

NURTURING SKILLS FOR 21ST CENTURY PARKS

EXTRACTS FROM DRAFT REPORT FOR THE PARKS
ACTION GROUP

MARCH 2019

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines findings from research for the Parks Action Group (PAG) on skills needed by parks professionals in responding to the changing context in which their services are operating. The most significant points from the research, and suggestions for ways in which parks professionals' skills can be nurtured, are summarised here and discussed in sections that follow.

Research background

There is extensive evidence testifying to both the role of parks in meeting pressing national economic, social, environmental and health and well-being priorities and the community benefits and cost savings that investment in parks can bring to community to other services. Sources also show that parks have a low political profile as non-statutory services and are significantly under-resourced however. The report begins by positioning this research within the context of fiscal austerity, staff reductions and mounting concerns over the quality and future provision of parks. A review of information on skills for parks revealed a paucity of research on the topic. A national green space skills strategy by CABESpace (2009a) more than a decade ago identified gaps in leadership, management, community engagement and partnership working skills. CABESpace (2009b) also highlighted the lack of age, gender and ethnic diversity among parks professionals and pointed to the absence of clear career progression routes as a barrier to recruitment. More recently, the latest Heritage Lottery Fund *State of Public Parks* report (2016) drew attention to 'diminishing knowledge, skills and expertise' as a challenge facing the sector. This skills shortage is major issue that does not appear to have received sufficient focus among policy-makers, employers and funders as yet.

The research on skills priorities and training provision discussed in this report involved an on-line survey with 118 respondents, regional focus groups involving some 50 parks professionals and in-depth interviews with 25 parks professions and sector experts. Exploring the experiences and views of parks professionals underlined wide variations in their individual routes into the sector, roles and skills and in the organisational situations in which they are working. When considering skills and CPD, it is important that such variations are

acknowledged and that the complexity entailed in delivering high quality public parks is recognised. It became apparent during this research that simplistic quick fixes will not provide the comprehensive and sustainable solutions that need to be developed in consultation with parks professionals in order to respond effectively to realities of 21st century parks provision. This also means looking into the future in being aware of issues that are likely to become increasingly prominent in the sector, such as climate change adaptation, getting the best from redevelopment, new partnerships, health & wellbeing programmes and devolution to new models of management.

Changing roles and expanding responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities of parks professionals have changed dramatically in the past decade. The research found managers and officers in local authorities tend to be fulfilling an expanding range of responsibilities in response to budgetary constraints, personnel reductions and heightened public and organisational expectations. Some participants described covering what were previously two, or even three, separate jobs in their current role. The phrase “fire-fighting” was used frequently by parks professionals who took part in the research. Skills therefore need to be considered in relation to capacity, time pressures and tensions in balancing what may be competing priorities between meeting environmental aims and community needs and operating commercially.

Traditional horticultural and operational activities such as grass-cutting, planting and pruning, tree maintenance, maintaining sports pitches and managing play facilities continue to be at the heart of parks provision. This has been accompanied by a shift from planned to reactive maintenance, more emphasis on health and safety, risk management, and responding to complaints. There have been slight increases in attention to flood alleviation, promoting biodiversity and naturalised planting. Whilst continuing to fulfil their traditional operational and environmental responsibilities, parks professionals also reported a significant increase in emphasis on a host of business and finance, public engagement and strategic activities in their day-to-day roles. The most commonly identified areas of additional focus on business and finance were: generating income from services and facilities, managing budgets, procurement and contracting, bidding for funding from external sources and managing capital projects. The most commonly identified areas of additional focus on public engagement were: community

consultation, liaison with Friends of Parks groups and managing volunteers – with participants pointing out that volunteers cannot be a replacement for staff and managing them takes time and skill. In terms of strategic activities, focus on collaboration, service redesign, administration and demonstrating the value of parks to other services and agencies are further areas where activity has increased. More than 70% of survey respondents indicated that their organisation has a strategy in place for ensuring future provision of high-quality parks and green spaces or is developing one.

Skills strengths and shortages

The research found strong evidence that whilst determining gaps in skillsets, the considerable strengths demonstrated by parks professionals in fulfilling such wide-ranging roles needs to be recognised. The research found that managers and staff are proving adaptable in responding to changes and remain proud, passionate and committed to their roles. Respondents were highly qualified overall and generally expressed confidence in their skills in what are now long-standing areas of activity such as: people management; performance management; health and safety; communications; collaboration and enhancing efficiency and performance management. Senior managers who took part in interviews were highly skilled in both the ‘green’ and the ‘business’ sides of their work. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff with the full gamut of skills that are now required became more pronounced as they looked down the staff structure, however. Contrasts were identified between managers and officers who had “worked their way up” and have a wealth of operational knowledge but are less skilled in management and what was described as “business acumen”, and those who came into parks with management and business experience without a grounding in core horticultural skills.

Analysis of the data identified those that skills parks professionals perceived to be important but in which they did not feel confident and sufficiently well trained, which supports the view that comprehensive and coherent action is required to address sector skills shortages. Commercial entrepreneurship and associated activities including income generation, sponsorship and charging for services were the activities in which the lowest proportion of respondents felt confident. With only 8% of survey respondents indicating that they felt

sufficiently confident in this area, this is a significant shortfall, given the current emphasis on commercial activities.

Another major skills gap was marketing and promotion, which was an issue for interviewees in smaller authorities or those where central services have been reduced due to wider funding cuts. Gaps also emerged when considering the related matters of 'influencing decision-making' and the inter-related matter of ability to demonstrate the value of parks to a wider range of services and priorities. The points raised by participants are a concern, given the importance of making the case for parks in order to attracting investment that reaps multiple rewards in strengthening communities and saving costs to other services.

Loss of core horticultural skills

Most importantly when considering provision of parks and green spaces, research participants expressed extreme anxieties over the loss of core horticultural skills that had occurred in their services. It is highly significant that managing planting and horticulture was the only area in which there had been a marked decrease in focus, with 32% of parks professionals who took part in the survey indicated this to be the case. The scale of the problem was evident from extensive comments during interviews with managers, who were frustrated that core 'green' skills were undervalued. What many interviewees referred to as a "dumbing down" of horticultural skills was the result of a swathe of retirements and redundancies, along with budget cuts meaning planting and pruning and other horticultural activities have been reduced – as remaining resources tended to be geared towards more reactive maintenance and basic tasks such as grass-cutting. These widespread concerns were coupled with comments on worries about the ageing workforce profile, with so many older staff having left or about to leave with "no new blood" coming into the sector to replace them. The research makes it clear that emphasis on nurturing core horticultural skills needs to be a priority. This is closely aligned with a need to attract new recruits into 'green careers' in the sector, many of whom may be motivated by environmental sustainability, i.

Competency framework

Drawing on these findings on current roles, responsibilities and skills needs during analysis of existing competencies frameworks enabled a draft competency framework to be developed

that aims to reflect roles of parks professionals at senior, management, officer and supervisor, front-line and apprentice level. This offers a first step towards developing a model competency framework in consultation with parks professionals, legal and human resources experts. Parks professionals indicated that they would warmly welcome a clear and comprehensive competency framework. They viewed this as both a means of demonstrating the highly skilled and expanding nature of parks professionals' roles and a foundation of a more coherent approach to developing skills, knowledge and behaviours required for providing successful 21st century parks.

Nurturing new recruits

Parks professionals who took part in the research tended to have responsibility for managing staff and overseeing their training. They were pessimistic about opportunities for progression and commonly highlighted the absence of clear career pathways for people coming into the sector. Lack of permanent job opportunities was a disincentive for running apprenticeship schemes in some areas. A number of participants commented on the quality and availability of day release training for apprentices. This has diminished as a result of supply and demand issues, participants explained, with a cycle of budget cuts affecting focus on these core skills and associated reductions in college courses. Whereas some interviewees described a "grow our own" approach and were using the Apprenticeship Levy as part of succession planning, others found the system difficult to navigate and voiced uncertainty about what the scheme entails or how it can be applied.

Training, knowledge and networking needs

Parks professionals' appetite for developing new skills and enhancing existing skills was highly evident during the research. A total of 89% of survey respondents were motivated to undertake further training and CPD. Unsurprisingly, areas in which participants expressed training needs echoed those important activities in which they felt least confident: commercial entrepreneurship, which can include attracting sponsorship and accessing external funds. This was followed by marketing and promotion and influencing policy-makers. Considering the immediacy of climate change and participants' emphasis on the well-documented role that parks and urban green space can play in responding to environmental threats, it is a concern that only 13% of participants indicated that they felt sufficiently well

trained in environmental stewardship and only 13% in contributing to climate change mitigation. Although park professionals' overall desire for training was very strong, only 22% of survey respondents indicated that they 'definitely' have access to sufficient training and CPD. Lack of time was the most common barriers to skills development, cited by 71% of respondents, whilst lack of funds for training was a problem for 57% of respondents.

Participants emphasised that training needs to be well-targeted and practically geared towards the realities of parks and green space management. Given constraints on parks professionals' time and diversity of roles, they commented that individual situations and styles of learning need to be taken into account. Participants strongly appreciated the value of mentoring, site visits, sharing best practice and networking, for example through regional Parks Forums, in which many were involved. The general impression among interview participants was of a lack of opportunities for networking however. Lack of time and a moratorium on travel expenses in many local authorities were major obstacles to participation in networking events. Some interviewees suggested that events involving politicians and professionals across the public and private sector could help raise awareness of the value of parks in fulfilling wider economic, social, environmental and health and well-being objectives. This could help them communicate the case for investment and benefits to other services.

An exercise to map principal providers of training and qualifications in the sector revealed extreme fragmentation of provision, which indicates that urgent attention is required to improve coherence. As there is no dedicated parks management degree, graduates enter the profession with a range of higher education qualifications. A large number of organisations offer training that is relevant to different aspects of parks professionals' broad-ranging roles. Yet there is neither a single body dominating training nor a single source of information on training for the sector. Research participants identified a need for a "one stop shop" for parks professionals bringing knowledge, information on training opportunities and best practice together. Interviews with parks and green space sector representatives suggest that certain organisations are consulting with members and working to update their offer in response to changing skills and CPD needs at present. Whilst some organisations are currently involved in discussions about arrangements for enhancing qualifications, training and CPD, it appears

that activities are happening on an ad hoc basis without a comprehensive overview of supply and demand. This is a significant obstacle to skills development at a time when the sector requires a more coherent approach.

While the research indicated high levels of qualifications and evidence of commitment to professional development, wide variation in individuals' paths into the sector is reflected in multiple types of qualifications and training among its professionals. Interviewees considered a need for more standardised and accredited training to be closely connected with a need to improve the status of working in parks as a profession. There was strong support for a modular CPD system that reflects a competency framework that is recognised across the sector and accredits skills and qualifications people already possess and whilst also being able to "top up" those areas where they are less proficient

National and local context

Finally, the extent of the issues identified was evident as parks professionals stressed repeatedly that skills development cannot be separated from the wider context in which parks are being delivered. Nurturing skills requires a more fertile national and local ground than is currently being provided. The lack of national recognition for the economic, social, environmental and health and well-being value of parks and contribution to other public services was a major theme raised during interviews however. The case for investment in parks as a saving in NHS costs was made repeatedly. Parks professionals commonly spoke about the impact of budgetary pressure "dumbing down" of horticultural skills on quality of parks. They also described knock-on impact of cuts in parks provision on local neighbourhoods, facilities for children and young people and anti-social behaviour, adding to pressure on numerous other services. While many participants bemoaned a lack of status afforded to their services, participants from local authorities where parks have a high political profile testified to the benefits successful parks provision had brought to other services and agencies. The interviews revealed the significance of dramatic contrasts in organisational situations and financial positions of parks services. Participants emphasised that differences in population profiles and inequalities in land-holdings, hence opportunities to operate commercially, must be taken into account when examining parks professionals' skills.

Recommendations

In light of these findings on views and experiences of parks professionals, this report concludes with recommendations for a comprehensive and coherent approach to nurturing parks professionals' knowledge and skills. These proposals for co-ordinated action by the PAG, MCHLG and cross-government departments, local authorities, sector organisations and training and qualifications bodies can be summarised as:

- 1) Develop a model Competency Framework that is updated to reflect realistic skillsets required among those who are currently working in the sector at different levels with different organisational arrangements – in consultation with representatives of parks professionals, employers, trades unions along with human resources and legal experts.
- 2) Bring together all relevant organisations to better co-ordinate their activities and develop a coherent approach to training and CPD, with a coherent system of accreditation and clear career pathways.
- 3) Develop training and CPD opportunities that respond to an updated competency framework and associated skills demands that recognise professionals' time constraints and are sufficiently creative and flexible to suit roles and learning styles, including options for site visits, shadowing, mentoring and on-line learning.
- 4) Ensure there is sufficient emphasis on maintaining and developing core horticultural skills, which have been lost as a result of budget reductions and the ageing workforce profile in the sector.
- 5) Central government departments should make the Apprenticeship Levy system easier to navigate and clarify ways in which it can be used to fund non-traditional apprenticeships.
- 6) Central government should establish a dedicated funding pot to enable parks professionals to enhance their skills and participate in CPD, networking and best practice sharing.
- 7) A national campaign should be launched to promote the value of parks and benefits of careers in the sector, including media materials such as video interviews with parks professionals in order to attract people from a diverse range of backgrounds into the sector.

- 8) Given the importance of parks to other services, a network of 'parks champions' should be established within local authorities to promote parks organisationally, along with training on awareness of the value of parks for private, public and non-profit agencies.
- 9) An on-line 'hub' should be developed that brings knowledge and information on parks management, training, CPD and networking opportunities together in one place for dissemination in different formats.
- 10) A series of case studies should be produced to share best practice in enhancing park professionals' knowledge, skills and CPD.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Having discussed findings from the research, this section firstly summarises the conclusions that have arisen from analysis of data from surveys, focus groups and interviews with parks professionals and representatives of organisations in the sector. It then sets out a series of recommendations to help national and local government and skills development bodies to nurture the knowledge, skills and competencies that are essential for parks and green space to flourish and fulfil its vital role for citizens, communities and sustainability in 21st century – and beyond.

7.2 KEY FINDINGS

Key points arising of the findings from the research that need to be recognised in future activities to can be summarised as follows:

7.2.1 Variations in routes, roles and locations

The survey and interviews highlighted the extreme variety in professionals' individual and organisational situations in which parks and greenspaces services are being delivered. As well as geographic location and size of organisations in which people worked, there were wide variations in: their routes into the sector; their particular roles and responsibilities; their qualifications, training and skills base; the profile afforded to parks organisationally; where the service sits organisationally; levels of human and financial resources organisationally; plus land assets, scope for commercialisation, contribution of volunteers and levels of deprivation in their communities.

7.2.2 Skills in context

The accounts of parks professionals who took part in the research demonstrate the it is impossible to separate out skills requirements from the national and local context in which services are operating. Respondents highlighted lack of job security and progression opportunities within the current context. Respondents also commonly expressed frustration that their services were underfunded and undervalued. Expectations for commercialisation

and development of associated skills, in particular, therefore need to reflect the realities of vast variations in organisational situations, socio-economic profiles and commercial opportunities in different localities.

7.2.3 Skills strengths and gaps

The passion for their service and adaptability of managers and staff in the face of changes and challenges must be recognised. Traditional operational and environmental activities have continued whilst strategic, financial and public engagement activities have also expanded. Respondents were generally highly qualified and expressed confidence in their skills in long-standing core areas such as leadership, communication and operational activities. Whereas some respondents were also confident in the increasingly 'business-oriented' aspects of their roles, principal skills gaps that were commonly raised related to commercialisation along with budgetary pressures and loss of personnel in their own department and central services. The main skills gaps that emerged can be summarised as: commercial entrepreneurship, marketing, accessing external funding, influencing policy-makers and demonstrating the wider value of their service. Managers expressed concerns about finding staff further down the ranks with the full breadth of skills that are now need.

7.2.4 'Dumbing down' of horticultural skills

Managers were highly conscious of a loss of core horticultural skills. In most areas, what was commonly referred to as a 'dumbing down' of traditional horticultural skills was the result of the ageing workforce profile, budget cuts resulting in a need to 'manage decline' and being part of amalgamated 'streetscene' services geared towards reactive maintenance. Balancing commercial approaches with the traditional skills and ethos of public park and greenspace management is therefore essential. Apprenticeships tend to exist only where they can lead to jobs. Some parks professionals described how they were using the Apprenticeship Levy in their service. Others reported lack of clarity over application of the Levy or commented that apprenticeships had been withdrawn due to absence of employment opportunities upon completion.

7.2.5 Barriers to skills development

Research participants were highly motivated to enhance their skills. However, commonly cited barriers were: an imperative to focus on ‘firefighting’ in the immediate term; resultant competing priorities and lack of time and/or funds for training; and an absence of/lack of awareness of appropriate training or CPD. They stressed that measures to help enhance skills must make effective use of their limited time and have practical application in their roles. Respondents found visits to other sites, networking and peer learning especially useful. They pointed out that such opportunities could be restricted due to lack of funding for travel as a result of budget cuts however.

7.2.6 Training provision

Having mapped training provision and interviewed representatives of organisations in the sector, this reveals a fragmented picture. Sector skills appear to be considering a number of the issues outlined in this report at present, with a number of parks-related organisations and training providers currently reviewing skills, competencies and training offers.

7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Analysis of findings from the research has led to proposal of the following actions to help nurture skills for professionals responsible for parks and green space. These are:

7.3.1 Clarify skills, competencies and career pathways

- Clarifying skills and competencies that are now required among parks professionals is a matter of urgency. Development of a model framework that is recognised by all stakeholders in the sector would serve multiple purposes. It would be beneficial in helping to: demonstrate the highly skilled and expanding nature of parks professionals’ roles; guide organisations in developing appropriate knowledge and skills; and assist in recruitment and succession planning.
- This should include a new suite of competencies which incorporates skills such as commercial entrepreneurship, engagement and influencing.
- Development of a model competency framework should be done through a process of close consultation with parks professionals in order to ensure that any proposals

that emerge are 'owned by' and not 'done to' the sector and that they gain commitment from all stakeholders.

- A new competency framework model should not place unrealistic expectations on managers and staff. This means that: requirements should be geared appropriately to levels at which people are working organisationally; human resources, legal experts and trade unions should be involved in its development; and any new model should be coherent with the Local Government Competency Framework 2010.
- Relevant sector bodies and experts could be consulted on development of clearer career development pathways for parks professionals. This would identify opportunities to enhance career progression through graduate, front-line and volunteer and apprenticeship pathways – enabling recruits to move from apprentice, to supervisor, to manager and beyond.

7.3.2 Enhance training and CPD

- Educational and skills development bodies need to respond to the need for a comprehensive parks professionals' skillset with a consistent and comprehensive approach to provision.
- There is a pressing need for greater coherence of training provision in the sector, which could be followed by activities to raise awareness of what is on offer. Sector representatives need to work together in order bring the existing 'jigsaw' of qualifications and training provision together and develop appropriate training provision in response to skills gaps.
- Delivery of qualifications and training needs to be sufficiently creative and flexible to reflect time-pressures faced by parks professionals along with individual styles of learning.
- The importance of mentoring, shadowing, peer networking, on the job training and e-learning as aspects of CPD that address 'real world' situations should be recognised.

7.3.3 Keep it green

- National and local government and sector skills bodies must not lose sight of the 'green' aspects of parks provision. For parks to survive and thrive, development and

application of horticultural skills needs to be prioritised for parks professionals at all levels.

- The ‘dumbing down’ of horticultural skills and loss of knowledge resulting from staffing cuts and retirement arising from the ageing workforce profile in the sector must be addressed urgently as the foundation for successful parks of the future. The value of professionals who are highly skilled in these areas ought to be recognised by enabling them to apply these skills to benefit communities, create civic pride and enhance environmental sustainability. Horticultural skills need to be nurtured particularly among new recruits and among managers coming into the parks sector from more generic backgrounds.

7.3.4 Finance knowledge-sharing and skills development

- Questions on non-traditional ways in which the Apprenticeship Levy can be utilised for development of parks professionals’ careers and skills need to be clarified. The Apprenticeship Levy system needs to be easier to navigate and awareness of opportunities to use the fund for parks professionals’ knowledge and skills development needs to be raised.
- In light of the ageing workforce profile in the sector, ways of funding apprenticeships in parks at varying levels that lead to jobs and long-term careers in the sector should be considered.
- National resources could be directed towards facilitating networking and information-sharing events and on-line sources such as a ‘parks hub’ bringing together: evidence of the value of parks; sector knowledge sources and best practice examples; and information on training and CPD.
- A dedicated national fund could be put in place support training bursaries and travel to site visits, shadowing and networking events.

7.3.5 Recognise the value of investment in parks nationally

- The vast body of evidence on the value of parks needs to be met with funding commitments that recognise the long-term value of investment in parks provision in meeting national priorities and supporting other local services.

- The government needs to invest time, effort and resources in championing the importance of parks through a public awareness campaign on the benefits and value of parks.
- An awareness raising campaign should be developed to promote the benefits of parks to all relevant agencies and stakeholders within the public and private sector.
- The government needs to invest time, effort and resources in fully nurturing the skills required for the successful and sustained delivery of parks.
- Park professionals' concerns over skills gaps in 'demonstrating wider value' of their service to other departments and agencies and 'influencing policy-makers', needs to be strategically linked to other work being undertaken by the PAG and its overall objectives.

7.3.6 *Raise the profile of parks locally*

- Best practice examples could be developed and disseminated to demonstrate the benefits of local authorities' corporate commitment to parks and green space.
- Resources should be invested in creating and facilitating a network of 'parks champions' at elected member level in every local authority in England.
- Focused events could bring parks professionals together with elected members, representatives of other services and agencies to facilitate networking and raise awareness of the benefits of parks in meeting objectives such as health and wellbeing, place-shaping, environmental and economic development goals.

7.3.7 *Promote careers in the sector*

- A series of case studies should be produced and disseminated to share examples of good practice on competency frameworks, skills development or training provision.
- Working in the parks and green space sector needs to be promoted as a career option that is attractive and welcoming to all and can be accessed at different levels, including through volunteering and apprenticeships. This might be done, for example, through media materials such as videos of interviews with existing parks professionals at different levels to demonstrate the value and variety of their work.

- Careers in the sector could be made more attractive to all by raising the profile of parks nationally and locally and relating this to development of a clear career pathway.
- Enhancing diversity in the sector could be considered through creation of a dedicated piece of research on this matter.

Conclusion

This section has rounded up the report by presenting a summary of its key findings from research involving parks professionals, training bodies and sector experts and making proposals for nurturing skills for 21st century parks professionals' knowledge and skills based on those findings.

Figure 3: Draft competency framework for parks professions

	GRADE	SENIOR MANAGEMENT SCP 39+	MANAGEMENT SCP 25-38	OFFICER & SUPERVISORY SCP 18-27	HORTICULTURAL SCP 10-20	APPRENTICE/ TRAINEE SCP 6-13
	POST TITLE	Parks Manager	Assistant Parks Manager/ Team Leader	Senior Officer/ Supervisor	Arborist/ Gardener	Apprentice/ Trainee
KEY COMPETENCIES	Interpersonal and empathy skills	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Customer care skills	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Promotes and understanding of Health and Safety requirements	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Political sensitivity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Promotes equality and diversity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Promotes best practice and continuous improvement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
	Broad knowledge of horticultural skills and practices	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
	Promotes pursuit of additional funding and income generation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
	Leadership and communication	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
	Promotion of stakeholder and community partnerships	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
	Internal and external project management skills	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
	Strategic vision and service planning	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
	Management of revenue and capital budgets	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
	Management of performance management systems	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
	Succession planning and training provision	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
	Analytical and problem solving abilities	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
	Understanding and championing of service within council priorities	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
	Organisational change and improvement	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗

Key

Strategic	People Management
Operational	Finance