



State of UK Public Parks 2021



Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Foreword	4
Overview	6
Research Methodology	12
Parks Finances – Still Facing an Uphill Struggle	13
The Quality of the UK's Parks – Arresting the Decline	20
Staffing & Skills – Maintaining and Developing a Future Workforce	23
The People Side of Parks – Visitors and Volunteers	27
Planning for the Future of our Parks – Parks Strategies	30
Other Comments – Consensus and Concerns	32
Conclusion	34
Appendices	36
References	38



Acknowledgements

About APSE

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is owned by its members and, working on their behalf, maintains and develops a network of local government officers, managers and councillors from local authorities across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Working on a not-for-profit basis, APSE is dedicated to promoting excellence in the delivery of frontline services to local communities around the UK. Through the extensive APSE network, more than 300 local authorities and organisations are able to share information and expertise on vital frontline services, ask for advice and innovative solutions, and develop new, viable ways forward in an effort to help one another.

APSE supports its member councils in the delivery of parks and urban green space services through briefings, advisory group networks, performance benchmarking, specialist consultancy support and training services. APSE has represented parks services on UK government bodies including advisory boards and continues to advocate for investment in parks and parks professionals.

About the report authors

This report was developed through Paul O'Brien, APSE chief executive who commissioned and scoped the work supported by lead author Wayne Priestley, APSE Principal Advisor and lead for Parks and Urban Greenspaces who provided further analysis, literature reviews and guidance in writing and developing this final report on the State of UK Parks 2021. Thanks must also go to Ian Baggott, Lizzie Hughes and Georgina Avins, of CFP who developed and analysed survey data to support the report findings.

About CFP

This report is supported by survey work and analysis conducted by CFP who are a specialist parks, green space and heritage company / practice.

CFP are skilled in working across the public, voluntary and community sectors, providing research, insight and deep sectoral knowledge regarding parks, green space and heritage matters. The Public Parks Managers survey work was conducted by Lizzie Hughes, Georgina Avins and Ian Baggott of CFP.



Acknowledgements

The report authors would like to thank the research participants who took time to complete the survey questionnaire and follow up interviews, and the many organisations who have contributed to this research including Drew Bennellick, Head of Land and Nature Policy UK, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Liz Stuffins, Chair of the Midlands Parks Forum, Helen Griffith, Chief executive Fields in Trust and Dave Morris, Chair of the National Federation of Parks and Greenspace. Finally thanks to the APSE networks and to the very many dedicated parks officers and councillors who are supporting our UK parks. Finally thanks also to the Landscape Institute, Keep Britain Tidy and The Parks Management Association and to the APSE networks, including the very many dedicated parks officers and councillors who are supporting our UK parks.

Foreword



Paul O'Brien, APSE
Chief Executive

In 2016 the previous 'State of the UK Public Parks' report was published by the Heritage Lottery Fund. That report identified that there was a need for central government, local authorities and a variety of partners to work together to address the problem of declining budgets, and the impact of the loss of finance on the quality, availability and future sustainability of UK's parks. In our 2021 'State of the UK Public Parks' report, published by APSE, we are disappointed to have to repeat many of the warnings made 5 years ago. Funding for our parks is once again at a tipping point with the loss of parks funding in further decline from £500 million lost between 2010 and 2016 to a further £190 million in 2021. A total of £690 million over the

past decade.

Whilst our report reflects on initiatives to stimulate parks, we find that continued austerity measures have not been ameliorated by central government support, which has amounted to sporadic and small-scale grants to support initiatives such as 'pocket parks' and small renovation projects. In many cases, funding can only be accessed by costly and inefficient bidding systems, which take little account of local need. As a consequence, the financing of urban parks has continued to be woefully inadequate for local authorities, who manage around 85% of the UK's urban parks.

Moreover, the impact of the COVID-19 health pandemic has created further challenges for UK parks. At the very point that parks became the lifeline for local communities during lockdown and travel restrictions, the ability to raise income from activities such as cafes, sports pitch hire and events was effectively stopped by public health restrictions. This income had become a lifeline to parks during the age of austerity, to meet the gaps in local budgets. Parks have therefore faced a double whammy; the loss of income but at the very point when footfall in parks has massively increased, placing additional budgetary pressures to clean, and maintain, our parks for the benefit of local communities.

It is therefore disheartening that our 2021 State of the UK Parks report has to repeat our earlier warnings of a looming crisis. We find that once again the level of funding for parks will not meet the needs of local communities, and yet parks could be regarded as a 'spend to save' investment initiative, meeting the outcomes of many public policy

objectives. Parks can offer: -

- A means to support the levelling up agenda, through the development of new parks to address the often-unequal outcomes in some of the poorest communities, when it comes to accessing green space.
- A means to support climate change action in both mitigation, in capturing carbon and enhancing biodiversity, and in amelioration, as part of action plans on flood defences, heat protection and air quality.
- A means to secure the future green skills within the UK. Our research found that parks are at risk of becoming de-professionalised because of a failure to recognise the key skills needed for parks and the need for career pathways to ensure the future of the parks workforce.
- A means to engage communities in volunteering; the pandemic decreased volunteer capacity due to self-isolation and public health regulations but parks offer a golden opportunity to engage young and old alike, and all within our communities to take pride and care in their local environment and enhance inclusion.

Whilst our report does show some glimmers of hope with some local authorities expecting the quality of their parks and associated budgets likely to increase, the majority are still facing the threat of static or declining standards and further budget reductions, coupled with increasing demands for space for new developments. Moreover, the issues of inequality, which government states it wishes to address, poses a further conundrum. Not only do we see problems in maintaining existing parks, but there is a clear need to create more parks in areas of need in order to level up the distribution of parks across the UK.

In 2016 it was noted that, "...there is a growing deficit between the rising use of parks and the declining resources that are available to manage them. This gap does not bode well for the future condition and health of the nation's parks." Sadly, we find this still to be the case in 2021, but made all the worse by the impact of COVID-19.

There is however an opportunity for parks services. The Government has stated as a key element of its 25-year Environment Plan to "leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it." We would suggest that the proper funding and management of one of the most highly used elements of the environment must surely be a key priority? Parks provide our communities with first-hand experiences of connecting with nature, and by association a much greater appreciation of climate challenges. Furthermore, we know that parks improve the physical and mental wellbeing of parks users. We must surely all recognise the value of that investment for current and future generations?

Overview

Following on from the previous two State of the UK Parks reports, carried out in 2014 and 2016 respectively, the 2021 report aims to outline how the UK Parks have fared in the following years.

It is important, as part of this process, that similar data is compared, allowing worthwhile and meaningful comparisons to be made. However, it must be noted that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which hit the UK in late 2019 has had a significant effect on the way parks and associated green spaces are now viewed by both politicians and the general public alike, and some of the results of the 2021 research will undoubtedly be affected by the pandemic's past legacy and ongoing presence.

There has been a plethora of reports and academic musings about how parks and green spaces are critical to the health and wellbeing of the people who use them. In fact, they are now also recognised as critical infrastructure in the fight against the negative effects of climate change by acting as carbon sinks, absorbing flood waters, reducing urban temperatures and improving local air quality.

APSE has produced a report entitled 'Post-

Pandemic: Green Urban Spaces' which highlights how important green urban spaces are to the health and well-being of local communities

During the lockdowns resulting from rising COVID-19 infection rates, parks and local green spaces were the only havens where people could obtain leisure and recreational experiences, as all other such facilities in urban and rural areas were closed. The daily interaction with nature, and the mental and physical benefits this has brought, has raised the profile of parks across the media both nationally and globally. The question is whether this increased value is reflected in both government and local authority investment in a sector which has lost hundreds of millions of pounds from greenspace budgets over the last decade.

Key findings

Parks budgets in the main continue to be cut, with an estimated £190 million being lost from local authority parks budgets over the last 5 years.

The level of cuts has not been equitable across the UK, with the North West region being one of the areas most affected by reducing finances and also the area with the largest reported number of parks in a declining condition.

Worryingly, the study has shown that the current condition of UK parks is at its lowest point since the 2014 survey, with the proportion of parks in good condition being lower than those in a fair condition. The areas showing the highest amount of fair or poor are Yorkshire and Humber, the North West, the North East and the West Midlands which clearly signals the need to 'level up' the quality of parks within the UK.

However, there is some room for optimism, with 40% of local authorities who responded, reporting that the condition of their parks will improve over the next three years, but, unfortunately, this still shows that the bulk of parks are either at a standstill or declining. Undoubtedly, some of

this decline may have been the result of, or hastened by, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on staff availability, either through redeployments or absences.

But undoubtedly the major contributor to this ongoing decline in many parks is the loss of staff with the percentage of respondents reporting staff losses equating to:

- 32% losing front-line staff
- 41% losing management
- 23% losing development staff

Whilst some authorities have reported staff increases over the coming three years. Unfortunately, most still expect further reductions, mainly to front line and management posts. The concern with this



fact, is that local authority parks services suffer from an ageing workforce, with almost half of staff being over 50 years old and predominantly being white males. There is therefore clearly a need to change this profile and the ethnic and gender imbalance by creating a more attractive and inclusive career structure.

A proactive approach is now needed to identify skills required for 21st century parks professionals if new entrants are to be encouraged, those identified included:

- Community engagement
- Partnership working
- Project development
- Strategic planning
- Sourcing external funding
- Climate change mitigation and planning for greater biodiversity (APSE State of the Market 2021²)

With the recognition of the importance of parks and green spaces to general health and wellbeing, the wider environmental benefits, and the growing number of visitors, even pre-COVID-19, there is a need to look at how these assets can be better funded and staffed, as many of the early options to look at new funding approaches, particularly those predicated on increased income generation, have struggled, particularly during the pandemic when most, if not all, of the income generating activities were curtailed.

In addition, the value of free access to parks without the pressure to spend on chargeable activities is critically important in areas of high deprivation, the very areas where the number of parks in a fair or declining state appears to be increasing.

This is a worry as, even before the pandemic hit, returns to the APSE State of the Market report showed that visitor numbers were increasing and, therefore, whilst users increased, budgets continued to reduce. During the pandemic, almost all of those who responded to the survey stated that they had experienced further increases in visitor numbers, which added to the existing strain on parks budgets through the need to provide and maintain social distancing measures, deal with increased 'wear and tear' etc. These costs were even more keenly felt as most income generating offers being used to plug existing budget cuts were closed. This shows the fragility of current parks funding, which has become heavily reliant on the ability to bring in additional income.

The greatest hope in helping to ease some of this strain is the work of Friends Groups and volunteers who have been invaluable, either through direct operational activities, or by accessing outside funding many local authorities cannot apply for. Numbers of both Friends Groups and volunteers have been rising year on year, however, during the pandemic they largely

ceased to operate due to the need to socially distance or self-isolate. It must be remembered that the age profile of volunteers meant that a high percentage fell in the 'at risk' groups and, as such, many volunteers are only just returning to help maintain and sustain their local parks and green spaces. A positive note is that many of the survey respondents replied that they expected volunteering numbers to increase in the future, but, again, there is a concern that some local authorities may not have the staff to supervise and manage this increase.

It is therefore clear that parks and green spaces are now globally recognised for their multiple benefits, both to people and to the wider environment. Unfortunately, their importance is still not being fully recognised by government, regarding sufficient funding being made available to local authorities to protect these valuable

assets which have proved their undoubted worth, particularly during the pandemic and with regards to achieving future climate change targets.

In an attempt to future-proof parks, many local authorities have now begun to develop green space strategies which clearly highlight the value of these spaces within their corporate priorities. Linking parks into health and wellbeing, achieving climate change targets, increasing opportunities for biodiversity, improving air quality and encouraging economic development, has seen many services now willing to invest in these areas, recognising them as important solutions to their wider strategic and operational aims and objectives. As well as local authorities recognising the value of parks and green spaces, the recent government emphasis on 'levelling-up' should also feature heavily in such strategies as green spaces often sit at the heart of more deprived communities.



However, even with this strategic approach and internal support, local authorities are still struggling to balance a long list of priorities and, as such, there is a need for government to recognise the need to sustain and protect the long-term future of the UK's parks, which have proved invaluable in protecting the nation's mental and physical wellbeing during the pandemic. This recommendation is made as the increased use of parks during the pandemic has led to greater demands on the physical infrastructure of parks and, together with reduced income generation, opportunities and support from volunteers, many parks have suffered.

If society is to truly sustain and maintain their public parks, then the current reliance on local income generation and volunteers needs to be supported by a realistic level of government funding being given to local authorities to ensure these valuable assets are protected and available to both current and future generations to help meet the challenges the future may bring.

Indeed, national government has stated as part of its Environment Bill that its aim is to improve the environment within a generation and "leave it in a better state than we found it." Part of this pledge will need to include identifying a way to fund more effectively and sustainably the future of our parks and associated green spaces.

70%
of respondents have seen negative impacts on the quality of their parks during the pandemic

26%
of UK Authorities represented

On average, parks make up less than
3%
of local authority budgets

37.5%
expect the condition of their parks to improve in the next 3 years

88%
of local authorities have reported increased visitor numbers

An infographic of a tree with a brown trunk and branches. The branches are filled with various statistics and text. The background is a solid blue color. The tree is positioned on the left side of the page, with its trunk extending from the bottom left towards the top left. The branches spread out to the right and down. The statistics are presented in white text on colored circular or cloud-like shapes that resemble leaves or branches. The colors of these shapes are yellow, dark blue, teal, and light green. The overall design is clean and modern, using a limited color palette.

£190m

lost from parks
revenue budget since
2016

40%

of respondents
expect reduced
revenue budgets as a
result of COVID

Almost
30%

of respondents expect
their parks to decline in
condition over the next
3 years

Over
60%

of respondents expect
their Friends Groups and
volunteer numbers to
increase

72%

of respondents see parks
as a priority for the local
authority

It is acknowledged that reports such as this can only be a snapshot in time, but they are necessary as reminders as to what progress, or lack thereof, has been made since the last report produced in 2016.

Whilst there are some glimmers of hope within the responses received, the trajectory still seems to be downwards despite the huge profile parks have had over the past two years as refuges for millions during the unforgiving pandemic we have been experiencing.

Governments around the world are now reassessing the value of their urban and public parks following the role they have recently played, as well as their future value in addressing the negative impacts of climate change and improving public health, but, despite many eloquent sound bites and numerous supportive reports from academia, there is still a long way to go before these spaces are properly funded and made sustainable for current and future generations. In

the words of renowned 18th century American polymath, Benjamin Franklin:

**“ well done is better
than well said ”**

Research Methodology

As over 85% of urban parks are managed by local authorities, the focus for information gathered for this report has been to ask local authority officers for their views and comments on the state of the parks they are responsible for. The parks managers survey contained many of the same questions asked in the 2014 and 2016 surveys, giving us an excellent longitudinal data set.

The survey undertaken covered the whole of the UK and, despite it being carried out during some of the worst months of the pandemic, returns were received from 1 in 4 of the UK's local authorities.

In addition to the survey carried out specifically for this report, data returns to APSE's annual State of the Market report for 2021, to which 78 local authorities responded, are also included as part of the research findings.

The APSE State of the Market Survey is carried out each year and has monitored trends across local authority parks and green spaces since 2012, and, therefore, contains a wealth of trends and changes to parks management across the last decade.

Reference is also made to APSE's report, 'Nurturing Skills for 21st Century Parks'³ carried out as part of the Parks Action Group working with the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). This group was created as part of the government's response to the House of Common's Communities and Local Government Select Committee report into the future of parks and green spaces.⁴

We also have noted the recent report of the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, 'Better Friends –The State of the Movement of Greenspace Friends Groups throughout the UK'⁵, which contains a wealth of statistical detail.

By amalgamating this rich source of data, it is hoped that the report will be a worthy update on the 'State of UK Public Parks' reports carried out in 2014⁶ and 2016⁷ respectively.



Parks Finances – Still Facing an Uphill Struggle



Local authorities across the UK have been on a roller-coaster ride over the last few decades ranging from being under-funded no-go areas to some sites being cash rich in the short term with investment by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. However, there has been a gradual decline in funding since the early 2000's with £100's of millions of pounds being stripped from parks budgets as a result of local authorities having to balance books in an age of Government imposed austerity. These cuts have not always been balanced evenly across the UK with grant-dependant councils suffering more with the loss of such

sources of funding and typically these councils have higher levels of deprivation. As local authorities struggle to meet social care needs, service budgets, particularly in non-statutory services, such as parks, have been stripped to meet these needs.

Parks have therefore had to look to generate their own income to cover the gaps in their budgets. To a certain degree the generation of income, has proven successful, with many parks budgets across England relying increasingly on such activities to plug the gaps caused by ongoing service budget cuts.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has created the perfect storm for parks managers, causing= the closure of income generating activities whilst having to deal with additional costs brought about by the need to enforce social distancing and deal with the additional maintenance needs of increasing visitor numbers.

A recent report produced by The Local Government Association 'Parks fit for the future' (2021), looked at a number of case studies of local parks which relied on external income as a significant part of their budgets and found that forecasted losses ranged between £87,000 and £8.8 million⁸.

This loss of external income has left many parks services in a vulnerable state.



Parks Budgets



THE AVERAGE
LOSS
OF REVENUE
BUDGET BETWEEN
2016 AND
2021 WAS
£475,000

From respondents' comments received about the level of budget cuts experienced, it is estimated over £190 million pounds has been lost from local authority parks budgets over the last five years, and as a consequence most respondents felt that the chargeable activities and the facilities which they provide in their parks will see price increases in the coming months and years. It should also be remembered that, unlike the previous two parks

managers surveys, this will be further impacted upon by the increased costs of the pandemic, as although additional funding has been provided by Government, it is likely that this will be for the short-term only.

From findings in the APSE State of The Market for Parks 2021, over 55% of respondents expected a budget decrease of between 5-10% in their budgets over the next five years which, although an improvement on previous years, still does indicate that parks budgets are continuing to fall. This fact is further emphasised by the fact The State of Parks survey findings showed that parks budgets had fallen from 4.2% of the total local authority budget in 2016 to just 3% in 2021.

However, on a slightly positive note, falls in budget levels do seem to be slowing down and the percentage of budget reductions in the next three years are expected to be lower than in 2016. Indeed, almost a third reported that they expected increases in budget levels over the coming years which although laudable, does still show over two thirds expect either no increases (17%), or are expecting further reductions (53%). The concern is that, if budget continues to decline, there is a real danger that minimum levels of funding required to maintain parks will be unachievable, which will lead to a spiral of decline, similar to that experienced in the 1970's and 1980's.

It does appear however, that there is some indication that there are local authorities who are able to increase their parks budgets over the coming few years which is likely to be



a reflection of the impact of COVID-19 (increased use/value of parks) but also possibly a longer – term view as to the role of parks in meeting climate change targets.

Perhaps one of the most concerning results from the survey has been the regional disparities which have become evident. Of those local authorities questioned, it was noticeable that many who had previously received considerable deprivation-based funding in the past have recorded the highest levels of expected cuts to their revenue budgets.

As well as having high levels of deprivation, these areas are often heavily urbanised with little easy access to parks and green spaces. A report by Public Health England entitled, *'Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19' (2020)*⁹ showed that local authorities with the highest diagnoses and death rates were mostly urban and had high deprivation levels.

Added to this is the fact over 40% of respondents said that as well as revenue concerns, they did not have any capital budgets to improve parks infrastructure in the current financial year. However, when asked about the future, over 60% did expect to have capital to invest over the coming three years, suggesting money is being earmarked for future developments, or well overdue infrastructure repairs.

Furthermore, research has showed that extended periods of confinement at home (such as during pandemic lockdowns), reduce physical activity, particularly among people with lower socio-economic status and increase the risk of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and self-harm. As well as the mental and physical wellbeing considerations, the survey has shown that many local authorities will be increasing costs for their chargeable activities and leisure facilities which will certainly preclude a large proportion of people who cannot afford such activities, increasing the isolation of such groups still further.

Therefore, there is clearly a need to level up such areas in relation to parks and greenspace access if residents are to receive the mental and physical health and wellbeing benefits such spaces can bring, as well as the wider environmental benefits such spaces bring such as cleaner air, connectivity with nature, climate change amelioration etc.

As a final note on the state of finances it should be remembered that these views and figures may be more adversely affected if the COVID-19 pandemic imposes further restrictions and lockdowns.

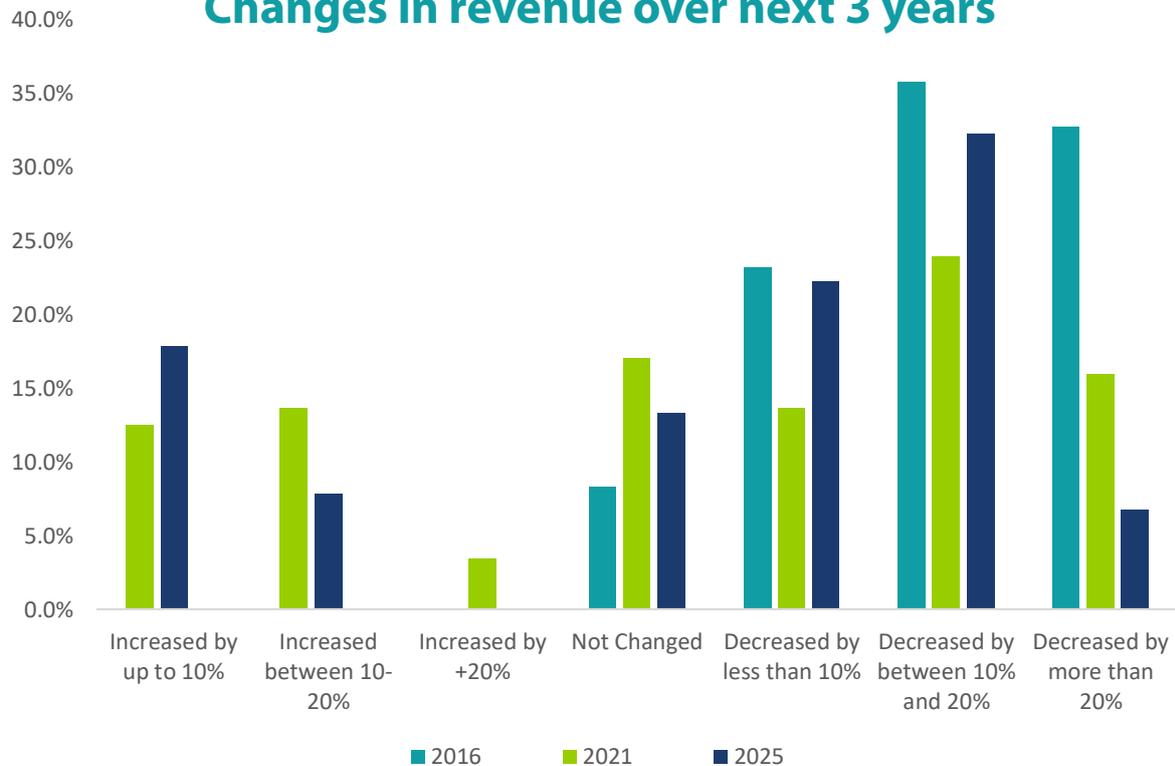
Changes in revenue budget over next three years

2022/25
(n=90)

2016/19
(n=173)

Scale of cuts	% of respondents	% of respondents
Decrease by more than 20%	6.7	20.8
Decrease by between 10% and 20%	32.2	54.9
Decrease by less than 10%	22.2	19.1
No Change	13.3	5.2
Increase by +20%	0.0	0.0
Increase between 10-20%	7.8	0.0
Increase by up to 10%	17.8	0.0

Changes in revenue over next 3 years



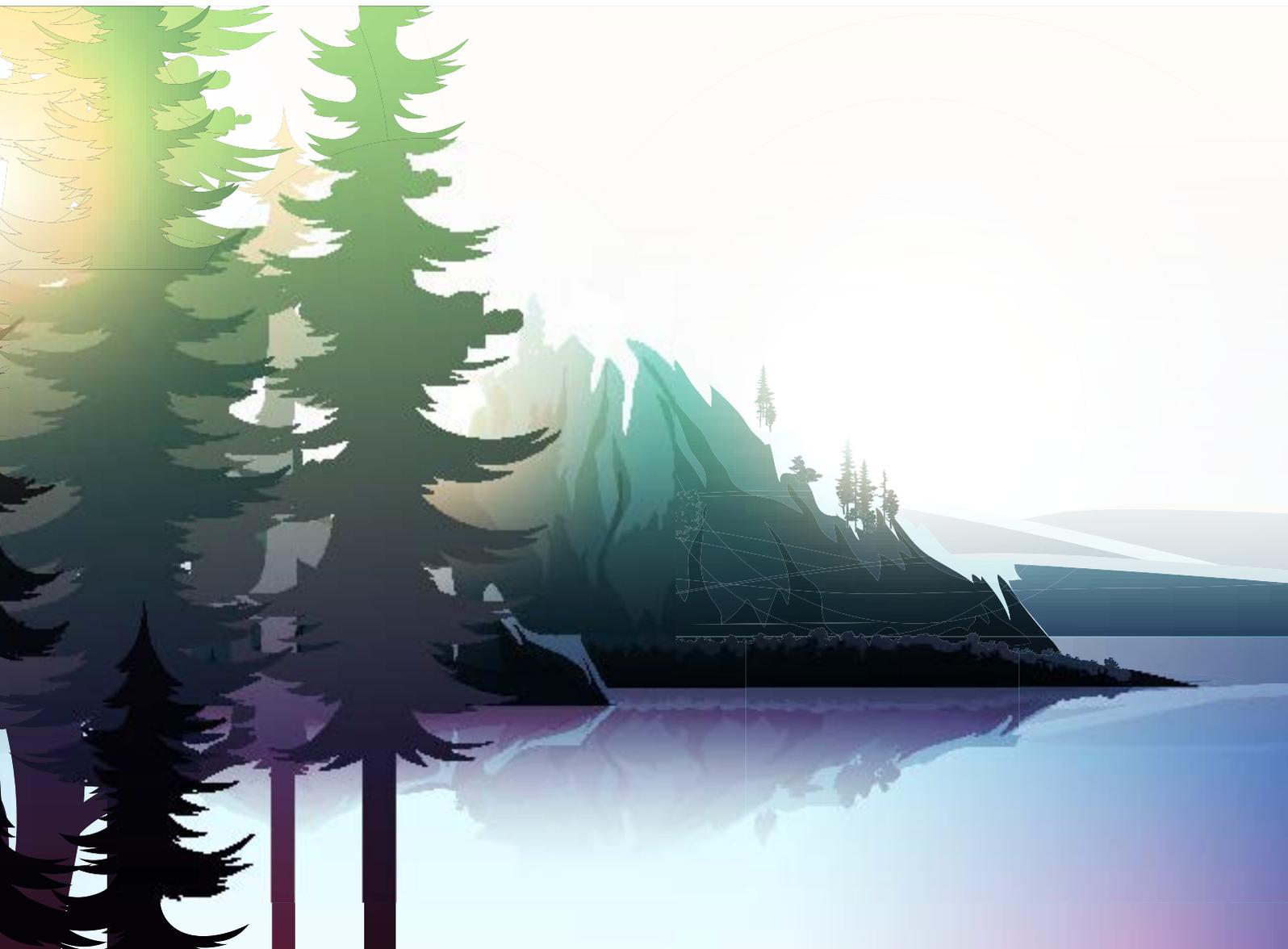
Revenue change by region (2016 – 2021)	n	Increase	No Change	Reduce
Yorkshire & The Humber	3	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
South West	4	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Wales	4	0.0%	25.0%	75.0%
West Midlands	14	14.3%	14.3%	71.4%
North West	20	25.0%	5.0%	70.0%
Scotland	13	23.1%	7.7%	69.2%
East Midlands	6	33.3%	0.0%	66.7%
London	9	44.4%	0.0%	55.6%
Northern Ireland	2	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
North East	2	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
South East	10	40.0%	20.0%	40.0%
East	6	16.7%	50.0%	33.3%

Parks Income

Income levels can be unpredictable. The 2016 Parks Report showed that on average 22.5% of total parks budgets came from external income sources, whilst in the 2021 returns this has fallen to 19%. However, over the next three years respondents expect this figure to rise to almost 24%, which does reflect earlier comments about the vast majority of respondents to the survey still expecting parks budgets to reduce and therefore this is one way to help plug the gaps.

The table overleaf identifies the areas within parks and green spaces which are key priorities for income generation.

Some returns regarding the percentage of external income making up their total parks budget were over 90%, which may give cause for concern considering the closure of most income generating sources during lockdown periods and does suggest the need for parks budgets to be more sustainably funded via additional government funding, bearing in mind its public commitment to improving the environment for future generations.



Priorities for generating income	2021	
	n	%
Refreshment provision/catering	21	17.5
External (commercial) events	18	15.0
Car parking	15	12.5
Use of facilities e.g. buildings	14	11.7
Cemetery and Crematorium fees	11	9.2
Commercial filming and photography	10	8.3
Internal recharges	8	6.7
Allotment fees	8	6.7
Council run events	8	6.7
Pitches and sports use	8	6.7
Other	8	6.7
Educational visits	1	0.8
Number of respondents	120	



The Quality of the UK's Parks – Arresting the Decline

The UK has a long tradition of providing quality urban parks which have been used by generations of families since the Victorian era onwards. However, in the 1970's and 80's many parks began to fall into decline, partly as a result of people's leisure activities and lifestyles changing and the associated budget cuts as parks become less of a priority. It was not until the 1990's with the input of National Lottery funding that a parks renaissance period began, characterised by large scale capital restoration projects which transformed a proportion of the UK's parks network.

However, as funding dried up and Britain entered a period of austerity, maintenance costs and reducing parks budgets have once again raised the spectre of decline and neglect. Local authorities are trying to stem this decline through the use of volunteers and Friends Groups as well as generating external income to help maintain these spaces.

But despite all these efforts, the 2014 and 2016 UK Parks surveys predicted that the quality of the UK 's parks would decline over the coming years:

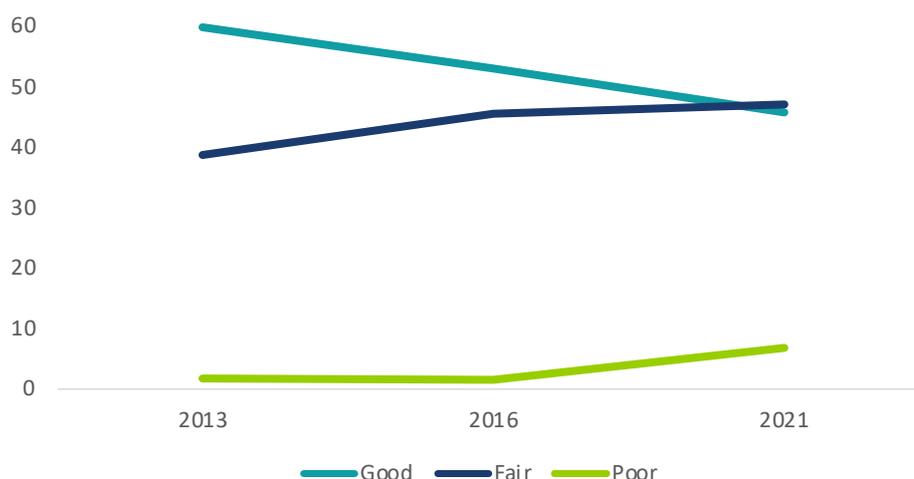
"The renaissance of our public parks that has been underway for the past 15 years is fast coming to an end" – State of UK Public Parks 2014

"It appears that the condition of many parks has now reached a tipping point when they are expected to fall back into a state of decline and neglect" – State of UK Public Parks 2016.

When we consider these comments, it does appear that the 2021 Survey supports these predictions.

The table overleaf shows that the condition of parks and green spaces in a fair condition is at its lowest since 2014 and approaching 1 in 10 of the UK's parks are now classed as being in a poor condition.

Current condition of parks and green space



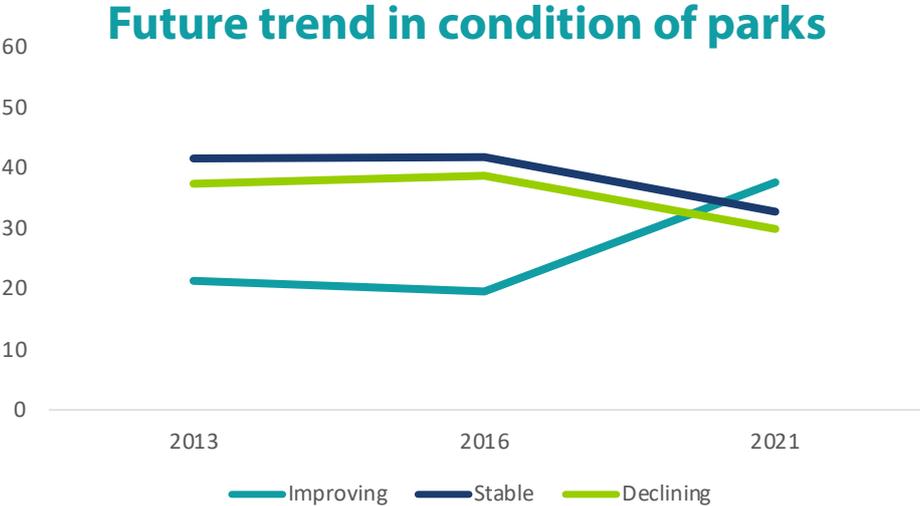
This decline has been a trend over the past five years (2016-2021) and, whilst there has been a slight increase in the number of parks improving, the general trend has been one of little improvement or decline. This is a key point within the survey findings, in that, although there is some glimmer of hope, the trend for parks is still largely one of stasis or decline.

Past trend in condition of parks

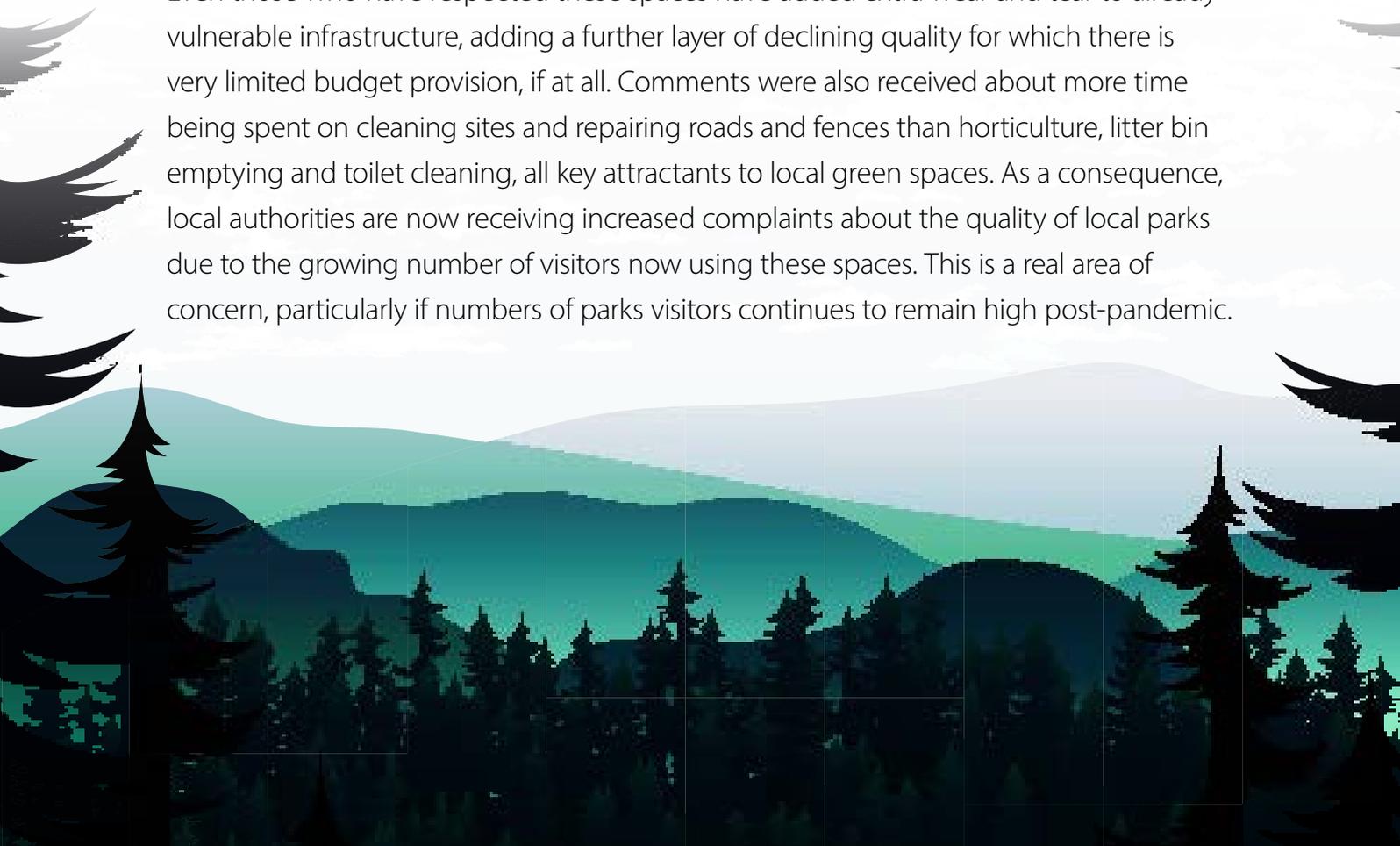


When the reported condition of a park was compared to the budgeting situation, there was a clear link between trends in conditions and budget cuts. Of the respondents who answered that the condition of their parks had 'declined' over the past 5 years, 73% reported that their budgets had been reduced significantly during this period. For those who reported that their parks had remained in a 'stable' condition, 66% reported that their budgets had either decreased or remained at the same levels, clearly showing that the state of the parks was very much affected by the level of cuts to their budgets.

Despite this grim picture, respondents stated that when looking towards the future, over a third expected the quality of their parks to improve. But again, as before, this still suggest two-thirds will see no improvement or further decline, emphasising the need for greater levels of national action supported by additional central government funding.



The concern is that much of this systemic decline was occurring pre-pandemic and we cannot therefore claim that the problems are recent. What the pandemic has done is opened parks and green spaces to a wider audience, not all of whom have been as considerate as would be wished for with incidents of anti-social behaviour, littering and fly-tipping and vandalism adding additional costs to already overstretched budgets. Even those who have respected these spaces have added extra wear and tear to already vulnerable infrastructure, adding a further layer of declining quality for which there is very limited budget provision, if at all. Comments were also received about more time being spent on cleaning sites and repairing roads and fences than horticulture, litter bin emptying and toilet cleaning, all key attractants to local green spaces. As a consequence, local authorities are now receiving increased complaints about the quality of local parks due to the growing number of visitors now using these spaces. This is a real area of concern, particularly if numbers of parks visitors continues to remain high post-pandemic.

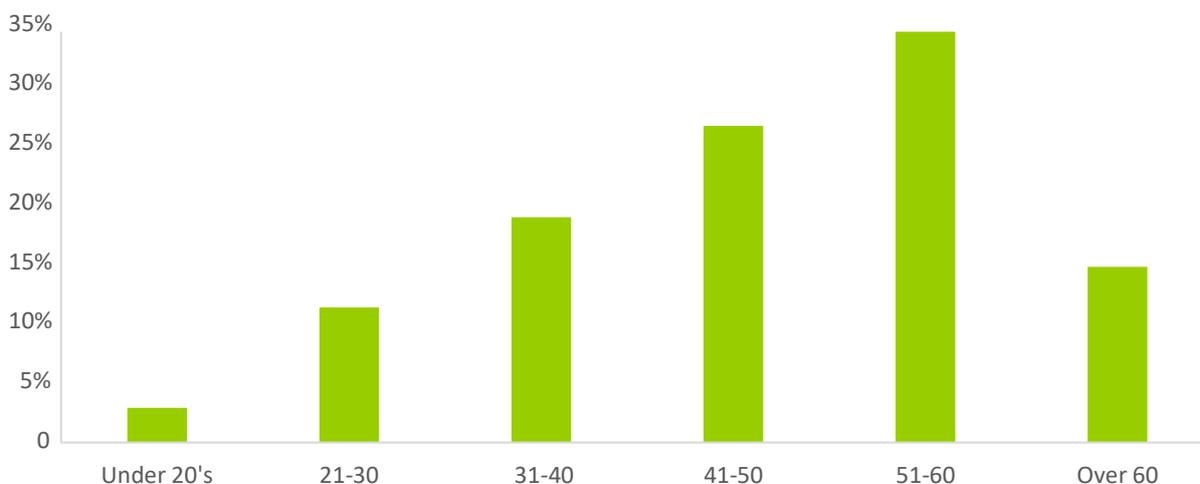


Staffing & Skills – Maintaining and Developing a Future Workforce

Parks and greenspace services across the UK are facing a staffing crisis in the next 5-10 years. APSE has been tracking the age profile of parks staff for over 10 years and it has become clear that certainly over the past five years in particular, the age profile has begun to change with the over 50 years age group now making up almost 50% of the workforce with most other age categories falling.

Coupled with this fact is that there has been a noticeable decline in staffing levels between 2016 – 2021. In particular front line operational and management staff have seen losses of 7.5% and 10% respectively. A good deal of these losses may well be down to natural wastage, indeed many of those who left may have been of an age approaching retirement, but they are also likely to be custodians of a great deal of service and horticultural knowledge. This coupled with a decline in apprenticeships, (or the ability to offer apprentices full time positions) in many local authorities, means there were be a dearth of new or experienced staff coming into, or remaining, in the service. This, combined with declining budgets, will cause serious problems in the future quality of parks at a time when visitor numbers are increasing and the number of roles our parks are expected to play (health and wellbeing, carbon sinks etc.) are increasing.

Age profile of Parks and Green Space Service



The 2021 survey however, has shown that almost a third of all respondents will be taking on additional staff over the next three years, but still the average figure show that in terms of front-line staff and management there will be slight reductions. Only in the case of development staff will there be a slight increase in staffing levels overall.

Changes in staffing level over next three years	Front line operational (n=64)	Management (n=53)	Development (n=52)
	% of respondents	% of respondents	% of respondents
Increased	34.4	24.5	32.7
Not Changed	28.1	39.6	46.2
Decreased	43.5	35.8	21.2
Average	-2.2	-2.0	+2.7

When considering the ethnicity and gender of staff make-up in parks services it is still very much white males who form the bulk of employees. Only in terms of parks and green spaces development staff is there something approaching equality with over 43% being female but again further work may need to be entered into regards establishing ethnicity percentages.



Ethnicities represented in Service	%
White – British/Traveller or Irish traveller/Irish/Other background	59.7
Mixed – White & Black African/White & Black Caribbean/White & Asian/Other background	16.5
Asian – Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi/Chinese/Other Background	12.4
Black – African/Caribbean/Other Background	10.4
Other ethnic group	0.8
Total	100.0

Clearly, there is a need to address the three areas of age, ethnicity and gender if the parks service is to be more sustainable and representative.

Perhaps one area which would make the service more attractive to a wider audience is with regards to the skills and training on offer and also its relevance to the modern world re climate change, biodiversity, community engagement etc.

To broaden the appeal of a career in parks and green spaces, there is a need to not only attract new staff but also to ensure they receive the appropriate training and skills development programmes.

The survey asked which areas of training were now critical to the future of parks staff and of the top responses were:

- Community engagement
- Partnership working
- Project development
- Strategic planning
- Sourcing external funding
- Climate change / biodiversity (APSE Parks State of the Market results 2021)

It is not surprising that these skills are often associated with parks development staff the area which has received the lowest level of staff losses in the last three years, in some instances even increasing in numbers, a trend which is expected to continue over the next three years, and will be critical to how parks services respond post-pandemic.

Traditional skills such as financial management and horticulture are still well represented as important, but the emphasis certainly seems to be shifting towards how we retain and develop our parks to meet the changing needs of the public and match the availability of funding be this internal or external and will be critical to how parks services respond post-pandemic.

“ The last decade has been incredibly difficult for most parks services. We have noticed a steady decline in experienced staff on the ground and in management leading to a greater urgency to train and develop new staff, who are coming into the service from a variety of backgrounds. There are few opportunities now to develop skills outside the workplace at seminars and conferences. Visitor numbers are increasing as more people realise the importance of local parks for good health and wellbeing habits. The government needs to ensure that the long term health of the nation is not compromised by the continuing drain on resources from environmental services.

Liz Stuffsins - Chair of Midlands Parks Forum

The People Side of Parks – Visitors and Volunteers

Parks have been welcome refuges for people throughout history and with the growing urbanisation of today's population, such spaces have become even more important. This has been further emphasised by the recent pandemic which is still seeing our parks and green spaces receiving hundreds of thousands of visitors every month. However, when parks managers are asked the question, 'do you know how many people have visited your park recently?' few have been able to put a true figure on visitor numbers which when arguing the case for funding would be a valuable tool in justifying budgets.

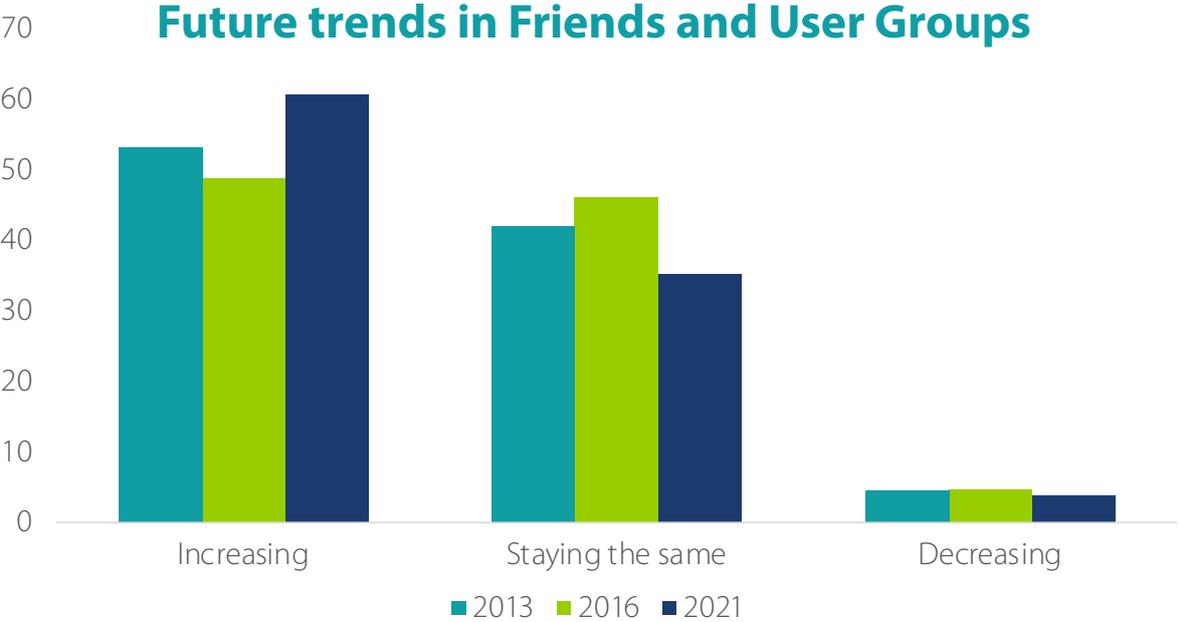
Where respondents were able to monitor visitor number, 88% said numbers were increasing. No respondents reported declining visitor numbers.

Understanding visitor numbers is important, but of equal importance is knowing whether people are enjoying their visit. When asked whether visitor satisfaction surveys were carried out, over 60% stated that they did not carry out such surveys.

However, where surveys were carried out, 40% reported visitor satisfaction levels were increasing, with 60% staying the same, whilst none reported falling satisfaction levels. Very few authorities have been able to measure satisfaction levels during the COVID period, but those who have, have reported high levels of increased public satisfaction, which is perhaps not unexpected. Whilst not asked in the survey, understanding the profile of visitors would be a critical measure in demonstrating the value of parks to the population, especially in relation to health and wellbeing and deprivation.

The general consensus from respondents is that use of parks and green spaces has increased significantly due to COVID-19. However, there is a split between authorities as to whether this has had a positive or negative impact on visitor satisfaction. Those authorities which reported that they have experienced an increase in visitor satisfaction said these areas were now valued and appreciated more than ever as a result of COVID, with reports of visitors feeling very grateful towards staff and services for parks remaining open and available. However, on the reverse side of this increased appreciation, is that more people are now calling for future improvements to their park's infrastructure, thus placing increased pressure on already overstretched parks budgets and reduced staffing resources.

A large number of UK parks now have a Friends Group and many of these provide volunteers to help maintain and raise funds for their local parks. Survey responses showed that even despite COVID, when many groups and volunteers were inactive due to the need to socially isolate, the general trend is that Friends groups and volunteering hours were increasing and predictions for the next three years show these numbers will continue to increase.



Of all the elements which have affected parks during COVID, it is the loss of volunteer hours which has been one of the most keenly felt, with estimated figures showing over £44 million of in-kind contributions being lost when compared to the figures recorded for the 2016 State of UK Parks Report.

Again referring to the LGA report ‘Parks fit for the future’ (2021)⁵, across the case studies within the report, the loss of in-kind volunteer contributions to park services ranged between £12,000 to £1.56 million.

Many local authorities commented that, volunteering numbers, activities and events have ceased or reduced significantly due to COVID-19, and the necessary following of government guidance. When restrictions were lifted, volunteering opportunities remained limited due to the need to socially distance.

Also, one of the main findings was that due to the age profile of many volunteers, a high percentage were shielding or felt concerned about returning to parks. Where volunteers were working on occasion this was putting additional demand on parks staff who were having to supervise volunteers to ensure their health and safety.

In those instances where volunteers were able to continue working independently, some authorities reported that there had been an increase in volunteer numbers, especially surrounding voluntary litter picking. The majority of these authorities recognised that a new profile of volunteers has emerged as a result of the usual volunteers shielding or isolating, which has been caused by a new found appreciation for parks and green spaces as a result of COVID-19. Many of these volunteers came from those people who were home working or furloughed and it is hoped that this source of volunteer help will continue to support the future maintenance of parks.

To support this hope, 67% of councils responding to the survey expect the number of volunteers to increase over the next few years.

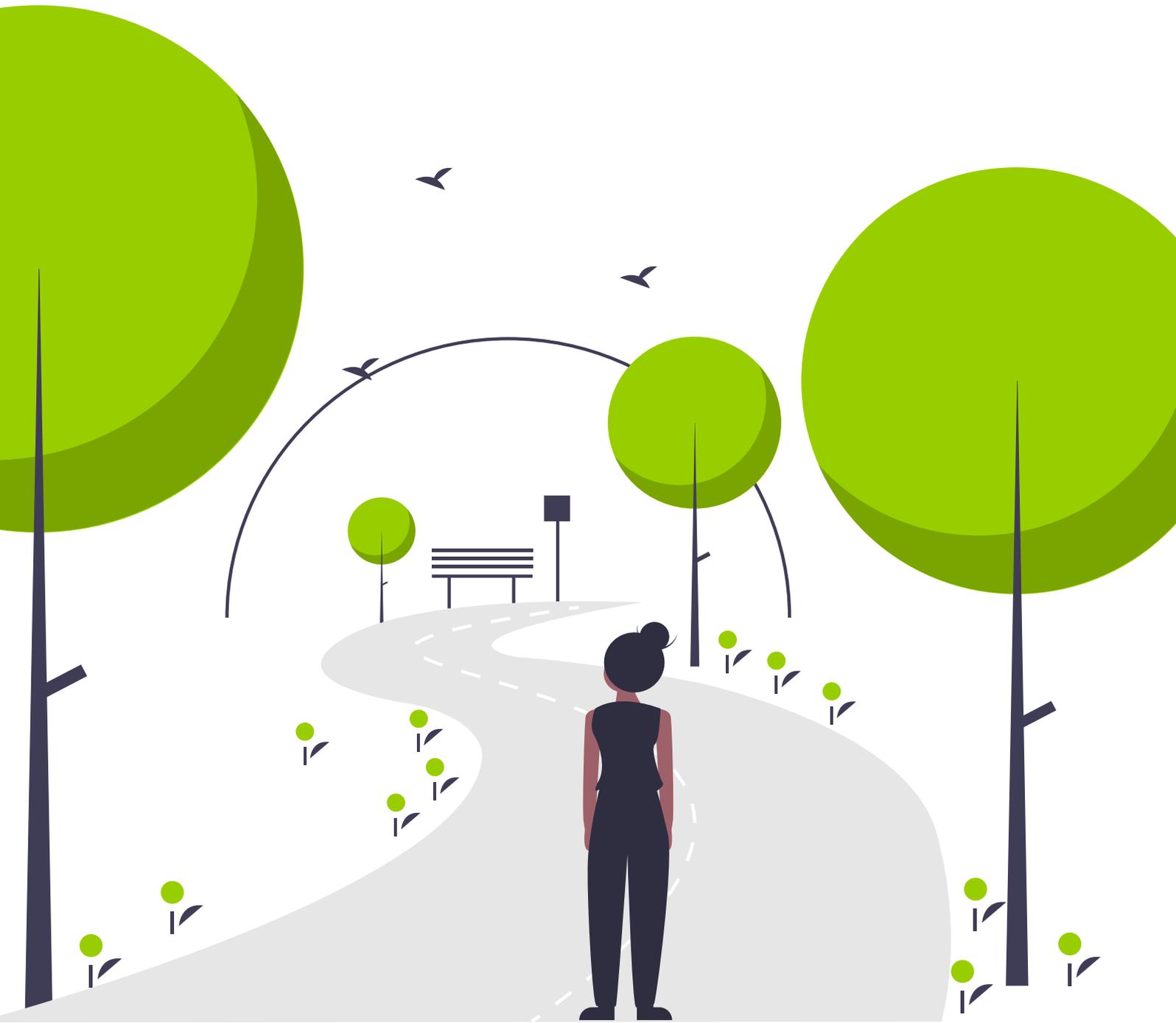
A detailed analysis of the health of the movement of over 7,000 local Friends Groups can be found in the aforementioned 'Better Friends' report by the NFPGS.

“ The Friends Groups movement, with now over 7,000 local groups throughout the UK, continues to grow, helping to promote and bring to life, maintain, fundraise and protect our green spaces. However, these passionate and dedicated volunteers face many challenges of their own (not least during the pandemic) and must be actively supported rather than taken for granted. The added value they bring needs to be backed up by well-staffed and well-resourced parks teams. The government needs to match the public’s love for and commitment to its green spaces by ensuring that adequate funding is provided to maintain and sustain such essential public infrastructure both for current and future generations

Dave Morris - Chair, National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces

Planning for the Future of our Parks – Parks Strategies

Parks have a long history within local authority services, some dating back to the mid nineteenth century. Over this period, they have varied from being the heart of community activities and recreation to no-go areas, returning to being the focus of public attention during the COVID pandemic as millions sought respite from the isolation imposed by social distancing. Looking more long term, parks and green spaces are now being recognised for their public health and wellbeing value as well as critical assets in the fight against climate change.



Other Comments – Consensus and Concerns

From comments received, there was a general consensus that Parks and Green Space services are currently experiencing big changes due to COVID-19, in particular, the increase in visitor numbers. This increased use could be seen as positive, as long as adequate funding and investments were now directed towards green spaces.

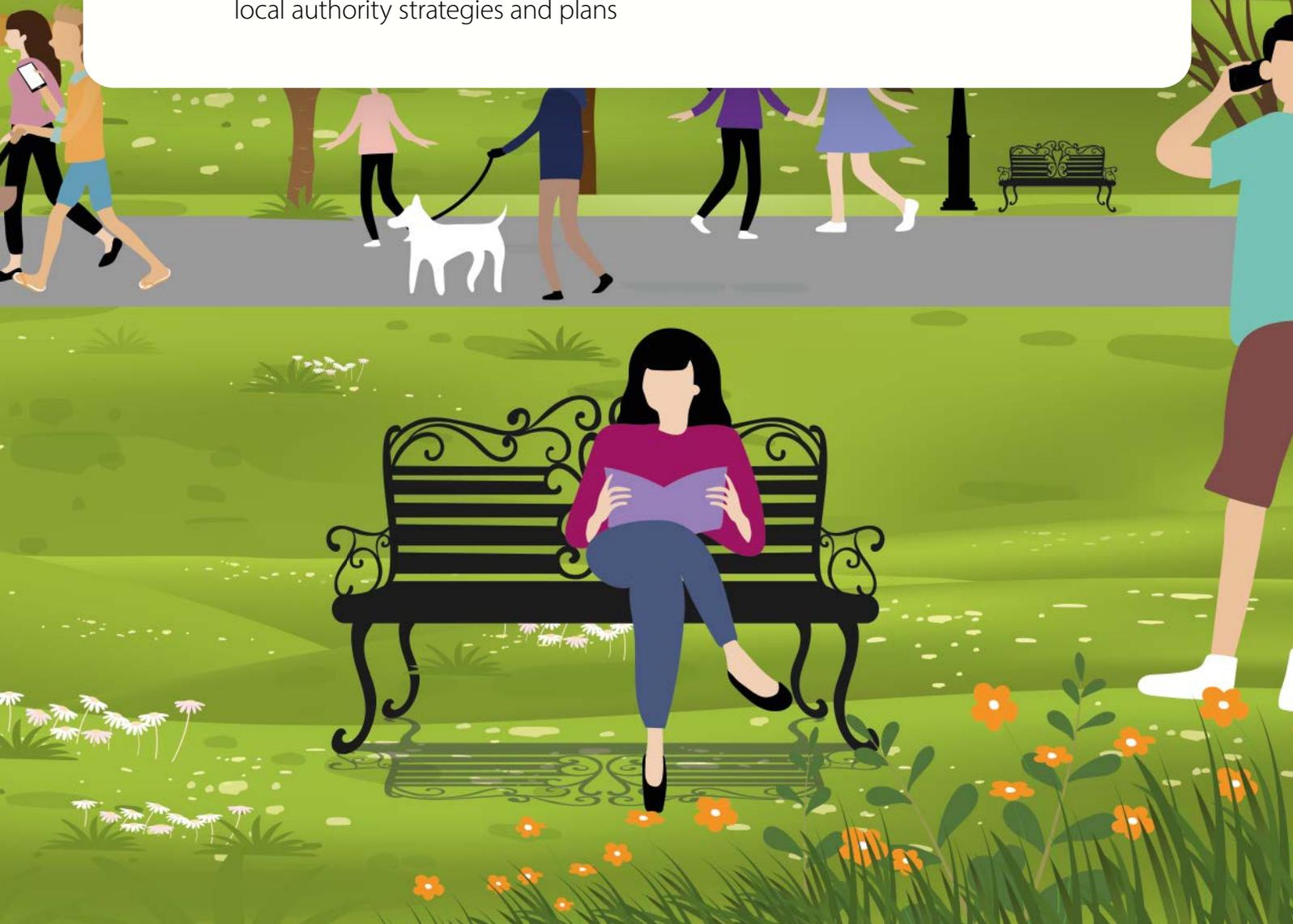
It was also reported that there are serious concerns about the long and short-term impacts of COVID-19—particularly on funding—as maintenance costs have increased, income generation opportunities have declined, in-kind contributions through volunteering activities have stalled, and competition for smaller funding pots has increased, assuming teams have the staff available to develop and submit bids. Added to this are the issues of staffing pressures caused by increasing workload, on-going budgets reductions and an ageing workforce causing a skills shortage within the workforce due to older, more experienced workers retiring from the service.

“ There are few public assets that work as hard as parks. The contribution of green space to prosperous placemaking, community health and wellbeing and local climate action is often heralded but, as this new report demonstrates, rarely properly funded. As we emerge from the pandemic and reflect on the outcomes of COP26 investing in the future of our parks and the people who manage them should be a priority. Locking in the multiple benefits that multifunctional green space delivers for everyone, forever.

Helen Griffith - Chief Executive Fields in Trust

Key findings

- £190 Million pounds lost from parks budgets between 2016 – 2021
- The north west and north east have seen the largest budget cuts
- 22.5% of total parks budgets came from external sources with further rises expected
- The proportion of UK parks in a fair or poor condition is the highest since 2013
- Since 2014 losses in staff have been: 32% front line, 41% management, 23% development
- Despite reductions in budgets and maintenance standards public satisfaction is still high bolstered by the COVID effect
- Friends groups and volunteering hours are increasing despite the hiatus caused by COVID
- Growing need to attract new entrants into parks service to address ageing work force
- New training requirements need to be met to be able to deal with role of 21st century parks and green spaces
- Importance of parks and green spaces being recognised through inclusion in key local authority strategies and plans



Conclusion

APSE undertook this research to assess the current state of UK Public Parks and consider how the findings from this work compare with previous reports carried out in 2014 and 2016 by The Heritage Lottery Fund.

Public parks have been part of the UK's culture and recreation for almost two centuries and throughout this time they have provided succour to our physical and mental health and well-being needs, whether this be as an escape from the hardships of Victorian industrial lifestyles, or more recently as refuges from the horrors of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increasingly the value of parks is being recognised for their contributions to ameliorating and mitigating the impacts of climate change through absorbing carbon dioxide, reducing flooding, creating cleaner air and offering shade and cooling in dense urbanised areas. Such benefits have now been formally recognised by the term '*ecosystem services*' and also include: the prevention of soil erosion provided by forests, the billions of tonnes of carbon stored by peatlands, the pollination of crops by insects, and water purification provided by our rocks, soil and wetlands.

But parks also offer more than just natural benefits: a new area of work shows how parks and greenspaces are providing '*cultural ecosystem services*' also. These are often defined as being the inspiration we take from wildlife and the natural environment and our sense of

place within the natural world. These benefits have been shown to contribute significantly to our mental health and well-being. These services came most notably to the fore during periods of pandemic lockdown, when millions of people flooded to parks and open spaces for opportunities to take recreation and exercise.

Parks and green spaces are therefore flexible enough to not only meet the needs of everyday parks users but also provide growing opportunities for wider and more long-term natural and cultural benefits.

Despite the profile and demand for our public parks and green spaces never being higher, we see constant threats to these spaces through reducing financial budgets and the demand for land for housing and economic developments. It seems a perverse situation where assets with such a wide range of multiple benefits, should still be struggling to maintain their existence.

As previously stated, it is the intention of this report to identify the current state of our public parks, and whether any progress has been made since the 2016 report. Sadly, from the research undertaken there is little evidence that any large-scale improvements have been made. In fact, in many areas there is a continuing decline in standards and funding availability and in some instances a worrying lack of access to parks and local green spaces, alongside the fragility of relying on volunteers

and income generation. Added to these are real worries about future availability of qualified horticultural staff, due to an ageing workforce and the difficulties in attracting new entrants, which could have serious future implications for the quality of parks and greenspace.

With a government in place which has clarified its intention '*to leave our environment in a better state than we found it*' action must now be taken to ensure such spaces are properly funded and maintained both for our current generation and generations to come. Unfortunately, we are still awaiting any real evidence of this promise.

APSE will continue to be an advocate for the UK's Public Parks and open spaces by promoting their value at every opportunity

along with like-minded organisations. Reports such as this 2021 report will hopefully be read by those who can make a difference and have committed themselves to do so.

It needs to be remembered that when reading this report, that the public has reconnected with nature as never before over the last few years, whether this has been as a result of the tribulations of the COVID-19 pandemic, or the wider concerns of climate change. Much of this reconnection has been through the increased use of local parks and greenspaces.

If these wonderful places continue to be allowed to decline (despite the acknowledgement that there are many other worthy priorities) people who lose such spaces will remember who allowed this to happen.

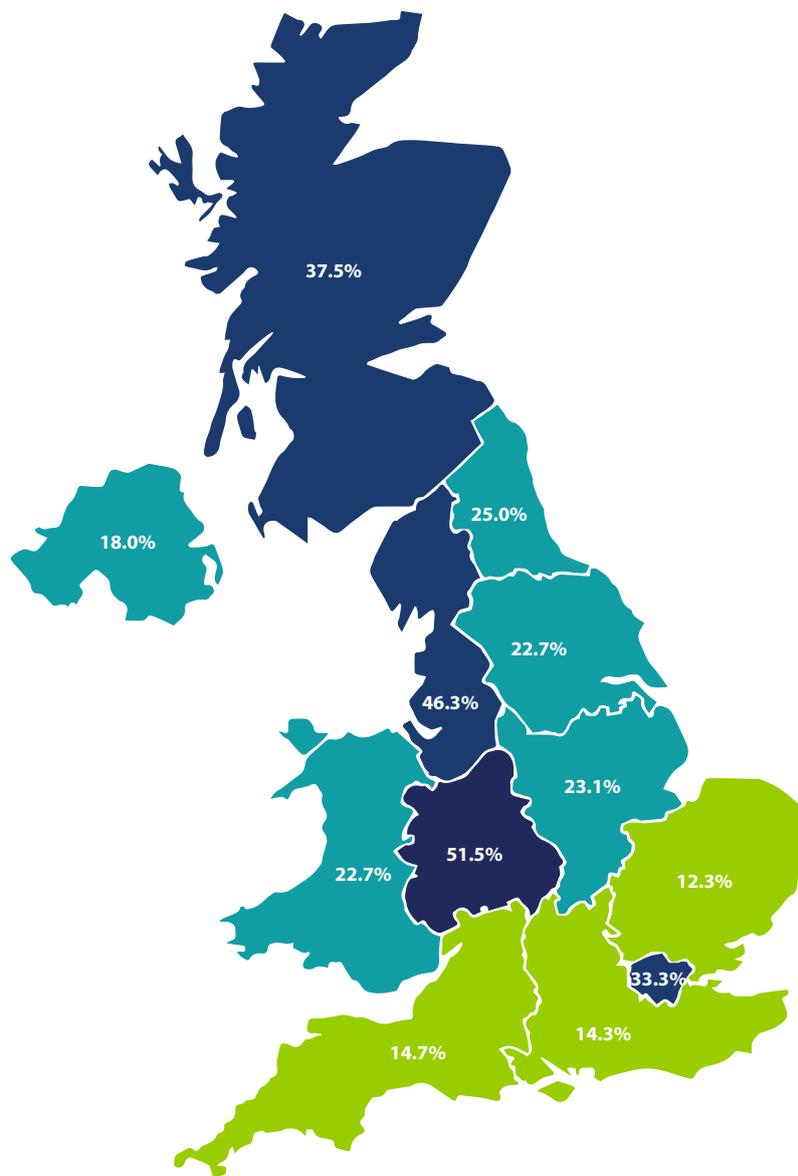
☞ It is sad to read, as predicted in the 2016 State of UK Public Parks study, that the state of the UK's public parks has improved little and for many has actually got worse over the last few years. Glimmers of hope exist, whether that be the huge rise in people now concerned about the environment, the increase in Local Authorities drafting urban green space strategies or the exciting work emerging from the Heritage Fund and National Trust's Future Parks Accelerator. What is clear however is that greater support and resource is needed to help the amazing army of people who care for our parks on a daily basis. Parks don't look after themselves!

Drew Bennellick - Head of Land and Nature Policy UK, National Lottery Heritage Fund

Appendices

Appendix 1: Who responded to the survey?

1 in 4 local authorities in the UK replied to the survey with strong representation from the Midlands, the North West and Scotland, although all countries and regions are represented in the reports' findings.



Appendix 2

Responses by type of authority	2021		2016		2014	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
District	42	40.4	70	36.3	70	39.3
Unitary	8	7.7	32	16.6	32	18.0
Metropolitan	20	19.2	27	14.0	22	12.4
Scotland Unitary	13	12.5	24	12.4	15	8.4
London Borough	11	10.6	18	9.3	20	11.2
Wales Unitary	5	4.8	10	5.2	10	5.6
County Council	4	3.8	8	4.1	5	2.8
Northern Ireland Unitary	1	1.0	4	2.1	4	2.2
Total	104	100	193	100	178	100

Top 3 Regions	West Midlands	North West	Scotland
% of authorities	51.5	46.3	37.5

References

1. Post-Pandemic: Green Urban Spaces (2021)
See: apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/post-pandemic-green-urban-spaces/
2. 21-20 Results of the APSE Survey - Parks and Green spaces State of the Market 2021
See: apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/members-area/briefings/2021/21-20-results-of-the-apse-survey-parks-and-green-spaces-state-of-the-market-2021/
3. Nurturing Skills for 21st Century Parks
See: apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/members-area/special-interest-portals/parks-portal/research-papers/nurturing-skills-for-21st-century-parks/nurturing-skills-for-21st-century-parks/
4. Government Response to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee Report: The Future of Public Parks (2017)
See: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/645570/Cm_Govt_Response_Future_of_Public_Parks_Accessible.pdf
5. Better Friends –The State of the Movement of Greenspace Friends Groups throughout the UK
See: natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NFPGS-PCUK-Report.pdf
6. State of the UK Public Parks 2014
See: www.heritagefund.org.uk/publications/state-uk-public-parks-2014
7. State of UK Public Parks 2016
See: heritagefund.org.uk/publications/state-uk-public-parks-2016
8. Parks fit for future (2021)
See: local.gov.uk/parks-fit-future
9. Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19 (2020)
See: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf



NEW MUNICIPALISM

Delivering for local people and local economies

Association for Public Service Excellence

3rd Floor Trafford House

Chester Road

Stretford

M32 0RS

Telephone: 0161 772 1810

Email: enquiries@apse.org.uk

www.apse.org.uk

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE™
We invest in people Gold