

Nurturing C21st Parks Professionals' Skills





The Modern Park

“When I started it was all about horticulture. I can’t remember the last time we specified what type of tree we needed”

Now it’s very much about what goes on in the park. It’s about activity, it’s about negotiating leases, it’s very much around engagement rather than maintenance. We’re always having to evolve.”

Paul Rabbit Section Head for Parks, Open Spaces and Projects
Watford Borough Council.



Parks in the current context

- Unprecedented public sector budget cuts.
- The public love their parks and greenspaces.
- A range of reports provide clear evidence of the value of parks for; health and wellbeing; local economy; anti-social behavior; community cohesion; biodiversity and combating climate change.
- But, as you all know only too well, parks are non-statutory and under-resourced.
- Staff cuts and the ageing profile of staff are very clear in APSE's State of the Market Surveys.
- Parks managers are expected to do ever more with ever less.

The Parks Action Group

- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government tasked with producing report on ways to ensure future sustainability of parks.
- **Departmental Group** - Defra, DoH, DoE, Home Office etc.
- **Parks Action Group** – includes **APSE**, HLF, Groundwork, Parks Alliance, LGA, Nat.Fed. of Parks and Greenspaces, National Trust, Natural England, Fields In Trust
- APSE responsible for chairing Skills and Knowledge work stream
- Main objectives:
 - Identifying opportunities to promote knowledge and skills through the parks sector.
 - Consider ways in which best practice can be shared across the parks sector
 - Review parks managers roles and identify ways to build capacity

Skills for parks research

- Explores skills and knowledge needed within this challenging context
- Research aims:
 - Identify the roles and responsibilities of current parks professionals
 - Identify where parks service currently sits in the council structure
 - Identify where there are gaps in knowledge and experience
 - Identify current training provision (formal/informal)
 - Identify gaps/needs in training provision
 - Membership/list of professional organisations currently used
- We will develop recommendations and publish a report.

Research methods

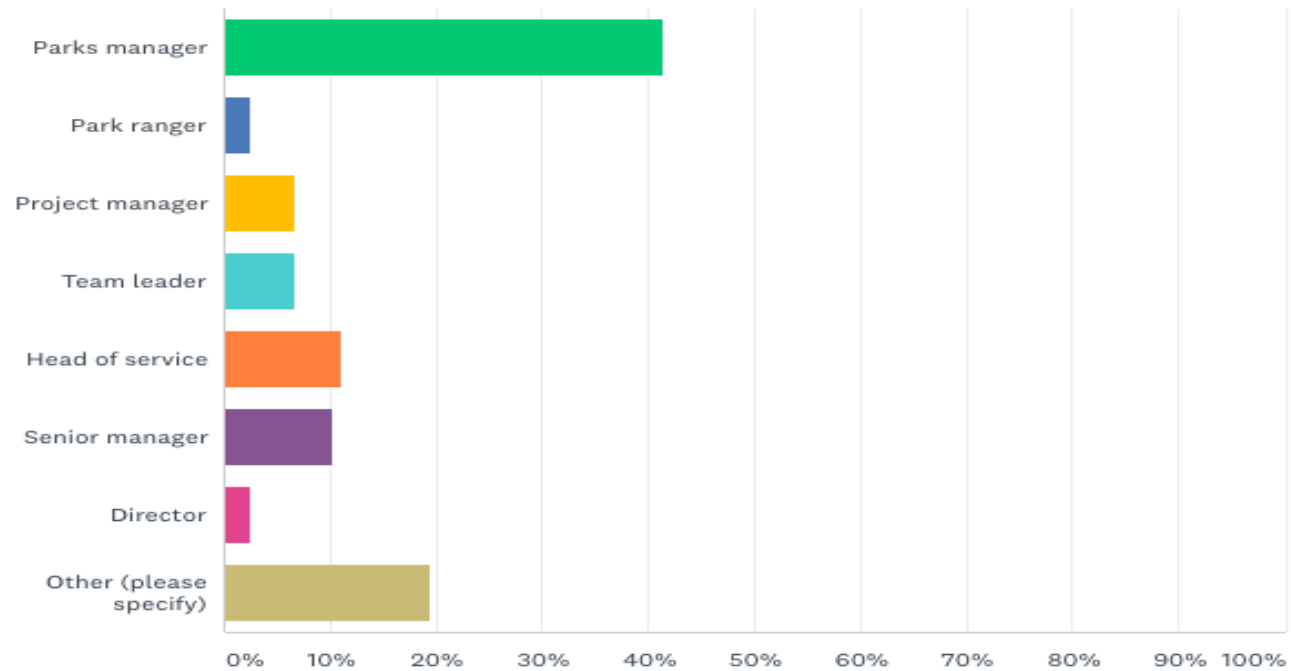
- An iterative process to determine experiences and views from the sector.
- Refining findings during stages of the research:
 - Initial Focus Group earlier this year
 - On-line survey to APSE parks contacts in England
 - One-to-one interviews with 20+ professionals
 - Focus group in Oxford earlier this month
- Statistical and thematic analysis of data gathered.
- Looked at: responsibilities; skills needs; skills gaps.
- We welcome your feedback on findings to date presented today...

Findings from survey

On-line survey received 118 responses – mainly parks managers

What is your current role?

Answered: 118 Skipped: 0



Roles and responsibilities



- **Respondents indicated least change in focus on operational activities, other than:**
 - Slightly shift from planned to reactive maintenance
 - More health and safety/legal compliance/risk
 - More focus on responding to complaints

- **Respondents indicated a strong shift in focus towards all strategic activities. Eg:**
 - 40% said focus on monitoring and improvement service performance has increased
 - 60% said overseeing service redesign has increased
 - 61% said collaboration has increased
 - 41% said demonstrating the value of parks has increased
 - 47% said administrative duties have increased



- **Respondents indicated much greater emphasis on all business and finance related activities, particularly:**
 - Managing budgets
 - Procurement and contracting
 - Generating income from services and facilities
 - Bidding for funding from external sources
 - Managing capital projects
 - Accessing community infrastructure levy
- **Respondents indicated much greater emphasis on all public engagement activities, particularly community consultation and liaison with Friends of Parks.**
- In terms of **environmental activities**, there was generally more emphasis on biodiversity and naturalised planning and also flood alleviation in some authorities.



Key skills

Survey respondents indicated the importance of an extensive range of skills that are required to meet the increasing demands of their roles...



Skills confidence and skills gaps

- Importance of a range of skills was ranked and respondents' overall confidence in these skills was weighted.
- Respondents generally felt confident in: people management; leadership; health and safety; demonstrating value for money; communications; collaboration and enhancing efficiency.
- **Gaps were identified where professionals considered particular skills important but generally lacked confidence:**
 - Commercial entrepreneurship
 - Influencing policy makers
 - Marketing and promotion
 - Demonstrating the business case for the service
 - Bidding for funds

Qualifications and training



- Respondents were pessimistic about career progression for new entrants.
- Respondents had a vast range of academic and professional qualifications.
- The picture on training provision and confidence in specific skills was diverse.

- Respondents felt least sufficiently well trained overall in: commercial entrepreneurship, marketing and promotion; bidding for funds; demonstrating the business case for their service.
- 89% felt motivated to undertake further training or CPD.
- 20% believe they 'definitely' have access to sufficient training and CPD.
- Lack of time was cited as a barrier to training by 71% of respondents.



Findings from interviews

- Interviews enabled more nuance and depth of analysis.
- The interviews demonstrated how difficult it is to separate out skills development from the wider context in which parks professionals are working.
- Parks professionals are passionate about the job, committed and highly adaptive.
- Parks managers are combining several roles in one job due to staff cuts.
- Lack of time/capacity is therefore a significant factor when discussing skills.
- It can be difficult for managers and staff to balance commercial, horticultural and community priorities.
- It can be difficult to find staff that have the mix of skills that are now needed.

Profile of parks organisationally



- Responsibilities, challenges and opportunities varied between authorities.
- There were stark contrasts in profile of parks and greenspaces between councils, despite their value for other services:

“It’s a shame that parks isn’t given as much importance as other services. It would be good for parks to be seen as more of an integral service rather than something that’s nice on the edge of everything else. It’s the hidden gem that sits beneath it all. You take it away and then they’d notice it.”

“There’s a short termism in the political environment.”

- The benefits of organisational commitment to parks were highly evident.

Demands



Parks professionals are multi-tasking and making things work despite difficult circumstances:

“Everybody’s trying to keep the plates up. But the fact that you make it work makes it look like it’s ok but that’s because nobody lets the plate drop.”

“I have to work at one level with the leader and chief executive and advise them about policy, then yesterday I was trying to take a parking machine apart.”

Skills development priorities



- Routes into the sector, qualifications, training were highly diverse.
- As with the survey, skills development priorities among interviewees tended to be: commercial entrepreneurship, influencing decision-making and demonstrating the wider value of parks:

“I’m in world of financial performance and trend analysis and that’s not something I came into parks to do and wasn’t around when I started in the mid 1980s...I’ve had no formal training in that.”

“I’d like to learn more about trying to influence people.”

“I’d like to be able to demonstrate how parks fit into the wider economy and environment and have skills in putting the business case across for that.”

Staff development priorities



- Developing these skills among their officers whilst also retaining horticultural skills is key.
- Some authorities were using the apprenticeship levy.
- But others spoke of lack of clarity in how to navigate this.
- Interviewees stressed that apprenticeships need to have jobs at the end.

Information and networking



- Information is diffuse: *“There isn’t a one stop shop for information. If there was an on-line parks library about how parks are effected by different things with all the different research that would be useful.”*
- APSE the most frequently cited provider of information, networking and training.
- *“We’re learning off each other which is some of the best CPD you can get because we all do these diverse things, I might be really good at doing one thing because I do a lot of, then there might be stuff I am struggling with someone else has done a lot.”*
- Best practice sharing is extremely useful. But: *“There’s a gap in sharing good practice.”*
- There was a wide variation in access to networking opportunities, with lack of time and restrictions on travel costs cited as a prohibiting factor by certain interviewees.

Loss of horticultural skills



There are widespread concerns about “dumbing down” and staff age profile:

“We’ve changed the landscape so it’s easy to maintain...the public have noticed there used to be shrubs, hedgerows and carpet beds. For the staff who’ve been here a long time, it’s devastating.”

“We do rely heavily on some of our older senior gardeners, some of whom are in their early 60s now. There is going to be a gap in our knowledge. I’ve lost half my staff in the last ten years. How will I replace that local knowledge?”

Conclusions

- Wide variation of professionals' responsibilities and profile of parks
- Levels of qualifications high and again varied
- Real concern about loss of horticultural skills
- Need to be commercially viable dominating environmental requirements
- Lack of real profile against other services
- Need for stronger voice and wider appreciation of cross-cutting benefits
- Age profile of staff is a concern.
- Opportunities for apprenticeships with job prospects are needed – confusion over apprenticeship levy needs attention.

Please tell us what you think....

- We welcome your feedback on the following points in particular:
 - Changing roles and responsibilities?
 - Skills gaps?
- Please write any comments on the sheets provided.
- Or email wpriestley@apse.org.uk