Designed landscapes
Investing in the past: funding heritage projects
The repair and regeneration of public parks

The regeneration of public parks has played an important part in urban regeneration and has brought pleasure to millions, but its achievements are at risk from government cuts.

That emphasis on public benefit aside, the HLF was also building on the relatively recent recognition of the design quality and heritage significance of 19th-century public parks. Since the publication in 1991 of Hazel Conway's pioneering People's Parks: the design and development of Victorian parks in Britain, historians have come to understand the sophistication and ingenuity of their designs, and their place in 19th-century urban morphology, and indeed in the history of 19th-century social development. They have been recognised as being as significant as the great 18th-century landscape parks of the gentry and aristocracy, which have long been seen as part of the national heritage.

The word regeneration was used by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) when it announced its Urban Parks Programme in 1995, understanding from the start that repair alone was not an adequate objective. The presence of the public in public parks is fundamental to their historic function, their design and their character in a way that it is not to other types of heritage. Moreover, regenerating parks, bringing people back into them, is the key to their sustainability: the presence of people plays a critical role in deterring antisocial behaviour. Third, in the absence of any statutory duty, demonstrably high levels of use and public satisfaction are critical in convincing decision-makers to dedicate adequate funds to their maintenance.

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The conservation philosophy that has informed the unparalleled investment of National Lottery funds into park repair and regeneration – over £600 million since 1996 – was thus based first and foremost on a recognition that many more public parks than previously thought had intrinsic historic significance, damaged or compromised though that may have become. The starting point, based on the practice of English Heritage in administering storm-damage grants to historic landscapes after 1987, was a historic landscape survey. This identified and assessed the significance of the site's historic features, built or planted, including views and spaces. These surveys
identified all changes, designed or accidental, which had marked the site's development from its inception to the present, and assessed their importance. The survey formed the basis for proposals for repair, rebuilding or replanting, set out in a restoration plan. The two exercises were generally contained in a single document, which cost on average around £14,000. The HLF recognised the expertise required, encouraging local authorities to commission the surveys and plans from consultants.

This approach produced some spectacular successes. With no limit initially on the capital grant to implement the proposals, an emphasis on whole-park projects and grants offered at 75 per cent, many project costs ran to several million pounds, although by 2000 the average cost per park was around £1.4 million. To give some idea of the impact, at the time the HLF announced its urban parks programme, English Heritage had a total budget for historic parks and gardens of £200,000 a year.

The HLF was pioneering in new territory, both in terms of the sites and of the breadth of the works it would entail, but its emphasis remained on thorough historical research and excellence in terms of design and materials. Parks such as Saltwell Park, Gateshead; Mowbray Park, Sunderland; Baxter Park, Dundee; Lister Park, Bradford; and Alexandra Park, Oldham were transformed, and proved hugely popular.

Although it was a capital programme, the HLF spread its influence as far as possible into the longer term. It funded five-year staff posts – head gardeners, rangers, park managers – and required applicants to sign up to a costed 10-year management and maintenance plan. For the first time in their history, parks had the benefit of a costed plan of maintenance. This proved an eye-opener to many local authorities. The cost was generally more than offset by the positive publicity which these projects garnered. Other less easily measurable benefits than visitor numbers included benefits to the local economy, health, crime reduction, education and social cohesion.

In support of its programme, in 1999 the HLF commissioned the first-ever assessment of the state of public parks. The Public Parks Assessment (PPA) identified the shocking decline of parks in the
previous 20 years, and the lamentable state of their financing. Between 50 and 70 per cent of bandstands, paddling pools, glasshouses and fountains had disappeared; 25 per cent of public toilets, boating facilities, tennis courts, shelters and cafes had gone. Over the study period, approximately £126 million had been withdrawn each year from parks’ maintenance, the resulting reduction in local authority spending amounted to £1.3 billion.

From the start, the HLF recognised that conventional conservation wisdom was not appropriate. There were several points of departure. For example, the HLF argued internally over what became known as ‘the bandstand question’. Was rebuilding a demolished bandstand recreation or, worse, pastiche? In many cases not only was the location known but, from photographs and even structural drawings or catalogues from the great 19th-century foundries which supplied them, also the detailed design. ‘Conserve as found’ was simply not appropriate. If you considered the park itself, not just the individual structure, as the heritage asset, reinstatement in authentic materials and in the correct location made perfect sense.

A similar departure was over the funding of new facilities such as play areas, meeting rooms, toilets or cafes, rightly judged to be fundamental to encouraging the public back into parks. As a result the HLF has funded not only the conversion of old buildings to new uses, but also a number of high-profile new park buildings and a host of more modest kiosks and pavilions. The HLF funding for these facilities not only recognised their importance, but also ensured high-quality design.

Over the years, the emphasis of HLF policy has altered, not necessarily for the better. The process of securing a grant has become more complicated and time-consuming. The simple faith that if you fix the park, people will come, has been codified in the form of access plans, audience development plans, training plans, volunteering plans, education and interpretation plans. Most of these have been imported from other heritage sectors with higher cultural thresholds and a more problematic relationship to the public than public parks. It is not all retrograde though. These activities plans have helped demonstrate the value of parks across a wide range of council services and have encouraged managers to think outside the box.
The other notable change is that as activities planning has crept up the HLF agenda, historical research and conservation have slipped down. This may seem an odd observation in the age of the conservation management plan. But it is notable that, with some honourable exceptions, the detail of a historic landscape survey has been replaced by a more desk-based approach, to which new design often fails to connect. Historical precedent has been loosened as a guiding principle. The resulting proposals are often at odds with the historic design because that design has not been properly analysed or understood. Tree-planting proposals, for example, surprisingly often reinforce accidental subdivisions of a once-flowing series of spaces.

Although the sums available have shrunk inevitably as a consequence of the Olympics, funding for parks remains a core part of HLF business in its latest strategic plan. The HLF has recently announced that its grants are now available for up to 90 per cent of capital costs. The new Parks for People programme is designed to be less onerous, but the application process has become a significant deterrent, the simplicity of the initial programme having been replaced by a host of objectives and requirements, which many authorities struggle with.\(^5\) The HLF remains eager to receive applications, and a visit to any town or city will show that the need for funding remains acute. It is salutary to remember that, despite the huge sums already spent, in 2000 the Public Parks Assessment identified the cost of restoring all historic urban parks at £3.5 billion.\(^6\)

Public park regeneration has been a great success story. It has played a key part in urban regeneration and has brought improved well-being, not to mention pleasure, to millions. Much credit goes to the HLF, but the success has also been due to tireless local campaigns and to dedicated local authority staff.

At this point, though, it is necessary to say that all the good that has been achieved is at risk from the vicious cuts imposed on local authorities by a government dedicated to shrinking the state and to privatisation. Maintenance budgets, staff and support for volunteers are all under threat, while asset transfer threatens the very nature of public parks. Public parks, free to enter and free for all to enjoy – with everything that means about tolerance and consideration, as well as access to beauty – are public goods and must remain so.

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\(^5\) Cabe Space, Audit and Survey: Heritage Lottery Fund Parks for People Programme, initial draft report, October 2010, p.31

\(^6\) Public Parks Assessment, 2000, 4.24

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Boarded up and unusable: such rights remain depressingly common around our towns and cities (Photo: Parks Agency)

The new play area in Caldecot Park, Rugby (Photo: Parks Agency)

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