

Overview of parks and urban green spaces

Well-designed and maintained parks and green spaces have an essential role to play in enhancing the quality of life in urban environments. They provide interesting and diverse places for walking, cycling, informal recreation and social interaction. They also have an important role to play in education, promoting healthy living and well-being, supporting biodiversity and reducing surface water run-off in urban areas.

The Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee report on Town and Country Parks in November 1999 emphasised the decline in the quality of parks and called for comprehensive improvement. The Government's response was broadly in line with the Committee's recommendations although it did not agree that there was sufficient evidence that a separate agency for parks should be established. The Government did undertake to develop proposals in the Urban White Paper and beyond.

One of the Government's commitments was to set up the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce to advise Ministers on a range of issues impacting on parks and green spaces. The Taskforce was announced in January 2001 and carried out a 15-month work programme. *Green Spaces Better Places*, the Taskforce's final report, which was published in May 2002, made 52 recommendations to Government.

The Government's urban green spaces policy statement was published as part of the public space report, *Living Places - Cleaner, Safer, Greener*, in October 2002. The statement sets out wide ranging proposals for providing stronger leadership and more focus on green spaces. The report also responds to the recommendations made by the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce. In support of this, *Living Places* outlined plans to:

- improve leadership (inter departmental Ministerial group) and organisational structures (CABE Space)
- improve the quality the green space information base;
- ensure better local strategic planning;
- draw together good practice;
- improve standards;
- encourage more community engagement; and
- ensure better use of resources.

Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future announced an additional £201 million up to 2005/06 to improve local environments, including parks and green spaces.

The revised version of *Planning Policy Guidance note 17: Sport, Open Space and Recreation* (published in July 2002) provides local planning authorities with a robust strategic framework for preparing development plan policies, which reflect the needs of local people for open spaces and ensures that such spaces are better protected from development.

Progress

We are making excellent progress in putting in place the mechanisms to deliver better parks and green spaces for everyone. We are working to ensure that everyone has access to networks of good quality green space, which meet people's diverse needs.

We invited the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) to set up the CABE Space unit to champion parks and public space. CABE Space was launched in May 2003, and is delivering against its five main programmes:

- enabling (including the CABE Space Advisory scheme) and delivery;
- standards and good practice, including green flag awards;

- policy and research;
- campaigns and advocacy; and
- skills development.

To support CAFE Space and assist in the delivery of its work programme, we have brought together the following Strategic Partnership:

- Groundwork
- GreenSpace, incorporating the Urban Parks Forum
- Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management
- Improvement and Development Agency
- Landscape Institute

To provide direct assistance to those responsible for caring for our green spaces we announced two 'enabling' schemes:

Living Spaces: will provide £30 million, to help community groups improve their local environments.

The CAFE Space Advisory Scheme (previously known as the *Strategic Enablers Scheme*) is assisting local authorities to prepare green space strategies.

We are supporting, through CAFE Space, the broader development of the Green Flag Award scheme, which recognises excellence in the provision, management and maintenance of parks and green spaces. To help promote and raise quality standards we have set challenging targets for local authorities in England to have green spaces that meet the Green Flag Award criteria by 2006. The scheme is managed by the Civic Trust.

To help promote good quality service standards and good practice more widely, we also introduced the 'Improving Urban Green Spaces' theme in Round 3 of the Beacon Council. The IDeA is helping to disseminate and share the good practice approaches.

We are taking action to ensure green spaces serve the needs of all people. We are focussing action on the following groups, which can often be marginalised in using and helping to improve green spaces:

Children and young people

In November 2003 ODPM published *Developing Accessible Play Space*, a good practice guide. The guide is aimed at play space providers, which are mainly local authorities and town & parish councils, but also include developers, housing associations and open space trusts. It may also be relevant to other groups and organisations working to create or improve play space provision.

We have also supported the Children's Play Council in producing *'More than Swings and Roundabouts: Planning for outdoor play'*.

Disabled and older people

We are supporting the Sensory Trust in promoting greater awareness of the importance of urban green space to quality of life, and of tackling the barriers preventing or dissuading use and participation by disabled and older people.

Black and minority ethnic communities

We are supporting the Black Environment Network in developing good practice to support the participation of black and minority ethnic communities in the creation, development and management of urban green spaces.