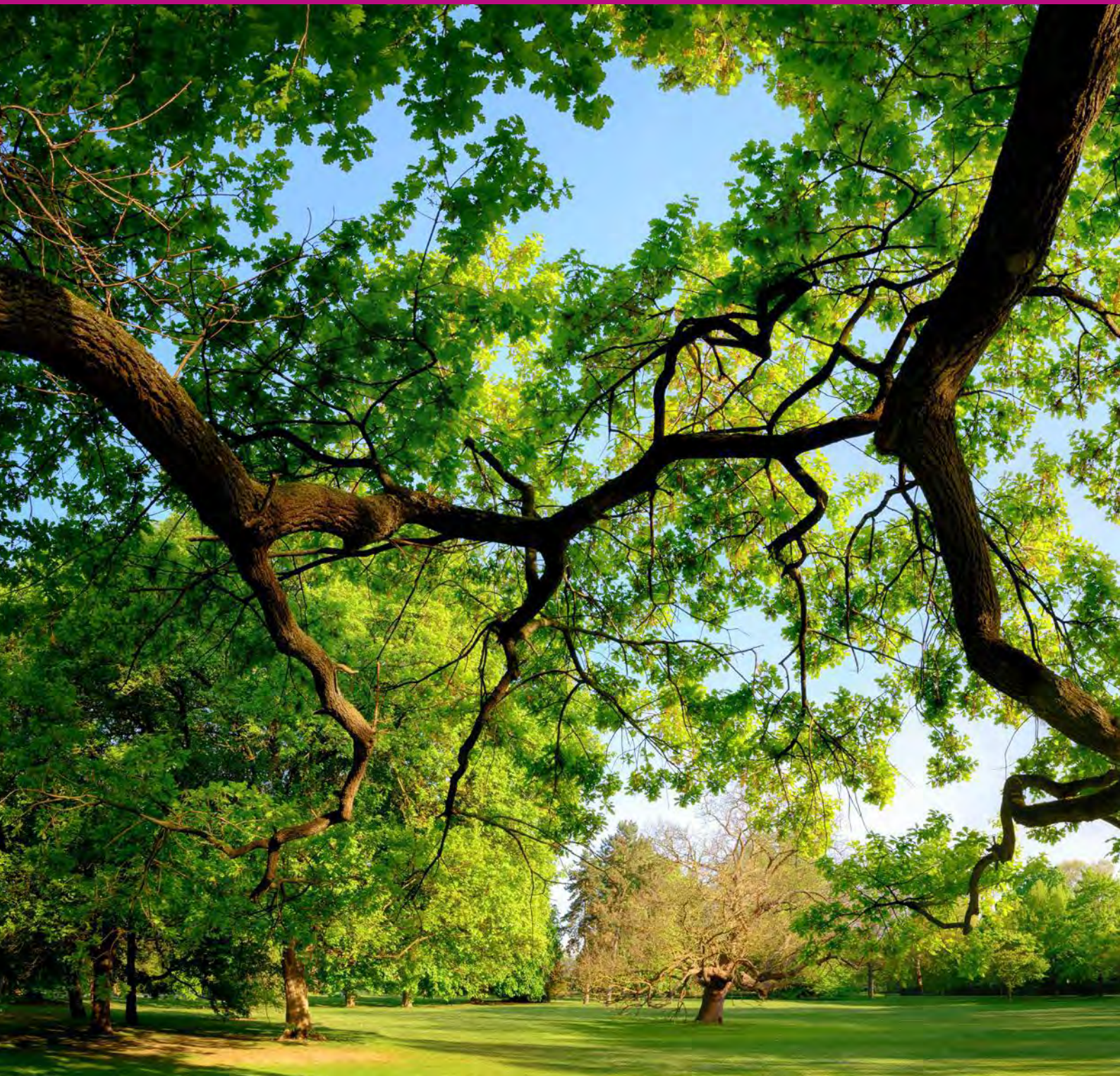




Nurturing skills for 21st century parks



REPORT FOR THE PARKS ACTION GROUP

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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.

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.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This Introductory section establishes the background to the research and briefly outlines the current context in which parks professionals are operating. It then provides a review of existent research on skills development in the sector and sets out the structure of this report.

1.2 Background

The Parks Action Group (PAG) was set up by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in September 2017 in response to a Local Government Select Committee report, which made 19 recommendations for protecting and enhancing the quality of parks provision. The PAG brings parks and green space bodies together with departments from across government and a £500,000 funding pot has been established to support its work. The PAG has prioritised activities to support the development of skills and knowledge alongside a review of parks finance. The PAG's Knowledge and Skills workstream brought together key bodies within the sector to develop proposals for: assessing current levels of skills and knowledge in the parks sector; identifying opportunities to promote knowledge and skills; considering ways in which capacity and skillsets can be enhanced; and sharing good practice. APSE was commissioned to undertake a research project to help inform this work. This draft report outlines key findings from the research and sets out recommendations that have arisen from the project. The parks sector and professionals working within it face considerable challenges in delivering and sustaining attractive, well-managed parks that are truly fit for 21st century communities based on those findings. This report proposes a series of recommendations as a first step towards nurturing the skills that will better equip professionals and organisations to respond effectively to those challenges

1.3 Skills in context

The work of 21st century parks professionals and skills required to fulfil their roles cannot be divorced from the national and local government context or the organisational situations within which they operate. The sector has undergone dramatic change over the past decade and an expanded and updated skillset is now needed to support parks professionals in responding to the demands this entails. There is also a need to look at ways in which the sector is evolving and consider skills in relation to issues such as climate change adaptation, working with private sector developers and other partners, health and wellbeing programmes and devolution to new models of management.

It is estimated that there are some 27,000 public parks along with a large and varied network of urban greenspaces in England, which cover more than a third of a million acres¹. There is a vast body of evidence demonstrating the benefits this brings to health and wellbeing, social interaction, recreation, child development, economic, climate change mitigation and biodiversity. Without needing to reiterate points that have been articulated in an extensive range of reports, examples include evidence of positive impacts on families, young people and children's cognitive, physical and emotional development (Parks Alliance, 2015) and reductions in the cost to the National Health Service². The most recent research on the subject demonstrates that parks save health services more than £111m a year the wellbeing value associated with the frequent use of local parks and green spaces across the UK is worth as much as £34.2bn annually (Fields in Trust, 2018). Parks and green spaces are intrinsically connected to a series of services at local level – particularly neighbourhood services, public health and sport and leisure – and contribute positively towards health, education, economy and environmental sustainability priorities at national level (Bailey, 2015; Beresford, 2015; Kenway & Barker, 2017). APSE's latest *State of the Market Survey* on local authority parks and green space (2018) found that benefits to other services in supporting healthy living promoting, community cohesion and reducing anti-social behaviour remain important priorities for parks managers.

1 Urban Parks Forum, 2001, cited Communities and Local Government Committee report (2017)

2 See for example, evaluation of Natural Health Service initiatives available at: <https://naturalhealthservice.org.uk/wordpress/outcomes/>

The Parks Alliance was established in 2015 to provide a unified 'voice of UK parks' and campaigns for the public popularity and wider benefits of parks to be better recognised politically and better supported financially. Despite the overwhelming evidence as to value of parks and green space, a large body of evidence also exists that argues that this has not been translated into political or resourcing priorities. Reductions in public expenditure totalling £83bn since 2010³ have inevitably meant remaining local authority resources have been concentrated on children's services and safeguarding elderly and vulnerable people. Provision of parks is non-statutory and numerous reports detail the decline in quality of parks and open space as a result of budget reductions. With more than half the population visiting their park at least once a month (HLF, 2016), parks are well-used and much-loved feature of British life. Parks Alliance (2015) reports that seven out of ten parents with young children are concerned about cuts to parks funding. Heritage Lottery Fund's *State of Public Parks* study (2016) included a public opinion poll, which showed a gap between the rising use of parks by members of the public and the declining park maintenance budgets and staffing levels. A common perception that they are under threat is being reinforced as the state of the nation's parks has become a source of critical media commentary.⁴

More than eight out of ten of parks in the UK are still owned by local authorities and the Communities and Local Government Committee inquiry on parks (2017) concluded that this should continue to be the predominant mode of provision. The inquiry also heard evidence on parks trusts⁵ and other alternative models for parks provision that have been successfully established. The *Rethinking Parks programme* was set up by Nesta, Heritage Lottery Fund and Big Lottery Fund to test new ways to fund public parks. Nesta's (2016) report on lessons from the programme suggested that parks need to diversify their funding sources in response to cuts and work with partners who bring new skills, resources and ideas for sustaining public parks. The Heritage Lottery Fund's *State of Public Parks* report (2016) concluded that although new ways of working and generating income are showing potential, more support, shared learning and collaboration are needed. The report included data from local authorities and trusts and a public opinion poll. It highlighted that three quarters of local authorities indicated a loss of staff over the past three years and expected this to continue – with managerial and administrative posts tending to decline at a higher rate in order to protect operational roles. It also found that, in contrast with local authorities, parks trusts reported stable staffing and funding.

A total of 85% of respondents in APSE's most recent *State of the Market Survey for Parks and Green Space* (2018) expect a decrease in revenue over the next five years, with average cuts of 5-10% the most anticipated levels. Almost half of the respondents expect to lose staff through natural wastage in the next 12 months, 34% through voluntary redundancies, 33% through recruitment freeze and 16% compulsory redundancies. These reductions are estimated to total more than 5% in 28% of cases, 6-10% in 16%, 11-15% in 2%, 15-20% in 6% of authorities and more than 20% of staff in 6% of authorities. This picture was more positive than in APSE *State of the Market Survey 2017*, which suggests stabilisation may be occurring following almost a decade of cuts. Whilst a £13m funding pot has been announced by HMCLG (Parks Alliance, 2019) since this skills research was completed, this is a relatively small amount that is geared specifically towards maintenance in 'pocket parks' and piloting innovation, rather than a long term commitment that will redress reductions in staffing and associated skills.

3 Spending Review 2010. Retrieved: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2010>

4 Examples of media coverage on the topic include:

Wallop, B. (2018) 'Britain's public parks: 175 years old, but will they survive. *The Telegraph*. 3 October, 2015. Retrieved: <https://www.dropbox.com/home/Apse%20skills%20for%20parks/media%20articles?preview=Britain%27s+public+parks+175+years+old%2C+but+will+they+survive%3F+-+Telegraph.pdf>

Moore, R. (2017) 'The end of parklife as we know it? The battle for Britain's green spaces. *The Guardian*. 9 July, 2017. Retrieved: <https://www.dropbox.com/home/Apse%20skills%20for%20parks/media%20articles?preview=The+end+of+parklife+as+we+know+it%3F+The+...+green+spaces+%7C+UK+news+%7C+The+Guardian.pdf>

5 Information and examples of the parks trust model are available as part of the National Trust's Future Parks 'toolkit'. See: <http://www.futureparks.org/toolkit/peoples-parks-trust>

APSE's latest *The State of the Market* data (APSE, 2018) also demonstrates that local authority parks services are involved in extensive efforts to preserve service provision within the current funding context. This includes income generation, sponsorship, charging for services and commercialisation as well as operational changes, efficiency savings, reducing management tiers and administrative staff, role flexibility and use of volunteers. The report (2018) indicates that benchmarking data shows managers and front-line staff are working hard to meet challenges and continue to maintain quality despite budgetary reductions, but there is a risk that quality could diminish.

The PAG was established in response to warnings about consequences of reduced spending that emerged from Communities and Local Government Committee inquiry on parks (2017).

A review of finance for parks and open spaces has been completed for the PAG (forthcoming 2019). This indicates that public resources going into parks across England in 2017-18 were 26%⁶ lower than the 2010-11 level. There are marked differences in allocation according to type of authority and urban and/or unitary authorities are faring worst. Importantly, whereas a third of the net budget for parks in 2010-11 was from commercial activity, almost 50% of parks services' income is now generated from fees and charging, based on a sample of 37 authorities (PAG, forthcoming 2019). This shift in funding sources has major implications for parks professionals' skills requirements. Detailed discussion of funding is beyond the scope of this report. Pertinent data is, however, drawn on in relation to specific findings in sections on parks professionals' responsibilities, skills and training that follow.

1.4 Sector skills research

The PAG has identified a need to assess current levels of skills and opportunities for developing a training offer that can meet the changing expectations and pressing demands on parks professionals. A search for previous policy research and academic literature sources suggests a paucity of relevant research on sector skills in the contemporary context.

Parks professionals' skills last became subject to attention at a national policy level in the early 2000s. Recognition of the need to promote public space management and maintenance and develop associated skills led to the establishment of CABESpace in 2003, as part of the Commission for Architecture and Built Environment (CABE). CABE published a series of research reports on skills in the sector between 2004 and 2010. CABE's (2004) study in six London boroughs found that management, promotion, representation and interpersonal skills were lacking and more strategic thinking was needed.

This qualitative study was followed by an extensive skills survey, which revealed skills gaps in design, finance, event management, marketing, arboriculture, horticulture and conservation and ecology. The *Skills to Grow Strategy* (CABESpace, 2009a) explored skills needs within a changing context in which partnership working, community engagement and volunteering had become increasingly important. The strategy drew attention to a shortage of leadership and management skills. These were broken down into capabilities including greenspace promotion, event management, site design and financial management and leadership (Worrall, 2017). CABESpace (2009b) pinpointed inconsistent workforce structures in the sector and a particular shortage of managerial skills among staff with technical skills. The strategy also raised the issues of; lack of funding for training, lack of appropriate courses as barriers to skills development. CABESpace's activities to address the sector skills shortage included a three-day leadership course for managers. While a range of organisations currently have an interest in developing skills for parks, there has been no single body charged with championing and co-ordinating development of parks and green space skills since shortage of funding led to the closure of CABE in 2012. This fragmentation is discussed in Section Five.

Recent qualitative research by Dr Mary Worrall (2017) aimed to develop a deeper understanding of issues related to personal, professional and management development among a small sample of people working

6 This figure is unadjusted for inflation.

in public parks and green spaces in London. Barriers to professional development that emerged from this study include: lack of support from line managers, fear of job loss and exposure to micro and office politics. Dr Worrall highlights: the contribution of Green Flag judging towards professional development; the need for coaching at sector level; and provision of confidential support for public sector parks managers to learn to work with organisational and party politics. Dr Worrall advises that the complexity of issues facing the sector and its professionals means that future skills development activities needs to be more than 'how to train people better'. A literature review conducted for her doctoral study underlines an absence of empirical academic research in the UK on issues related to the skills of staff in the parks and green spaces sector. A few small-scale studies on roles and competencies in the sector have been conducted in Australia, New Zealand and USA, where parks staff tend to enter the profession as Parks and Recreation graduates.

The Heritage Lottery's report *on State of Public Parks* (2016) recommended sharing of best practice and development of new skills among the measures needed to improve parks provision. This report raised the issue of 'diminishing knowledge, skills and expertise' along with loss of managers and operational staff. This survey found the most distinctive trend in skills was the decline in front-line horticultural skills. The proportion of park managers recording these skills have fallen in the past three years was 41.1%, which was the highest fall followed by landscape design and ecological skills. Those particular skills for which demand was expected to increase were identified as: sourcing external funding, developing projects, partnership working and community engagement. The report concludes that the focus for skills development in the future will be on financial expertise, partnership working and engaging with communities. Nesta (2016) also included working with partners who bring new skills, as well as resources and ideas, in its suggestions for sustaining public parks. Joint working to address current skills shortages and attracting future recruits is therefore important for established public and private providers and also where parks and green spaces are governed and managed using innovative new models.

This overview of existing information on sector skills indicates that existing sources tended to be either out of date, relatively small-scale, or include skills in analysis of broader parks provision and quality issues. This project for the PAG therefore responds to an absence of research in focusing on professionals' perspectives as a step towards better understanding and nurturing the skills they need deliver and sustain 21st century parks.

1.5 Lack of diversity

In examining skills needs and planning for the future within the parks and greenspaces sector, it is important to acknowledge the lack of diversity in the existing workforce profile. Almost a decade ago, CabeSpace pointed out that people working in the sector are predominantly white men aged over 40: 'Local authority parks management has a workforce that is unrepresentative of the communities it serves particularly in terms of age, gender and ethnicity' (2009b, p.9). This was the conclusion from national employer survey which found that green space workforce was 98% white and had a higher proportion of men than other professions, with a gender split of 71% males and 29% female. CABESpace pointed out that young people were not attracted to the sector. Lack of career pathways and progression opportunities along with perception of low pay and undervalued staff were cited as disincentives. Although responses to a question on disability were relatively low, this found only 8% of the sector's workforce on average were disabled, compared with 19% of the workforce as a whole.

More recent data (Norrie 2017) drew on the Labour Force Survey to determine the extent of ethnic diversity across 202 cross-sector occupations in England and Wales. This found that only 5.9% of people working as gardeners or landscape gardeners were from minority ethnic groups, compared with 19.9% in all jobs, leading the sector to be ranked as the fifth least diverse occupation. APSE's State of the Market data (2018) also confirms that the ageing profile of the public parks workforce profile has continued. More than 44% of people working in parks were aged over 50 in 2017-18, making this the predominant age profile and raising concerns as to their imminent retirement. A total of 28% were aged between 40 and 50; more than 21% were aged between 25 and 40; and 7% were under 25.

1.6 The apprenticeship levy

Funding for skills development obviously requires consideration in light of the wider public sector finance context more generally. Recent attention to issues surrounding the Apprenticeship Levy by both central and local government, suggests that this warrants particular attention when considering the financing of sector skills development. The Government announced in October 2018 that the Levy would be reformed to allow greater flexibilities in response to difficulties with the system reported by employers. This move was welcomed by the Local Government Association (2018). A report from the LGA subsequently warned that councils could lose up to £12m a month if they continue to underspend the levy (Peters, 2018). The LGA argues that the underspend is due to lack of capacity and resources to meet required targets and shortage of schemes that have been accredited by the Institute of Apprenticeships.

1.7 Report structure

Section 2 outlines the research aims and objectives and the approach and methods used in responding to the project brief.

Section 3 discusses findings on responsibilities that are now required of parks professionals along with challenges they face in fulfilling changing expectations and expanding demands of the role.

Section 4 reports findings on parks professionals' perceptions of skills priorities strengths and gaps in responding to these changes and challenges. It then provides a draft competence framework, based on analysis of the data.

Section 5 reports findings on parks professionals' perceptions of the training, knowledge and networking opportunities that are currently on offer. It then outlines the results of a review of existing training provision, which included interviews with prominent organisations.

Section 6 positions the findings within the broader national and local context.

Section 7 draws together conclusions arising from this research and analysis. It sets out a series of practicable recommendations that will help to address the skills and knowledge needs of the sector appropriate to various levels within organisations.

1.8 Conclusion

This introduction has established the background for the project and need to better understand the responsibilities, competencies and skillsets expected of professionals responsible for parks and green space. It has mapped the ways in which sections of the report that follow respond to that need.

2. RESEARCH AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

2.1 This section sets out the aims and objectives of the project and the research approach and methods that have been adopted in response to these requirements. The research involved: an on-line survey with input from 118 respondents; regional focus groups involving some 50 parks professionals; and in-depth interviews with 25 parks professions and sector experts.

2.2 Aims and objectives

The PAG has identified a need to assess current levels of skills in responding to demands faced by parks professionals and consider opportunities for developing a training offer that can help underpin provision of parks now and into the future. Following on from discussions at Knowledge and Skills Workstream meetings, a need was identified for research that responds to the following aims and objectives:

- To establish the roles and responsibilities of parks professionals in the current context.
- To consider what skills are required to respond to challenges facing public parks and maximise the potential of parks to contribute to social, environmental and economic goals.
- To gain an overview of current knowledge and skillsets among professionals responsible for public parks.
- To gain understanding of competencies that need to be developed among managers and staff in the sector at different levels.
- To map existing provision of training and identify gaps in this provision.
- To use this information to make recommendations for capacity building.

2.3 Approach and methods

Following meetings of the PAG Knowledge and Skills workstream, it was agreed that the above aims and objectives could best be addressed using an approach that combined desk-based research with qualitative and qualitative methods. The following methods were used to facilitate an iterative process, whereby findings were developed and refined in accordance with: analysis of parks professionals' roles, skills strengths and gaps; feedback from professionals and experts in the sector; and a review of the existing training offer.

2.3.1 Survey overview of responsibilities, skills and training

A first step in this research process was an exploratory focus group, which was convened in Manchester. Bringing together 26 parks professionals to discuss their perceptions of their responsibilities, skills and training helped inform the subsequent collection of quantitative data. This initial picture on changes occurring in the sector was then used, along with relevant literature, to inform the design of a quantitative survey. The on-line survey was structured so as to provide an overview of parks professionals' perceptions of: expectations placed upon them; skillsets that are currently required; their confidence levels in these skills; access to training in these areas; along with their qualifications, knowledge sources and networking activities.⁷ This survey, which comprised 29 questions and took around 15 minutes to complete, was distributed by email to APSE parks contacts in England. It should be noted that survey respondents were self-selecting rather than being a representative sample, which is a limitation that is common to much research. The results are reported as rounded up percentages and in terms of weighting of responses for multiple response questions. The survey responses discussed here thus offer an overview rather than statistically detailed findings.

⁷ The option for respondents to include additional comments was deployed for a number of the questions to enable the survey to capture information beyond predetermined options.

Profile of survey respondents

The respondents provided an appropriate spread in terms of job titles, organisational arrangements and time in their current role. Of the 118 respondents, 42% were parks managers, 11% were heads of service, 10% were senior managers, 7% were project managers, 7% were team leaders, 3% were directors and 3% were park rangers. As the survey was anonymous, respondents were able to opt out of questions that may have been perceived as making them identifiable. Where a model of service delivery was identified, the vast majority (70%) of respondents came from local authorities where theirs was an in-house service, with 14% from authorities where the service is contracted out, 3% from authorities with shared services and the rest having other arrangements. A total of 34% of those who identified the directorate or department in which their service is located were in environmental services, 19% were part of street scene, 19% from neighbourhood or community services, 19% from leisure services. More than half of the respondents had been in their current position more than five years, with 9% of these in their role for more than 20 years, whilst 23% had been in their role more than two years and 21% had been in post less than two years. Respondents who specified authority type came from district councils, counties, unitary councils, London boroughs and other organisations. Almost a third of respondents who specified location came from the South East of England, followed by 24% from the Midlands, 15% from greater London, 13% from the North West and 9% from North East and 9% from the South West.

2.3.2 Interviews and focus groups to gather detailed data

Following the survey, in-depth interviews were then conducted with parks professionals in local authorities and trusts to gain more detailed insight into current roles and levels of knowledge and skills. Most of these participants were recruited via a supplementary survey question, which asked if they would be willing to be contacted. A total of 20 parks professionals were involved in interviews. The majority of participants were parks managers (although specific titles varied according to particular authorities in some cases). A head of service, a project manager, a group supervisor, a team leader and a tree officer also took part in the interviews⁸. Attempts were made to ensure a representative spread of participants in terms of geographic regions, type of organisation, size and type of local authority. Participants' identities have been anonymised to enable them to give comprehensive accounts of their experiences.

The interviews were semi-structured to ensure consistency whilst also being sufficiently flexible to reflect participants' own priorities and perspectives (Bryman, 2012). The interviews were carried out by phone and took one hour to complete on average. A Topic Guide was used which covered: roles and responsibilities; service arrangements and profile of parks organisationally; route into the sector, qualifications and knowledge sources, CPD and training to date; self-reported skills strengths and skills gaps; and suggestions for improving the development of knowledge and skills in the sector. All of the participants were responsible for some staff, which ranged from three to more than 200 employees. In addition to their own skillset, participants were therefore asked about development of staff skills and opportunities for apprentices. This provided qualitative data, which was digitally recorded and selectively transcribed and then analysed thematically using the Framework Analysis method (Ritchie et al., 2014). A model encapsulating the skills required for 21st century parks management, along with understanding of skills strengths and skills gaps, was refined using focus feedback from two further focus groups in Oxford and Nottingham. As with survey respondents, focus group and interview participants were self-selecting. As the discussion which follows will demonstrate, organisational and professional situations within the sector vary dramatically. The findings outlined therefore represent a snapshot of experiences and opinions amongst 20 parks professionals in a range of locations and situations, rather than claiming to be 'generalisable' (Bryman, 2012).

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Roles have been cited generically rather than using participants' particular job titles in order to preserve anonymity.

Analysis of responsibilities and skillsets to develop a competency framework

Analysis of results from the activities outlined above was then drawn on to develop a draft competency framework for 21st century parks professionals to be developed. This is based upon the roles, responsibilities and skill-set model that has emerged from the survey, interviews and focus groups. It also draws upon responses to an APSE Network Query⁹ sent out to members, which asked them to provide job descriptions and competencies. A proposal arising from development of this draft and insights from participant interviews is that this framework should be subject to testing, consultation and feedback from parks and human resources professionals, as discussed in Section Three.

2.3.3 Mapping existing training provision to guide future direction

A desk-based review of the current training offer was undertaken to explore what training and qualifications are on offer from a range of bodies. The results of this exercise are available in matrix format in Appendix A. This matrix was then supplemented by with interviews with sector experts and representatives of training provider bodies, which explored their respective roles in sector skills development and provision. Five semi-structured interviews were carried out to determine: organisational awareness of skills demands within the sector; and what activities, if any, are being implemented to meet such needs.

2.4 Conclusion

The process of collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, outlined above, enabled a series of key findings and over-arching themes to be identified. These concerned: the need to look at skills development within the context of wider public sector challenges; the existence of wide variations in organisational situations; parks professionals' changing roles and responsibilities within a changing context; strengths and gaps in skills; and barriers to training and knowledge sharing. The findings are discussed in the sections that follow.

⁹ APSE Network Queries enable the organisation's staff and members to exchange information through posing questions on-line, whose responses are gathered into a Network Query report on the topic.

3. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1 This section firstly outlines findings on park professionals' roles and responsibilities that emerged from the survey, focus groups and interviews. It then discusses how parks professionals are adapting to changing roles within a changing context and responding to challenges that are arising from their expanding range of responsibilities. The survey revealed that parks professionals' roles and responsibilities have expanded significantly in recent years. Whilst responsibility for core operational skills have remained, there has been a significant additional focus on a host of business and finance, community engagement and strategic activities. The only area in which there has been a significant decrease in focus is managing planting and horticulture, despite this being at the core of parks provision. Interviews showed that managers and staff are proving adaptable in responding to changes and remain passionate about the service.

3.2 Changing roles

The role of the traditional 'parks manager', who was responsible for managing a limited range of activities – horticulture, budgets, staff, contracts, visitors and award submissions – is very much a thing of the past. There is widespread agreement that roles and responsibilities of parks professionals have changed dramatically during the 21st century. Survey respondents and focus group and interview participants were asked about their changing roles in a changing context and ways in which their particular responsibilities have altered in recent years. The following comments are typical of points that were made repeatedly during interviews with parks professionals about how their roles have changed:

"It's now about marketing, public expectations, business acumen in sponsorship deals and not just old-fashioned horticultural skills we used to have years ago."

"I've come into it very much from the horticultural background and that's where my interest and passion lies, but that's such a small percentage of what I do now."

Whilst it is safe to say that, "no two parks managers' jobs are the same", as one interviewee put it, a distinct trend towards expansion of all park professionals' duties was evident during the research. All of the participants who took part in interviews stressed the breadth of responsibilities they now need to cover. The need to work with a growing range of partners from different sectors and in particular to get the best deal for parks in redevelopment partnerships was also apparent:

"I can spend a lot of time dealing with housing developers and planners as well as making sure we've got enough ice-cream to sell in the kiosk, doing town centre rebranding, emergency planning, floods and working with the fire service. Only 50% of my diary is about parks... It's not unusual for me to be mending toilets because something needs doing now and there's nobody to do it. I have to work at one level with the leader and chief executive and advise them about policy, then yesterday I was trying to take a parking machine apart."

"Less people are having to take on greater areas of responsibility. So, for example whereas you had an allotments officer in the past who just dealt with allotments or a play officer who just dealt with play, now that would just be one component of a person's work."

3.3 Expanding responsibilities

The survey asked parks professionals about changes in focus during their time in their present role. This time-frame was used to provide a picture of shifts in the sector overall, rather than as a result of when individuals changing jobs. As particular expectations and job specifications obviously vary hugely according to positions and organisations, respondents could indicate task that were not part of their personal role and include duties that had not been included as an option. Responses showed areas of responsibility

have expanded significantly within existing roles. This revealed that whilst the need to fulfil traditional operational and environmental roles remains, there has also been a strong increase in emphasis on a range of strategic, financial and public engagement activities, as discussed below. See *Table 1: Areas of additional focus most commonly identified by survey respondents*.

Table 1: Areas of additional focus most commonly identified by survey respondents

| Activities | Most commonly identified areas of additional focus |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Operational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> reactive maintenance health and safety/compliance risk management responding to complaints |
| Environmental | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> flood alleviation promoting biodiversity naturalised planting |
| Public engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> community consultation liaison with Friends of Parks groups managing volunteers |
| Financial and commercial | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> generating income from services and facilities managing budgets procurement and contracting bidding for funding from external sources managing capital projects |
| Strategic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> collaboration service redesign administration demonstrating the value of parks to other services and agencies and health and well-being partnerships 'making the business case' |

3.3.1 Operational activities

Survey responses indicated that operational activities were the area that has been prone to least change. Tasks including managing and maintenance of buildings within parks, enforcement to combat issues such as litter and dog-fouling and managing children’s play facilities, bowling greens and sports pitches appear to have generally retained their previous level of focus. The survey revealed the operational activities that have become more prominent among professionals were: health and safety and legal compliance or risk management, cited by 45% of respondents responsible for this; managing reactive maintenance, cited by 39% of respondents; and responding to complaints, cited by 35% of respondents. In terms of environmental activities, the survey showed a slight increase in flood alleviation, along with 39% focusing more on promoting biodiversity and 38% on naturalised planting. Most importantly given the centrality of horticulture to parks provision, the only area in which there has been a significant decrease in focus is managing planting and horticulture. A total of 32% of parks professionals who took part in the survey indicated that emphasis on this had decreased during their time in their current role.

3.3.2 Strategic activities

The survey reflected a growing emphasis on taking a strategic approach to parks management. When asked whether a strategy for ensuring the future provision of high quality parks and green space had been put in place in their organisation, 44% of respondents said that it had, whilst 29% of respondents indicated that such a strategy is currently being developed. The survey found a strong increase in focus on all strategic activities. The areas where increase in emphasis was most prominent were: collaboration with partners in other services, external organisations and businesses, which was cited by 61% of respondents; and overseeing service redesign, which was cited by 60% of respondents who had this duty. Administration had increased in 47% of cases, whilst demonstrating the value of parks for other services/health and community wellbeing was receiving increased attention in 41% of cases.

3.3.3 Financial and commercial activities

Survey respondents also indicated that there is much greater emphasis on all business and finance related activities. This was particularly true of generating income from services and facilities, which was cited by 72% of respondents with this responsibility. This emphasis on commercial opportunities reflects research on finance for the PAG (forthcoming 2019), which demonstrates that almost 50% of local authority parks' income now comes from such sources. Managing budgets was cited as an area of increased focus by 41%, of respondents with such responsibilities; procurement and contracting by 52%; bidding for funding from external sources by 48%; and managing capital projects by 37% responsible for this task.

3.3.4 Community engagement

Responses to the survey also revealed a much greater emphasis on all public engagement activities, particularly community consultation, which was cited by 48% of respondents, and liaison with Friends of Parks groups, which was cited by 46% of respondents. There was also more attention focused on managing volunteers in 45% of cases.

3.4 The 21st century parks professional

It must be stressed that there is no one approach to parks provision and, as one interviewee explained, "a parks officer can mean lots of different things to different people." Authorities size, type and structure of authorities, along with resources available and organisation profile of their parks and open spaces vary greatly, as discussed in Section Seven. These factors all shape the roles of parks professionals, who will obviously also be at different levels within their organisation and stages in their career. For example, one interviewee from a city council said his authority had recently appointed a manager whose role is dedicated purely to developing commercial opportunities, whereas parks professionals in smaller authorities who took part in interviews tended to describe an extensive range of responsibilities.

Survey respondents, focus group and interview participants were from a broad range of roles and levels within different organisations, as outlined in the previous section but the majority were parks managers or in similar positions (see 2.3:1). Dramatic expansion in responsibilities from the traditional C20th 'park manager' role into the broad-ranging expectations upon the average 21st century parks professional are therefore used to represent general trends in the sector, as illustrated in *Figure 1: Roles and responsibilities of the traditional parks manager*. This can be compared with the extensive and complex range of responsibilities, which were encapsulated in a model that was refined according to survey results, one-to-one interviews and feedback from focus groups. This is illustrated in *Figure 2: Roles and responsibilities of the 21st century parks professional*.

Figure 1: Roles and responsibilities of the traditional parks manager



Figure 2: Roles and responsibilities of the 21st century parks professional



3.5 Responding To Change

Evidence from this research suggests that parks professionals are not only expected to perform an ever-growing list of duties, their responsibilities are also increasingly complex. Parks professionals who took part in interviews emphasised how adaptable they have had to be in recent years in responding to changes and meeting new expectations. The following comments are typical:

"Our role is so varied we just get on and do everything we need to do."

"There are lots of dynamic people in parks, setting up events, getting external funding to improve sites and doing community development."

"It's a constantly changing environment. It is a really difficult sector to be in at this moment in time but there are opportunities. We're not in a great place but we are doing fantastic things still. There are some really ingenious ideas and creative ways of working coming through and that's what the sector allows us to do."

"I love it, I love the variety of work."

"I enjoy the job and the pace of it because there's always plenty to do."

3.5.1 Commitment, pride and passion

Parks professionals' commitment to their role was evident during the interviews and participants commonly commented that they find their job enjoyable and rewarding even though it is challenging:

"From my own experience, I love the job that I do from a job satisfaction point of view, but it's not very well paid or recognised or secure."

"It's challenging but despite the negatives it is rewarding."

The words "pride" and "passion" were used frequently by interviewees, with such comments including:

"My staff are proud and passionate about parks."

"Park managers are passionate about parks."

3.5.2 Time pressures

Parks professionals reported having taken on additional roles as staff have been lost, as shown in the previous section which inevitably means time pressures have escalated. In addition to performing additional roles, many interviewees commented that reductions in support services that used to be available to them, such as human resources and marketing, mean they need to do more of these activities themselves. Lack of time and capacity is therefore an important factor to consider when discussing skills. One interview participant summed up his frustration at lack of time to fulfil all the demands upon him:

"I'm fully aware of what needs to happen, but I would need to conjure up an extra eight hours a day to do it."

The words "juggling" and "balancing" were used frequently during interviews with parks professionals. Interviewees commonly spoke of multi-tasking in order to meet the range and complexity of their workload. A strong sense of parks professionals making things work despite difficult circumstances also emerged during the interviews. The following exemplifies numerous in the same vein:

"Everybody's trying to keep the plates up. But the fact that you make it work makes it look like it's ok but that's because nobody lets the plate drop."

3.5.3 Balancing priorities

The scale of difficulties facing 21st century parks professionals is also evident in the need to balance competing priorities. Participants commonly need to fulfil horticultural, technical, management, leadership and financial roles. It can also be a challenge for parks professionals to balance tensions between commercial and community priorities, as the following example of comments indicates:

“When I started we were a public service that was there for providing a service for the public. While there is still that core...we are being told you are running a business. So, we are more business focused. My personal view is that we need to provide a core service that has that free public service element, but if you want that extra thing such as events, somehow that has to be paid for. That means trying to somehow get that balance between working commercially and as a public servant. There is obviously some conflict.”

3.6 Conclusion

Exploring the roles and responsibilities of 21st century parks professionals is an essential step in understanding their skills development needs. Conducting the survey, focus group and one-to-one interviews during this research has revealed the extensive range of duties that now make up park professionals' every day work. This overview of increasing expectations upon parks professionals in areas related to strategy, finance and public engagement, along with interview participants' views on demands and reward of their jobs, underpins findings on skills and training that are discussed in the following sections.

4. SKILLS, STRENGTHS AND GAPS

This section outlines findings on parks professionals' perceptions of skills priorities and strengths and discusses principal skills gaps that have been identified. It then presents a draft competency framework, which offers a model that can be used to further consider core competencies that are now required of professionals working at different levels in the sector.

The survey indicated that parks professionals tend to feel most confident in their skills in: people management; performance management; health and safety; communications; collaboration and enhancing efficiency and performance management. 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. 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. Participants expressed extreme anxieties over the loss of core horticultural skills that had occurred in their services however. Many referred to this as a "dumbing down" of horticultural skills as a result of retirement, redundancies and budget constraints. The model competency framework presented here aims to reflect the wide breadth of knowledge, skills and behaviours that are now required whilst recognising the need to better recognise the core 'green' skills upon which the profession is based.

4.1 Recognising strengths and challenges

As highlighted in Section Three, parks professionals who took part in the research spoke about their passion for parks, their commitment to their jobs and ability to adapt in the face of challenges and change. Although the focus of the research was on ways in which knowledge and skills might be developed and enhanced, the range and strength of park professionals' existing knowledge and skills was highly evident. Survey respondents and interview participants indicated an extensive range of skills spanning horticultural, operational, people management, leadership, business and community engagement activities. The senior parks professionals who took part in interviews tended to be highly qualified and skilled in both the 'green' and the 'business' sides of their work. Many pointed out that difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff with fully rounded skills became more pronounced as they looked further down their staff structure however, as outlined below.

In light of expanding expectations, certain participants said they needed to develop strategies for coping with demands upon their service and on them personally such as "learning personal resilience" and "managing public expectations". The need to understand the relationship between capacity and skills was apparent, as spelled out by one interviewee:

"If you're in a local authority that's doing nothing but firefighting, that requires a different set of skills and it becomes about health and safety and stripping things out. I'm not sure you can easily separate capacity and skills. If you're under pressure from a capacity point of view, the breadth of skills you need is larger, but developing and utilising those skills is more difficult if you are constantly firefighting."

4.2 Variations in skills

The survey and interviews revealed wide variations in routes into the sector and in individuals' qualifications, training, as outlined in the next section. Variations in park professionals' roles according to organisational structures and situations have been previously noted. Levels of confidence in different skills will inevitably vary according to roles and responsibilities, time in the job/sector and level of organisational seniority.

A general trend might be identified from comments from managers who have come up "through the ranks" and have a wealth of horticultural knowledge and operational skills but believe they lack "business acumen". Conversely, a new generation with management and business skills may be entering the

profession, or transferred from other local authority departments, who can lack core horticultural skills. The variety of the role and extensive responsibilities that are now encompassed, outlined in the previous section, could be perceived as a benefit of the sector for individual career development. It can also make it difficult to recruit individuals who possess the full suite of competencies that are now required, as a senior manager explained:

"It's good for an individual's career development to be able to do a lot of different things. But that also makes it difficult for people coming into the industry, who might have good experience in one area but very little experience in another."

As the survey involved respondents in a wide range of organisations and positions, it should be recognised that it offered a broad-brush overview. One-to-one interviews had the advantage of enabling variations in qualifications, training and confidence in skills among professionals to be fully explored in relation to their roles and organisational situations. This meant that professionals were more willing to discuss skills strengths and weaknesses when they were able to contextualise their comments. The interviews also provided opportunity to drill down into details of skills requirements.

4.3 Identifying skills gaps

Respondents to the on-line survey were asked how important they considered a range of skills when performing their current role. The survey then asked separate questions on that range of skills, which covered their levels of confidence and their level of training. Importance of skills and confidence in skills – which was weighted according to whether they were 'extremely', 'reasonably' or 'not at all confident' – were later ranked according to responses overall. Ranking skills in terms of both significance and confidence then enabled principal gaps in skills and training to be identified. This meant that, for example, whilst 92% of respondents thought 'leadership' was 'extremely important', this was also an area of activity where 49% of respondents felt 'extremely confident' and 48% were 'reasonably confident'. This level of confidence is of particular interest as leadership was an area where a skills gap was identified during a survey by CABE (2009a) almost a decade ago, suggesting that particular skills shortage has been addressed.

Respondents tended to be highly qualified and generally expressed confidence in their skills in long-standing core areas such as: people management; performance management; health and safety; communications; collaboration and enhancing efficiency. The survey found that 'people management' was the skill in which survey respondents expressed most confidence overall. A total of 48% indicated that they were 'extremely confident' and 50% that they were 'reasonably confident' in this area and nobody was 'not at all confident'. Another example is 'performance management', which 70% of respondents indicated was 'extremely important' in their current role and in which 25% of respondents were 'extremely confident' and 68% were 'reasonably confident'. See *Table 2: Parks professionals' three key skills strengths in priority areas*. Areas where respondents lacked confidence but were not ranked particularly highly overall and might therefore be regarded as not a particular concern include, for example, asset transfer.

Gaps were identified where professionals considered particular skills important but generally lacked confidence. See *Table 3: Parks professionals' three key skills gaps in priority areas*. Common skills gaps at manager and officer level identified through the survey, focus groups and analysis of data from qualitative interviews can be summarised as: commercial entrepreneurship; influencing policy-makers; marketing and promotion; demonstrating the wider value of parks; and accessing external funds; along with widespread concerns about loss of horticultural skills. Interviews revealed that skills in performing these activities can be complex and inter-related.

Table 2: Parks professionals' three key skills strengths in priority areas

| Skill | Respondents indicating they are 'extremely confident' | Respondents indicating they are 'reasonably confident' |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Leadership | 49% | 48% |
| People management | 48% | 50% |
| Performance management | 25% | 68% |

Table 3: Parks professionals' three key skills gaps in priority areas

| Skill | Respondents indicating they are 'not at all confident' | Respondents indicating they are 'extremely confident' |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Commercial entrepreneurship | 28% | 17% |
| Marketing and promotion | 21% | 9% |
| Influencing decision-making | 21% | 14% |

4.4 Commercial entrepreneurship

'Commercial entrepreneurship' was the area where survey respondents indicated least confidence overall. A total of 17% were 'extremely confident' in this area, whilst 29% indicated that they were 'not at all confident' in this area. This might be considered a significant skills shortage given the emphasis on activities such as income generation, sponsorship and charging for services highlighted in previous reports and the findings on park professionals' expanding responsibilities outlined in the previous section.

Some respondents were confident in both their horticultural and management skills and in the increasingly 'business-oriented' aspects of their roles and were able to both access external funds and seize commercial opportunities. One manager, for example, said recent changes in the sector had, "focused the thinking on innovation". Another said he had been able to, "see opportunities and take them." Another described having had to learn such skills "on the job" out of necessity:

"I'm a parks manager, but I'm running a number of small businesses. So, one of the skills I have developed, which I wasn't taught, is how to run a small business. ...we run some parks as businesses with concessions and licences. I'm in world of financial performance and trend analysis and that's not something I came into parks to do and wasn't around when I started in the mid-1980s. I've had no formal training in that."

Comments made during interviews suggested that 'commercial entrepreneurship' and business and finance skills seemed to be regarded by interviewees as separate yet inter-related skills. A number of participants spoke of a need or wish to develop financial and commercial skills or enhance existing skills in these areas. Such comments include:

"Entrepreneurship skills is the biggest gap. I look at it as getting the balance between the management and leadership, which is obviously a vital part, and the technical aspects, but then there is also the commercialism. Commercialism is the bit that's probably newest to park managers."

"We don't have the skillset of business acumen in my team. Business operation and income generation are different skills in my view, and also need negotiation and persuasion."

"There's going to be another tranche of savings this year. I'm asking my managers to come up with proposals to see how they could save 20%. ..We've been pared down so much I've turned it around to see how we could make income to counteract savings. I am looking at our skillset and where do we want

active, so they are 'pensioner's playgrounds'. These are hugely popular, but we get nothing in particular back through Health England or NHS and being able to show the wider value of the service would be very valuable."

"Proving the wider value of the service would be very valuable and trying to capture and communicate and linking that to the financial benefits."

4.8 'Dumbing down' of horticultural skills

Parks professionals were all highly conscious of a loss of core green skills that has occurred in recent years, which was repeatedly referred to as a "dumbing down" of horticultural skills. The ageing profile of the sector is well-documented, with 44% of the parks workforce over 50 years-old (APSE, 2018). Participants explained that this 'dumbing down' 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 or stopped. These widespread concerns about "dumbing down of horticultural skills" were coupled with comments on worries about the ageing profile of staff:

"We've changed the landscape so it's easy to maintain...the public have noticed there used to be shrubs, hedgerows and carpet beds. For the staff who've been here a long time, it's devastating."

"We do rely heavily on some of our older senior gardeners, some of whom are in their early 60s now. There is going to be a gap in our knowledge. I've lost half my staff in the last ten years. How will I replace that local knowledge?"

"We're lacking technical skills because the old guard are going."

"The older guys have gone and taken their knowledge with them."

In those authorities where parks are part of amalgamated streetscene services, some participants commented that activities tended to be geared more towards basic or reactive maintenance. As one interviewee explained:

"Horticulture generally is massively underfunded in the sense that people don't really want to spend the money or recognise the skillset...We need to make the distinction between horticulture and general grounds maintenance. From my point of view there is value in the knowledge of knowing what something is, when to prune it, how to prune it, knowing the Latin name for it and that skillset has been dumbed down."

"All our money goes on picking up and maintaining because we aren't planting. Lots of our parks equipment was sold off to make just pennies in savings. We lost a huge amount of staff with all the cuts and land-based skills have always been at the bottom of the pile. I can't remember the last time I chose a variety of tree. We've not been planting new trees because they cut the budget. the contractor ceased to fund street trees. A councillor raised a motion that we want replacement trees."

"We've dumbed down and don't have a lot of proper horticulture now. So, opportunities for those skills are less and you can be gardener and spend most of your time cutting grass, litter picking and cutting shrubs."

"It's meant to be cleaning and greening, but it's all cleaning and no greening."

Balancing commercial approaches with the traditional skills and ethos of public park and greenspace management is essential, according to interview participants. While managerial, business, marketing, and community engagement have become increasingly prominent, participants highlighted a danger of core horticultural skills becoming obsolete if action is not taken to retain and develop them:

“From an operations point of view and being able to manage the team and day to day running of the park, I don’t think you can manage the team unless you have practical knowledge of it that you can’t be taught in a classroom. Yes, the management of it, the marketing of it, the income generation and commercialisation and all that kind of thing. But, on the day to day running, if you want high standards and well maintained parks you need to know what the shrub is, when you should prune it and how you should prune it.”

“You’ve got to be able to semi-business manage, have financial management skills, be able to use communication skills and IT. I believe that has eroded other core qualities of parks management.”

4.9 Staff Skills

The majority of survey respondents were responsible for between one and 20 staff, 14% had between 21 and 40 staff, 16% had between 41 and 100 staff, and 18% had more than 100 staff. All of the interview participants were responsible for officers and/or frontline staff. Whilst the survey concentrated on parks managers’ own skills, the interviews also offered a chance to canvass their views on skills requirements and skills levels and opportunities for progression among their staff.

Park managers commonly expressed concerns about finding staff further down the ranks with the full breadth of skills that are now needed. They said they often struggled to recruit staff that have the appropriate mix of skills. One interviewee explained that front-line staff had been promoted who had strong operational skills, but they can lack more generic management skills:

“I now have staff who are knowledgeable about their particular area but have not had a lot of training in leadership and management skills. It’s tripping them up.”

On the other hand, certain managers pointed to staff who might have the right broad-based management and business knowledge to meet current commercial demands, but do not have sufficient grounding in more traditional horticultural skills. The following comment demonstrates difficulties in finding staff with the right combination of skills:

“We had really big trouble recruiting for a parks co-ordinator. I sat on an interview panel for this and what I found was and almost a 50/50 people between that were practically minded and people that were academically minded.”

A need to “grow our own talent” was raised by several interviewees, with some suggesting a graduate route into the profession would be welcome. Interview participants also highlighted the lack of clear career pathways and progression opportunities for people coming into the sector however, which echoes findings by CabeSpace (2009a) almost a decade ago. One participant commented:

“I’d struggle to sell it to my own son who is 22 and just leaving university. I don’t know where the parks profession is going to be in 10 years. Hopefully things will turn around.”

Participants were keen to emphasise that volunteers are widely used and this is an aspects of community engagement that has increased significantly in recent years. They pointed out that volunteering can also be a god route into employment in the sector:

“We have had both younger and older people volunteering and becoming apprentices and they are now members of our team.”

Participants also stressed that volunteering is not a substitute for paid employees however. Volunteers’ capacities and interests are highly individual, expectations placed upon them must be realistic and health and safety must be considered carefully. Managing volunteers is a skill in itself and volunteers need training

and skills development:

“Volunteers are wonderful and we have lots of Friends of Parks groups but they you do need looking after and they need to be trained and skilled, and it takes skill to train and manage them.”

4.10 Apprenticeships

The survey showed that 33% of respondents were responsible for between one and five apprentices and 10% were responsible for between six and 20 apprentices, but the majority of respondents were not responsible for apprentices. The interviews gave a mixed picture on apprenticeships. Whereas some participants described vibrant apprenticeship schemes run in partnership with local further education colleges that were key to a progression strategy, other authorities had abandoned the apprenticeship route. One interviewee said his service was unable to take on apprentices because more experienced people who could teach them were no longer in post. Others said lack of job opportunities had made recruitment and retention impossible:

“If an apprentice knows that there will be jobs at the end they’ll tend to stay if there’s a definite endpoint of opportunities within the organisation, which has been incredibly difficult with the financial constraints we are all facing. Otherwise they’ll jump out at the opportunity of real employment.”

Whereas some interviewees described how they were using the Apprenticeship Levy, others expressed uncertainty about what the scheme entailed or what it allowed. Some said they found the system too confusing to navigate. One participant described how his authority was using the Levy to fund 50% of the cost of six apprentices each year as part of its long-term succession plan. Another described using it outside of the traditional entry level approach for developing the skills of existing staff including its arboriculturalists. Comments on apprenticeships included:

“I am trying to use apprenticeships to work on a succession plan because I’ve got a number of staff who are rumoured to want to retire so we are trying to look at filling that with a new generation.”

“We are using the Apprenticeship Levy. I did it all through our human resources department. I heard about the Levy and asked if it could be done. The apprentices will have jobs at the end when we have vacancies that come up. If there’s a vacancy we may fill it with two apprentices.”

“We tend to find a very high percentage of apprentices end up getting a full-time job at the end. Because of the ageing workforce we are in a constant flux of people coming and going. So, they finish it job ready and 99% get a full-time job. They all go to college and we now have eight members of staff who went through our apprenticeship scheme and are up to team leader level. We need to nurture skills.”

4.11 Developing core competencies

Having gained insight into the roles and skills needs of 21st century parks professionals during the survey focus groups and interviews, further analysis enabled a model framework to be developed, which sets out suggestions for core competencies that are now required. See: *Figure 3: Draft competency framework for parks professionals* at the end of this section. Clarifying skills and competencies can help to: demonstrate the highly skilled and expanding nature of parks professionals’ roles; guide organisations in developing appropriate knowledge and skills; and assist recruitment and succession planning.

As one interviewee explained:

“There is some real value in trying to create a new level of competence and skills sets set that could build on the sector’s knowledge that people already have. We have management competencies that we work to but we’ve now taken things to the next level on commercial management. And there’s also a need on

equality management, so we put focus on diversifying our workforce. People will recognised value of a set of competencies if it's recognised by the council they work in or the sector generally. . .It would mean if you were in a council there is some recognition that services require a level of competence."

The draft model suggests the core competencies for parks professionals as appropriate at different levels: senior management; management; officer and supervisor; horticultural; apprenticeship and trainee. Drawing on job specifications and existing competency frameworks provided by authorities in response to an APSE Network Query¹⁰, allowed the draft framework to reflect roles and skills requirements in terms of wider competencies. The common elements of the sample job specifications and frameworks have been included in the updated draft framework and a supplementary suite of competencies has been added to address changing demands of the sector.

This draft model is proposed as a first stage in a process of developing a competency framework that is recognised as a standard by all stakeholders in the sector and is coherent with the Local Government Competency Framework 2010. It is clear from this research that development of a widely-recognised framework must occur in consultation with parks professionals in order to properly appreciate their roles and skills. It would also require consultation with key sectoral bodies, education and training bodies, human resources and legal professionals and trades unions.

4.12 Conclusion

This section has outlined findings on parks professionals' skills strengths and gaps from the survey, interviews and focus groups. It has also presented a draft competency framework based on analysis of the research findings, along with examples of existing job specification and competency framework.

¹⁰ APSE Network Queries enable the organisation's staff and members to exchange information through posing questions on-line, whose responses are gathered into a Network Query report on the topic.

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 |

5. KNOWLEDGE, TRAINING AND NETWORKING

5.1 This section discusses survey respondents' and interview participants' views on priorities for training and analyses current provision of training in the sector. It then outlines parks professionals' principal sources of information and opportunities for networking and offers their suggestions for better supporting knowledge development and best practice sharing in future. Survey respondents showed a strong appetite for training and CPD, but lack of time, funds and appropriate provision were cited as barriers. Areas where respondents viewed themselves as not sufficiently trained echoed those where skills gaps were indicated. The wide variation in paths into the sector is reflected in the wide variation in types of qualifications, training among its professionals. Interview participants highlighted the lack of clear career pathways and progression opportunities for people coming into the sector. Where some services are using the Apprenticeship Levy, others find the system difficult to navigate. An absence of recognised accreditation for skills and CPD was also highlighted and mapping of training provision reveals a need for more a coordinated approach. Participants would welcome more opportunities for networking and best practice sharing and an on-line 'hub' bringing together knowledge, best practice and information on training and CPD. Training needs to be well-targeted and sufficiently flexible to reflect time constraints and learning styles, they stressed. Practical activities such as site visits were regarded as especially useful.

5.2 Routes into the sector

Just as Section 3 made clear that 'no two parks managers' jobs are the same', findings from the research suggest that 'no two routes into the sector are the same'. Interviews revealed the wide variety of participants' educational and employment backgrounds and life-stages at which they had entered the profession. Among the 20 parks professionals interviewed, there were examples of people who had begun as apprentices straight from school, "come up through the ranks" and then gone on to do horticultural qualifications and MBAs. There were a number who had started out with 'green' degrees, such as forestry or environmental management and then done management training and qualifications. There were also certain interviewees who had come into parks having gained commercial or management experience in another industry. In one case, a participant had run a successful fashion business before volunteering in a park had helped turn a passion for the outdoors into a profession. Understanding this variety in entry points into the sector is important in appreciating differences in skills and knowledge and, hence, individual training needs.

5.3 Qualifications and accreditation

The wide variation in people's paths into the sector is reflected in the wide variation in types and levels of qualifications among its professionals. Survey respondents were asked to state their highest level of qualification but, as previously noted, those who took part were from different organisations, roles and levels of seniority. Overall, the survey showed a high level of qualifications, as found in the CABESpace survey (CABE, 2009). Individual responses are too numerous to list, but academic qualifications ranged from GCSE's, HNDs, Diplomas, BA and BSc Hons. Degrees, Postgraduate Certificates through to Masters Degrees and two PhDs. Titles of what might be termed 'green' degrees, diplomas and masters courses completed by respondents include 'environmental management', 'horticulture', 'countryside management' and 'amenity management', with the largest cluster of degrees in 'landscape architecture'. Other respondents specified public sector management, business and management qualifications at diploma, degree and doctoral level, with a high proportion stating MBAs and one Doctorate in Business Administration. This spread of green and management or business qualifications undoubtedly contributes towards the complex picture of skills' strengths and gaps discussed in the previous section.

Respondents also cited a wide range of professional qualifications awarded by sector bodies. These

included: NBOSH, professional development through the Landscape Institute and ILAM¹¹ certificates or diplomas in leisure management. Membership of professional bodies is discussed below and for some organisations this is a status that requires accreditation and proof of competencies. Being a Chartered Member of Landscape Institute was specified by a number of respondents.

Having professionals taking different routes into the sector can boost its skills base. The absence of a clear set of qualifications or standards is also a disadvantage for recruitment and professional development however, according to the majority of interview participants. One interviewee pointed out that, unlike the USA, there is “no degree that prepares undergraduates specifically for a career in parks and green space”. This parks manager believes that the situation should be rectified through partnership between universities and sector representatives to develop a parks management degree with an emphasis on work-based learning. Others also stressed the importance of “on the job” learning in tandem with formal qualifications.

Certain participants argued that the need for standardisation of qualifications and accredited training is closely connected with the need for the sector to command the proper status and recognition it deserves. One participant suggested that, whilst establishing a ‘chartered’ institute can take up to a decade, steps towards “professionalisation” might be taken immediately. He believed this would help raise awareness of the profession, the extensive responsibilities it entails and the value it brings. He explained that this might be approached through, for example, a modular system that accredits skills and qualifications people already possess and whilst also being able to “top up” those areas where they are less proficient. He explained this as follows:

“One of the things that the sector has really struggled with for decades is any form of chartered standard or a standard leading to an institutional qualification. The principle of some chartered status or institute qualifications would mean that there is a stronger requirement to do more ongoing CPD – not just around horticultural skills, but also business management, marketing and entrepreneurial skills. A royal charter takes decades and we need something more immediate, but to develop a professional standard for the sector would be real step forward. It would give it more credibility. Managers who have come up through operational horticulture ranks may have fewer formal qualifications, whereas a new generation of managers may have commercial acumen but lack horticultural knowledge, so it could be a case of recognising what people do have and supporting development of what they don’t.”

Another participant, who has both human resources and management team experience in the parks service, argued that having a clear and comprehensive competency framework could be the foundation of a more coherent approach to developing skills, knowledge and behaviours. He too strongly believed that a more consistent approach to qualifications for parks managers is needed:

“There isn’t a set qualification that allows people to come into the industry and work up from a lower grade up to a manager and follow that through. Communications, legislation, managing staff, IT, you can get all of these in dribs and drabs but they don’t add up to something in particular. In other professions you do qualifications and have letters after your name and that seems to have been lost in parks. We need to develop a qualification that is modular so you can add to it according to your role and as you progress. Not having that de-values people, when we want parks to be an exciting profession that a diverse range of people want to come into and build careers in.”

5.4 Training needs

The survey asked parks professionals about their participation in training to date and current training needs in relation to a series of areas of common parks activities. Unsurprisingly, activities in which most respondents feel sufficiently well trained largely echoed those activities in which the majority feel sufficiently confident

¹¹ Survey respondents and interviewees referred to ‘ILAM’, which has been incorporated into the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity.

in their skills, which outlined in Section 4. Areas in which they indicated that they were 'sufficiently well trained' were: health and safety management/legal compliance (38%); leadership (36%); risk management (32%); people management (33%); project management (30%); enhancing bio-diversity (22%); enhancing efficiency (20%); performance management and improvement (20%); and service review (20%).

The areas in which most participants had taken part in training in the past five years can be ranked as: project management (31%); communications (30%); managing volunteers (27%); risk management (27%), health and safety management/legal compliance (26%); enhancing efficiency (26%); marketing and promotion (25%); environmental stewardship (23%); income generation (23%); enhancing bio-diversity (22%); collaboration and partnership working (22%); community engagement and consultation (21%); people management (20%); leadership (20%); performance management and improvement (20%); and demonstrating value for money from your service (20%).

5.5 Priorities for further training

Areas of activity in which respondents indicated that they did not feel sufficiently well trained also largely echoed skills gaps discussed in the previous section. Commercial entrepreneurship and marketing and promotion were the activities in which the lowest proportion of respondents felt 'sufficiently well trained', with only 8% indicating that this was the case for either of these areas. Only 9% of respondents indicated that they felt sufficiently well trained in influencing policy-makers and 9% in attracting sponsorship, while a total of 13% felt sufficiently well trained in accessing external funds. In terms of environmental activities, only 13% of participants indicated that they were sufficiently well trained in environmental stewardship and 13% in contributing to climate change mitigation.

The areas where most respondents indicated that they would welcome training can be ranked as: commercial entrepreneurship (35%); attracting sponsorship (32%); bidding for funds (25%); influencing policy-makers (25%); contributing to climate change mitigation (24%); demonstrating the business case for the service (24%); marketing and promotion (22%); communications (21%); developing a strategic vision (19%); event management (19%); and environmental stewardship (18%). A promising finding of the survey is the widespread enthusiasm among respondents for developing new skills and enhancing existing skills. A total of 89% of survey respondents felt motivated to undertake further training or CPD. In general, even where respondents indicated they had taken part in some training, at least 30% also indicated that they would welcome further training in almost all areas of activity. Interviewees' comments on motivation for further training include:

"I've always been very proactive about training and find it very refreshing and stimulating. So, I have a good track record on training. Anything the council's offered I've lapped up."

"I think you can never know enough and are always striving for improvement."

5.6 Access to training and CPD

The survey asked respondents whether they believed they had access to sufficient training and CPD overall. Only 20% indicated that they 'definitely' have access to sufficient training and CPD. Whilst 58% 'somewhat' believed that they had had sufficient training and CPD, 22% responded that they 'definitely' did not have access to enough opportunities.

As with other aspects of the research, the findings showed very mixed perspectives between respondents in different authorities who took part in interviews. An interview participant from a small local authority who had recently taken on the role of parks manager was very anxious about the absence of training:

"I've had no training at all. It's all been on the job. I haven't done any training whatsoever from a parks or a management point of view. It would build my confidence and help me drive it forward. Opportunities

for training are definitely lacking, but whether they want to invest in that area and where their priorities lie is another question. I rely heavily on some of the older staff who have that wealth of horticultural knowledge, but they will be retiring soon."

Several participants praised a commitment to training by their employers, however. They saw performance appraisals as a good means of discussing their CPD needs with their line manager and request training to address skills gaps and also to do so with staff they managed. One participant commented:

"The council is supportive. If I asked for something in particular following an appraisal, they would generally be supportive."

"I've worked my way up from the bottom and the authority has been good about skills and training and CPD."

"I've recently done in-house training on income generation. There is a lot of training and our training is rigorous."

5.7 Common barriers

With only one in five participants believing they had sufficient access to training and CPD, lack of time was the most common obstacle to skills development, which was cited by 71% of respondents. This was followed by lack of funds organisationally, which was a problem for 57% of respondents. Lack of suitable training events was an issue for 30% of respondents.

The following from a parks manager who took part in an interview was a typical comment on time pressures:

"If I go on training my work backs up so much that it's just not worth it."

"It's lack of time that's the issue when you are trying to do some many things and I'm already having to pick up emails at home in the evenings and weekends just to get everything done."

Respondents who listed 'other' barriers to training cited points including; "distance and cost"; "lack of organisational understanding of service specific needs for future training", "imperative to focus on 'firefighting' in the immediate term"; "one day courses suitable for CPD are too far away"; "competing priorities" and "lack of awareness of what's out there".

5.8 What works and what doesn't

The interviews provided a chance to ask parks professionals their views on what makes training and CPD successful or otherwise. A manager with twenty years' experience in the sector emphasised that "staff development is difficult". She stressed that there is "no quick fix" in addressing skills shortages and the sector should "own" any initiatives to improve training and CPD, rather than this being something that is "done to the sector". Efforts to enhance knowledge and skills should take the complexity of those who care for them and work in them on board and organisations need to consider how to "take people along with you".

Given the time pressures that have been discussed in the previous sections, finding time for training and CPD was an issue for most interviewees. They commonly stressed that measures to help enhance skills must therefore make effective use of limited time.

"What is offered needs to be well-targeted, local and efficient."

"I've been to APSE's 'modern parks managers' training recently and the Westminster Briefing event about the Parks Action Group. APSE is tapping in to what are the buzz issues of the moment. They do a quick

turnabout of providing a course. It's always very professional. You come back and you know you've learned something. The Parks Action Group event was really good for bringing together people who are doing the same job and facing the same pressures."

Participants made a distinction between operational training, such as playground inspection and health and safety courses, and more strategic and managerial training. Several interviewees commented that training needs to be specific to parks and to be realistic rather than theoretical or abstract. PRINCE 2 was named by certain participants as a useful practical learning tool. A number of participants suggested that site-visits to learn what is happening in other places were much more effective than sitting in a training room for members of his team. Other comments include:

"I've been through management training recently. That was intellectually interesting but I'm not seeing a difference on the ground which makes me think its content isn't immediately applicable."

"I've been through a course covering leadership and management, which has lots of 360-degree analysis and that's been a real eye-opener."

A number of interviewees pointed out that local government in-house training and other courses on matters such as management and leadership were mostly of high quality but were generic to all services. This means that whilst links might be made to other services requiring similar skills training, with commercialisation being a particular example, parks professionals value training that is geared specifically towards their own service. Participants believed they would benefit from more specific training that was geared towards parks and green space management:

"There are management courses but it's difficult sometimes to see how relevant it is to the day to day job. It's always perfect case scenario. It would be better if that could be applied in our real work situations."

"The leadership and management training I did was useful in some ways as a reflective process and as a self-appraisal tool. I don't know if I manage people any different now than I did before."

A number of interview participants referred to the CABESpace leadership programme, which was introduced following a major review of green space skills by CABESpace (2009a). This was a nationally funded three-day programme, which received positive feedback during formal evaluation at the time (Pathways, 2010). The majority of interviewees who had attended the programme, prior to the closure of CABE, found it helpful, saying for instance:

"I did the CABESpace three-day training as a young parks manager and it was great. It's not just what they deliver in training but also about coming together and spending so much time with other managers. It was really motivating."

There were contrasting views on certain questions about future qualifications, training and CPD. One participant believed that more concerted application of existing CPD might be more beneficial than introducing another layer of formal qualifications, as suggested by the participants quoted at the start of this section. Also, some managers who were responsible for staff at officer level believed on-line CPD would be attractive, whereas others pointed out that this was not the right approach for members of their staff who work predominantly outdoors. The point that on-line information and training can be difficult for some to access was also stressed by some interviewees.

5.9 Training for apprentices and front-line staff

A total of 54% of survey respondents had responsibility for staff and apprentice training, 60% of whom held a budget for this. This involved NVQs, day release at local further education and horticultural colleges

for those coming into the sector. A number of participants commented on the quality and availability of training for apprentices:

"NVQ doesn't go into enough depth and you need to do training on the tools and apprentices come back to us without the grounding they used to have."

"Because of austerity, a lot of authorities have lost that knowledge and it can't be passed on to people coming in... There has been huge decline in horticultural courses due to supply and demand. Growing our own is the only model at present to be honest."

Training for front-line staff predominantly entails continually updating skills and knowledge on operational matters such as spraying and use of chainsaws, especially when this is linked to legal or health and safety requirements, managers explained. A number of participants referred to "on the job training" as the most important method of developing front-line skills. One manager believed that staff development needed to be practically orientated and that it should dovetail with community engagement where possible:

"Theoretical stuff in our team-building here is always tied in with something practical and we often try to include the public and community groups when we do it. We did an event recently that involved litter picking with council bosses, councillors and the public. English Heritage is very driven by that kind of approach and I learned that skill through them, so there's more emphasis on outdoor activities and community involvement in our CPD."

5.10 Training and non-professionals

Some interviewees raised a need for training on parks in order to increase knowledge and understanding of parks issues among people outside of the profession. This included people from other council departments, public and private agencies, local authority elected members and parish councils, along with more robust strategies for community involvement of volunteers. The following comments illustrate the need to recognise the involvement of non-professionals when considering training:

"There's a whole other side that would be interesting to explore and that's how can parks become easier to access by government departments, other local authority departments and by businesses to make it more investable. That doesn't necessarily mean more commercial, but we just need to better communicate what we do and the value we bring."

"It's not just about training people who work in parks, but councillors and other parts of the council could have training about what we do in parks."

"Parishes are taking on parks management in some parts of our borough. I don't think there's real understanding of what they're taking on but that doesn't mean they can't rise to the challenge. It would be very beneficial if they were helped... if they could meet and share knowledge, skills and tools."

"Community involvement brings pressure and strain on your managers because volunteers are not staff. Volunteering brings a wonderful dimension, but it also brings a huge amount of pressure and sometimes you can question whether the energy has produced good results. I've suggested a stringent audit of our community outreach to set down five stages of involvement of community work. Whereas I was doing the practical stuff as a youngster... now the expectation is that they have to be able to liaise with the community, an ambassadorial role. I want the staff to be able to know what's available and to be able to communicate but there needs to be the time and resources to do that."

5.11 Provision of training

As with the diverse range of qualifications pertaining to parks professionals discussed above, provision of training also appears highly diffuse. The survey asked park professionals, which organisations they had used for training in the past five years. Those cited most frequently can be ranked as: APSE; Keep Britain Tidy; private sector providers; LGA, CABE, Landscape Institute; and Royal Horticultural Society. This was followed by Register of Play Inspectors, Institute of Cemeteries and Crematoria, English Nature, English Heritage, Parks Alliance, Play England/Sport England and in-house training by councils. 'Other' providers named by respondents included: Moderngov, Historic England, Arboricultural Association, ILAM, Countryside Management Association, Heritage Lottery and universities, along with LANTRA in relation to staff skills development. Additional organisations that had provided training referred to during interviews included: Westminster Briefing, Britain In Bloom and Nesta.

Following the survey, an exercise was undertaken to map principal providers of training and qualifications in the sector. The results of this exercise are summarised as a matrix of; organisations and websites; training courses offered; and qualifications. See *Appendix A: Matrix of relevant training organisations*, which indicates the most relevant training on offer from a selection of key providers and organisations that oversee qualifications. This mapping exercise made it apparent that an extensive range of bodies are providing training that is relevant to different aspects of parks professionals' roles, responsibilities and levels of seniority. For example, LANTRA offers training and qualifications for land-based industries such as use of landscape tools and amenity pesticide spraying. CMA provides access to study days on matters ranging from tree identification to fundraising for events and developing and implementing management plans. The Landscape Institute is an educational charity that promotes the art and science of landscape practice and provides a professional home for all landscape practitioners including landscape scientists, landscape planners, landscape architects, landscape managers and urban designers. These are just some of the many bodies related to training and CPD in the sector.

There is no one body that dominates training in the sector however. Nor is there a single source of information on training for the sector. The fragmented nature of training and qualifications in the sector therefore needs to be recognised. Where sector skills councils previously existed to take an overview of supply and demand of training in different industries, this appears to now be happening on an ad hoc basis. Interviews with parks and green space sector representatives suggest a number of organisations are consulting with members and working to update their offer in response to changing demands in the sector at present. CMA, for example, has recognised a need to replace its previous accreditation system CMA is currently consulting with members on skills levels and where there may be gaps in the accreditation process. CMA may look to provide training that better reflects what members feel they need in a changing world. Recent annual Conferences have covered such elements such as partnership working, working with volunteers and fundraising. The Landscape Institute has recently conducted a review of skills among landscape professionals and is now creating a new competence framework (Landscape Institute, 2018). A spokesperson explained that, in reviewing its offer, the Institute is exploring potential to expand beyond traditional landscape architecture and that better supporting parks professionals is a key aspect of its discussions. Whilst elements of the new standards touch on parks management they are not primarily focused at the parks management profession.

Interviews with representatives of organisations within the sector tended to suggest there is recognition of the need for greater coherence on training provision. Importantly, comments from a number of sector representatives suggest that conversations are under way between various organisations and with educational bodies, who are hoping to work collaboratively to help modernise the training offer and streamline or consolidate overlapping activities.

5.12 Networking

Membership of professional organisations can be both a source of information and offer opportunities for networking. Survey respondents were asked about membership of professional organisations. While the Parks Alliance offers a collective voice for the sector, there is no dedicated professional organisation. APSE¹² and the Landscape Institute were cited most frequently during the survey. APSE covers a much broader range of public services than parks, whilst Landscape Institute members can be from the private as well as the public sector and be working on hard landscaping projects as well as green aspects of parks and open space. Other organisations that were referred to include: Arboricultural Association, ICCM; Chartered Institute of Horticulture; Institute of Groundsmanship; Countryside Management Association and Royal Horticultural Society. Parks Alliance, regional Parks Forums and Core Cities meetings were referred to as commonly used networking venues. Being a Green Flag judge was cited in the survey and was frequently referred to by interviewees as an especially effective way of sharing good practice and learning from other places and professionals.

The importance of Parks Forums in sharing practice and knowledge

The value of networking was strongly appreciated by all interview participants, as shown in the following comments:

“Learning from each other is the best CPD you can have.”

“Because parks covers so many different things, there may be aspects of the work we don’t do very often that they do all the time somewhere else and we can benefit from that knowledge.”

“In having a unified voice and extra knowledge, you can improve efficiency. I’ve found APSE’s play officers group a very good forum and we’ve picked up some really good tips from these events.”

“Green Flag judging is peer to peer best practice sharing, so it’s a natural rather than a classroom-based process.”

“I am very lucky in the fact that I do volunteering work for the Green Flag awards scheme so I go around the world to see how people do it elsewhere. Local government at the moment is very inward looking because people haven’t got time or resources to do anything outside their own area. I do it in my own time as my family has grown up but a lot of people haven’t got that time.”

Training, knowledge and networking overlapped considerably in most interview participants’ accounts. The opportunity to share knowledge and experiences was seen as one of the most positive things about training events by many interviewees. The benefits of informal networking were also referred to. For example, one participant commented:

“I have good connections with our neighbouring authority. If there’s something we’re struggling with, I often get on the phone to them to see how they’re handling it, and vice versa.”

The general impression given by interview participants was of what one referred to as “a gap” networking opportunities. This was due to the absence of a specific national forum for sharing good practice in parks and green space management, they commented. There was also a strong impression that there is currently much less scope for networking than participants had had previously. This was a result of both a dearth of “networking support mechanisms” and time-pressures:

¹² Whilst APSE featured prominently in response to all survey questions on training, information sources and networking, it should be born in mind that the survey was conducted by APSE and sent to its database of parks contacts. Respondents may therefore have had greater familiarity with the organisation administering the survey than other organisations.

"We used to have a parks group that met fairly regularly in my region, but people are now too stretched timewise to take advantage of those spaces"

"There was capacity to attend meetings that are more speculative, for creating partnerships etcetera in the past."

"What's needed is making sure staff understand the opportunities for commercial approaches but in a balanced way. So, it's about where they can go to get advice on best practice, shadow days visiting other parks management organisations. Again, that's been directly associated with austerity because one of the problems is a moratorium on staff travel so that's a major issue."

"There's no longer any money to travel to anything that's not on our own doorstep, even though learning from others is a good investment in the long run."

"As a sector, we are not very good at sharing best practice and a lot of that comes down to lack of money."

One senior manager said she was a member of a regional parks forum, but thought this was not sufficiently well-focused at present:

"We should be networking and sharing instead of every three months turning up and talking."

Lack of age, gender and ethnic diversity in the sector was referred to in Section One. One participant commented on feeling isolated as a female in the profession:

"Land based skills are a male dominated environment. As a woman I go to events and it's an old boy's network. If you're a woman and go there with a male member of staff people, will talk to him and not me."

5.13 Information sources

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the general sources of information they turn to most regularly in helping fulfil their role, from a list that enabled more than one box to be ticked. Information sources that were chosen most frequently, can be ranked as: visiting sector websites; APSE advisory groups; conferences and workshops; reading public sector trade publications; consulting professional organisations; informal peer networking. Participating in social media platforms was indicated by 17% of respondents.

The survey also included the option of an open-ended question asking participants to name the specific information sources they use most regularly. Responses included: government websites; emails, search engines, Twitter and LinkedIn; the publications *Horticulture Week*, *The Municipal Journal* and *Local Government Chronicle*; Sport England, Landscape Institute, Keep Britain Tidy, APSE, RoSPA and LANTRA; London Parks Benchmarking Group, West Midlands Parks Forum and Midlands Countryside and Access Benchmarking Club; and World Urban Parks Association. The abundance of information on offer coupled with the absence of a single, readily accessible location was raised by a number of parks professionals. Comments on this matter from survey respondents and interviewees include:

"Many organisations offer really brilliant, offer free of charge, online resources and I use these all the time – wildlife trusts, RSPB, BTCV, National Trust, English heritage etc. have lots of very helpful, clued up people offering such valuable information. But knowing it exists and where it can be accessed is half of the battle."

"We need something to filter all that information that is out there."

"We need a one stop shop or hub bringing everything together."

5.14 Conclusion

This section has reported survey respondents' and interviewees' perceptions of the current training offer, their views on networking opportunities and their principal sources of information. It has also analysed opinions on what works and what does not when training parks managers and staff and highlighted the fragmented nature of training provision in the sector at present.

6. SKILLS IN CONTEXT

6.1 It was highly apparent during the research that roles, responsibilities and associated skills requirements cannot be separated from broader national and local context in which parks professionals are working. This section situates the findings on skills within the national public finance context and discusses the significance of variations in organisational situations for parks services and skills development. The lack of national recognition for the value of parks was a major theme raised during interviews with parks professionals, who stressed the impact of budgetary pressures on staff and services. Dramatic variations in organisational situations, financial resources, local authorities' commitment to parks and opportunities for commercialisation was also apparent. Participants' points on these matters make it evident national and local political commitment and attention to resourcing issues are required if parks professionals' skills are to be properly nurtured.

6.2 Effects of budgetary pressure

Section One outlined the context of reductions in resources and loss of staff in the sector. Within this context, only 4% of survey respondents were 'extremely optimistic' about opportunities for career progression and 22% were 'slightly optimistic', whilst 34% were 'extremely pessimistic' and 17% were 'slightly pessimistic', with remainder indicating that they were 'neutral'.

Parks professionals who took part in focus groups and interviews commonly voiced their passion for the job and cited examples of their commitment to providing high quality parks as a benefit to local residents and communities. They also commonly expressed frustration at the difficulties they believe this currently entails however. Participants in this research were highly aware of the effects of wider public sector budget reductions on parks and green spaces. Interviewees made repeated references to resourcing issues. Typical comments include:

"Local government has been squeezed and squeezed."

"Everyone is doing more with less".

"Every day we are being told that budgets are being cut and we don't know where we are going to find further savings."

In a climate of fiscal austerity, professionals who took part in the research often tended to be combining what were previously several roles into one job as the result of recruitment freezes and redundancies, as outlined in Section Three. The word "pressure" was used repeatedly by interview participants, with reference to the effect of financial constraints on managers, staff and services. The following comments are typical:

"We are becoming more stretched as jobs are merged."

"You can see that members of the team are pressured and challenged and get stressed."

"We are under extreme budgetary pressure. We are currently undertaking a review of grounds maintenance with a view of cutting costs and reducing staffing numbers. That is creating a massive pressure point."

Section One outlined statistics on the impact of budget reductions on staffing from APSE's most recent *State of the Market Survey Report on Parks and Greenspaces* (2018). That report also drew on APSE Performance Networks' benchmarking data, which indicates that managers and staff are working hard to maintain quality of parks provision despite budget reductions. It showed they are finding innovative ways to sustainably manage parks whether through income generation, partnerships or alternative forms of funding. They had made personnel cuts, efficiency savings and operational changes – such as prioritising maintenance on greatest needed, reducing play facilities and making operational changes including reducing grass

cutting, reducing bedding plants and replacing annual planting schemes with perennials. Interviews with participants in the present research suggested that, having taken these steps, there was no further room for manoeuvre in many areas. Interviewees highlighted the negative impact of decline in quality of parks, urban greenspaces and play areas on neighbourhood services, anti-social behaviour and community cohesion. Where naturalistic planting has been implemented as a means of increasing bio-diversity and reducing expenditure, participants pointed out that what are intended to be wildflower meadows can be perceived as neglected sites and become prone to fly-tipping if resources are insufficient to ensure this is done properly. The knock-on impact of decline in quality of parks on other aspects of public services was a recurrent theme raised by interview participants:

"I've seen some horrendous cuts in parks and in play especially...The recreational value drops because people can't use that surface."

"It's a self-fulfilling prophecy if parks look awful, as less people use them they then attract anti-social behaviour."

"Green space is under threat more than ever, from development and from neglect."

Several participants explained that, although they had been successful in securing funding from bids and capital investment has been secured, this is not necessarily backed by revenue spending. Comments in this vein included:

"What a waste of money, all that capital funding that's gone into parks and we're just letting them go downhill."

"We don't need new equipment, we need more maintenance. It looks shabby. You take equipment out because it's a danger. People say it looks run down, and we get complaints...It becomes a site for vandalism and drug taking because there's nothing for [young people] to do. You need to get the youth on board, but we need funding for that."

6.3 Lack of recognition for the wider value of parks

The wider value of parks is well-evidenced in the large volume of reports referred to in Section One. Parks professionals are highly aware of the positive relationship between parks and a broad range of environmental, social and economic benefits, as well as positive health and well-being outcomes. Interview participants discussed ways in which they liaise closely with police and anti-social behaviour teams to help prevent crime and anti-social behaviour. The role played by parks in community cohesion, environmental and health was also emphasised, with typical comments including:

"It's one of the few places left in society where the whole community can meet and having this egalitarian space you can use, that's the way you integrate communities."

"Parks are vital to the environment for carbon, water, biodiversity and being able to breath the clean air and we need large tree canopy for that. If you look at prevention of asthma and lung disease it makes a good business case for saving the NHS money."

Despite the volume of evidence to support such claims, interview participants commonly expressed a belief that parks do not have a sufficiently high national political profile. Typical comments include:

"The government doesn't place as much recognition on the sector as it should be given."

"We've been terribly undermined. There's a short-termism in the political environment."

"We are very, very underfunded and a lot of that work that is difficult to quantify and so it's not accepted by central government."

“People say parks and green spaces and green gyms are good for health, but nobody wants to pay for them. Nationally, we are only good at fixing broken things, not at stopping them getting broken.”

“In order to improve there needs to be a commitment from higher up that parks serve a valuable role in the community, especially when you have high density housing and that might be the only outdoor space people have. I think the public do recognise the value of parks but it's getting that link recognised politically amidst the financial constraints.”

Whilst interview participants were aware that resources are stretched thin and statutory services must be prioritised, they believed the case should still be made for the long-term value of investment in parks:

“The pie gets cut into so many pieces and of course it has to look after the children and the elderly. But we still have to stand up for parks because the old and the young need that space and we need people to be brought together.”

“It's a vote winner, a winner in terms of our nation's health, flood relief, air quality. It ticks absolutely everything we want as a nation in order to live green, sustainable lives. It's frustrating because we can deliver on targets for obesity and air quality. . . We could save this nation billions in terms of healthcare if we had enough parks that were safe and fit for purpose.”

6.4 Variations in the profile of parks organisationally

As well as the need for national government to recognise the importance of parks, interviews reflected a strong sense of the need for parks services to have a stronger organisational profile within local authorities. Comparing accounts from 20 parks professionals who took part in interviews revealed contrasts in the recognition and attention given to parks and green space between councils, however. The following comment is from a parks manager in an organisation where the service has a low profile organisationally:

“It's a shame that parks isn't given as much importance as other services. It would be good for parks to be seen as more of an integral service rather than something that's nice on the edge of everything else. It's almost the hidden gem that sits beneath it all. You take it away and then they notice it.”

Whilst most interviewees bemoaned lack of national government recognition for parks and the demise of funding their service, participants spelled out clearly the benefits of corporate commitment to parks in local authorities' where this does exist. The following comments came from interviewees in authorities that been successful in winning awards and generating income:

“One of the things really helped is that we've had a stable and supportive portfolio holder for ten years. We've worked side by side to set priorities. He has made the single biggest difference not just to the portfolio he protects, but also advocacy to other councillors in terms of spreading the word on the value of green space to other services.”

“We get a lot of political support as a service – the passion for parks and greenspace in the community is reflected politically.”

“We have a very understanding council that believe in their green spaces. We've made a good case and we've always tried to make sure the profile of parks and greenspaces are up there.”

“Passionate political leaders enable green space to flourish. I was brought in to help develop the parks as there was a need and desire in the authority to do so.”

“We have had a well-established horticulture and grounds maintenance team, a commitment to retaining everything in house and are very much into community engagement, events promotion. . . So I'm feeling that we are in quite a good place.”

6.5 Variations in resources

The Heritage Lottery *State of Parks* report (2016) showed that funding for parks trusts has been more stable than that of local authorities and some councils have withstood the effects of public sector austerity better than others. Both this report and The Communities and Local Government Select Committee on Parks Report (2017) raised concerns that austerity has led to increasing polarisation between better maintained flagship parks and small neighbourhood parks. The research on parks services finance conducted for the PAG (2019) found wide variations in funding allocations according to authority type.

Interviewees pointed out that where parks have had sufficient corporate attention and resources, this has met with resounding public support. These comments were from areas where Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) bids have been match-funded by authorities with positive results:

“HLF brings people in and puts more of a spotlight on the park and encourages staff to have more pride and want to improve it. . .it’s good from my point of view to use that HLF as a blueprint for the other parks. Once you have something to celebrate it’s harder to get rid of it. . .If you’re in charge of a park that’s got green flag status it’s harder for people at the top to get rid of them and it gives you a benchmark.”

“HLF came to us at exactly the right time and there was 25-year corporate commitment to those parks in our bids, so we made sure a lot of the grant was also revenue. We’ve seen the popularity of parks snowball and are trying to maintain the revenue. So, we’ve lost one manager, but we haven’t seen massive cuts. We have a very good environmental education team bringing 12,000 children a year to the parks for proper experiential learning and all of that has been valued.”

An officer in an authority that has experienced largescale budget reductions said that councillors in her authority are, *“starting to realise what they’ve lost.”* Others commented:

“They have to realise we have to spend to save or make money. We have to have buy – in by the members and the council.”

“It glues people together, it glues civic pride and it’s not just about how cheaply we can do it for.”

6.6 Variations in organisational situations

‘No two parks and no two authorities are the same’, according to the Heritage Lottery *State of Parks* report (2016), which found that some councils modifying existing practices whilst others are making radical changes to delivery models. The Communities and Local Government Select Committee Inquiry on Parks (2017) considered mixed models in ownership and management, but the vast majority remain in local government control and evidence pointed to state provision continuing to be the predominant model. Heritage Lottery Fund’s *State of Parks* research (2016) found that parks trusts were in a more favourable financial position than local authorities. A parks manager from a trust who took part in the present research was clear that his service has had performed well due to having additional resources that are not open to councils. He also commented:

“Where there are exciting new open spaces, they are not going to the local authorities but the management companies...We don’t want to end up with this paradox of declining existing public open space in the communities where we need it most and pristine public spaces for others to use for themselves.”

There are wide variations in organisational situations and arrangements in which parks and greenspaces are operating, from large cities to rural district. There are differences in terms of where the parks service sits organisationally. Parks professionals in some authorities said that becoming part of an integrated directorate meant their service has been subsumed under streetscene services. They commented which can mean a lower profile for parks than previously or fewer opportunities to use specialist horticultural skills:

"We are integrated with streetscene, which means that very few staff are on the park all the time, so it's about managing expectations."

"Parks used to sit under leisure and we work closely with sports development people and parks might have a higher profile under leisure."

"As a highly qualified supervisor of specialist arboriculturalists, I am paid the same as a supervisor of litter pickers."

One manager voiced a view that parks and green spaces in his area had received more focus due to being kept separate from streetscene services:

"We still have proper park keepers that stay in a single park each day and it's liked by the public. it's a presence and it gives people that feeling of familiarity and security and it's a vote-winner... They have a good relationship with the community, the dog walkers and the park user groups and issues can be dealt with promptly. With the rise in social media, if anything is out of place, it's jumped on by social media."

One manager commented on the impact of his authority's decision to bring the service back in house:

"We have brought things in-house and localised delivery. This has made everyone more passionate about having a green service for your own area rather than contracts, so the money stays in the borough. We are trying to nurture this new attitude."

6.7 Contrasts in commercial opportunities

Income generation and commercialisation is practiced widely and parks professionals and Section Four shows professionals are keen to further their skills in this area. A picture of stark contrasts in commercial opportunities was apparent during interviews for this research however. This is significant in light of the importance of commercialisation to the findings on roles, skills and training discussed in previous sections. Participants pointed out that unequal land assets make it much more difficult to be commercial in some authorities than it is in others. A number of participants also pointed out that levels of deprivation in their communities affected opportunities for charging. Expectations for commercialisation and development of associated skills therefore need to reflect the realities of diverse situations in different localities. One large city council, for example, described maximizing potential from assets including a zoo and generating £400k a year from ice-cream concessions in parks and £300k a year from roundabout sponsorship and large-scale events featuring pop stars. A parks manager from a district council described his authority as "fortunate" in having an active football league, allotments, bowling greens and golf courses that collectively contribute 60% of its overheads, or 40% of its maintenance costs.

In comparison with such examples of generating income, participants voiced extensive comments on lack of assets and barriers to commercial activities. These include:

"The poorer parks in poorer areas tend to be the ones that get behind. It is important to have a broader strategy for the management of public space so commercial areas are integrated with poorer areas from a funding and management point of view."

"When you say 'parks' in my area, what we are actually talking about is mainly urban greenspaces on estates. These are never going to have any chance of generating money, but they are vital to the children living on those estates and the people who walk their dogs there and that is probably the only exercise and fresh air many of them get."

"There are some parks that have done it very well, but they have these wonderful parks to start with and amazing venues which we haven't got in some of the smaller councils... It's the really big events

that work but then you've got to have the infrastructure made available to you. We only have events for around 1,000 people."

"Some areas have parks that are regional attractions, but our methods are limited because we don't have landholdings."

"We have no real income generation from any of the parks apart from a few café franchises to avoid us having derelict buildings and people who take on franchises have to agree to provide toilets."

"It is a challenge because in small councils, people often carry several different portfolios and it's often difficult for the managers to have the head space to think commercially."

"Most customers are community groups with very limited income. Some can afford to pay for events, so we could charge a fee for managing an event, for example, but there is an opportunity cost and cost in terms of staff time and we have to pitch the cost right as they are charities."

"Charging for some activities needs to be balanced with the ethos of parks as a public space that is freely accessible for all."

Funding issues also persist even the parks manager in the authority referred to above that is bringing in high levels of income:

"I'm not saying we don't have continued challenges. The next financial year will be tougher. The service is still being asked for savings. But the holy grail of a zero expenditure in parks is not possible."

6.8 Conclusion

This section has considered the local and national context in which professionals are operating. Understanding this context is essential in exploring the skills that are required in the sector and helps point towards recommendations for underpinning skills development, which are outlined in the next section.

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.

- 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.

7.3.2 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.

7.3.3 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.

7.3.4 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.

7.3.5 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.

7.3.6 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.

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Appendix: Matrix of relevant training and skills organisations

| ORGANISATION AND WEBSITE | TRAINING COURSES OFFERED | EXAMPLE OF QUALIFICATIONS |
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| ARBORICULTURAL ASSOCIATION https://www.playinspectors.com/ | Offers training courses for arborists and tree surgeons. It aims to raise standards of education and knowledge across the industry through events and training activities | |
| ASSOCIATION FOR PUBLIC SERVICE EXCELLENCE (APSE) http://www.apse.org.uk/apse/ | APSE offers a series of courses for local authority officers on: the principles of parks management managing volunteers managing allotments managing events in parks http://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Managing%20allotments(39).pdf http://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Managing%20events%20%20in%20parks%20and%20open%20spaces(8).pdf http://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Volunteers%20in%20local%20authorities%20-%20managing%20your%20valuable%20resource(13).pdf http://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Principles%20of%20modern%20parks%20management(11).pdf | |
| CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF HORTICULTURE | The Institute provides the opportunity to associate with those colleagues through technical and social gatherings, through its publications, on its website and through schemes such as the mentoring and CPD initiatives currently being developed by the Institute. | |
| CHARTERED INSTITUTE FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY | Launched in 2011, CIMSPA is the professional development body for the UK's sport and physical activity sector. It was built on two successful historic mergers – firstly ILAM (Institute for Leisure and Amenity Management) with NASD (National Association for Sports Development), followed by ISPAL (The Institute for Sport, Parks and Leisure) and ISRM (Institute of Sport and Recreation Management), paving the way for IMSPA. https://www.cimspa.co.uk/training | |

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| <p>CITY & GUILDS NPTC – https://www.nptc.org.uk/</p> | <p>City & Guilds Land Based Services (formerly NPTC) is the UK's largest awarding body in the land-based sector – encompassing agriculture, horticulture, forestry, animal care, conservation, machinery and more</p> | <p>Forestry and agriculture awards Levels 2 and 3 https://www.nptc.org.uk/qualificationschemes.aspx?id=3 https://www.nptc.org.uk/qualificationschemes.aspx?id=9</p> <p>Horticulture awards Levels 2 and 3 https://www.nptc.org.uk/qualificationschemes.aspx?search=SG9ydGljdWx0dXJl</p> <p>Certificates of Competence – Horticultural Practices is a qualification which is practically assessed. The training can be gained from industry experience (on the job training), a short training course or as part of a college course. https://www.cityandguilds.com/qualifications-and-apprenticeships/land-based-services/certificate-of-competence/0145-horticultural-practices#tab=information</p> |
| <p>COUNTRYSIDE MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION https://countrysidemanagement.org.uk/</p> | <p>The CMA supports countryside management professionals throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. https://countrysidemanagement.org.uk/study-days-and-other-events/</p> <p>Study Days are for many CMA members the most important benefit of membership. These training events are typically hosted by a CMA member who is willing to share their experience. There is often a focus on a specific subject or project. A visit to view and discuss a range of issues and features at a site is also a common format.</p> <p>Training Days differ from Study Days in that the focus is usually on developing specific skills (e.g. identification skills) or areas of understanding. An external trainer or expert often leads the event and the events are often organised in partnership with other organisations.</p> | |

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| DEGREE AND MASTERS COURSES | Universities offer a variety of Degree and Masters courses that are relevant to parks and green spaces. These include: landscape architecture; | Degree Courses https://university.which.co.uk/search/course?utf8=%E2%9C%93&c%5Bq%5D=horticulture Masters Courses https://www.postgraduatesearch.com/pgs/search?course=agriculture-and-horticulture&qualification=masters |
| GROUNDWORK | Groundwork offer a comprehensive list of professional courses for business and individuals wishing to learn more about Environment, Health & Safety; delivering accredited and non-accredited courses, and offering both in house and open course options: CIEH Level 2 Award in Environmental Principles and Best Practice CIEH Level 3 Award in Environmental Management CIWM Waste Smart (Advanced and Foundation Level) Manchester Carbon Literacy Standard | https://www.groundwork.org.uk/Sites/msstt/pages/msstt-business-training |
| HERITAGE LOTTERY FUND | | |
| HISTORIC ENGLAND | HE provide training and guidance to help local authorities, heritage professionals, owners and voluntary organisations look after England's heritage. HE also train those whose work directly or indirectly impacts on historic sites and buildings. https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/training-skills/ | https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/training-skills/heritageskills-cpd/vocational-qualifications/ |
| INSTITUTE OF GROUNDSMANSHIP https://www.iog.org/ | IOG learning (training) courses, are run on a regular basis and cover a range of turf maintenance and management issues for different sports. This includes: bowling greens; cricket pitches; winter pitches (football and rugby); reinforced pitches; artificial surfaces; 3G pitches; racecourse and grounds. | https://www.iog.org/sites/default/files/documents/pages/iog_learning_qual_factsheets.pdf |
| INSTITUTE OF LEISURE AND AMENITY MANAGEMENT | The ICCM is the only provider of accredited education and training opportunities for those persons working within the service, its Professional members. http://www.iccm-uk.com/iccm/index.php?pagename=training | |

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| <p>KEEP BRITAIN TIDY</p> | <p>Keep Britain Tidy delivers a wide range of training courses and workshops for private and public sector organisations including local authorities, housing providers, business improvement districts, community stakeholders and schools across the country. All of their courses can be delivered on a regional or in-house basis.</p> <p>Topics include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crew training on recycling basics, the importance of their role in the public eye and practical monitoring • Legal and enforcement – dog fouling, conflict management, issuing Fixed Penalty Notices, vehicle issues, environmental legislation and Police and Criminal Evidence (PACE) • Community engagement • Eco-Schools and youth involvement <p>https://www.keepbritainty.org/local-authorities/training</p> <p>Keep Britain Tidy is also responsible for the Green Flag scheme</p> | |
| <p>LANDSCAPE INSTITUTE</p> | <p>The Landscape Institute (LI) is the chartered body for the landscape profession. It is an educational charity that promotes the art and science of landscape practice.</p> <p>The LI works with universities to maintain the highest standards in landscape education by accrediting a range of undergraduate and post graduate courses.</p> <p>LI offers quality training and professional development opportunities. LI accredits over 20 higher education programmes in the UK and work with 12 universities to meet the needs of the profession.</p> <p>https://www.landscapeinstitute.org/education/</p> | |

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| <p>LANTRA</p> <p>https://www.lantra.co.uk/</p> | <p>Provision of training for land-based activities, which includes:</p> <p>Safe use of landscape tools and equipment (Chain-saws, stump grinders, brushcutters, leaf blowers, grass trimmers, power and non-power pruning, wood chippers, etc.)</p> <p>Safe use of pesticides and understanding biology of pests</p> <p>Tractor driving, winter maintenance vehicle driving, 4x4 & ATV's, pedestrian mowers and ride-on mowers.</p> <p>Bee Keeping</p> <p>Grounds maintenance (Winter sports pitches, bowling greens, cricket pitches, synthetic sports pitches, pond and wetland areas, wildflower meadows, hedge laying etc.)</p> <p>Arboriculture (Tree felling, forestry and arboricultural operations, tree pruning, saws and cutting equipment, winching, etc.)</p> | <p>https://www.lantra.co.uk/search?keywords=&content=course&f%5B0%5D=categories%3A5406</p> <p>https://www.lantra.co.uk/search?keywords=pesticide&content=course</p> |
| <p>MODERNGOV</p> | <p>ModernGov provides a wide portfolio of highly interactive and informative CPD certified training courses led by senior experts and professionals. Our courses focus on enhancing key skills to support organisational and professional development.</p> <p>https://www.moderngov.com/</p> | |
| <p>NEBOSH</p> | <p>NEBOSH is a leading global brand in health, safety and environmental qualifications. Their internationally recognised qualifications help to raise the competence of safety and environmental professionals as well as individuals at all levels in the workplace.</p> | <p>https://www.nebosh.org.uk/qualifications/</p> |
| <p>NESTA</p> | | |
| <p>OFQUAL – REGISTER OF REGULATED QUALIFICATIONS</p> <p>https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/</p> | <p>Independent qualifications regulator for England. The organisation regulates so that qualifications are sufficiently valid and trusted. OFQUAL make clear and considered judgements for the benefit of those who study, and rely on, regulated qualifications.</p> | <p>https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/Search?category=Qualifications&query=NPTC%20Level%203%20NVQ%20in%20Amenity%20Horticulture%20(Decorative%20Horticulture)&status=Available%20to%20learners</p> |

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| REGISTER OF PLAY INSPECTORS INTERNATIONAL https://www.playinspectors.com/ | Examines, accredits and certifies individual play area inspectors. It is the official UK body for examining, accrediting and certifying inflatable, indoor and outdoor play inspectors. The RPII also accredits courses for the training of inspectors to ensure that playground safety standards are met and adhered to | Accrediting and certifying individual play inspectors who have shown the required level of knowledge and demonstrated competence to the required standards. https://www.playinspectors.com/ |
| ROYAL HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY https://www.rhs.org.uk/ | Offers a range of fully accredited qualifications and work-based training courses for professional horticulturists & keen gardeners. RHS qualifications run from Level 1 to Level 3 on a variety of horticultural practices including: soil preparation and propagating seeds, plant health and plant propagation, landscape design (gardens and urban), weed control, plant recognition and taxonomy | RHS Level 1 RHS Level 2 RHS Level 3 https://www.rhs.org.uk/education-learning/qualifications-and-training/rhs-qualifications Master of Horticulture https://www.rhs.org.uk/education-learning/qualifications-and-training/master-of-horticulture |
| SPORT ENGLAND | | |
| WAMITAB | WAMITAB is an awarding organisation and charity that develops qualifications for those working in resource management and recycling; cleaning; street cleansing; facilities management; and parking from operative through to management level. | Level 2 Certificate in Local Environmental Services Skills https://wamitab.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/HB_V6_L2-Local-Environmental-Services-Skills.pdf |
| WESTMINSTER BRIEFING http://www.westminster-briefing.com/ | Provides political information, policy communication and public affairs critique. Offers briefings, summits and training events which have links to horticultural and management skills http://www.westminster-briefing.com/forthcoming-events/environment-and-transport | |

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