

Managing green spaces

Seven ingredients for success





Mini-Beast
House

Introduction

England's parks and green spaces are being managed in a context which is changing fast and fundamentally. Councils are being given greater autonomy to determine the services they provide to their communities, but this autonomy comes with significantly reduced resources.

So the challenge is to keep going with less money, while safeguarding the service and quality expected by local people.

This briefing brings together evidence to assist green space managers, corporate decision-makers and advisors in deciding on the future of services. Councils are testing different approaches to managing and financing public spaces.¹ In many cases service delivery will be radically restructured as a result.

We set out seven 'ingredients for success', describing the issues that matter but also, importantly, some that distract. Even when these ingredients feel familiar, the new challenge is using them to manage change. The briefing is relevant to all organisations managing green spaces, including housing associations and councils.

The ingredients arise from research for CABE between 2009 and 2010 by the New Local Government Network (NLGN). It examined how the structure and organisation of parks and green space services affect their performance.

The briefing also sets out the resources that green space managers can draw on to describe the critical services that green space provides to local communities.

More information on the study is available at: www.cabe.org.uk/publications/managing-green-spaces

The full report is available on request from NLGN info@nlgn.org.uk

'The challenge is to keep going with less money, while safeguarding the service and quality expected by local people'

© Nick Turner Photography



¹ *Community-led spaces: A guide for local authorities and community groups* CABE Space, 2010.

Why a green space service matters

Parks and open spaces fundamentally affect our wellbeing. They are an important determinant of health and quality of life. They influence how happy we are with where we live. They are vital pieces of local infrastructure. The quality of parks and open space services has a proven effect on public perceptions of local authority performance.

Green space also significantly affects the economic performance of a place. However, an NLGN survey of local authority finance directors in 2009 found that when resources become scarce, environmental and culture services are the most exposed and vulnerable to forced cuts.²

This study looked at how parks and green space service structures can change to provide leaner, locally focused services which are fit for purpose. They certainly can adapt. But just cutting the management and maintenance of green spaces is nearly always found to be a false economy, because it generates costs in other areas. For instance, it increases the need to police anti-social behaviour in a derelict space.³

People value their local green spaces

- There is a strong link between people's satisfaction with their local parks and green spaces and their satisfaction with their neighbourhood. If people are satisfied with local parks they tend to be satisfied with their council.
- Almost nine out of 10 people use their local parks and green spaces and 48 per cent of people use these spaces at least once a week.
- 81 per cent of respondents have used their local park or open space in the last six months. This compares with 32 per cent who had used concert halls, and 26 per cent who had visited galleries.
- In 2007, 91 per cent of people thought it was very/fairly important to have green spaces near to where they live, and by 2009 this had risen to 95 per cent.
- In the largest survey of its kind conducted with those living in deprived communities, residents see the provision of green space as essential to their quality of life alongside housing, health, education and policing.
- The 2003/04 Survey of English Housing identifies the three main things that would improve people's local area. Issues relating to the quality of public space are cited as many times as factors relating to employment, health and housing.
- 91 per cent of the public believe that public parks and open spaces improve people's quality of life, and 74 per cent believe that parks and open spaces are important to people's health and mental and physical wellbeing.⁴

For more information on why green spaces matter go to:

www.cabe.org.uk/urban-green-nation/facts



Linking up: a sensory garden in the heart of Walthamstow helps to connect local public transport stations with the retail centre

2 *Scanning financial horizons: Modelling the local consequences of fiscal consolidation* NLGN, 2010.
3 *Decent parks, decent behaviour? The link between the quality of parks and user behaviour* CABE Space, 2005.
4 All findings in *Urban green nation: building the evidence base* CABE, 2010.

About the study

This research focuses on the largest landlords of the country's urban green space stock: local authorities and housing associations.

For this study a green space service is defined as the structure(s) within an organisation with responsibility for the delivery and management of parks and green spaces. There is no one set structure. It could be a dedicated parks department, or located within a wider department with responsibility for other services such as street cleansing or waste management.

The study examined how the organisation and structuring of parks and green space services affects their performance. Using eight case study examples and structured interviews with key personnel, it explored the 'positioning' of parks and green spaces in relation to other services and departments within an organisation.

The research included housing associations to illustrate different ways of working with communities to deliver good-quality green space.

Four factors, adapted from recent work by LG Improvement and Development, were analysed:

- awareness and understanding of the context within which the service operates, including relating to corporate priorities
- level of political and managerial leadership and the skills to advocate for, and drive improvement in, the service
- existence of reliable evidence to use for advocacy, underpinned by an ability to measure a service's contribution on an ongoing basis
- ability to work in partnership to achieve shared outcomes.⁵

© CAS Photography



Community space: Albion Community Garden in Salford (both pictures) was rejuvenated after residents of all ages came together to transform a derelict plot of land

© CAS Photography



Ingredients for success

The seven key findings from the study are summarised on the following pages. All quotes are drawn from research interviews with local authorities and housing associations.

Full information on the study, the case studies, the interviews and the concepts of structure, positioning and performance are available at: www.cabe.org.uk/publications/managing-green-spaces

© Mischa Haller



1

High-performing services depend on strong and motivational leadership

The quality of political and managerial leadership, and the access a green space team has to this, was identified as the most important driver of performance. Strong leadership provides advocacy, vision and ambition for the service at a cabinet or managerial level; secures and protects funding; builds partnerships; drives innovation; and provides motivation. Investment in skills at all levels is needed to achieve good leadership. Successful heads of service are communicators, motivators, advocates and brokers.

‘It’s a skill to manage it without money. It’s about persuasion. You need to get your ideas across to the manager, elected members and chief executive. That’s an art in itself, and I leave that to the head of service. He’s a master at it. Without that, we’d have been in trouble a long time ago’

Green space officer,
environment directorate

Unified management and maintenance functions matters

Those green space services which separated their day-to-day maintenance functions from the overall management found it harder to deliver good quality and efficient services than those that unified them. Separation can lead to competing priorities, communication failure and lack of familiarity with day-to-day operations, and can reinforce silo mentality. When services are integrated, priorities are more likely to be shared and there is better advocacy of the interests of the service.



© Natural England/Doorstep Greens

Planning ahead: preliminary work at the Doorstep Green for Dene Valley Community Park, County Durham

‘The key change has been the integrated service. Putting a parks and a horticulture service together means you’ve not got two separate arms, you’ve not got development investing in sites and maintenance doing something else’

Parks development manager,
leisure and culture services

The location of a service, whether in a dedicated parks department or a larger department, is not the most important driver of performance

The division or directorate within which green space services are placed is not of major importance, with one exception. Green space services are at risk of being neglected when part of a larger waste department. Priorities and resources can be diverted because waste is a significant statutory responsibility for the local authority.



© Jane Sebire

Digging in: residents get involved in gardening and vegetable planting at Islington's Gambier House

‘Given the complex range of agendas that parks services can influence, there was never one clear place in the council to sit to make any difference in terms of policy or budget or service delivery. For example, we can have an impact on environmental issues while in a leisure service and vice versa...it doesn't matter where you put us as long as you unify the two functions’

Head of green space service,
leisure and culture services

An active understanding of the policy and practice context is needed to stay responsive and relevant

Keeping alert to the internal and external context is critical. The way local services are delivered is changing rapidly. The government is firmly advocating that local authorities share services to deliver efficiencies and to empower communities to lead on service delivery. The green space sector is a relevant sector that will deliver on these agendas. An understanding of the current context, and how it relates to their role, enables green space managers to respond fast and be relevant.

‘The commissioning model takes us into a place where we can actually deliver on our ambitions. For a number of years our strategic objectives for green space have required the orchestration of activity across a wide range of different places. If you are sitting in a traditional parks department, you have a limited capacity to mobilise’

Commissioner of green space services,
strategic commissioning authority



© The Corporation of London

5

Provide evidence to gain the support of leaders and partners

The absence of a robust evidence base demonstrating the value of high-quality services is a deal-breaker. Tracking change and putting together benchmarked data is invaluable for both strategic planning and day-to-day management. The benefits far outweigh the effort of data collection. Local authorities now have the ability to set their own indicators of performance, defined by what is important locally. As local communities value their local green space, this provides a chance to devise appropriate indicators that clearly measure the contribution of green spaces over time.

‘It is worrying that the cabinet member is unable to get a good understanding of how parks are performing from our set of figures because they don’t tell the full story. The challenge is to create a set of indicators that can be compared to other local authority parks services or indeed other internal services’

Head of green space service,
leisure and culture services

6

Transparent, legible structures are more effective for those using and delivering the service

Structures that place, in an organisational sense, green space managers close to senior management encourage better, and a more frequent, communication and co-ordination. In deeper, more hierarchical structures, the green space service may end up buried. A transparent service structure, where it is clear who is responsible, is also beneficial for users of the service and avoids duplication. However, structure does not dictate performance. Motivated individuals with the desire to make it work can override structural difficulties.

‘When you talk to local users and friends groups, there can be frustration. We manage the parks, someone else is maintaining the horticultural features in the park, and another organisation is responsible for the cleansing. So all of a sudden when there’s an issue, they’ve got three people to talk to’

Head of service,
adult and communities directorate

Effective and targeted partnerships underpin successful services

Green space services are non-statutory and can meet the objectives of other public service areas so active partnership working is fundamental to success. Forming effective personal relationships, and proving the value of green space services to the partnership, is especially important. It is not just about internal partnerships. This is about ensuring that the green space service's delivery objectives are met with partners from national and local agencies, and friends groups. Delivery in partnership with communities is critical.



© Mark Ellis and Ashley Bingham, ICD Photography

Consulting communities: collecting local views in Queenborough, Isle of Sheppey

© Nick Turner Photography



Local initiative: Doorstep Green project at Carter Park, Middlesbrough

‘Successful partnership working is about relationships. It’s about identifying the agenda of a partner organisation and how you can help them. The challenge is to find the common themes so that you can jointly deliver projects which will help both of you achieve your common aims’

Head of green space service,
green space directorate

Moving forward

What does this study tell us about high-quality green space services? First, that the structure of the service, or where it is located in the organisation, is not of great significance. What does matter very much is unifying the management of the green space service and day-to-day maintenance. And it is essential to invest fully in skills at all levels.

Parks and green space services serve too many agendas to operate successfully in isolation. The sheer numbers of friends of parks groups – 4,000 at the last count – demonstrate the powerful sense of ownership that people have over their local green space.⁶ So for any changes to succeed, the community needs to be closely involved. Working in partnership pays off across the board: it can be with transportation and public health services, for instance in providing new opportunities for play and exercise. It can be with planning and development control, to mitigate and adapt to climate change. It can be with external organisations such as housing associations, to deliver tailored services to improve estates.

And finally, this study shows why strong and motivational leadership is critically important. Investment in the environment pays for itself many times over. When budgets are being scrutinised, and green spaces are being raked over in the search for savings, then use that spotlight to perform. It is a chance to promote the extraordinary value for money from green space, and the multitude of benefits it provides. It is a chance to persuade people to buy into a vision for the better stewardship of the living landscape of our towns and cities.

© Natural England/Doorstep Greens



People first: improvement works at Bristol's Clifton Place Community Garden

⁶ *Community networking project final report* GreenSpace, 2003.



Other resources

CABE has a range of resources to help green space managers. More information is available at: www.cabe.org.uk/future-of-parks

Innovations in urban green space management
Is the grass greener demonstrates the value of taking an alternative approach to the management of green spaces. It draws on innovative examples from around the world.⁷

Alternative models for funding public green space
Paying for parks sets out alternative funding models to support green space managers in thinking more creatively and innovatively about ways to fund their spaces. It provides practical examples of other organisations that have levered in additional funding for their spaces by working across the private, public, community and voluntary sectors.⁸

Capturing the views of people using spaces
Spaceshaper is a practical toolkit which brings people together to discuss a space, identify its strengths and weaknesses and measure how well it meets everyone's needs. Spaceshaper 9-14 can be used in schools and youth clubs so that the views of young people are not overlooked.⁹

Transfer of public assets to the community
Community-led spaces, published jointly with the Asset Transfer Unit, is a guide for local authorities and community groups which explores the asset transfer approach in relation to public open spaces. It uses examples from a charitable trust set up to manage land with a 99-year lease to community groups that initiate temporary uses of land awaiting development.¹⁰

Producing and implementing an open space strategy
Open space strategies best practice guidance, published jointly with the Mayor of London, offers practical advice on how to prepare, deliver, monitor and review a green or open space strategy. On average, local authorities that have had an open space strategy in place for three years have gained four times more Green Flag awards than those authorities without strategies.¹¹

Calculating the real value of parks and green spaces
Making the invisible visible sets out an alternative way to calculate the value of green spaces and to use this information to plan over different times. Most local authorities record their parks and green space assets as just £1. The report offers a new framework which quantifies their replacement cost and measures local demand by looking at park use.¹²

Benchmarking your service against others
Urban parks: Do you know what you're getting for your money? explores the benefits of collecting data and sharing it to assess the existing quality of parks and green spaces, and set clear and measurable aspirations for future quality.¹³

Self-assessed improvement
Towards an excellent service (TAES) developed to help improve performance in the green space sector, TAES enables green space managers to evaluate their service and identify areas for improvement and track progress in achieving this.¹⁴

Improving open spaces in social housing areas
Decent homes need decent spaces sets out 10 priorities for change and the Neighbourhoods Green partnership is working with social housing providers to take these actions forward.¹⁵

7 www.cabe.org.uk/publications/is-the-grass-greener

8 www.cabe.org.uk/public-space/parks/paying-for-parks

9 www.cabe.org.uk/public-space/spaceshaper

10 www.cabe.org.uk/publications/community-led-spaces

11 www.cabe.org.uk/sustainable-places/advice/open-space-strategies
Green Flag finding from CABE's bi-annual survey on local authority progress in completing open space strategies.

12 www.cabe.org.uk/publications/making-the-invisible-visible

13 www.cabe.org.uk/publications/urban-parks

14 www.cabe.org.uk/public-space/parks/taes

15 www.cabe.org.uk/publications/decent-homes-need-decent-spaces



The briefing is drawn from research examining how the structure and organisation of parks and green space services affect their performance. It sets out recommendations for local authorities and housing associations to ensure the best possible services in rapidly changing circumstances. It will be of interest to green space managers and decision-makers determining the future management of their parks and green spaces.

CABE
1 Kemble Street
London WC2B 4AN
T 020 7070 6700
F 020 7070 6777
E enquiries@cabe.org.uk
www.cabe.org.uk

Commission for Architecture
and the Built Environment

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

Published in 2010 by the
Commission for Architecture and
the Built Environment

Graphic design: Draught
Associates
Printed by Blackmore Ltd
Cover images: Natural England/
Doorstep Greens © Nick Turner
Photography and Jane Sebire

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, copied or transmitted without the prior written consent of the publisher except that the material may be photocopied for non-commercial purposes without permission from the publisher.

CABE is the government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space. As a public body, we encourage 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.

