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The skills

shortage in parks:

a summary of research

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The Government's Liveability agenda recognises the valuable contribution of good quality parks, gardens and green spaces to the well-being of our towns and cities and the people who live and work in them. Over 2.5 billion visits are made to parks each year by over half the UK population. But while huge numbers of people benefit from parks, there are fewer and fewer people who have the skills to look after them.

New research, commissioned by national environmental and green space agencies highlights that the professionals who plan, manage and maintain our parks, are a dying breed. Literally.

Many of the skilled people doing these jobs are now approaching retirement, and as experienced staff leave there are few younger people who possess the right skills to replace them. Our parks and green spaces are facing a crisis, just as their value to society is being rediscovered.

The research found that even among the 'Beacon Councils', those local authorities recognised for achieving exemplary green space services, park departments are struggling in the face of a serious skills shortage and relevant training, and their staff are facing poor career prospects and low pay. Their success as Beacon Councils was largely inspired by one or two older and experienced managers, rather than reflecting a robust and enduring structure of well trained staff.

Green spaces for sustainable communities

In April 2004 the Government published The Egan Review - Skills for Sustainable Communities. It sets out the skills needed to deliver urban places which offer, amongst other aspirations, 'well-maintained, local, user-friendly public and green spaces with facilities for everyone including children and older people'.



The Government is now taking forward the Egan Review's recommendations to create a new national skills centre. The agencies supporting this report - CABI Space, The Countryside Agency, Lantra, English Nature, English Heritage and Sport England - are seriously concerned by the gravity and extent of the green space skills problem highlighted by this new research and believe it is vital that the new national skills centre includes those responsible for creating and managing green spaces. Later this year CABI Space, supported by a wide range of partners, will be publishing a strategy for addressing the national green space skills problem.

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Headline findings

The research was designed to map careers, professions and skills required for the management and maintenance of public green space in those councils awarded Beacon status for their park service. The fact that only seven councils out of over 400 park-managing authorities were able to achieve this status is alarming in itself. However it meant that good practice lessons could be drawn from their experiences for the benefit of other authorities. While work is ongoing to extract that good practice, some key findings are presented in response to the Egan Review.

Organisational issues

Successive local government restructurings have led to a loss of status of parks departments. In most local authorities the parks department is a sub-section of a larger department – such as leisure services, cultural services, or even street cleansing. This has effectively left the service without a recognised or recognisable home within local government: a different organisational model operates in each of the case-study councils.

As a result, parks departments are the neglected sibling and are uncompetitive within the directorate for funds, unless there is a strong and overt political will for them to succeed. Often, parks' staff are not entirely aware of how they fit into the council's management structure and it is not always apparent where responsibility lies.

Lack of diversity

Staff composition is unrepresentative of the community of park users and the working population as a whole, comprising predominantly white men aged over 40. There is virtually no ethnic diversity and the proportion of women working in the sector is only around 10%. The workforce is an ageing one, with 68% over 40 and 92% over 30 years old.

Qualifications, skills and training

Despite a number of highly skilled staff dedicated to the management and maintenance of green spaces, the study identified a deficiency in specific skills at all levels within the sector. At the operational and supervisory levels this is attributed to the lack of apprenticeships and the lack of provision of anything more than basic, mandatory (eg health and safety), training of short duration. At the managerial level, there is a clear need identified for training in strategic thinking, vision and leadership across the sector.

Although horticulture rates highest in importance amongst the practical skills at the operational level, it is management, promotional, presentational and interpersonal skills that are most lacking. To meet the needs of local communities, there is clearly a requirement for more people-oriented training to be made more widely available to workers already in the sector, as part of a structured framework of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), as well as apprenticeships and school work-experience placements.



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Career prospects

More significantly, career prospects are rated as poor, very poor or non-existent by 54% overall. There is a lack of development within the sector with promotion generally being a long time in coming, with 77% of respondents expecting to wait over four years, and 44% over seven years, to move into the next post. Around 60% of staff have been in the same post for more than ten years with the exception of one council, where only 16% have been in the same post for this period. Better pay and prospects and a recognisable career progression would be invaluable in recruiting higher calibre staff.



Staff recruitment and retention

Though staff retention is good it can mask career stagnation and a lack of opportunity. There are recognised benefits to working in the sector but these are not well communicated outside the sector. Principal obstacles to recruiting skilled and young staff are seen by most respondents as low status and recognition, poor career development prospects and bureaucratic difficulties with recruitment procedures. Low pay in the sector, particularly at entry level, is also a contributory factor.

Poor public image

The public perceives this work to be low skilled, mundane, physical, menial and boring: in short, not a stimulating career. However the impressive range of activities undertaken by staff (such as working with people, nature conservation, horticulture, education, ecology and so on) highlights the absurdity of treating the management of parks as if they were similar contractual tasks to street cleaning, verge maintenance and refuse collection.

The partners call on the Government to recognise the urgency of the crisis in green space skills.

The partners believe that the scale of the problem demands that the Government now places green space skills as a central component of a national skills strategy to deliver sustainable communities.

The partners jointly offer their full assistance to the Government to ensure that priority is given to attracting people to plan, manage and maintain our green spaces.

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Details of research

The research mapped the occupations, skills and careers of those responsible for delivering green space management and maintenance in six of the seven Beacon Councils, along with those of their contractors where applicable. It examined the profile of people working in the sector: their terms, conditions and prospects, their skills and experience, their training needs and opportunities, their aspirations and frustrations, and identified 'success factors' and weaknesses in practice within Beacon Councils. There will be a forthcoming set of recommendations highlighting the examples and transferable lessons of good practice from these councils.

The research team conducted 36 in-depth interviews with heads of service and green space workers from senior management, middle management and operational levels, and received 64 replies to a detailed questionnaire.

The work was undertaken by GreenSpace and The Parks Agency with the support of CABA Space, The Countryside Agency, Lantra, English Nature, English Heritage and Sport England.

www.cabespace.org.uk

www.countryside.gov.uk

www.lantra.co.uk

www.english-nature.org.uk

www.english-heritage.org.uk

www.sportengland.org

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Photography:

Page 1: Chorlton Park, Manchester (Green Flag Award Park).
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Page 2: CABA Space

Page 3: Ogden Water, Calderdale (Green Flag Award Park).
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