

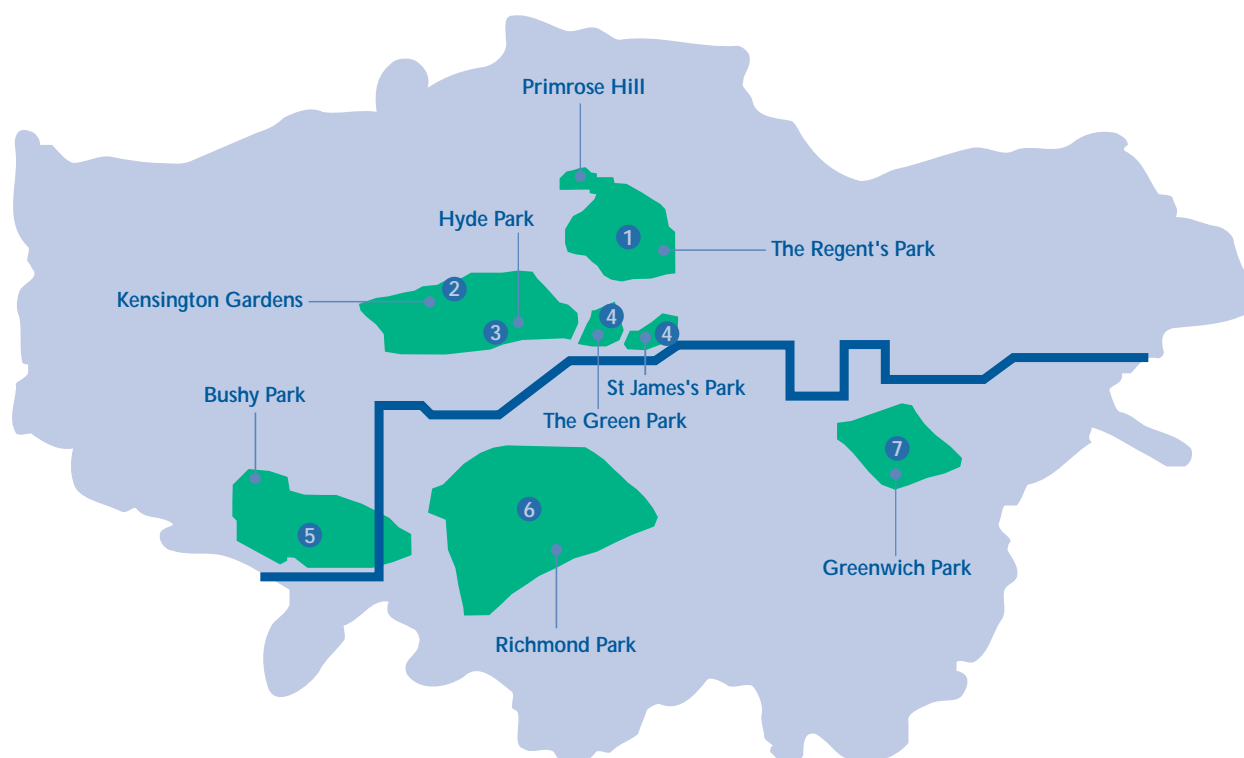
# The Royal Parks

An Executive Agency



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL  
HC 485 Session 2003-2004: 2 April 2004

## 1 The Royal Parks



### 1 The Regent's Park and Primrose Hill (338 acres and 54 acres respectively)

The Regent's Park is mainly open parkland but it also contains a rose garden, with over 400 varieties of roses, and it is home to London Zoo and the Open Air Theatre. The Park has the largest grass area for sports in central London and this facility is currently being renovated and improved with lottery and partnership funding. To the north of the Park, Primrose Hill offers fine views of Westminster and the City.

### 2 Kensington Gardens (274 acres)

The Gardens were formed in 1689 from land taken from Hyde Park. As well as natural features such as tree-lined avenues and the Flower Walk, the Gardens also offer much loved features such as the bronze statue of Peter Pan, the Albert Memorial and the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Playground.

### 3 Hyde Park (346 acres)

Hyde Park is the focal point for public events of all sizes, from open air concerts to political assemblies or exhibitions. The Park is popular with joggers, cyclists, roller-bladers and horse riders and also contains the Serpentine, used for boating and swimming. The project to build the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain in the Park is currently underway.

### 4 The Green Park and St James's Park (47 acres and 67 acres respectively)

These Parks, which contain The Mall, provide the backdrop for British ceremonial life. Popular with tourists and office workers, the Parks provide tree-lined avenues, flower displays and grasslands in the centre of London.

### 5 Bushy Park (1,112 acres)

Bushy Park is a centre for wildlife, sport and education. The Park also has an important place in history, housing General Eisenhower's Headquarters during the planning and execution of the D-Day landings. The Park has recently started on a major restoration project with lottery funding.

### 6 Richmond Park (2,470 acres)

This is the largest of the Parks and has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a National Nature Reserve. Features of this Park include the herds of free-roaming fallow and red deer, the woodland gardens of the Isabella Plantation, the protected view from King Henry's Mound to St Paul's Cathedral 10 miles away and Holly Lodge, which provides educational facilities for those with special needs.

### 7 Greenwich Park (180 acres)

Greenwich Park is the oldest Royal Park, dating from the fifteenth century. The Park is part of the Greenwich World Heritage Site, with the Royal Observatory located at its centre. Each year, thousands of runners set off on the London Marathon from the Park.

# executive summary

- 1 The eight Royal Parks covered in this report are major historical and cultural resources, which cover some 5,000 acres and attract millions of visitors each year. The Parks are: St James's Park, The Green Park, Hyde Park, Kensington Gardens and The Regent's Park (with Primrose Hill) in Central London; Greenwich Park to the East; and Richmond Park and Bushy Park to the West. **Figure 1** shows the locations and the sizes of the Parks and highlights some of their individual features.
- 2 The Parks are managed by an organisation called The Royal Parks (the Agency), which is an executive agency of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (the Department)<sup>1</sup>. The Agency is accountable to Parliament through the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who sets the organisation's policy and key performance targets and determines its level of resources each year. Part 5 of this report discusses the way the Agency is organised, and its key targets.
- 3 In 2002-03, the Agency's grant from the Department was £23.7 million and its self-generated income amounted to £6.1 million, making a total income that year of £29.8 million. The average number of Parks staff employed by the Agency in 2002-03 was 87 together with 151 officers and administrative staff of the Royal Parks Constabulary.

## The Agency's responsibilities are wide-ranging

The Agency is responsible for:

- the horticulture and landscaping of over 5,000 acres that comprise the eight Parks including 21 lakes and ponds and the 13 miles of the Longford River;
- maintaining 280 buildings (22 of which are listed), statues and memorials, which give an insight into the rich diversity of London's architecture, history and heritage;
- maintaining over 100 miles of roads and paths and 49 miles of boundary walls and fencing in the Parks;
- playing host to an average of 70 national or State ceremonials and commemorative events each year;
- accommodating a number of 'assemblies', rallies and marches each year, for example in 2002, the Parks hosted the Countryside Alliance assembly which over 200,000 joined and approximately one million people marched as part of the Stop the War campaign;
- staging around 12 major events each year and hosting national sporting events, for example the London Marathon.

<sup>1</sup> The Agency is responsible for a number of other areas, including Brompton Cemetery (Grade II listed), Victoria Tower Gardens and Grosvenor Square Gardens, and maintaining the gardens of Numbers 10, 11 and 12 Downing Street, Canning Green, St Margaret's Church Green, Poets' Green and the Longford River (the part within Hampton Court Palace Home Park comes under the management of Historic Royal Palaces).

- 4 This report looks at how the Agency is managing and developing the Parks, and its resources, to meet the needs of current and future users. In particular, we considered what the Agency is doing to:
- achieve a wider range of users and uses (Part 2);
  - manage its physical resources effectively (Part 3);
  - increase its own income (Part 4);
  - strengthen its management capacity (Part 5).

## Our main findings

### 5 On achieving a wider range of users and uses

- The Agency has acknowledged the need to improve its information on users and potential users and to establish a more reliable basis for the visitor numbers figure (60 million) used in its annual report (paragraphs 2.2 and 2.3).
- The current annual visitor survey lacks data on what motivates people to visit the Parks and the value they attach to them. This information would help the Agency to meet users' needs and plan for the future. The results of our own qualitative survey provide evidence for the view that users attach considerable value and importance to the Parks, and see them as vital to the well-being of London (paragraphs 2.4 and 2.5).
- The Agency is developing a number of strategies aimed at encouraging greater access to the Parks but the strategies lack action plans or quantifiable targets for individual Parks, and the Agency's marketing material does not make the most of the strong selling points of the Parks (paragraphs 2.7 to 2.9).
- The Agency is building on successful educational projects in some of the Parks and developing a more coherent programme for education, although the capacity of the Agency to deliver such a programme needs addressing along with the need for more information about the people participating in educational events in the Parks (paragraphs 2.10 and 2.11).
- There are good examples of initiatives helping people with special needs in certain Parks, for example the partnership with the Holly Lodge Centre, an educational charity focussing on people with disabilities, based in Richmond Park. In seeking to make all the Parks more disability-friendly, the Agency could also learn from practice elsewhere (paragraphs 2.12 to 2.15).
- The Agency is stepping up its efforts to engage the wider community in its work to encourage a wider sense of ownership in the Parks and as a way of minimising the tensions between the different uses of the Parks, for example, large scale entertainment on the one hand and quiet reflection on the other (paragraphs 2.16 to 2.18).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Agency should consult with under-represented groups, using methods such as consultation groups, to identify the main obstacles to more frequent use of the Parks.

The Agency should extend its annual visitor survey to generate information on visitors' attitudes to the Parks.

Without a reliable method of estimating visitor numbers the Agency should not include such numbers in its annual report to Parliament.

The Agency should strengthen its strategies for encouraging greater access to the Parks by setting action plans with targets for individual Parks and specifying systems for review and evaluation, and updating its marketing and public relations material.

The Agency should compile a comprehensive database on the people participating in educational events in the Parks, including information on their age, ethnicity and disabilities, and extend to all the Parks the work being done in some of the Parks to develop partnerships with key education stakeholders.

The Agency should consider working with The Sensory Trust<sup>2</sup> to make the Parks more accessible to disabled users, and undertake disability audits.



### 6 On managing the Agency's physical resources effectively

- The Parks are highly regarded for their horticultural standards and with few exceptions continue to meet their annual performance targets for soft landscape presentation, although in the last three years the Parks have not quite achieved their performance targets for overall quality and cleanliness. The process of assessing horticultural, quality and cleanliness standards has remained the same for almost a decade (paragraphs 3.2, 3.4 and 3.5).
- The Agency is taking action to assess its maintenance priorities and address its estimated £110 million backlog of buildings maintenance, but has yet to set clear priorities for action. Significant progress in reducing the backlog will depend on the Agency's ability to generate additional income (paragraphs 3.8 and 3.9).
- The Agency has made little progress in forming a 'benchmarking club' with national or international partners as a way of improving the physical environment of the Parks (paragraph 3.11).
- The Agency is reviewing its highly regarded horticultural traineeship scheme, which is currently operating below capacity (paragraph 3.14).

<sup>2</sup> The Sensory Trust is a national charity working in the field of social inclusion and accessible and inclusive environmental design. This work ranges from physical site design through to interpretation and policy issues.

## RECOMMENDATIONS



The Agency should review its processes for assessing horticultural, quality and cleanliness standards in the Parks to minimise the risk of the targets no longer being sufficiently stretching. The Agency's performance should be subject to external comparisons.

The Agency should become part of a network of international parks, such as the International Park Strategic Partners Group<sup>3</sup>, to share best practice on all aspects of park management.

The Agency should set targets for increased take-up of the horticultural traineeship scheme.

### 7 On increasing the Agency's own income

- The Agency generates income to supplement its annual grant from the Department and has increased the amount raised from £4 million in 1999-2000 to £6.1 million in 2002-03, a rise of 53 per cent (paragraph 4.2).
- With the aim of achieving a step change in its self-generated income, the Agency has established an independent charity, The Royal Parks Foundation, which aims to raise an additional £5 million in 2004 (paragraph 4.4).
- Commercial events are a significant source of income for the Agency but the risks of commercial failure need to be better managed. The Agency is also conscious of the need to reduce the wear and tear caused by such events on the Parks and Hyde Park in particular (paragraphs 4.7 and 4.8).
- The Agency needs a more reliable basis for ensuring that it recovers its costs and makes a profit (paragraph 4.9).

## RECOMMENDATIONS



To maximise its self-generated income, the Agency, working closely with The Royal Parks Foundation, should explore opportunities to learn from other parks.

In hosting commercial events, the Agency should take a more considered approach to the risks involved particularly where its expenditure commitments are dependent on the income from the events and also where the income is not received in advance.

The Agency should improve the information it holds about the cost and profitability of income generating activities so that it can develop a more reliable basis for assessing whether events are covering all the Agency's costs and maximising the potential profits.

<sup>3</sup> The International Park Strategic Partners Group is chaired by Sydney's Centennial Parklands and consists of 12 international partners, who come together periodically to share best practice in park management. As of May 2004, this group will be known as Parks Forum.



## 8 On strengthening the Agency's management capacity

- A new Senior Management Team has improved the Agency's corporate management and decision making and is benefiting from expert financial and commercial advice from the re-launched Royal Parks Advisory Board (paragraphs 5.3 and 5.4).
- The Royal Parks Foundation has been established with the aim of generating more financial and public support for the Parks (paragraph 5.5).
- The Agency is introducing a new performance information system, has aligned its objectives with those of the Department and has set more measurable targets (paragraph 5.6).
- The Agency's new targets tend to be inward-looking both in their focus on internal management processes and because they are not subject to external challenge, for example, through benchmarking against other parks. And some targets are not cascaded effectively to the individual Parks (paragraph 5.7).
- The Agency is seeking ways of quantifying the economic contribution that the Parks make to London and the nation. This will be a complex task but we have identified research by other organisations which could help the Agency in its work (Appendix 3). In particular, CABI Space<sup>4</sup> has commissioned research into this area (paragraph 5.7).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Agency should consider, as a priority, participating in the Green Flag Award Scheme. This would provide an opportunity to benchmark the Parks against a widely applied standard and receive an objective assessment of what the Parks offer visitors. This recommendation can be read across to the other recommendations above regarding benchmarking. The cost of participating in the Scheme would be approximately £3,400, although preparing for the assessment process would require management time and effort.

With reference to the publication 'Setting Key Targets for Executive Agencies: A Guide'<sup>5</sup>, the Agency should now work with the Department to set targets that are focussed on outcomes and these targets should be cascaded within the Agency where appropriate.

In seeking to quantify the economic contribution that the Parks make to London and the nation, the Agency should learn from research by other park organisations and develop links with CABI Space.



<sup>4</sup> CABI Space is the national organisation that champions better parks and public spaces. It is a unit within CABI, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, and was launched in May 2003 with funding from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and support from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

<sup>5</sup> 'Setting Key Targets for Executive Agencies: A Guide' is a joint publication by HM Treasury, the Cabinet Office and the National Audit Office produced in November 2003.