



National Audit Office

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
Enhancing Urban Green Space

LONDON: The Stationery Office
£12.25

Ordered by the
House of Commons
to be printed on 27 February 2006

PREFACE



Why urban green space is important

1 For many years the need for good-quality, well-maintained urban parks, recreation grounds and other green spaces was not regarded as a priority and decline in many neighbourhoods set in. But green space makes a vital contribution to the quality of urban life and to the achievement of a range of Government objectives. Access to green space is a powerful weapon in the fight against obesity and ill-health, especially amongst children. Neglected parks seem to attract anti-social behaviour and have the potential to undermine regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods. In growth areas, good quality parks and open spaces are one of the best ways to ensure new communities blend harmoniously with old.

2 The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, supported by other Departments, has embarked upon a number of initiatives to raise the profile of green space. It has required local government to approach the planning of urban squares, parks, green corridors and nature reserves in a more comprehensive and strategic manner. It has urged local authorities to improve the quality of their open and green space and set national targets to help achieve this. And it has established a new unit within the Commission for the Built Environment to champion public space, and specifically to develop best practice and provide advice and support to local government on public and green space issues.

Value for Money

3 Our report shows that initiatives led by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister have helped to reverse the decline in the quality of urban green space in many of England's urban neighbourhoods. New sources of funds from central government and the lottery have helped to bring about the refurbishment and renewal of many green spaces. Some notable examples include Sheffield Botanical Gardens and King Edward Memorial Park in East London. And local communities have an increasing say in helping to protect and enhance green space.

4 The nation spends almost £700 million on urban green space each year. Our report identifies three main risks to value for money from this expenditure:

Resources need to be targeted better

5 Without a strategic approach there is a danger that resources will be targeted badly – for example by making a good park even better at the expense of improving a run down green space in a deprived area that desperately needs improvement. One third of urban local authorities still do not have strategies for their green space and many existing strategies are weak, particularly in identifying costs and demonstrating efficiency. Central government needs to use performance data more methodically to support poorer performing local authorities with advice and mentoring.

More modern and innovative procurement approaches are needed

6 The limited information on unit costs suggests some local authorities may spend five times as much as others maintaining their green space and there is scope for improved efficiency. Many local authorities have responded to inadequate performance by green space maintenance contractors by taking services back in-house. Fewer have tested the value for money of their existing arrangements against some of the more innovative methods of supplying green services illustrated in this report. These include shared contracts across local authorities or longer-term partnerships with the private, voluntary and community sectors.

Capacity and skills need strengthening

7 Green space is still too often treated as a Cinderella service. Its voice is often dissipated within local authorities and underrepresented in important decision-making arenas. Central government expects local green space managers to make the case for green space expenditure against other pressing priorities and to forge links with the private, community and voluntary sectors. Green space managers' training needs to be tailored to the new role expected of them. Otherwise there is the danger that when budgets are tight, the case for green space will not be made effectively, will slip down the local priority list and decline will set in again.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Background

1 Good quality green space plays a vital role in enhancing the quality of urban life. Urban green spaces help to make neighbourhoods more attractive to live in and provide opportunities for city dwellers to relax, take exercise, play sport, and meet friends and neighbours. The existence of high quality urban green space contributes to wider Government objectives such as improved health, more sustainable neighbourhood renewal and better community cohesion, especially in more deprived communities.

2 Urban green space includes many types of land in an urban setting from formally designated areas such as parks to more natural areas such as corridors along river banks. Such green areas account for around 14 per cent of urban space. We estimate that the cost of maintaining and renovating urban green space was about £700 million in 2004-05. Local authorities have the key strategic role in ensuring sufficient local provision of good quality urban green space, although a number of other bodies, particularly housing associations, may be responsible for managing elements of green space.

3 The quality of urban green space declined during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Reasons for this decline include the increasingly competitive demands on local authority leisure and other service budgets, inflexible and insensitive contracting out of maintenance work and a fall in the local and national political and administrative priority given to green space.

4 In 2001, the Government set up an Urban Green Spaces Task Force to advise Ministers on how to go about raising green space quality and ensure it receives the priority that its importance to local communities deserves. Improving urban green space is now part of a wider “liveability policy” which is concerned with creating high quality and attractive places. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) is responsible for leading national policy on liveability and green space issues. The key policy initiatives and associated programmes designed to bring about improvements in urban green space together with a timeline are shown in **Figures 1 and 2 overleaf**.

PREFACE



Why urban green space is important

1 For many years the need for good-quality, well-maintained urban parks, recreation grounds and other green spaces was not regarded as a priority and decline in many neighbourhoods set in. But green space makes a vital contribution to the quality of urban life and to the achievement of a range of Government objectives. Access to green space is a powerful weapon in the fight against obesity and ill-health, especially amongst children. Neglected parks seem to attract anti-social behaviour and have the potential to undermine regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods. In growth areas, good quality parks and open spaces are one of the best ways to ensure new communities blend harmoniously with old.

2 The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, supported by other Departments, has embarked upon a number of initiatives to raise the profile of green space. It has required local government to approach the planning of urban squares, parks, green corridors and nature reserves in a more comprehensive and strategic manner. It has urged local authorities to improve the quality of their open and green space and set national targets to help achieve this. And it has established a new unit within the Commission for the Built Environment to champion public space, and specifically to develop best practice and provide advice and support to local government on public and green space issues.

Value for Money

3 Our report shows that initiatives led by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister have helped to reverse the decline in the quality of urban green space in many of England's urban neighbourhoods. New sources of funds from central government and the lottery have helped to bring about the refurbishment and renewal of many green spaces. Some notable examples include Sheffield Botanical Gardens and King Edward Memorial Park in East London. And local communities have an increasing say in helping to protect and enhance green space.

4 The nation spends almost £700 million on urban green space each year. Our report identifies three main risks to value for money from this expenditure:

Resources need to be targeted better

5 Without a strategic approach there is a danger that resources will be targeted badly – for example by making a good park even better at the expense of improving a run down green space in a deprived area that desperately needs improvement. One third of urban local authorities still do not have strategies for their green space and many existing strategies are weak, particularly in identifying costs and demonstrating efficiency. Central government needs to use performance data more methodically to support poorer performing local authorities with advice and mentoring.

More modern and innovative procurement approaches are needed

6 The limited information on unit costs suggests some local authorities may spend five times as much as others maintaining their green space and there is scope for improved efficiency. Many local authorities have responded to inadequate performance by green space maintenance contractors by taking services back in-house. Fewer have tested the value for money of their existing arrangements against some of the more innovative methods of supplying green services illustrated in this report. These include shared contracts across local authorities or longer-term partnerships with the private, voluntary and community sectors.

Capacity and skills need strengthening

7 Green space is still too often treated as a Cinderella service. Its voice is often dissipated within local authorities and underrepresented in important decision-making arenas. Central government expects local green space managers to make the case for green space expenditure against other pressing priorities and to forge links with the private, community and voluntary sectors. Green space managers' training needs to be tailored to the new role expected of them. Otherwise there is the danger that when budgets are tight, the case for green space will not be made effectively, will slip down the local priority list and decline will set in again.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Background

1 Good quality green space plays a vital role in enhancing the quality of urban life. Urban green spaces help to make neighbourhoods more attractive to live in and provide opportunities for city dwellers to relax, take exercise, play sport, and meet friends and neighbours. The existence of high quality urban green space contributes to wider Government objectives such as improved health, more sustainable neighbourhood renewal and better community cohesion, especially in more deprived communities.

2 Urban green space includes many types of land in an urban setting from formally designated areas such as parks to more natural areas such as corridors along river banks. Such green areas account for around 14 per cent of urban space. We estimate that the cost of maintaining and renovating urban green space was about £700 million in 2004-05. Local authorities have the key strategic role in ensuring sufficient local provision of good quality urban green space, although a number of other bodies, particularly housing associations, may be responsible for managing elements of green space.

3 The quality of urban green space declined during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Reasons for this decline include the increasingly competitive demands on local authority leisure and other service budgets, inflexible and insensitive contracting out of maintenance work and a fall in the local and national political and administrative priority given to green space.

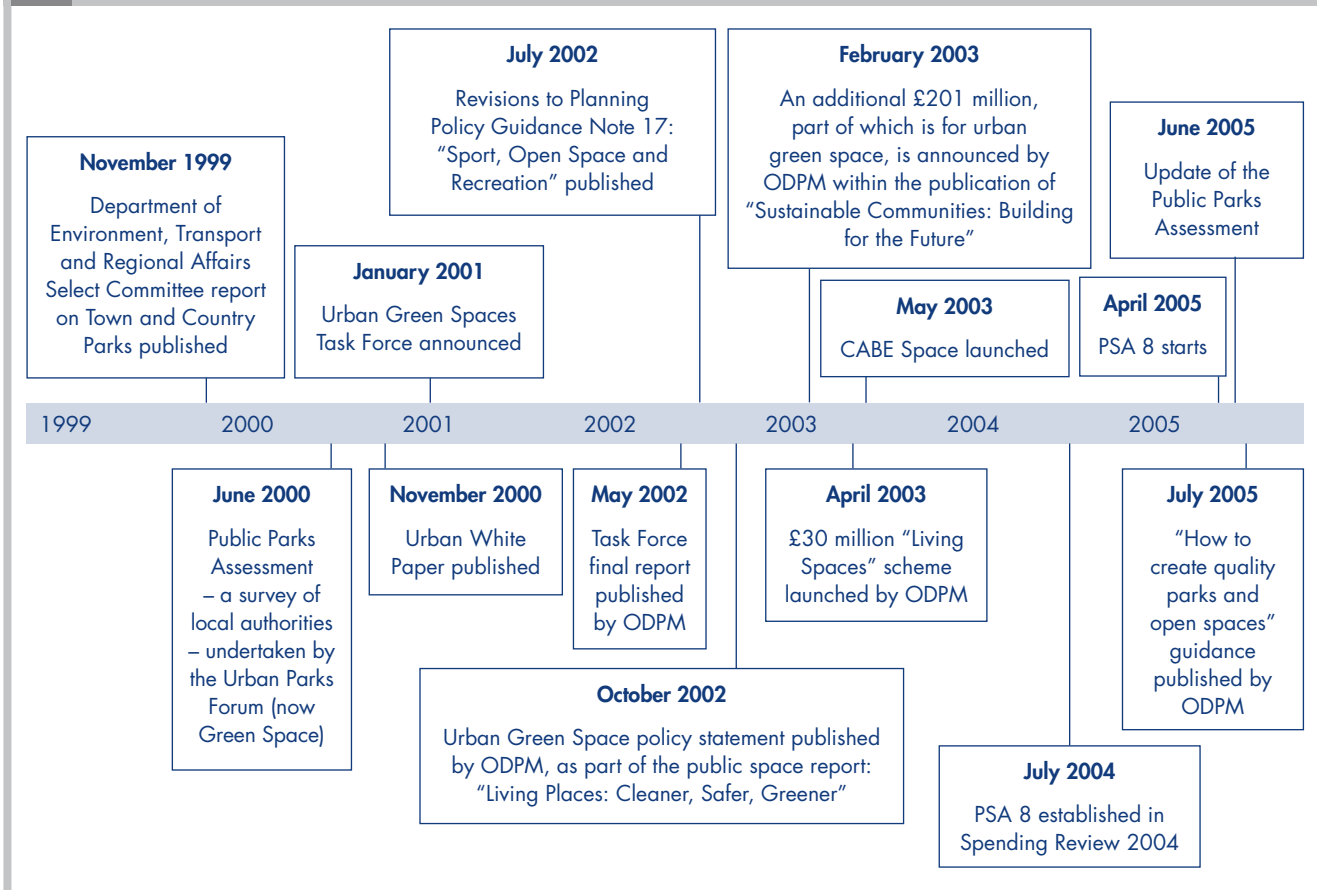
4 In 2001, the Government set up an Urban Green Spaces Task Force to advise Ministers on how to go about raising green space quality and ensure it receives the priority that its importance to local communities deserves. Improving urban green space is now part of a wider “liveability policy” which is concerned with creating high quality and attractive places. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) is responsible for leading national policy on liveability and green space issues. The key policy initiatives and associated programmes designed to bring about improvements in urban green space together with a timeline are shown in **Figures 1 and 2 overleaf**.

1 Key national policy initiatives to enhance urban green space

- Revised **planning rules**, (Planning Policy Guidance Note 17, July 2002) calling upon local authorities to assess the existing and future needs of their communities for open space and to set local standards for the maintenance and adequate supply of facilities
- Establishment in 2003 of a separate unit within the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment – **CABE Space** to champion public spaces focussing initially on parks and green spaces
- Promotion of a **Green Flag Award scheme** to provide national standards and encourage better green space management
- Commitment of around **£201 million** of new central government direct funding for 'liveability' over 2003-04 to 2005-06
- Introduction in July 2004 of a new **Public Service Agreement (number 8)** requiring the delivery of cleaner, safer and greener public spaces in deprived communities and across the country with measurable improvement by 2008
- Development and spread of **good practice** in green space development and management
- Encouragement of **partnership approaches** between Whitehall departments, between local authorities and other local public bodies and between local public bodies and the community and voluntary sector

Source: National Audit Office

2 Urban Green Space Timeline

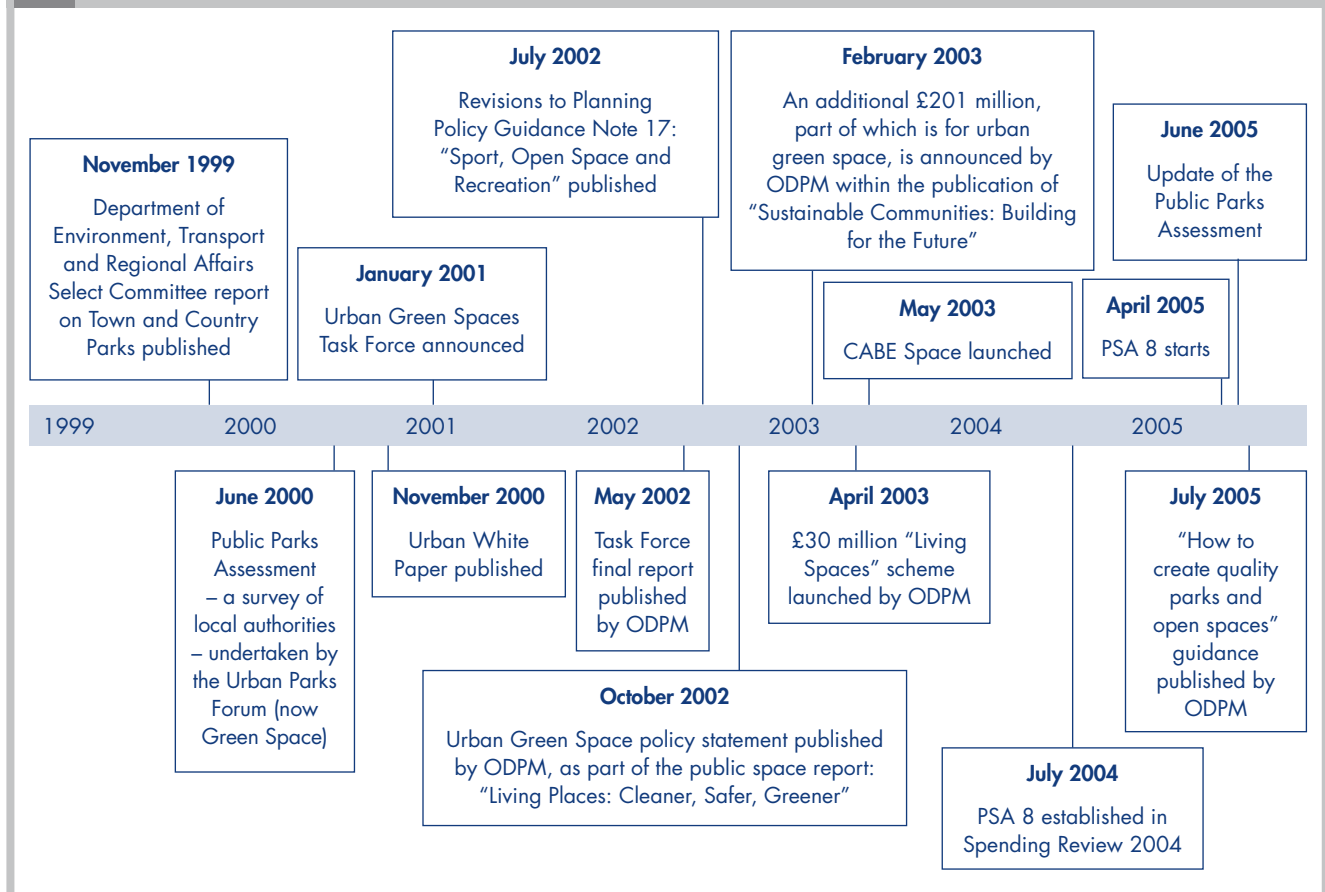


1 Key national policy initiatives to enhance urban green space

- Revised **planning rules**, (Planning Policy Guidance Note 17, July 2002) calling upon local authorities to assess the existing and future needs of their communities for open space and to set local standards for the maintenance and adequate supply of facilities
- Establishment in 2003 of a separate unit within the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment – **CABE Space** to champion public spaces focussing initially on parks and green spaces
- Promotion of a **Green Flag Award scheme** to provide national standards and encourage better green space management
- Commitment of around **£201 million** of new central government direct funding for 'liveability' over 2003-04 to 2005-06
- Introduction in July 2004 of a new **Public Service Agreement (number 8)** requiring the delivery of cleaner, safer and greener public spaces in deprived communities and across the country with measurable improvement by 2008
- Development and spread of **good practice** in green space development and management
- Encouragement of **partnership approaches** between Whitehall departments, between local authorities and other local public bodies and between local public bodies and the community and voluntary sector

Source: National Audit Office

2 Urban Green Space Timeline



5 The impact of these initiatives is the subject of this report. This report examines whether the barriers to the enhancement of urban green space have been well identified, and after an introductory part (Part 1), considers the progress:

- in enhancing and tracking the quality of urban green space (Part 2)
- in improving the financial management of urban green space (Part 3)
- through the planning system to protect and enhance urban green space (Part 4).

6 We carried out a survey of urban local authorities and asked for data on the condition of their green spaces. This updated a previous survey commissioned by ODPM, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Countryside Agency and English Heritage in 2000 called the 'Public Parks Assessment'. We asked the Landscape Department of the University of Sheffield to review urban local authority green space strategies. We ran six large focus groups of community groups and green space managers, and used an expert panel. We visited the organisations involved in managing and funding urban green space, as well as working closely with the Audit Commission. We also surveyed many academic and other studies and reports. Our methodology is explained in more detail at Appendix A.



FINDINGS

Overall findings

What is working well

7 The decline in the quality of urban green space has been halted in most areas and there are signs of recovery in many places. Both those who manage and those who use urban green space agree. In 2000, managers in less than 44 per cent of urban local authorities believed the quality of their green space was stable or improving. This figure has increased to 84 per cent in 2005. And urban residents' satisfaction with green space increased by eight per cent between 2000 and 2003.¹

8 Central advocacy by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and CABA Space has helped to raise the awareness of the importance of good quality urban green space to local communities and wider Government objectives. Around 69 per cent of local authorities now have a green space strategy completed or in development. In 2000 the equivalent figure was 53 per cent.

9 New sources of funds, especially from the lottery, have enabled local authorities and other public bodies to bring about refurbishment and improvement. Central funding has encouraged greater partnership working and helped to bring about more engagement of local communities in refurbishment programmes and schemes (Figure 3 on page 8).

10 The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has identified the need for local authorities to innovate and plan to ensure funding to sustain improvement is built into refurbishment schemes, and is encouraging them to do so.

What needs more development

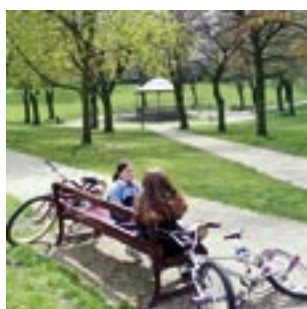
11 The improvement in the quality of urban green space is not yet universal. Our survey of parks managers revealed that in some sixteen per cent of urban local authorities the quality of their green space was considered to be in decline. Local authority surveys of residents show that there is wide variation in the level of satisfaction with urban parks and green spaces. Some local authorities score only 54 per cent satisfaction, whilst others achieve 92 per cent satisfaction. And resident satisfaction has risen faster in authorities where satisfaction levels were already relatively high in 2000.

12 Mainstream expenditure by local authorities on upkeep required to sustain improvement over the longer term has increased, although not at the rate of increases spent on other local public services or the funding made available.

13 The lessons from central government funded projects to encourage local authorities to innovate in service delivery have yet to be fully identified and spread. And local authorities need to improve the information they collect on the cost of their green space management to provide assurance on their efficiency and effectiveness.

14 Despite the higher profile of green space, many urban local authorities have not yet reflected this importance in well conceived and well supported local strategies. There remains a need to continue to promote urban green space, and to identify and apply good practice advice to secure a more widespread and sustainable improvement.

¹ The resident satisfaction survey is carried out every three years.



Part two findings: Improving the quality of urban green space

What is working well

15 Eighty four per cent of urban local authorities believe the quality of their parks is stable or improving. This compares to less than 44 per cent in 2000. In 2000 more than 55 per cent of urban local authorities considered their historic green spaces were declining in quality. We found that this had fallen to 16 per cent in 2005.

16 The Government has set targets to track and measure improvements in green space quality. Within a broader aim to enhance 'liveability' – improving the quality and safety of public spaces and local environments and people's enjoyment of them – the Government has set national targets to focus attention, track progress and measure achievement under the eighth Public Service Agreement of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Two of the sub-targets relate directly to green spaces – improving residents' satisfaction with green spaces, and increasing the number of areas with a green space which have won a Green Flag Award (**Figure 4 overleaf**) by 2008. Other indicators are generic and include green space issues but not explicitly, such as the number of local authorities whose environmental services are judged to be performing well or performing strongly by the Audit Commission as part of their Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

17 In aggregate residents' satisfaction with green space has increased. Between 2000 and 2003 the proportion of residents across England who were satisfied with their local parks and open spaces rose by eight percentage points to 71 per cent. The overall target to increase satisfaction to 75 per cent by 2008 is likely to be achieved.

18 The number of individual green spaces recognised as being of good quality is increasing. The Green Flag Award, which is administered by the Civic Trust on behalf of the Green Flag Advisory Board and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, is the national standard for parks and green spaces in England and Wales. The number of local authorities taking part in the award scheme has increased steadily, and the Civic Trust are confident that the PSA target – for 60 per cent of local authority districts to receive at least one award – will be met. The Green Flag Award scheme is well regarded by urban green space managers who believe that it has been effective in raising the profile of green space and increasing visitors.

19 Wider participation in the Green Flag Award scheme could enhance the quality of green space across an urban area. There is early evidence to suggest that better urban local authorities use the Green Flag Award as a benchmark to drive up standards across all of the spaces for which they are responsible.

3 The renovation of urban green space; the example of Sheffield Botanical Gardens



The site

A 19 acre garden, originally designed by Robert Marnock in the Gardenesque style, which dates from 1836. It contains a large collection of listed buildings including the Grade II* listed curvilinear Glass Pavilions, one of the earliest ever built.

The problem

Derelict listed buildings, dilapidated glass pavilions, overgrown planting and lost landscape design.

The plan

Sheffield City Council sought a restoration in keeping with the spirit of the original Victorian layout, but adapting it to modern-day needs. To create a centre for horticultural excellence and educational opportunities.

Phase One: renovation of Grade II listed, derelict buildings.

Phase Two: restoration of the Glass Pavilions.

Phase Three: landscaping.

The funding

The majority of the funding came from a Heritage Lottery Grant of £5.06 million (75 per cent of the required sum), to be matched by £1.22 million raised locally through fundraising and sponsorship (25 per cent). Sheffield City Council contributed £350,000 towards the project. Match funding was raised by the Sheffield Botanical Gardens Trust and the activities of the Friends group. Donations were made by businesses; charities; societies; Landfill Tax; bequests and private individuals; sponsors.

The achievement

- The only Botanical Gardens in the country undertaking a complete garden restoration.
- Derelict buildings renovated and in use.
- Restored and restocked Glass Pavilions officially opened by HRH Prince Charles, September 2003.
- Landscape restoration completed September 2005.
- Final completion of the whole project expected November 2005.

Source: National Audit Office/Heritage Lottery Fund

4 The Green Flag Award scheme assesses the quality of parks and green spaces against eight criteria

The green space must be:

- Welcoming
- Healthy, safe and secure
- Well maintained and clean
- Managed in a sustainable way

In addition the management of the park should:

- Make the most of its conservation and heritage potential
- Encourage community involvement
- Actively market the park
- Have strong management plans in place

Source: National Audit Office, based on Civic Trust information

20 Local community groups make a substantial contribution to the enhancement of urban green space. Government has launched a series of initiatives and sponsorship to support community engagement. Many community groups are 'Friends' groups (Figure 5).² Their main role is to act as a voice for a particular park or green space, and they often act as a link between the local authority and the wider community. There are over 4,000 community groups involved in green space across the country, and it is estimated that the annual economic value of their work across the UK could be as much as £35 million.³ Green space managers are increasingly recognising the need to engage with such groups in order to respond adequately to the changing needs and expectations of local residents.

What needs more development

21 There is wide variation in the level of satisfaction with urban parks and green spaces. Some local authorities score only 54 per cent, whilst others achieve 92 per cent satisfaction. Many local authorities would have to increase residents' satisfaction by considerable margins if the aggregate national target was applied locally (Figure 6 overleaf).

22 Work needs to be done to ensure that urban communities which have endured poor quality green space for many years do not miss out on improvements. We found that this group contained many deprived communities in receipt of Neighbourhood Renewal Funds for use on green space, and others attracting no special targeting. Much still needs to be done if the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is to meet its specific target that all deprived communities attain an average resident satisfaction score of 75 per cent by 2007-08. But there also needs to be a focus on the others in the poorly performing group which are not classified as deprived and do not receive Neighbourhood Renewal Funds. Some deprived areas currently receiving Neighbourhood Renewal Funds are already achieving high quality green space, and it may be more productive to target funds more carefully, or even refine the target itself towards a national minimum resident satisfaction score.

5 The 'CV' of Friends of Southwark Park



Their 'job': Formed in 1996 to improve a very run-down but much loved park for the whole community.

Aims: To maintain and provide the local community with a green space to escape to, that they want to use, enjoy and feel proud of – the original reasons for building the park in 1869.

Activities: Involved with Southwark council in decision and policy making. Assisting with running the 'Young Friends of Southwark Park' for 8–15 year olds. Producing and implementing the Sunday summer free bandstand concerts. Applying for funding. Tours and talks for civic visitors and community groups.

Role: Everything from helping to set the budgets to sweeping the pathways! Totally involved and committed.

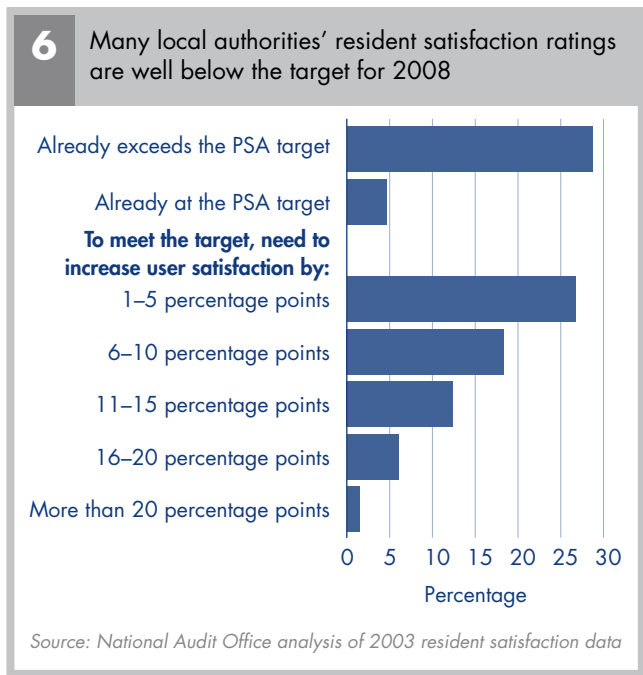
Successes: Turning around a virtually abandoned park. Helping shape the direction of the Heritage Lottery restoration project. Seeing that local campaigning can bring about positive change.

Issues: Getting more people involved with the group. Raising staffing levels and maintenance issues and ensuring that Southwark Park remains a focal point for the community.

Source: Friends of Southwark Park

² Community Networking Project, GreenSpace, November 2003.

³ Community Networking Project, GreenSpace, November 2003.



23 Despite the increasing number of authorities taking part in the Green Flag Award scheme, accredited space is still scarce. Across urban England, there are 7.3 Green Flag Award winning spaces for every million people. Participation in the Green Flag Award scheme is discretionary and the spread of awards is uneven. Urban residents in the North West have 17.7 Green Flag spaces per million people, compared with only 2.8 in the West Midlands.

24 Given the recent rapid growth in the numbers taking part, concern has been expressed about maintaining the quality and comparability of judging standards. The Civic Trust has plans in place to maintain the credibility and consistency of the award and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister should monitor this carefully.

25 There is a risk that in the short term the Green Flag Award scheme may help to widen the gap between the best parks and green spaces and the rest if it is only seen to recognise already good spaces. Authorities pursuing a Green Flag for one space may be tempted to divert resources away from others. About 40 per cent of urban green space managers told us that the pursuit of an award had been significant in diverting resources away from other green space in the area.

26 The Green Flag Award scheme may not yet have driven up the standard of the poorest parks – one quarter of the parks which managers had rated as ‘good’ in 2000 have been awarded a Green Flag, compared with only two per cent of parks which had been in ‘poor’ condition in 2000. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recognises that such an award scheme will represent the top end of park and green space management, and the Green Flag Advisory Board is considering how the underlying principles can be used to support poor and failing spaces to improve.

27 Progress in enhancing urban green space continues to be held back by skills shortages. In 2002, the Urban Green Spaces Task Force concluded that there had been a decline in the number of experienced individuals employed in parks and other green space. Our research and work by CABE Space has confirmed the continuing widespread deficit in skills (particularly management skills) and relevant training at all levels in the sector. The Government has established a new Academy for Sustainable Communities which aims to help tackle the skills issue for the sector. Due to the wide range of organisations involved, progress on a national skills strategy has been slower than anticipated. CABE Space had planned to produce a skills strategy by 2005, but it is likely to be published in 2006.

Part three findings: Improving the financial management of urban green space

What is working well

28 We estimate that almost £700 million was spent on urban green space in 2004-05. Eighty five per cent of funding came from the public sector and the bulk of private funding came from planning gain contributions from private developers (Figure 7). The majority of central government funding is channelled through the local authority revenue support grant to local authorities. Programmes supported by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs contribute £12 million. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is the main other departmental funder. The national lottery distribution bodies have made a significant contribution to revitalising parks and green spaces through sustained green space programmes.

7 Around £700 million was spent on urban green space in 2004-05

	£	%
Local authorities	482	70
Central government and European Union	106	15
National Lottery	58	8
Private sector	34	5
Third sector	13	2
Total	693	100

Source: National Audit Office

29 Additional sources of funds have been made available by central government and the lottery distribution bodies. The majority of additional funding comes via central government grants and National Lottery funded programmes. Lottery programmes are targeted at renovation or new facilities rather than for maintenance and upkeep of green spaces. Local authorities, third sector and community groups have welcomed these additional monies as they are effectively targeted at improving green space. The central allocation of these additional funds to different local groups has led to increased partnership working between local authorities and others in the delivery of green space.

30 Local authority expenditure on green space has risen. Over the last six years cash expenditure by local authorities on green space has increased by around five per cent a year on average, or around 2.5 per cent a year in real terms. Between 2002-03 and 2004-05, local authority expenditure on green space rose by 19 per cent (10 per cent after inflation).

31 Some local authorities are beginning to experiment with innovative ways of delivering green space services. For example, one local authority has developed a public-private partnership approach and another has handed the management of one of its parks to a voluntary sector organisation.

32 A number of local authorities have developed voluntary benchmarking clubs or associations to compare the economy and efficiency of aspects of green space management, either locally, or between like authorities. The data collected by these benchmarking clubs suggests a wide variation in the unit cost of managing green space. For example, the average cost of maintaining one hectare of green space varies by a factor in excess of five, suggesting there is considerable scope for improved value for money in some local authorities.

What needs more development

33 Local authority expenditure on green space, which makes up four-fifths of public sector spending, has increased by 19 per cent in cash terms since 2001-02, but has nevertheless not kept pace with the increasing level of overall local authority spending or the increasing amounts spent on other environmental and cultural services. Funding is made through formula grant⁴, which is unhypothecated and its use is therefore within local authority discretion. Green space, along with most other environmental and cultural services, is non-statutory and its funding is often under severe pressure from other services.

34 Current performance reporting and assessment regimes provide limited assurance on the economy and efficiency of local authority green space expenditure. Under Comprehensive Performance Assessments, green space management is not subject to the same level of scrutiny as built environmental services. Of the 23 indicators used by the Audit Commission to assess the performance of local authority environmental, protective and cultural services, the sole indicator relating specifically to green space, measures local residents' satisfaction with green space. The paucity of measures means that green space management is not subject to the same level of scrutiny as built environmental services. And this in turn may mean that senior officers and local politicians do not give green space management the priority it deserves.

⁴ Formula grant is the pot of money which local authorities use to fund their services. It comprises revenue support grant, redistributed business rates and primary formula police grant.

35 Local authority budgeting and reporting on green space expenditure needs to be strengthened to enable better measurement of economy and efficiency. We found that the current budgeting, accounting and financial reporting procedures and practices of many local authorities make it difficult to devise appropriate economy and efficiency measures for green space. These weaknesses include:

- Relevant costs of different directorates or divisions within local authorities contributing to green space management are not brought together.
- External sources of funding are not brought together with mainstream expenditure in a consistent manner to demonstrate total resources devoted to green spaces.
- Costs on individual green spaces or categories of green space are not allocated or apportioned.
- Contracts with external suppliers may not provide for reporting to allow allocation of costs across different activities or areas of green space.
- At the level of detail required, expenditure is not accounted for on an accruals basis and does not include non-cash costs such as depreciation.
- Costs are not related to units of activity or outcome, such as hectares maintained to recognised quality standards.

36 A national framework for improved financial management is needed to strengthen the performance of urban green spaces. We would expect local authorities to build upon existing financial guidance and procedures so as to be able to account for expenditure for each green space so as to support improvement plans and funding allocations to achieve desired outcomes. The Annex to the Executive Summary sets out a framework for local authorities to use to improve their financial management.

37 Modern contracting practices need to be adopted more widely. We found that many authorities have responded to the service problems brought about by inflexible contracts by bringing services back in-house. Few have adopted innovative approaches. There is scope for many local authorities to consider more modern contracting practices based on flexible measures of outcome and closer partnering.

Part four findings: Planning urban green space

What is working well

38 Eighty-three percent of urban green space managers consider that the work of ODPM and CABE Space has raised the status of green space issues. This has been achieved through a combination of improved policy guidance by ODPM and better strategic information and guidelines to green space managers provided by CABE Space.

39 ODPM's revised policy planning policy guidelines have set clear objectives for planning authorities that are designed to:

- Protect open space, playing fields and green spaces in cities and towns, and
- Provide clarity for planning authorities, developers and landowners in terms of what can be expected to preserve and enhance open space, sport and recreation provision in the future.

40 CABE Space have worked closely with and supported green space managers in many local authorities. They have provided one-to-one support and guidance in key areas such as the benefits of green space and how to produce a green space strategy.

41 Achieving national objectives for urban green space depends on rigorous local assessment of need and audits of provision. Those authorities that have audited their current provision of green space as required under policy planning guidance 17 are better able to:

- Meet the current needs of residents
- Identify the quality, shortfalls and surpluses of open space, and
- Determine how best to meet future needs arising from developments.

42 Today, eighty-one per cent of local authorities have completed or are in the process of undertaking an audit of their current provision of open space as recommended in Planning Policy Guidance 17. Two-thirds of authorities have completed or started their needs assessments.

43 Green space strategies help to develop a shared vision between politicians, officers, key partners and stakeholders to support, protect and enhance green space. Nearly seventy per cent of urban authorities have produced or are in the process of developing a green spaces strategy.

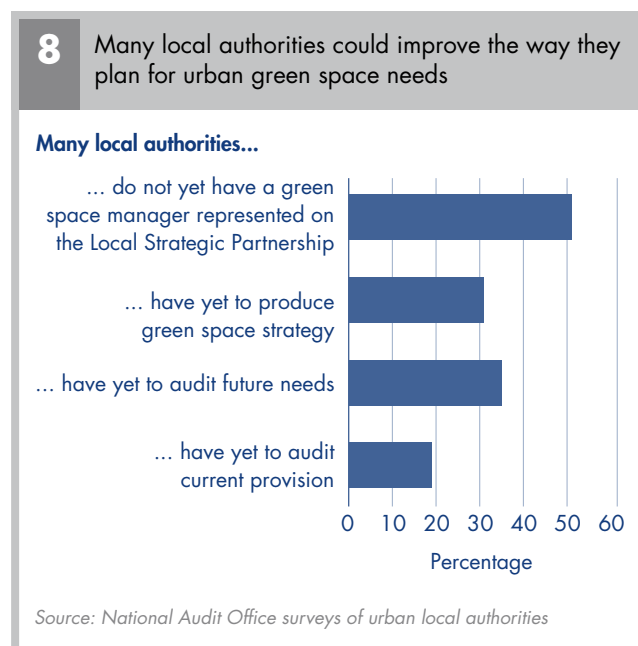
What needs more development

44 One in five urban authorities has yet to start auditing their current provision of green space. And some 35 per cent have yet to start examining what their future needs are likely to be (see **Figure 8**).

45 Sixty per cent of urban local authorities have not yet formally adopted green space strategies. About 30 per cent of urban local authorities have yet to produce a green space strategy and do not expect to do so within the next year (Figure 8).

46 There is a wide range in the quality of current green and open space strategies. Common aspects that need to be improved include:

- Coverage of green space managed by bodies other than the local authority.
- Consideration of the needs of all users of green space, matched to the socio-economic profile of the area.
- Clearer allocation of responsibilities for action between different bodies.
- Setting a minimum standard for access to green space.
- Linking green space strategy with other local government service strategies.
- Prioritisation of spending options and consideration of skills and training needs.
- Providing for the monitoring and review of strategies and a timetable for implementation.



47 Local authorities need better guidance on the software tools available to map green space provision and access. We found that less than one fifth of urban local authorities had used geographic information systems in the production of the strategies we examined. We found urban green space managers had limited knowledge of the usefulness of such systems for mapping the provision of green space with demographic and other data to help develop a strategy. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is developing a green-space database for England, which will allow the sharing of a full range of green space information through a map-based internet tool. This should form the first step towards a consistent base-line that planners and managers of green spaces could use for their green-space audits and assessments. ODPM plans to launch a pilot database in mid 2006.

48 The fragmentation of green space management and its low status constrains the capacity of some urban local authorities to establish a shared vision for green space. We found that green space managers were not represented on half of urban local strategic partnerships (see Figure 8). Green space management is not usually represented at cabinet or chief officer level within local authorities. Chief Officers of parks and open space services usually report to a more senior officer within a Leisure Services or Environment Directorate. And green space management may be spread across two or more Directorates.



RECOMMENDATIONS

New sources of funds and better central government advocacy have helped to halt, and in some places reverse, a significant decline in the quality of urban green space. But the profile of green space issues in many urban neighbourhoods remains relatively low and the commitment and resources to maintain the many enhancements that have taken place in recent years are not guaranteed. More can and should be done to ensure the revival in urban green space gains momentum and is more widespread and sustainable.

1 Quality targets need to be better focused to drive up performance where it is needed and to be owned more locally

National targets to improve residents' satisfaction with urban green space and to increase the number of Green Flag Award winning green spaces can help to encourage improvement. But there are risks in the current approach that whilst success in some places will be celebrated, failure in others might be allowed to continue. Monitoring of the delivery of PSA 8 should ensure risks are managed and problems identified and tackled.

ODPM, working with **CABE Space** should:

- Use performance data to target more methodically poor performing local authorities for advice and mentoring. (See paragraph 2.14).

ODPM, working with **local authorities**, should:

- Encourage the development of locally owned green space targets within Local Area Agreements. (See paragraph 4.9).

ODPM, working with the **Green Flag Advisory Board** and the **Civic Trust**, should:

- Make sure that training standards for judging Green Flag Awards are upheld, and that judgements are of a consistent high standard; (See paragraph 2.19).
- Take action to address the regional imbalance in the Green Flag Award scheme. (See paragraph 2.22).

2 More needs to be done to improve the status and skills of green space managers

Green space management is still too often treated as a Cinderella service. Its voice is often dissipated within local authorities and underrepresented in important decision-making arenas. Improving the status and skills of green space managers will help to put green space at the heart of local authority decisions.

ODPM should:

- Encourage and support a green space champions' network; (See paragraphs 4.24 and 4.25).

CABE Space, working with **LANTRA** and others should:

- Make sure the national green space skills strategy addresses the need to equip managers with the skills to think and plan strategically and engage successfully with communities, local politicians and their fellow officers. (See paragraph 2.38).



Local authorities should:

- Address the fragmentation of green space management within their organisational structures so that a single green space champion is identified; (See paragraph 4.25).
- Consider “re-branding” the parks department in order to give proper strategic weight to the role and to attract good quality individuals; (See paragraph 4.24 and Figure 35).
- Check that green space strategies address the need to enhance skills. (See paragraph 4.19 and Figure 58).

Local Strategic Partnerships should:

- Make sure that a local green space champion is represented on the board; (See paragraph 4.26).
- Make sure their Community Plan and Local Area Agreement reflect green space ambitions. (See paragraphs 4.9, 4.14 and 4.26).

3 More practical help needs to be provided to enhance community engagement in urban green space projects

An increasing number of community and voluntary groups are helping to enhance urban green space, supported by new sources of funds. The ability of such groups to organise themselves and to quickly come to grips with dealing with public and other services is crucial to their success.

ODPM should:

- Ensure, through their web-sites in particular, that they provide good and easily accessible information on how to set up, organise and administer a community group (See paragraph 2.30 and Figure 33), and
- Provide ‘one-stop shop’ information on how community groups can access advice and funding that may be available to them, and present clearer and more immediate guidance on eligibility criteria for funds. (See paragraph 2.33 and Figure 33).
- Identify a nominated officer to promote and co-ordinate friends of parks groups and to act as a focal point for advice and assistance to these groups; (See paragraph 2.29 and Figure 33).
- Work with friends groups to maximise synergies between them and link them into wider community group networks and the local strategic partnership. (See paragraph 2.33 and Figure 33).

4 More needs to be done to identify the most efficient and effective ways of sustaining urban green space

New sources of funds, particularly from the lottery, have helped to bring about the refurbishment of much urban green space. Sustaining these improvements will require local authorities to commit to on-going maintenance and upkeep. The lack of a generally agreed framework for assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of green space management makes it difficult for national and local government to assess appropriate mainstream funding levels and the value for money obtained.

ODPM, working with the **Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy**, should:

- Promote and build upon the guidance, already established in the Best Value Accounting Code of Practice by relating costs to quality and outcomes; (See paragraphs 3.23, 3.25 and Figure 43).
For example:
 - Aggregating all spending streams within an area to be able to account for total resources committed to urban green space. This would include all internal directorates involved within local authorities, and external streams of funding;
 - Total costs should be apportioned amongst individual green spaces and types of green spaces, and also between units of activity or output such as hectares maintained; and
 - All should be accounted for on an accruals basis.

The Annex to this Executive Summary sets out the key steps local authorities need to follow to obtain more reliable data on the costs of managing their green space.

Local Authorities should:

- Use the reliable data on costs to embed efficiency measures, such as those currently used in the work of the Association for Public Service Excellence and other benchmarking clubs, into their management of green space (see paragraph 3.25). These might include for example the cost per hectare of maintaining to quality standards:
 - different types of parks and recreational grounds;
 - land within affordable housing areas;
 - highway maintenance.
- Review current green space management contracts to ensure they take advantage of the principles of partnership working and achieve best value. (See paragraph 3.31 and Figure 45).

5 Planning for urban green space needs to be strengthened

There is no statutory requirement for local authorities to provide good quality urban green space. It frequently falls down the local political agenda, and is not planned for as rigorously as other services. Where local officers methodically identify existing and future need for green space, and determine the best way to meet that need, they are more likely to win the support and commitment of local planners, politicians and communities.

ODPM should:

- Require evidence of robust and well supported local strategies as a condition of central government grants and encourage similar requirements of other funders such as the lottery distribution boards; (See paragraphs 3.13, 4.13 and Figure 40).
- Review the adequacy of green space strategies within local community plans to inform targeting of central advice and support where it is most needed. (See paragraphs 4.19 and Figure 58).

ODPM, working with **CABE Space**, should:

- Provide a clearer lead on the types of tools that local authorities need to use in order to assist their green space planning; (See paragraph 4.21 to 4.23).
- Develop a programme to improve local politicians' awareness of the importance of green space to the delivery of community priorities. (See paragraphs 3.22 and 4.24).

Local authorities should:

- Undertake assessments, as required by Planning Policy Guidance Note 17, of existing green space provision and future need, as a precursor to developing an effective strategy; (See paragraph 4.13).
- Work more closely with other providers of green space, especially housing associations, to identify the best ways of enhancing local provision; (See paragraph 4.19 and Figure 59).
- Make sure that their green space strategies have clear and achievable objectives and timetables for implementation. (See paragraph 4.19 and Figure 58).

The recommendations in this report if implemented will result in cost savings because they will reduce waste in the local procurement of green space services and improve the targeting of resources and support where they are most needed. They will also help to avoid the costs of failure due to lack of capacity of local authorities, working with community and voluntary groups, to achieve expectations.