

Is the grass greener...?

Learning from international innovations
in urban green space management

Executive summary



This report examines the management of urban green space around the world. It establishes that, not only does an investment in green space management deliver clear and consistent benefits to all the cities concerned – to their local populations, political representatives and to green space managers – but that these lessons are highly transferable to practice in England. So, by setting the right aspirations, resources and political commitment, it is within the grasp of every local authority in this country to be among the very best in the world.

Certain cities around the world are well known for the quality of their urban green space. The research is based on the premise that green space management practice in these cities offers potentially important lessons for practice at home. Eleven such cities were chosen for analysis from the US, South America, New Zealand as well as Europe and a range of important lessons were revealed.

Localities benefit from high quality green space

The 11 cities have enjoyed a diverse range of benefits flowing from their investment in urban green space and its management. Not least, these include:

- **The enhanced reputation of the cities for their high quality living environments**
- **Their improved reputation for sound urban governance**
- **City marketing benefits in the light of the increasingly competitive economic environment**
- **A raised environmental awareness and citizen involvement**
- **Social benefits via better health, accessibility, recreational opportunities and quality of life**

These benefits go well beyond the immediate policy objectives of urban green space management. They have, therefore, potentially wider local political benefits for the responsible city administrations concerned.

What, then, are the lessons to learn?

01

Find a champion Political commitment is required

Successful green space management results from a mix of political will by successive administrations, reinforced by the technical skills of green space managers. For a strong organisation to manage green space both operationally and strategically, political and administrative commitment need to exist side by side, with support for green space issues existing at all levels of the administration and across the political spectrum. [In Curitiba, the success in providing and maintaining urban green space has stemmed from the political determination of successive mayors.](#) The inclusion in the new local government structures of at least one cabinet member with direct responsibility for urban green space would be a minimum starting point to build a greater political commitment in England.

02

Think long-term A statutory commitment delivers results

A political commitment went hand-in-hand with a long-term commitment as a pre-requisite for not only delivering high quality green space but to ensure that it remains high quality thereafter. This requires foresight, long-range planning, and the fostering of civic commitment to urban green spaces. [In Aarhus, the 'Green Structure Plan' emphasises the political vision of 'Aarhus surrounded by Forest' – a vision which has strong public support.](#) In different ways, in all of the cities, the management of green space is a statutory responsibility and the need to invest in the management of public green space is therefore non-negotiable. A carefully constructed set of statutory green space roles and responsibilities would create the necessary incentive to raise quality in England to at least a minimum acceptable level.

03

Get it in writing A strategic view can join-up priorities

A clear spatial structure and policy framework for urban green space can help ensure its priorities infuse other key policy areas. This gives its management a welcome continuity, regardless of political changes, and helps consolidate its relative importance. [In Malmo, the Green Plan provides guidelines for future needs of urban green space.](#) In England, a statutory provision for local authorities to create green space strategies as an element of new Local Development Frameworks linked to the community strategy process, might facilitate a more strategic and community-driven view. They should include a clear spatial vision for green space and provide the basis for more detailed green space management plans to structure, coordinate, and resource day-to-day maintenance.

04

Consult widely A local view can help garner support

A coherent local view of urban green space management needs to reflect the priorities of local populations. The continual engagement of residents as users and customers was the favoured approach across all the cities, along with an improvement in communications between city administrations and their citizens. [In Tokyo, the Urban Parks Act fosters community participation in the management of green space.](#) In England, the frequent apathy of local populations towards green space might be addressed by more proactively communicating the benefits of green space to local citizens, and by involving them more directly in decision-making. This community support can be harnessed to shape political priorities.

05

Cover costs Adequate and reliable resources are a prerequisite

There is not only a need for adequate funding, but also for reliable funding over the long-term. Rolling funding plans, for example, allow administrations to commit themselves to projects spanning several years. [In Wellington, 10 year financial planning enables managers to think long term.](#) Supplementary income streams are also important, as long as these funds are treated as additional funding, over and above core income. In England, the constraints of annualised budgetary rounds need to be overcome, whilst the capital and revenue funding available for green space management should be clearly published locally and nationally, to allow adequate scrutiny of available resources. Revenue funding streams must be protected so that maintenance can be prioritised.



Hibiya Park, central Tokyo, (Department of Park Development, Tokyo Metropolitan Government)

06

Start internally Make the case in-house for green space

Across all the cities, the winning of resources and support requires strong leadership, a strength of conviction and the ability to present green space issues to key political and organisational audiences and decision makers. Managers are advocates for high quality urban green space. **In Malmö, the marketing of the benefits of high quality green space to an internal audience is vital in winning political support and willingness to spend.** The most successful international examples are founded on the ability to continually make the case for resources to a wide and diverse range of audiences. Green space managers in England need to understand that much of the battle for resources lies in repeatedly demonstrating the value they add, thereby garnering cross-political and public support for their work.

07

Get them trained Skills are a fundamental investment

A well-trained and engaged staff that knows how to combine political, economic, organisational and design skills and how to take advantage of the variety of opportunities is crucial. This requires a stable staff, to build up detailed knowledge and expertise, plus a continual renewal and investment in skills at both management and operational levels. **In Wellington, an in-house apprentice scheme reaps benefits in purpose planned training and staff loyalty.** The transformation of green space management services in England will require a similar investment in staff. The aim should be to create long-term stability in organisational structures in order to nurture staff development, commitment and the building of internal links. The creation of dedicated degree programmes and CPD opportunities in the sector may provide a starting point.

08

Quality is always the watchword Focus on design and management

The international experiences emphasised the danger of quantity over quality. It results in standardised green space with little regard to the needs of the surrounding communities. A long-term commitment to high quality green space can generate lasting value; **in Paris, many of the high quality parks and gardens evident today date back to the reign of Napoleon III.** Such commitment needs robust, high quality designs where subsequent interventions respect the original character of the project. In England, green space managers need to be involved in the design and planning of green space from the start, as do skilled landscape architects in their ongoing management. Resources can be saved by designing high quality and resilient parks and urban green spaces, by considering the long-term costs of design decisions and engaging communities in the ongoing management of green space.

09

Manage resources Emphasise efficiency and balance responsibilities

Efficient management is important. To reduce costs requires: first, an investment in modern management methods, learning where appropriate from private sector practices; second, the introduction of clear and direct decision-making structures, [in Melbourne, management tools inform strategy and resource decisions](#); and third, an investment in a skilled maintenance workforce. Benefits were apparent in both localised and centralised management and operations – a balance needs to be struck in the light of local circumstances. English local authorities need to establish the optimum cost/quality ratio by distinguishing those elements of the service which are best devolved to the neighbourhood level from those that require more strategic organisation.

10

Work with others Projects are partnerships

Success can come in both heavily privatised and largely public models – and all states in between. All are partnerships which need nurturing over the long-term, for example collaborative relationships which aim to increase responsibility for quality on the part of contractors and the creation of a transparent but competitive council environment. [In Tokyo, new partnerships with the private sector have been specifically developed to benefit green space quality](#). In England authorities need to consider which aspects of urban green space management can be more efficiently delivered by the private sector, and which are best left to the public sector. The former are likely to be the more routine, easily-specified maintenance tasks – those requiring more creative interpretation and adaptability in the field might be retained in-house. Other key stakeholders, including voluntary and community groups, can also beneficially have a direct role in green space management.

11

See the big picture Integrated responsibilities to coordinate actions

Local government green space responsibilities should be integrated with the activities of other organisations, achievable by devolving responsibilities to a local level, to better integrate service delivery at the ‘coalface’. Equally, integration at a more strategic level is valuable to secure a broader buy-in to green space objectives. In both models, the benefits of a strong, central organisation with responsibility for all (or most) green space functions were evident, as was the need for a coordinated set of aspirations and actions. [In Curitiba, a concentration of resources has made it easier for the city to take over duties from the state and government](#). In England, fully integrating responsibilities in one overarching organisation will be an important aspiration, as will dissociation between ownership of public green space and its management.

12

Be flexible Consider a dedicated management model

Dedicated and semi-independent agencies have been particularly successful internationally, partly because of fewer competing calls on expenditure. [The dedicated Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board \(MPRB\) is a much admired model for other park management agencies across the world](#). Unfortunately, such models are hard to replicate – their political and financial independence and narrow focus on public green spaces is outside normal local government structures. In England, it is unlikely that local governments would be willing to relinquish tax-raising powers and political accountability to an independent parks agency, except in exceptional circumstances. Opportunities may be provided where new settlements or other major developments are being planned and where it is important to capture the rising land value for long-term management needs, such as the Government’s Sustainable Communities Plan for the south east of England.

13

Keep good records Monitor investments and outcomes

Accurately recording the state and condition of urban green space and monitoring management processes is vital. The benefits? Both more effective maintenance processes and more outcome-focused management. [In Groningen, the public space management system \(BORG\) has led to focused, outcome based management processes](#). The most sophisticated systems might track depreciation of assets over time, so the condition of new investments can be monitored and lessons learnt, and so that costs can be factored into ongoing work programmes as part of a continuum of replacement and maintenance activities. In England, these systems are largely absent and will offer significant benefits in a context where continual improvement is dependent on adequate feedback to inform decision-making.



Urban parks and green spaces in England have suffered severe decline over the last 20 years

The challenges in England

The lessons from international practice are particularly important at a time when key sources of research, policy and advice concerning urban green space in England consistently identify a range of issues which negatively impact on practice. These can be grouped as fundamental challenges to be addressed by practice at home:

- **Poor understanding of urban green space**
- **The failure to establish coherent, challenging aspirations**
- **Fragmented and diverse responsibilities and powers**
- **Uncoordinated and under resourced urban green space management services**
- **Inadequate urban green space maintenance delivery**
- **The impact of standardised approaches to management**
- **The need to demonstrate the benefits of good urban green space management practice**

The key lessons from the research offer inspiration about how these challenges may be overcome

The report

- Presents and discusses research examining good practice in the management of urban green space in 11 cities, across five continents
- Evaluates this international practice in a comparative manner to establish the common reasons for local good practice overseas
- Establishes transferable lessons of direct relevance to every local authority, every local and national politician and every urban green space manager in England

The report uses the following 11 cities as case studies:

- **Melbourne** Australia
- **Aarhus** Denmark
- **Hanover** Germany
- **Groningen** Netherlands
- **Malmo** Sweden
- **Minneapolis** USA
- **Curitiba** Brazil
- **Paris** France
- **Tokyo** Japan
- **Wellington** New Zealand
- **Zurich** Switzerland

The full report can be freely downloaded as a pdf from www.cabespace.org.uk

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