Award criteria are:

- 1 A Welcoming Place
- 2 Healthy, Safe, and Secure
- 3 Clean and Well Maintained
- 4 Sustainability
- 5 Conservation and Heritage
- 6 Community Involvement
- 7 Marketing
- 8 Management

Best Value

Introduced in 2000, Best Value is a strategic tool for bringing about improvements in the delivery of all a council's services on a continuous basis. In order to measure performance the government has developed a series of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI), which are a national measure of performance. The main performance indicator associated with parks and urban green spaces is BVPI 119 (satisfaction with cultural and recreational activities). This indicator examines what percentage of the local population is either satisfied or very satisfied with the park and urban green space service. BVPI 199 (cleanliness) is also applicable.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA)

CPA was introduced in 2002 with the intention that the Audit Commission should undertake these assessments. CPA data is used to report to local people in simple terms how their council is performing, help councils focus on their own improvement planning and assist the government in identifying councils where further targeted support and recovery planning may be needed in order to protect services for local communities. There are eight key service areas which are assessed: education; social care and children; social care and adults; libraries and leisure; environment; housing; use of resources and benefits. Parks and urban green spaces come under the service area of environment, which is largely about keeping them clean. Cultural services are also scored and parks and green spaces are covered in this. However, recent announcements by government indicate that CPA is likely to be phased out in its current form with a greater emphasis on citizen satisfaction in a new performance framework.

Planning Policy Guidance 17: Open Space, Sport and Recreation (PPG17)

PPG17 was revised in 2002 (as part of a rolling programme of PPG revisions by ODPM) to reflect, in a more meaningful way, the fact that open spaces, sport and recreation underpin people's quality of life. The guidance emphasises the multi-functional nature of open space and the importance of natural spaces for 'passive' recreation and enjoyment. It also requires open space standards to be set locally, reflecting local community needs and demand, placing as much importance on quality and accessibility standards as those for quantity.

User and non-user surveys

The use of surveys has increased in popularity in recent years, and they can be used as a tool for determining the public's perception of quality. These surveys may be taken across the service or be undertaken for specific sites, for example to support a bid to the HLF. Some local authorities undertake annual MORI polls as a method to determine customer satisfaction with respect to parks and urban green spaces; others have undertaken User Satisfaction Surveys as part of the Best Value process. In addition some local authorities undertake surveys of individual sites in order to support funding bids or the development of management plans. The Place Consultation Tool (PCT) is an easy to use way of assessing the quality of public space which is accessible to community groups such as park 'friends' groups, civic societies and environment trusts as well as professionals such as parks managers, landscape architects, planners and maintenance contractors. It provides the potential to track changes in people's perceptions of the quality of a particular site over time. This will help managers make sure that what they deliver actually meets users' needs.



Traditional parks with high quality horticulture are relatively expensive to maintain but are hugely popular with a wide range of visitors.

03 How urban parks and green spaces are funded

Parks and green spaces need two sorts of funding: capital, to pay for one-off improvements, renovations and equipment; and revenue, to pay for general on-going maintenance and staffing. The two are linked – if you don't pay for day-to-day maintenance a park will gradually decline until it's in such a poor state that it will need a considerable investment of capital to restore it.

As the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce identified, one of the major reasons for the decline in quality of urban parks between 1980 and 2000 was the widespread decline in revenue funding. In many places this remains a problem. However, as outlined below, it's now becoming easier to find capital funding.

Capital funding

In the last five years there's been a welcome increase in the amount of capital funding for green spaces from national government. In addition, government is giving local authorities more flexibility about how they raise and spend their money. For instance, they now have more freedom to borrow, as a result of the Prudential System (Part 1 of the Local Government Act 2003) which took effect from 1 April 2004. However, these flexibilities do not yet seem to have been widely utilised for funding parks and green space.

More recently, the introduction of the Cleaner Safer Greener element in the Safer, Stronger Communities Fund (see www.neighbourhood.gov.uk for more information) indicates that central government wants local partnerships to have more control over the way funds from central government are spent at a local level.

There are other sources of capital funding for parks and urban green spaces: the Single Regeneration Budget (a programme which is now completed); the Heritage Lottery Fund Public Parks Initiative (formerly the Urban Parks Programme), which has provided £400 million to parks and urban green spaces with historic interest; the Big Lottery Fund, which is currently launching a range of new programmes, many of which could benefit green space, including £90 million in additional funding over the next three years, and Section 106 agreements from planning developments. However there are plans to scale planning obligations back to pay for improvements directly related to new developments, including open spaces. This is part of a wider consultation

on introducing a Planning Gain Supplement to better capture an element of increased land value to support the provision of necessary infrastructure.

Revenue funding

Revenue funding for most parks and green spaces is paid for by local authorities, which in turn receive money from central government. The way central government calculates the amount of money each local authority receives, and indicates how it should be spent, is complex – but important to understand in the context of this report.

In general, local authorities receive around 75 per cent of their revenue expenditure from central government via the Local Government Finance Settlement and specific 'formula' grants such as Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and Local Public Service agreements. The remaining 25 per cent of revenue expenditure is raised directly by local authorities via council tax.

The Local Government Finance Settlement is the process of allocating formula grant each year to every local authority. Formula grant is made up of Revenue Support Grant (RSG), re-distributed business rates or national non-domestic rates (NNDR) and police grant (where applicable). It totalled approximately £46 billion in 2004/5.

The allocation of formula grant each year is determined by the Formula Spending Share (FSS) and the amount of council tax the authority is assumed to be able to rise. The FSS is based on mathematical formulae that include information on the population, social structure and other characteristics of each authority. Separate formulae have been developed to cover the seven major service areas (or blocks), which local authorities provide, because different factors influence each service area and one formula could not be devised for local authority services generally. The seven service areas are:

- education
- personal social services
- police
- fire
- highways
- environmental, protective and cultural services block (EPCS)
- capital financing

The EPCS block provides funding for a wide range of non-statutory services, including parks, in accordance with the following sub-blocks:

- allotments, cemeteries and crematoria
- museums and galleries
- waste management
- recreation
- planning control and implementation
- environmental services

It's important to note that the government doesn't use the FSS as a measure of how much a council *must* spend on any service. The government believes in the importance of local democracy and accountability. Therefore, whilst the FSS provides a rationale for dividing up resources between local authorities, the government does not seek to control the actual amount of money a local authority decides to spend on a service in any year. This means that if government wants to increase the funding to a particular service – for instance, parks – there is no guarantee that any extra money nominally allocated to the EPCS block would actually be spent on parks.

Thinking ahead pays off. Spending capital funding on revenue generating assets in or around parks, such as venues for public hire and use, can help secure long term revenue streams for maintenance.



The way [REDACTED]
Council measures the
return on investment in
its parks makes it difficult
for [REDACTED] to make useful
comparisons with other
councils.



04 Is funding the only factor that affects the quality of parks?

Green Spaces, Better Places, the report of the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce, identified a range of causes of decline in urban green space quality. These included changes to the way parks services and management are structured and delivered, and a decline in resources over the previous 20 years.

In 2001, the *Public Parks Assessment* showed that only 18 per cent of parks were considered to be in good condition, and that the condition of 37 per cent of all parks was declining. The Taskforce considered that due to the low priority afforded to green spaces and the increasing demands from statutory public service areas, such as education and social services, local authorities would struggle to find the capital needed to reverse the decline from their existing budgets.

Other causes of decline

Financial constraints are not the only factor affecting the quality of urban parks and green spaces. *Is the grass greener...?* a study published by CABI Space in 2004, which investigated international innovations in urban green space management, identified seven fundamental questions challenging current practice in England.

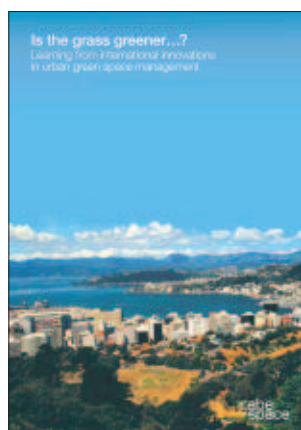
- 1 How well is urban green space understood?
- 2 What are the aspirations for urban green space quality?
- 3 Who is responsible for urban green space management?
- 4 How are management responsibilities coordinated and resourced?
- 5 How is urban green space maintenance and reinvestment delivered?
- 6 How are management practices applied to local contexts?
- 7 What are the outcomes and results of urban green space management practices?

The study identified that the low profile and status of parks and urban green space services provision has led to a situation where local government splits up the responsibility for managing green space between different departments and agencies. This results in a confused and poorly integrated organisational structure and a lack of coordination of activities, services and responsibilities, including the work of private contractors.

Is the grass greener...? identified that the ability to think imaginatively about ways of maximising the potential of all funding sources for urban green spaces has been hindered by these uncoordinated organisational structures and activities. These fragmented delivery structures prevent local authorities from making the most of core funding streams and drawing in alternative sources of funding through partnerships, trusts, local charges and taxes.

All of the above issues are exacerbated by the lack of information about the different types of urban green space and about the different problems and opportunities they present for green space managers. Lack of data extends to a lack of clarity about where responsibilities lie as well as to more fundamental concerns. These include knowing what spaces exist in an area, what they are used for, what qualities they have, how they should be cared for and most fundamentally the resources required to maintain them to a level of quality to which the local authority aspires.

The study established that such a lack of coherent data and evidence about the level of local authority expenditure in relation to quality of parks and green spaces hinders the monitoring and assessment of investment. By studying the practice of parks and green space managers overseas *Is the grass greener...?* concluded that this correlation needs to be understood in order to implement any improvements and – most significantly – make the case for additional resources.



As *Is the grass greener...?* highlighted, making the case for more resources requires sound data about what local authorities spend on parks in relation to the quality of those spaces

05 The research approach

Stage one: identifying local authority case studies

A case study approach was taken involving a small sample of local authorities. The selection of the eight local authorities involved in the research used a series of criteria as indicated below. Selection was made to provide a range of expenditure and quality levels within different types and sizes of local authorities. The selected local authorities provided a range of quality standards (as defined by the Green Flag Award) and a range of levels of expenditure per head of population (as defined by 2003/04 CIPFA Leisure and Recreation Statistics for 'Urban Parks and Open Spaces').

Although the sample size is too small to be used to establish statistically valid patterns which could be applied across all local authorities in England, the depth of the scoping exercise does provide valuable insights into the problems and challenges the local authorities face in delivering and maintaining high quality green spaces.

You'll notice that the local authorities surveyed have been kept anonymous so their answers could be comprehensive and transparent.

Stage two: interviews with local authorities

A series of interviews with relevant personnel within the local authorities, supplemented with associated financial and managerial information, aimed to explore how parks and green spaces budgets are spent and the subsequent impact of this expenditure on urban green space quality. Central to this understanding was the need to identify how quality aspirations are defined and established and to understand how quality aspirations drive priority setting, resource allocation and subsequent expenditure.

To gain a range of perspectives across the local authorities, interviews were carried out with a range of local authority staff and members.

Stage three: studying the financial data

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting (CIPFA) Leisure and Recreation Statistics provided part of the available financial data for the local authorities. This information is reported to CIPFA annually on a voluntary basis and for 2003/04 relates to community parks and open spaces. The average expenditure for this year was identified as £10.15 per head of population, and for the purposes of the research this was taken as a median level of expenditure.

Additional financial data was also analysed for trends during recent years. Local authorities are obliged to submit this information, which relates to levels of local authority expenditure on different services areas, to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The RO6 returns cover parks and urban green spaces and were studied for all English authorities and the specific case study authorities from 1998/9 to 2003/4. We did this to provide a national context for the specific local authority expenditure.

Stage four: undertaking a comparative analysis

After completing the interviews, the answers were assessed using a framework for analysis based on a number of themes identified by the research team as having an influence on both local authority expenditure and green space quality. The themes of exploration included the influence on quality and expenditure of available revenue and capital funding, political priorities and decisions, and management structures and mechanisms.

Criteria for selection of case study locations

Aim	Criterion
• To choose authorities covering a range of expenditure levels	• High and low spending authorities, according to CIPFA annual returns
• To choose authorities providing a range of quality experiences	• Green Flag Award holders
• To choose authorities covering a range of population sizes	• Different levels of population from about 50,000 to 1,000,000
• To choose authorities giving a geographic distribution across England	• Selection from different government regions

06 What we found out

We set out to explore the link between the amount local authorities spend on their parks and green spaces and the quality of the individual sites they deliver. However, analysing the relationship between local authority expenditure and the consequent physical condition of parks and urban green spaces proved to be impossible due to the lack of data about both expenditure and quality.

One reason was that some authorities do not clearly separate their expenditure on the parks service from other public service delivery areas. For instance, a service such as litter collection may be delivered across the whole of a local authority area, and so data for how much it costs to collect litter in parks may be impossible to extract.

Another was that most of the local authorities did not have much information about the quality of individual sites.

There was, then, a general paucity of information and data. The research was therefore unable to identify a


direct link between levels of expenditure on parks and urban green spaces and their quality. However, this does not necessarily mean that there is no relationship between expenditure and quality. We know that there is a link between cutting budgets and decreasing quality as found by the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce – but the fact that accounting is different between different authorities and not related to quality means that a positive relationship was not found as part of this research.

Some explanations for why this may be such a difficult issue include:

- it was not possible to track expenditure to quality for individual sites, let alone individual services.
- this was primarily due to a lack of coherent data and evidence about the level of local authority expenditure in relation to the quality of parks and urban green spaces in England.
- there is inconsistency when accounting for expenditure and quality relating to parks and urban green spaces across England.



Setting priorities is as important as setting budgets. Parks created in the 19th century ‘for the health, well-being and recreation of local residents’ are still worthy corporate priorities for local authorities in the 21st century.



██████████ is sure there's
a link between what
██████████ Council
spends on its parks and
the quality achieved, but
without proper records she
finds this hard to prove.

Conclusions

The key issues emerging from the research are highlighted below:

The importance of assessing the existing quality of parks and green spaces, and to set clear and measurable aspirations for future quality

Without knowing what levels of quality local authorities are trying to deliver, they can't make a strong argument for more resources, or defend existing budgets from cuts. It's also impossible to make strategic decisions about funding priorities. We found that in many places quality is determined by whatever resource is available, rather than being a strategic aspiration.

The difference between cutting budgets and making efficiency gains is not always appreciated

While many local authorities have sought efficiencies in managing and maintaining their parks, the approach appears to be driven by the desire to make savings, without assessing the effects of the saving. The correlation between quality and expenditure did not drive improvements and therefore local authorities were less able to monitor and assess effectiveness.

Such approaches are in stark contrast to the findings of the 2003 review of public sector efficiency undertaken by Sir Peter Gershon, which emphasised that service cuts were not to be perceived as efficiency gains. They also have important implications for the effective delivery of local public services and local democracy, currently being investigated by the Lyons Inquiry into local government funding and council tax reform.

Increases in national funding do not necessarily lead to more resources at a local level

Unless local politicians think that parks and green spaces should be a strategic priority, they'll lose out on funding to other service delivery areas. This highlights the need for local authorities to create and adopt green space strategies that make clear the way in which high quality green spaces can deliver on other local priorities such as health, education, reducing crime and promoting sustainable development.

The level of local importance does not always carry through the decision-making hierarchy, with parks and urban green spaces slipping down the agenda as financial decision-making moves onto a higher and more strategic level. At this level, parks and urban green space services don't seem to be able to compete with education, social services, transport and crime reduction

Local politicians determine where parks and urban green spaces lie within the priorities of the council and they are the ones to influence and inform. This combination of committed councillor and senior officer working together to drive forward service improvement is especially critical in terms of the budget-setting process and the bidding processes associated with securing capital funding. The ability to retain or increase revenue budgets, as well as secure a share of any available capital, relies on the ability of individual officers to produce the right business case and identify strategic priorities, and the ability of politicians to represent this business case at cabinet level, scrutiny panels and Local Strategic Partnerships.

The importance of a corporate strategy and a strategic approach

By using corporate and community strategies – either through inference or by measurable targets – to highlight main areas of concern, councils can let local residents know how to gauge their performance and success as a service provider. Achieving the stated aims and objectives is therefore a high priority, because political control can be determined by the ability to deliver on the promises contained within these public documents. It's therefore important for parks and urban green spaces to be mentioned in both corporate and community strategies as an expression of political commitment.

Parks and urban green space services must forge direct links between service delivery and meeting the aims and objectives of the strategies. These links need to be clear and well defined, providing an obvious justification for continued or increased financial commitment.

The commitment to achieving an improved service appears to be accompanied by:

- robust management information systems, such as quality assessments and facility audits
- ongoing monitoring of the relationship with contractors
- measurable targets, including quality targets
- well defined action plans
- regular feedback from users and non-users
- clear and thorough business and strategic plans
- green space (or at least parks and urban green spaces) strategies
- detailed management plans for sites
- strategies for staff training, linked to training needs
- a meaningful publicity strategy

Some local authorities are gathering useful data and managing strategically

In places where this happened, strategic planning was comprehensively and overtly linked to wider corporate strategies, with substantial emphasis on how the parks and urban green spaces service could address and contribute to the highest political profile issues such as education, health and regeneration. A corporate approach can be used to help develop the level of social commitment of developers and local businesses so that they can understand the importance of parks and green spaces to communities and contribute actively to a partnership in some way. Authorities that took this approach were prepared to review the relationship with unsatisfactory contractors and break from past methods.

Strategic planning is fundamental for the effective use of resource

But this is impossible without good management data.



Local authorities that have produced green space strategies and parks management plans are better able to set out their vision for improving the quality of their parks and green spaces and identify the political and financial support required to achieve their goals.

██████████ Council has a good vision for its parks, but **██████████** hasn't got the right data to track how the vision's being achieved.



Recognise yourself?

Maybe this snapshot of eight local authorities is totally typical. Maybe it echoes the picture in your area.

Maybe not. Perhaps you have a system to set strategic objectives, allocate resources to meet those objectives and accurately measure the benefits achieved.

Either way, we'd like to hear from you with your experiences of the issues raised by the findings of this survey.

In particular we'd like to know whether you could provide answers to the following questions if you had to:

- 1 How much money you currently spend across the whole of your local authority parks and green space service (both capital and revenue expenditure, and any additional sources of income)?
- 2 How much money you spend on each park or green space site?
- 3 Can you track the levels of income and expenditure for both the whole service and each site over the last five years?
- 4 What is the quality of each of the parks and green space sites within your local authority area and how is it measured?
- 5 Can you track the levels of quality achieved for both the whole service and each site over the last five years?

Finally:

- 6 Could CABE Space and ODPM do anything that would help you answer these questions?

Please e-mail us with a 'yes' or a 'no' to questions one to five with brief reasons why, and your more detailed comments on question six to publicspace@cabe.org.uk by 1st September 2006.

By the way, if you're one of the local authorities who helped us in this research, thank you for taking part. You may be anonymous, but we recognise your contribution.

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In parks, as in most things, you get what you pay for. Or do you?

For decades, parks were deprived of investment. Their quality declined. Now, more resources are being ploughed back into parks and urban green spaces. And quality seems to be improving.

But is it really that simple? Does more money guarantee better parks? Would a 10 per cent increase in funding lead to a 10 per cent increase in quality? Do some councils deliver better parks for their money than others? This publication summarises a survey which tried to find out, and asks local authorities for feedback on whether the results reflect their own experiences.

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