

Section 3: The future of country parks

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3.1 A Sustainable Future for Country Parks

To ensure an improved and more sustainable future for country parks, a process of change needs to be put in place. Achieving this aim requires a two-strand approach:

- strategic development;
- delivery methods.

3.1.1 Strategic development

Strategic development of the country park service requires the following key elements:

- a commitment to prevent further undermining of the country park brand;
- reinforcement of the country park image through enhancement and consistency of service and visitor experience;
- the use of incentives to encourage the participation of all country parks in the process;
- the development of a vision for country parks that could be shared by all;
- the adoption of the gateway concept as a shared theme for all country parks to adopt;
- the development of a set of eight core areas of activity that all country parks would address to some degree and relate this involvement to the visitor;
- the development of a set of minimum standards adopted by all;
- the establishment of a partnership-based strategic working group. This should comprise organisations that directly benefit from the ability of country parks to deliver their organisation's policy objectives and that have access to resource opportunities.

3.1.2 Delivery methods

Delivery methods designed to create improvements require the following:

- dissemination of information through the activities of the Country Park Network;
- establishment of incentives, increased access to funding opportunities, awards that recognise excellence and improvement;
- ensuring that country parks are included in local authority parks and greenspace strategies;
- widespread use of a standardised self-audit database;
- creation of a country park register and a guide to country parks;
- an increased emphasis on the delivery of services for 'people' rather than 'place';
- specific research into training needs and opportunities, management plans, management structures, customer surveys, identification of good practice and dissemination of the information;
- the establishment of a delivery or practitioner group to facilitate and inform the work of the strategic working group;
- specific research into how the demand for new country parks is best met.

3.2 Development of country parks

3.2.1 Historical development

Country parks are a part of the parks and greenspace heritage of this country. A comparatively recent phenomenon, pioneered by the Countryside Commission from the

late 1960s, country parks were developed in partnership with local authorities for the remainder of the 20th century.

Originally created to provide recreational attractions for urban dwellers - to deflect them from the 'countryside proper' - they were conceived with car-borne visitors in mind. Country parks were to provide a range of facilities and a supervisory service. Each park was to be operated as a single unit and managed by statutory bodies, or private agencies or a combination of both.

This concept matured over the years as the fear of a 'leisure' invasion of the countryside diminished. Eventually a recognition that rural areas can directly benefit from tourism occurred and, during the latter period of the Countryside Commission's support for country parks, the 'gateway' concept emerged. This correctly identified the potential of country parks to provide physical access to the greater countryside and to provide visitors with an experience that would encourage them to develop an interest in the countryside, feel confident about visiting it, and embark on their visits in an appropriately informed way.

It was also hoped that the gateway concept would encourage greater access to countryside recreational opportunities for a more diverse range of visitors. The traditional customer base was still largely the car-driving white middle class. The gateway concept has only ever been partially adopted and implemented (see Appendix 1, The History and Development of Country Parks).

3.2.2 Country parks today

This review of country parks reveals a picture that is not altogether unsurprising and follows on from the findings in the Public Parks Assessment.¹ Four out of five parks using the name country parks have been through the designation process. The majority of the parks, nearly 65%, lie within the urban fringe and many more lie on the main national road networks within easy access of large conurbations. Most parks are either sites of historic and/or conservation interest and nearly 80 percent have at least one landscape planning designation.

However, like urban parks, **a proportion of country parks are suffering from a lack of investment.** Despite their recent origins, the condition of 15% of country parks was reported as declining. However, there was also good news: many parks were reported as improving (54%), and this probably reflects the strong focus of many of these parks on nature conservation (as referred to in section 2.3.6) which will improve over time. Whilst it is estimated that total revenue expenditure on country parks is in the region of £62 million, data shows this would need to be increased by around 28% to take revenue spend to the levels of the early 1980s. The same conclusions can be drawn for country parks as for their urban counterparts: **good parks are getting better and poor parks worse.**

Country parks are clearly important to significant numbers of people. Around 2,500 people are employed in managing and maintaining country parks and 98.5% of all country parks have on average three or more voluntary groups associated with them. An impressive **73 million visits are made to country parks each year.**

3.2.3 Relevance of country parks to our future

When country parks were first conceived and established, their primary aim was to provide countryside-based recreational opportunities. Alongside this aim, they also

successfully acted as mechanisms for protecting vulnerable land, and as wildlife conservation centres. Just like their urban counterparts, country parks are now expected to demonstrate that they can play a part in delivering services across a much broader social agenda. Country parks and the activities they provide should therefore address:

- social inclusion;
- sustainability;
- community engagement;
- education;
- health;
- crime;
- local economies;
- heritage.

Their ability to contribute to ‘the bigger picture’ will largely determine how much support and commitment they receive both from the government and from grant-aiding organisations such as the lottery bodies.

Country parks can become more successful if they can be shown to address many of the national issues facing government today. For example, country parks can contribute to policy aims on:

- **Health** - via participation in sport and recreation, including healthy walking and green gyms, and through the ability of greenspace to relieve stress-related symptoms;
- **Social inclusion** - by providing access for the elderly, the disabled and other excluded groups and as places where a wide cross-section of society can enjoy a quality environment communally;
- **Culture, sport and the arts** – as venues in their own right, as quality environments and for a diverse range of events;
- **Employment** – through education, training and lifelong learning programmes for staff and students as well as active members of community groups;
- **The needs of children and young people** - by providing safe and stimulating environments for play, learning, social interaction, sport and recreation;
- **Sustainability** - by acting as examples of good practice utilising sustainable resources and operational methods;
- **Biodiversity** - through their contribution to local and national Biodiversity Action Plans and the active conservation and enhancement of nature and wildlife within the park and surrounding areas;
- **Community engagement and active citizenship** – by engaging the local community and park users, by supporting community-based groups and by offering opportunities for participation and volunteering in a wide range of activities, including manual tasks, visitor welcoming and management.
- **Linking town and countryside** - many country parks link town and country physically because of their urban fringe location. Research for the Countryside Agency by the University of Manchester - on sustainable development of the countryside around towns - has identified the urban fringe as a landscape in transition. Its role as an important bridge to the wider countryside is complemented by its being able to provide land for 'a combination of agricultural production, physical space and settings for residential use and recreation'. The research covers not only development pressure and the difficulties facing farmers but also the relevance of greenspaces to the quality of life in urban areas. It concludes that the urban fringe is 'the main area and a 'learning zone' for sustainable development'.²

Country parks have an important function in the urban fringe, both in conserving strategically important greenspace and in providing recreational opportunities for both rural and urban dwellers.

- **Tackling the urban/rural divide** - country parks link town and country socially and culturally. Their principal users comprise urban or suburban dwellers making visits to the countryside. 'For the majority of the population, the urban fringe is their first experience of the countryside.'²
- **Heritage and tourism** - country parks have the potential to play an important role in local tourism, especially where they are based in a heritage property such as Rufford Country Park in Nottinghamshire or Sir George Staunton Country Park in Hampshire. Normanby Hall Country Park, Scunthorpe, has been reinvigorated by a Heritage Lottery Fund award to restore its Victorian kitchen garden and is now attracting tourist visits drawn by that particular heritage feature. This aspect of country parks is often under-estimated by managers and local authorities.³
- **Education** - country parks can provide important educational opportunities, not only in terms of the national curriculum but also in terms of allowing a general appreciation and understanding of the countryside and countryside matters.

Observations made during this review would suggest that there are numerous isolated good practice examples of country parks contributing to these and many more social issues.

For example, in one country park there was evidence of drug abuse on the site and the problem appeared to be increasing. Working in partnership with the local police and specialist outreach workers, the rangers received training to enable them to identify the different types of substance abuse, make better contact with the drug abusers and direct them towards professional help. As a consequence, drug abuse on the site reduced and syringes and other drug paraphernalia were less evident and were removed more effectively.

At another site, park staff actively sought to tackle racism and encourage more of the substantial local Asian community to visit the site. To achieve this, they made use of 'Apple Day' that was part of their events programme. The park targeted local schools inviting one school with high percentages of Asian pupils and one with high percentages of white pupils to work together on the event. The pupils were asked to develop jointly a presentation to their own families and park visitors on the theme of 'Harvest'. To ensure that the pupils' families were present, the park arranged free transportation for both school groups. The events were hugely successful, resulting in excellent interaction between the pupils, and encouraging them to celebrate not only the harvest but also the cultural diversity of their local communities. **As a consequence of this initiative, there are now consistently higher numbers of Asian families regularly visiting the park.**

There is an urgent need to identify and examine these good practice examples, produce guidance that will allow the critical elements of each to be understood and replicated by third parties, and disseminate the information throughout the range of country parks.

3.2.4 Definition of a country park

Although designation of country parks by the Countryside Commission was originally based on certain basic common elements, the range of country parks is now very wide in terms of size, landscape types, facilities and recreational opportunities. They include reclaimed opencast mines, quarries and gravel workings, a former airfield, a disused

railway, and redundant waterworks, as well as tracts of farmland, coastline, estuary and historic parkland. These sites house water-sports centres and ancient woodland, demonstration farms and country houses, and they range in size from 13 hectares to 1,274 hectares. Country parks were established in many designed landscape parks, and several, such as Lyme Park, Tatton Park, Elvaston Castle, Hardwick Hall, Clumber, Cannon Hall and Knebworth, are included on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest. Indeed designation was used to protect historic parkland.⁴

Many now have local heritage value as designed landscapes of the late twentieth century: Reddish Vale country park for example has been described as a cultural landscape assembled for pleasure. Country parks have been the great recycled landscapes of the late twentieth century, reflecting the period's changes in culture and society. The development of the country park is a significant historical phenomenon in landscape design of the late twentieth century. Many new designs have heritage merit as post-war designed landscapes.

This extraordinary diversity among country parks may be a weakness in terms of branding at a national level, but it is a strength in terms of local distinctiveness. A more worrying aspect of the wide range of provision is in basic visitor facilities. The advisory panel concluded that **minimum facilities must include toilets, interpretation, site-based staff and access routes to and around the park.**⁵ Research has demonstrated that in many cases such basic provision has been eroded. This has been more damaging to the image of country parks than the array of landscape types or of recreational provision.

3.2.5 Greenspaces

Country parks are and must be seen as part of the total greenspace fabric of this country. Country parks were, after all, originally created with the express purpose of providing recreational opportunities for an expanding population. As such, they stand to benefit from recent government action and policy changes.

The Urban Green Space Task Force's final report, *Green Spaces, Better Places*, emphasised the value and benefit of greenspaces and highlighted the serious issues that hamper their performance and restrict their improvement. The report called for government action and a commitment to make additional and new resources available to those who deliver park services.

In its response to *Green Spaces, Better Places*, the government outlined a new approach designed to enable improvements to parks services. Their report, *Living Places: Cleaner, Safer, Greener*, identified a number of initiatives designed to assist local authorities to provide better park services. Local authorities will be given assistance to develop park strategies. **It is imperative that country parks are included within these strategies and that their high value and strategic importance within the network of greenspaces are duly recognised by the strategies.**

The cross-cutting potential of greenspace was highlighted by the government's proposals. Parks and greenspace were acknowledged for their vital role in improving the liveability of villages, towns and cities, and as key components of sustainable communities. *Living Places* made it quite clear that the increased funding opportunities available to support social regeneration and improvement initiatives must be available to park services. Local authorities must see park improvement initiatives as a priority issue worth including in

funding programmes such as New Deal, Neighbourhood Renewal, Crime Reduction, and the division of resources controlled through Community Strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships. To make the most of these opportunities, park services need to be able to compete within the existing bidding culture. **Country parks need to develop specific initiatives that demonstrate their social benefit and their contribution towards diversity and social inclusion. Moreover, they need to be able to attach measurable outputs to these initiatives.**

Additional financial support will also be given to community based initiatives. With an average of 3.5 volunteer groups operating within each country park, they are ideally placed to develop initiatives that can access this new funding. However, efforts must be made to tackle diversity and social inclusion, to genuinely engage the local community and to involve it more broadly in parks management.

The potential for more lottery money is also highlighted in the *Living Places* report. The New Opportunities Fund will seek to establish ways in which its resources can be allocated to park improvement initiatives. Opportunities will be available provided country parks are ready for involvement.

Living Places does not specifically include country parks but neither does it exclude them from any of its proposals. In fact, the report states that it sees no difference between urban and rural greenspace issues. Considering that the vast majority of country parks occur on the urban fringe, and are easily accessible to urban populations, the potential for such parks to act as a bridge between rural and urban communities, and offer benefits to both, allows them a strong and unique strategic position.

3.2.6 Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 (PPG 17)

The revision of Planning Policy Guidance Note 17: *Open Space, Sport and Recreation* (2002) (PPG 17), provided new opportunities for creating improvements within parks and greenspace. PPG 17 placed an increased emphasis on the value of parks and greenspaces, ensuring they are given higher planning consideration.

The revised PPG 17 provided local authorities with greater scope for greenspace improvement in their negotiations with commercial developers. Financial contributions can be sought for improving existing greenspace or for the acquisition and creation of new greenspace. Greenspace is also afforded greater protection against loss; it is now necessary to prove that the greenspace is surplus to requirements before allowing it to be sold for development. In order to establish that the land is surplus, efforts must first be made to improve the site's popularity and genuinely test whether or not revisions to the site would create greater relevance and use.

Within PPG 17 there is now an insistence that park services make use of park and greenspace strategies. The companion guide, *Assessing Needs and Opportunities*, prescribes an appropriate methodology and standard required of the strategy. A local authority's ability to negotiate successfully for greenspace contributions will largely depend on the quality of their strategy. In order for country parks to access their share of the possible gains that proper use of PPG 17 potentially releases, they need to be included within the parks and greenspace strategy. Furthermore, the strategy needs to recognise their strategic, recreational and environmental value.

Within PPG 17, advice is provided for urban fringe and rural areas. Referring to urban fringe areas it states:

'The countryside around towns provides a valuable resource for the provision of sport and recreation ... local authorities should encourage the creation of sports and recreational facilities in such areas and the development of managed countryside, such as country parks, community forests and agricultural showgrounds'. For rural areas, PPG 17 states 'those sports and recreation facilities which are likely to attract significant numbers of participants or spectators should be located in, or on the edge of, country towns'.

Provided the improvement of country parks is included within local authority parks and greenspace strategies, and a demand for the services they offer can be demonstrated, they are well placed to compete for their appropriate share of developer contributions, such as section 106 agreements.

3.3 A strategy for improvement

3.3.1 Under-performing parks

An initial analysis of the data might appear to suggest that the problems associated with country parks are not particularly significant. After all, 65% of responding officers declared that their parks were either in good or very good condition, and 54% declared that the condition of their parks was improving. However, the underlying traits are less positive with 9% of country parks in decline and 17% of parks experiencing a decline in visitor numbers. When the individual features and built structures within a park are examined, poor condition assessments were provided for 24% of parks and 33% reported decline. **Considering country parks are relatively new provisions, with many being less than 30 years old, it is evident that there are serious operational issues that need to be addressed.**

Should the popularity of country parks decline and visitor numbers diminish there is a danger that the image of country parks will suffer. Visitors to country parks tended to be either regular visitors, who considered the park to be local, or day-trippers/tourists actively seeking a day out and selecting a country park from a range of attractions available in a particular geographic area.

Any decline in the popularity of country parks is likely to endanger the commitment received from local authorities and grant-giving bodies. An image of country parks as unsatisfactory, irrelevant and unimportant may be created. It is hard for very public-facing organisations to commit scarce resources to any area of service that is viewed in this way and so the cycle of decline becomes consolidated and the task of reversing decline becomes that much harder.

3.3.2 Reinforcing the brand

A good approach to bringing about improvements to country parks, and expanding their relevance and value to modern society, would be through a positive reinforcement of their image - the country park 'brand'. Efforts must focus on maintaining services and reputations that are already good and ensuring that those parks that currently fall below an acceptable threshold, and therefore threaten the integrity of the image, are brought up to scratch. Continuity and enhancement of image and consistency of service and visitor welcome are imperative.

3.3.3 Participatory approach

There are two possible approaches to trying to create a consistent level of service across the entire range of country parks. The first would be to arbitrarily insist that parks meet defined standards by threatening to withdraw their designation if they fail. However, there are perceived drawbacks to this approach:

- there is no copyright on the term ‘country park’ and so no park can legally be prevented from being called a country park. The only thing that could be withheld when a park’s designation was withdrawn would be the recognisable brown road sign that directs visitors to the park;
- withdrawing a poorly performing park’s designation does not bring about improvement, indeed it is likely to further reduce a local authority’s commitment to the park, further limit access to resources and hasten its decline, the opposite to what is intended.

A far better approach would be one of encouragement and persuasion, initially based on establishing a culture of self-help and mutual benefit. Establishing this culture could be a principal objective of the recently established Country Park Network.

3.3.4 Use of incentives

The best way to encourage participation in new initiatives, designed to eliminate or reduce problems, would be to offer some form of direct and tangible incentive. Simply contributing to solution finding is unlikely to be a sufficient incentive for park managers to justify allocating time and effort to this work, especially if their park is performing well. If, for example, new initiatives could be linked to increased opportunities to access grants, then park managers and park departments would be able to commit much more readily to implementing new approaches to service delivery.

Another possible incentive that would encourage the participation of park services in a process of reform and change would be some form of award that recognises high standards and/or improvements. The award would have to benefit the service provider in some way, for instance, through improved status and kudos, and perhaps through higher visitor numbers.

3.3.5 Shared vision

The consistent and widespread involvement of park managers, in a process designed to bring about improved services, should start with the establishment of a shared vision that all country parks can ‘buy into’. There is a need for an overarching philosophy and a set of shared aims and objectives that would help to create an attractive, meaningful and consistent image which visitors could depend on.

That is not to say that the diversity and individuality of the current range of country parks should be diminished, indeed it is something to be celebrated. What is needed is a common approach to service delivery, and a shared commitment to developing initiatives that deal with specific themes or work areas. This would help to maximise the value of available resources and to create an appeal that is consistent throughout all country parks.

A suitable vision that could be applied by all country parks might read as follows:

*As a country park, we welcome and **encourage all visitors**. We will try to ensure that each visitor’s experience is as enjoyable and informative as possible. We will actively seek to provide visitors with a safe and clean park that caters for the needs of individuals and family groups. We will seek to*

accommodate and provide for the recreational needs of visitors, whilst managing the land in a sustainable way that conserves, protects, and improves the landscape, natural environment and wildlife.

We will respect and support local culture and heritage, and encourage the involvement of visitors and the local community in the management and maintenance of the park. We are stewards of this land and will ensure that its many benefits are conserved for the enjoyment of generations yet to come.

3.3.6 Gateways and strategic greenspaces

The adoption of a ‘common theme’ that links all country parks would be useful in terms of achieving consistent service delivery and reinforcing a consistent perception amongst the customer base. Appendix 1 identifies the ‘gateway’ concept as a potentially powerful basis on which to deliver country park services. For a number of reasons, it was never implemented and tested on a wide scale. In looking at the demand for new country parks, our research has shown that the gateway concept is something that makes the creation of new country parks particularly attractive to local authorities.

The potential of a given country park to act as a ‘gateway’ to the wider countryside was identified by the Countryside Commission in the 1980s. The word was used both literally – that is, footpath and rights of way links from the park boundary – and metaphorically, to mean intellectual access and overcoming cultural barriers which prevented potential urban visitors from enjoying the wider countryside. This ‘gateway’ role remains an important function of, and a potential opportunity for, country parks.⁶

In considering this gateway concept, it is important to ask whether some country park interpretation succeeds in offering genuine intellectual access to the countryside or not; some have been charged with perpetuating ‘countryside illiteracy’.⁵ A country park’s primary function is as a quality environment for public enjoyment (which much countryside, dominated by industrial agriculture, may not be). It is a destination in itself for most visitors. At the same time, there is a need to develop ways of using country parks as shop windows for the countryside: for example by selling local produce, by providing a venue for farmers’ markets and by interpreting the local countryside environment. Agricultural practice, e.g. muck-spreading, silage and crop rotation, could be explained as well as providing information about wildlife. There is a pressing need for explanation and illumination of divisive issues such as hunting and food production, in which country parks are well placed to play a significant role. Interpretation to date has largely been restricted to the site itself and to ‘safe’ subjects such as habitats and species.

3.3.7 Shared programme of activity

As part of the work to bring about improvements to all country parks and establish a consistent image, there is a need to establish the topic areas and areas of activity that could consistently be included within the work programmes of country parks. This should be in addition to concentrating on core areas such as recreation and sport. A suggested list of topic areas and areas of activity, designed to equally address the ‘people’ and the ‘place’ aspects of park management, is as follows:

- **Linking town and country** – providing the link between rural and urban life, encouraging greater physical access to the wider countryside and a greater understanding of rural culture, rural lifestyles, agriculture, and the issues and problems that threaten a rural existence;
- **Education** – working with schools, colleges and adult learning centres, linking to the national curriculum, especially Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), plus early learning and learning for life initiatives and programmes;

- **Interpretation** – imparting a greater understanding and appreciation of the natural environment as a generic issue, plus accurate interpretation of specific local attributes such as an historic landscape or an industrial, rural or social/cultural heritage;
- **Recreation and sport** – providing sporting and recreational opportunities, whether formal or informal, from gentle walks through to national cross-country championships, from kite flying through to hang-gliding. Active participation in sport and recreation ensures a healthier lifestyle and reduces the likelihood of developing serious illnesses and diseases. In some rural and urban fringe locations, the country park may well be the only provider of certain sports or recreation facilities. In some cases they provide substantial opportunities and are engaged in many different sports and advanced levels of participation.
- **Sustainability** – promoting awareness of the importance of sustainable development, utilising and demonstrating sustainable working practices and renewable resources, becoming centres of sustainability excellence, all linking to the park’s education and interpretation programmes;
- **Biodiversity** – continuing to build on the valuable contribution already made by country parks towards improving local biodiversity and ecological systems, strongly linked to the park’s education and interpretation programmes;
- **Heritage** – many country parks are historic sites with historic landscape features, whether designed, natural or semi-natural. All country parks have some associated industrial, rural, social or cultural heritage. The conservation, enhancement and interpretation of this heritage should be an integral part of site management and visitor experience;
- **Events and festivals** – providing a programme of events and festivals that encourage visits, reinforce education and interpretation work and actively seek the participation and involvement of a diverse and multi-cultural audience.

Not all country parks will be able to excel in all of the topic areas particularly as parks tend to fall into the definitions of heritage, recreation and conservation sites. The physical nature of each site, combined with its local distinctiveness, will mean that each site will have specialisms and areas of excellence. There are many other areas of activity that individual country parks are involved in and, in order to ensure that country parks do not become too uniform and predictable, it is important that these other areas of activity continue. However, there is no reason why all country parks cannot address each of the suggested shared topic areas to some degree, and effectively relate this involvement to park visitors.

Apart from reinforcing the image of country parks, by agreeing a set of objectives or activity areas such as the ones described above, country parks would be able to pool resources and share experiences, good practice and lessons learnt. This would greatly enhance their effectiveness in delivering consistent, high quality and meaningful activity programmes that encourage participation, attract visitors and increase access to relevant funding sources.

3.3.8 Minimum standards

The final component required to enable a process of improvement to begin, is a set of minimum standards that all country parks strive to achieve. These must be designed in a way that provides managers with a useful tool, assisting them to identify and target weak areas of service delivery and to measure progress against achievable performance indicators. The work would ideally complement and support the Best Value review process rather than produce duplication of effort. Again, the adoption of a set of

minimum standards would consolidate the brand image and help to ensure that the customer perception was one of quality and assured satisfaction. A suitable set of minimum standards would address the key areas of:

- **Management process** – use of management plans, business plans, training needs assessments and programmes, and visitor surveys;
- **Supervision** – staff to visitor ratios and standards of customer care;
- **Visitor facilities** – number of toilets per visitor, cleanliness, car parking, catering;
- **Visitor welcome** - implementation of warden services and undertaking visitor welcome surveys to highlight good practice and key areas for improvement;
- **Information** – internal and external signs, leaflets, interpretation material and activities;
- **Disabled access** – disabled access audits and implementation to meet DDA requirements;
- **Sustainable transport links** – bus, train, cycle and footpaths;
- **Customer and community involvement** – forums, consultation, volunteer activities, decision making involvement;
- **Accessibility** – both to the park and around the park;
- **Customer satisfaction** – minimum complaints, maximum satisfaction, responding to feedback.

This is not intended to be a comprehensive list but provides a guide to the type of areas that minimum standards could address. The performance indicators that would accompany the minimum standards could be designed to indicate a minimum-, mid- and high-standard to assist managers progressively to improve beyond the minimum standard. The advisory panel produced a draft set of minimum standards that, together with performance indicators, are shown in Appendix 2.

The more pragmatic reason for establishing a system of nationally recognised standards and performance indicators is the relationship of such measurements to the bidding culture in which country parks, along with most other public services, now exist. As the former planning minister, Lord Falconer, put it: 'You will not know to whom to provide rewards unless you know who is doing what ... You only get money for those things if you have a means of measuring how well it is going on.'¹⁷

3.3.9 Multi-agency strategic working group

The services provided by country parks are valuable and contribute to achieving the objectives of many different organisational agendas - including those concerned with heritage, sport, nature and the environment. Whilst some of these organisations are helping to support country parks, the nature of their support is usually limited to comparatively small financial contributions to very specific initiatives. The strategic and intellectual input is in general not occurring. Organisations that can benefit from the work of country parks must be encouraged to get more directly involved. In this way, they will better understand how the parks contribute and be able to influence activities so that country parks become even more relevant to the delivery of their individual objectives. This will lead to a greater willingness to invest further in country parks. Until country parks are recognised as being important to these organisations the support they receive from them, financial and otherwise, will remain limited.

The involvement of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in country parks has grown. It recognises that many country parks have significant heritage value and, as a consequence, it has already financially supported several schemes based within country parks. It has

also made changes to one of its funding programmes to ensure that this involvement continues and grows. HLF actively welcomes applications from country parks for heritage-based restoration projects. The involvement of a representative of HLF on the advisory panel proved very useful. The involvement of other organisations in the strategic development of initiatives to improve country parks would be just as useful.

The creation of a strategic working group that included all of the organisations that are, or should be, interested and involved in country parks would seem an essential component of any attempt to create improvements within the service area. The commitment of these organisations at a strategic level would help to identify how country parks could contribute to achieving the organisations' objectives. It would then be possible to develop specific initiatives to achieve these objectives, either across the whole range of parks, or - involving the most suitable and relevant parks - at an individual or local level. Once suitable schemes have been identified, the chances of securing financial backing and practical support from these partner organisations would be greatly increased.

By ensuring that all potential partner organisations are involved at the strategic stage, it would be possible to create efficient improvement programmes. These could work on many different levels and support several different agendas simultaneously, thereby avoiding duplication of effort, inefficiency and lost opportunities. The combined effort of many different organisations, all committed to achieving and supporting improvements to country parks, is bound to be greater than the sum of their individual efforts.

The best way of securing the support and involvement of other relevant bodies is through the creation of a strategic working group established as a partnership and focusing on the mutual benefit of all involved. By involving these partners at a strategic level, a symbiosis could be created between the development of country parks and the programmes and initiatives being developed by these partner organisations. Once the value of country parks is better understood by the partner organisations, existing and new funding opportunities are likely to be identified or developed, and parks can be encouraged to apply.

A strategic working group in England might include, amongst others, the following organisations:

- Heritage Lottery Fund
- Sport England
- Forestry Commission
- English Nature
- English Heritage
- Environment Agency
- Countryside Agency

Depending on specific areas of research it may be beneficial to occasionally create sub-groups from the strategic working group and to draw in other organisations such as:

- Green Flag
- British Trust for Conservation Volunteers
- Groundwork Trust

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) already makes a significant contribution to country park funding opportunities. It would therefore seem sensible to include a representative of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) within the strategic working group.

3.3.10 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

The country parks that are established in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland share the same basic functions and characteristics as the English parks and could be seen by visitors as an integral part of the same family. Any scheme that seeks to maintain and improve the image and reputation of country parks should therefore give due consideration to the country parks that are found within Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

There are two possible approaches to dealing with this issue. The first is to embark on a process of brand distinction i.e. to separate English country parks from the rest and to give them a distinct title, the most obvious being 'English Country Park', or 'Country Park of England'. In this way, any improvements created within English country parks would not be affected by different approaches to country parks in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The disadvantage of this approach is that any re-branding takes time to establish and invariably costs substantial amounts of money. Re-branding would involve new signs, new logos affecting uniforms, vehicles and literature, and substantial marketing and promotion activities to inform the public of the change.

A more desirable approach would be to ensure that the bodies responsible for country parks in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - Scottish Natural Heritage, the Countryside Council for Wales, and the Department of the Environment Northern Ireland - were included in the improvement process, possibly as members of the strategic working group. In this way, there would be continuity of image, access to good practice examples found in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and clarity of message to the public. Some of the organisations that would be involved in the strategic working group, HLF for example, have a national remit, and the inclusion of representatives from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would suit their requirements. Any additional research that followed completion of this study would be likely to deal with themes that are generic to all country parks and there might be greater opportunity to fund this work if the organisations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland supported the process.

3.4 Delivery

3.4.1 Encouraging participation

The strategic approach to bringing about the development and improvement of country park services identifies the need to gain the support and participation of all country parks or at least the vast majority. However, there is nothing to prevent work from continuing, provided a substantial number of country parks are involved in the initial developmental stages. The recently established Country Park Network, currently funded by the Countryside Agency, provides an excellent vehicle through which to inform country park managers, start the process of involvement and encourage the participation of other country parks.

The Country Park Network is developing a series of 'road shows' that will take place on a regional basis. The road shows, entitled 'Country parks are special because', will foster and encourage the establishment of regional forums and networks, and promote the adoption and implementation of the recommendations of this study. This in itself will

serve as a useful starting point to engage parks managers and get them to ‘buy into’ the proposed actions. However, it will not be sufficient to ensure widespread commitment and action.

This report is complemented by a research note and will be downloadable via the internet. The aim is to ensure that the report is widely available and widely read in order to help inform park managers of the report’s recommendations and encourage their involvement.

Promoting and disseminating the recommendations of this study is an essential part of securing the support of park managers to deliver a programme of improvement. However, this action on its own will not be sufficient. What is needed are real and tangible benefits that park managers can use to convince senior officers and politicians to invest additional resources in the park. **The incentive most likely to achieve this additional commitment is undoubtedly access to additional revenue and capital grant funding.** The proposed strategic working group offers the best opportunity for ensuring that these additional funding opportunities become available. By demonstrating that country parks can and will achieve the specific objectives of the strategic partner organisations, increased access to a range of grants should follow.

Another useful, but perhaps less powerful, incentive that could be employed is the use of awards that recognise quality services and improved services. The Green Flag awards scheme run by the Civic Trust is being heralded as a ‘national standard’ for all parks and the number of parks, including country parks, entering the scheme is increasing.

It is important that the set of minimum standards proposed earlier in this report adequately refer to and address the requirements of award schemes such as Green Flag. The inclusion of the organisations behind the award schemes within the strategic working group would be the best method of ensuring that their assessment criteria and the country parks minimum standards were mutually compatible.

The Green Flag award is arguably more relevant to country parks than any other kind of park. Many country parks rely on tourists and day-trippers to boost their visitor numbers and income-generating potential. A Green Flag award may encourage these visitors to visit the country park instead of an alternative visitor destination.

There is no doubt that success encourages success. As the various ‘components of change’ identified within this report start to be implemented and start to generate improvements for participating country parks, others will wish to follow.

3.4.2 Self-audit database

The Countryside Agency has established a country parks self-audit database to assist individual parks to assess their performance against common assessment criteria and performance indicators. The database has been based on a set of minimum standards but could also include other practical assessment criteria. Self-audit databases are excellent tools not just for measuring the standards being achieved, but also for measuring and plotting progress and improvement. A park can measure the standard currently being achieved, set this against the required minimum standard and use interim stages to facilitate progression towards the desired standard. Once the minimum standard has been met they can define a higher standard with interim stages that they can then aspire to achieve. Self-audit databases help to establish a culture of continuous improvement within the management and operation of the park and assists managers in

understanding what it is they need to do in order to reach the standard. They also help managers to identify the individual areas of weakness within their service delivery.

In addition to defining the tasks required to achieve specific performance targets, it will be possible to use the self-audit database to make comparisons between one individual park's performance and the regional and national average performances. This ability to compare, together with the ability to demonstrate improvement, could make the self-audit database an invaluable asset when trying to achieve positive Best Value reviews. The collection of individual park data and the development of performance related statistics at a national and regional level could be one of the functions of the Country Park Network.

The self-audit database will be available on-line via the Country Park Network website. It will allow national data to be continually updated - as a park completes its self-audit, the information would immediately be stored within a central database.

3.4.3 Country park register and guide

One of the possible tasks for the Country Park Network would be the creation of a publicly accessible national **register** of country parks from which a **guide** to country parks could be developed. The guide, which would be available on-line, would help to promote country parks and encourage greater visitor numbers and participation in country park events. The guide could form the mainstay of an overall marketing strategy that promotes all country parks, helping to raise awareness of their value, availability and accessibility.

Initially the guide could be based on the register information and contain details of where the parks can be found, together with a brief description of the main features of the park, the available facilities, activities and contact details. Over time, the guide could incorporate more critical comment and be linked to some form of accreditation process depending on their individual merits, the available facilities, activities and performance standards. The published hard copy version of the guide could contain details of annual events programmes, where these are available. The on-line version could be much more regularly updated and include all of those activities whose dates are not fixed a year ahead. The on-line version would be included within the country park website.

Managing the information that is included in the country park register and guide could be a function of the Country Park Network. Any grading or classification of parks according to their individual merits would require some form of independent inspection to ensure that the information provided was accurate and honest.

A country park register and guide would perform many functions: it would act as an incentive, because a good entry in the guide could bring additional kudos and customers and it would support the marketing efforts of individual parks. The inclusion of an independent inspection and review process would encourage park managers to accurately self-audit.

3.4.4 Non-responding parks

Only half of the country parks responded to this study. In order to create the register and guide, and encourage high levels of participation in the change process, it would be important that more parks became involved. All non-responding parks should be re-contacted and encouraged to complete a revised and simplified questionnaire that concentrated on the information most needed to implement the recommendations of

this report. The non-responding parks should also be encouraged to make use of the self-audit database.

The publishing of this report and the actions proposed to help facilitate the general improvement of all country parks, such as the Country Park Network and the self-audit database will, it is hoped, convince park managers that this is a process worth 'buying into'. Establishing this first level of commitment from non-responding parks would be an important step towards full commitment to the whole process.

3.4.5 People management

During the early development of country parks, the emphasis and justification for their creation was entirely focused on providing for the needs of people; any reference to the management of the land and its wildlife was conspicuous by its absence. This has evolved to a greater emphasis on nature conservation and a very inconsistent attitude towards managing the parks for the benefit of visitors. That is not to say that the excellent management of the environment and nature conservation, which is clearly evident in many of the parks, should in any way be undermined or reduced. **However, without a greater emphasis on people management rather than place management, efforts to improve the delivery of country park services will not be as successful as they should be.**

Terry Robinson of the Countryside Agency stated to the Select Committee inquiry into town and country parks: "Their primary aim (country parks) is to provide for people."⁸ While all country parks do this, the degree to which user preferences and perceptions are surveyed, and to which people participate effectively in management, varies widely.

There are major resource implications in effective community participation. The fact that effective participation requires more, not less, leadership, has to be understood. Equally, as the Cabinet Office has recognised, "The *pretence* of consultation simply causes cynicism and mistrust".⁹ Brian O'Neill, Superintendent of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, confirmed recently that effective use of the voluntary sector – to huge benefit for the park – involved a 'complete change in organisation and culture within the park service'.¹⁰ Nearer to home, Joe Taylor of Coombe Abbey Country Park, commented that park staff need to be doing less and enabling more.⁵ Community involvement should not be interpreted as offering a means to cut costs - it is about prioritising scarce resources, and enabling is no cheaper than doing.

In part as a result of Countryside Commission sponsorship, a profession of countryside recreation management has developed since the early days of country parks. There are now several degree-level courses in the subject. The advisory panel identified the culture that has developed as a pertinent issue. It noted in particular the over-emphasis on land-management and nature-conservation among new entrants into country park management and a lack of training and understanding of people-management. Experienced head rangers and managers stress the over-arching importance of new entrants enjoying communication as much as conservation; children as much as wildlife, and social awareness as much as ecological awareness. Even modern guidance on management can appear to get this emphasis wrong.¹¹ **The conclusion of panel discussions, and of the consultants' workshop was that not only can you not avoid people, but that they are the priority, over and above the land itself and must be the principal focus of management decisions.**

Appendix 3 provides a table prepared by the advisory panel that illustrates the existing and potential range of people using country parks.

3.4.6 Quality of life capital

There is an assessment tool available to assist managers to achieve a balance between pure environmental management and managing a park for the benefit of visitors. In addition, it helps managers to place a recognisable value on the benefits provided to visitors and this assists them in justifying their service and retaining and improving the resources available to them. This tool is called the Quality of Life Capital¹² and involves an approach developed jointly by the Countryside Agency, English Nature, English Heritage and the Environment Agency to provide a consistent and integrated way of managing for quality of life. The core idea is that the environment, the economy and society provide a range of benefits for human life and it is these benefits or services which we need to protect and enhance.

Politicians, policy makers, planners and developers continually face decisions that seem to set different social, economic and environmental goals against each other. Where should new development be accommodated? Is the loss of greenspace or outlook justified to create new jobs or housing? How should visitor pressure be managed in a beautiful but fragile landscape? Decisions like these need a fair and comprehensive method for setting out and comparing all the plusses and minuses of different options, taking account of expert and lay views. This is what Quality of Life Capital sets out to provide. It:

- stands back from living things or places and considers the benefits or services that they provide for human well-being;
- provides a consistent, systematic and transparent evaluation framework for all scales of decision making;
- integrates environmental, social and economic issues;
- emphasises improvements of quality of life rather than acceptance of the status quo;
- values the commonplace as well as the unusual and rare;
- facilitates participation, putting professional/expert judgements alongside the concerns of local people;
- works with other tools and processes including environmental impact assessment, sustainability appraisal, community planning and Best Value.

The kind of processes used in Quality of Life Capital are not new and have been used, if not recognised as such, by practitioners for some time. All that is new is to set out in a thorough and explicit way activities which have previously been more piecemeal, partial and implicit, and a methodical framework to make it easier for all practitioners to do thoroughly and consistently what some are already doing.

Quality of Life Capital offers park managers a tool that they can use to resolve conflicts between people and place, and puts a more readily accepted value on the benefits and services that they provide to visitors and the local community. The establishment of pilot studies to apply the Quality of Life Capital process in a practical setting would help to establish just how useful this process can be. Application of the model in three different park types in three different regions would show whether the model can be used to:

- drive forward practical improvements;
- encourage and facilitate the direct involvement of visitors and the community;

- generate and establish higher levels of understanding and support from the senior decision makers that control the resources allocated to the parks.

3.4.7 Staffing

There is a need for more diverse training opportunities, greater access to training throughout the country and, crucially, adequate budgets to fund training. Within urban parks, and indeed the entire greenspace sector, training has also been identified as a critical element of improving service delivery. Capel Manor college (in conjunction with the Royal Parks Agency), the London Development Agency and the Green Heart for London Steering Group are promoting the use of training opportunities such as modern apprenticeships, and the provision of a more rounded training and development programme linking to formal qualifications and accreditations. The scheme is designed to provide career development and learning opportunities throughout a staff member's working life.

There is also a need to continue to support and endorse the professionals involved in country park management, given the low, or at best marginal, status many have within local authority management structures. Championing the benefits of good management from outside local authorities is highly desirable if that status is to be redressed.

It is also important, both from a management and staff-motivation perspective, to ensure that managers are given a greater degree of autonomy and budgetary control than is presently the general case. If motivation is to be preserved and enhanced then measures such as ring-fenced budgets to administer, and retention of income by entrepreneurial skills on the part of managers, need to be introduced.

3.4.8 Management

While enhanced provision may be provided occasionally through opportunities to create new country parks, in the large majority of locations the only opportunity for such enhancement will be through improved management of existing country parks.

Our research revealed that a number of country parks do not have a management plan or, where they do, it has not been reviewed in recent years. Perhaps more surprising, however, was the attitude of those who do have such a plan towards its usefulness. At one park, for example, the original weighty management plan was replaced by a new one in 1998, which got to draft stage and remained there. It was primarily oriented to nature conservation rather than people. There were no plans to finish or update it: 'it informs management but it is not our bible' was the manager's summary.

We were also surprised by the widely varying attitude among managers towards community participation in management. While it was fundamental and highly developed in some country parks, at others it was far less developed. The fact that there is a professional sector of countryside management may also account for the notable lack of enthusiasm for community involvement among many managers – a strong sense that this is a specialist area, and that community participation could easily be hijacked by narrow interests, was a view expressed in several of our case study interviews.

There is now a wealth of good advice on management plan preparation (See Appendix 4). The key elements for success are:

- resources for preparation of the plan and implementation of its proposals;
- cross-departmental involvement and occasionally inter-authority support for the plan;

- a vision of the park's favoured state plus proposals and costings to achieve and maintain this;
- understanding of the primary importance of people;
- understanding and identification of the unique characteristics and qualities of the park;
- proposals for measurement both of the value of the park and of performance;
- annual targets and continuous review.

There was much support for the Countryside Commission's Visitor Welcome Checklist, which was seen to set out sensible principles and give helpful guidance.¹³ It offered a host of benchmarks but was never linked to funds and so adoption was patchy at best. It offered an audit trail but not standards in its own right.

3.4.9 Delivery group

This report has identified the need for a specific strategic working group that includes all of the organisations that may gain from an improved country park service with an increased ability to tackle social agenda issues and achieve the corporate objectives of the partner organisations. The practical delivery of ideas and initiatives generated by the strategic working group requires an interface between strategists and practitioners. The Country Park Network can offer some assistance in delivering this interface and ensuring effective feedback between the two. However, a welcome addition to this relationship would be a 'delivery' or 'practitioner' group that would be directly enabled by the Country Park Network.

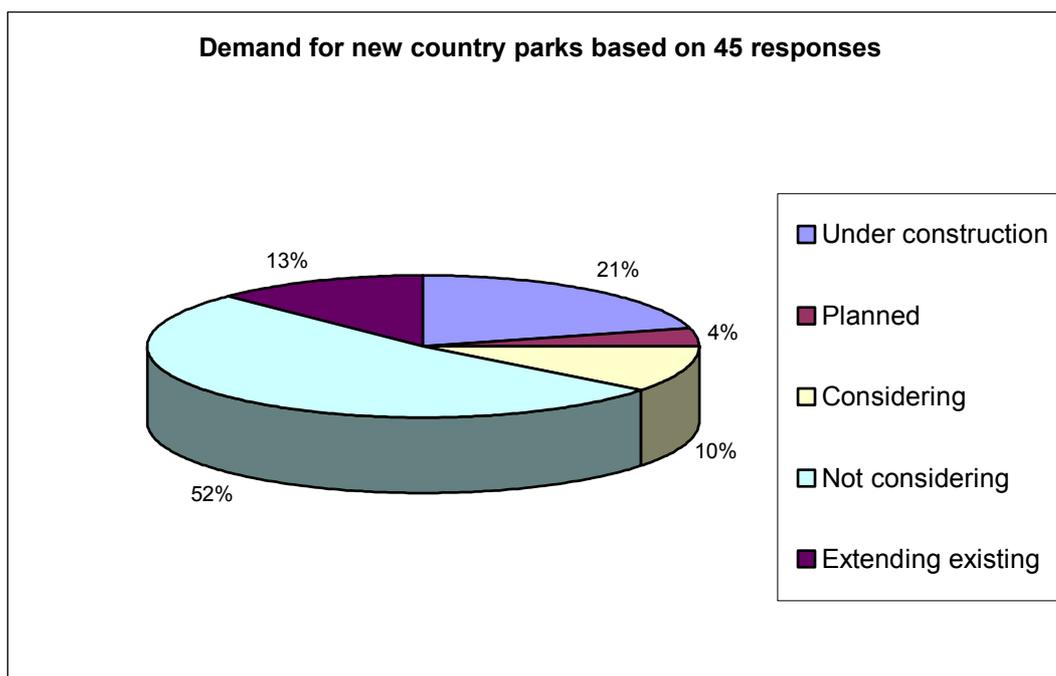
The Countryside Agency has three pilot studies examining and reporting back on the experiences they have encountered whilst developing historic restoration projects to attract HLF funding. In part encouraged by the ongoing success of these pilot studies, this report recommends the establishment of other pilot studies to apply the Quality of Life Capital approach and assess its potential impact as a means of opening up new and diverse improvement opportunities. Avenues for funding such pilot studies would need to be explored by the delivery group. These pilot studies could form the basis of a delivery group that could provide feedback on their experiences to the strategic working group and act as a focus group and possibly even as test sites for the implementation of some of the ideas of the strategic working group. In this way the latter would be much better informed about the difficulties of implementing specific initiatives and the reaction that such initiatives are likely to receive from a cross section of park managers. The inclusion of such a group will add credibility to the whole strategic review process.

To further facilitate this feedback process, it would be useful if a representative of the Countryside Management Association were included within the membership of the delivery group.

3.4.10 Demand for new parks

Despite the resource problems associated with existing country parks, our survey reveals that the demand for and creation of new country parks (or extension of existing parks) is being explored by a substantial number of local authorities. In a sample of 45 local authorities, 19 (42%) confirmed they were actively engaged with the idea of expanding their country park services and were either extending existing parks or considering, planning or constructing new ones.

Figure 35 Demand for new country parks



The Country Park Network has received comments from country park managers that suggest that there are a great many local authority owned greenspace sites in existence that could meet or exceed the designation criteria for country parks where formal designation is not being sought. Many of these sites are currently designated as Local Nature Reserves, or similar. The actions resulting from this study, may be of benefit to these sites and other public recreational spaces that operate under similar circumstances to country parks.

Section 3 references

- ¹ Public Parks Assessment (May 2001): A survey of local authority owned parks, focusing on parks of historic interest, undertaken by the Urban Parks Forum
- ² University of Manchester for the Countryside Agency, *Sustainable development of the countryside around towns*, 2002.
- ³ At Coombe Abbey, located in Coventry but owned by Rugby Borough Council, Coventry continues to fail to recognise the tourism value of the park as a heritage site. (Consultants' Workshop 8.5.02.)
- ⁴ Countryside Commission, *Enjoying the countryside: priorities for action*, CCP 235, 1987, p.12.
- ⁵ Urban Parks Forum, minutes of Country Parks Renaissance Advisory Panel (CPRAP) Away Day, 30 July 2002.
- ⁶ Some doubt was expressed by CPRAP members about the physical gateway role. At Lydiard Country Park, on the edge of Swindon, despite the promotion of footpath links to the wider countryside in exhibitions and leaflets, there was little evidence of success: for the large majority of users, the Park itself was the destination.
- ⁷ House of Commons Transport, Local Government and Regional Affairs Select Committee, Public Spaces: uncorrected evidence presented by Lord Falconer of Thoroton, QC, Minister for Housing, Planning and Regeneration, on 21 May 2002 (HC-854-i), qq.20, 122.
- ⁸ House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee *Town and Country Parks*, 20th report of 1998-99, 3 vols, 27 October 1999 (HC 477 - I-III), vol.III, p.60, q.398.
- ⁹ Urban Green Spaces Taskforce, Working Group 3, *People and Places*, DTLR 2002, p.16.
- ¹⁰ Brian O'Neill, paper to International Park Strategic Partners Best Practice Forum, biennial conference 2002, *Parks – A Sustainable Future*.
- ¹¹ Countryside Management System Partnership, *A guide to the production of management plans for country parks*, Aberystwyth, 2000. See Appendix 4: Review of existing advice on management plans
- ¹² Quality of Life Capital, Managing environmental, social and economic benefits *Overview Report*, March 2001. www.qualityoflifecapital.org.uk
- ¹³ Countryside Commission, *Visitor Welcome Checklist*, CCP 476, 1995