

COVER FEATURE

PARTNERS FOR LIFE

A photograph of a garden. In the foreground, there are several plants with bright yellow flowers and green foliage, some of which are out of focus. Behind them, a dense cluster of red flowers, possibly nasturtiums, stands in sharp focus. In the background, a wooden fence with horizontal rails is visible, and beyond that, a blurred green landscape under a bright sky.

Public-Private Partnerships. What are they, how do they work and is this just the latest buzz phrase from within the sector or are they the future of green space management? Becky Volker takes a closer look and finds out just what all the fuss is about.

Few would argue the benefits of a well managed, maintained and designed urban park. A 'good' park can personify a city's vitality and character, provide a space for the community to come together and go a long way towards increasing property value, health, fitness and quality of life.

At the other end of the scale, a chronic shortage of funding and resources can lead to parks being blighted with poor management and maintenance and insufficient or nonexistent staffing. All too often these spaces, which once represented a green haven in the midst of the city, can become little more than derelict wastegrounds, empty and underused and attracting antisocial behaviour where once they symbolised the pride of municipal life.

Many city parks started life in the 1800s when the new municipalities, aided by funding from rich philanthropists, identified them as a way of improving health and reducing discontent in the increasingly overcrowded Victorian cities.

Today, as parks managers know all too well, the resources of local authorities have become increasingly thinly spread, with the health service, education and social services, to name but a few, rightly being considered a high priority for allocation of funding. Parks are not a statutory service, and therefore local authorities are not required by law to allocate money to their upkeep, and unfortunately, rich philanthropists willing to donate money to parks seem to be thin on the ground in the 21st century. This has led to the decline of many urban parks and green spaces, as detailed in the Public Parks Assessment, a research project carried out by GreenSpace (then the Urban Parks Forum) in 2001.

Undoubtedly, parks have risen up the government's agenda over recent years, with their benefits to health and the economy being widely acknowledged and initiatives such as the HLF's Urban Parks Programme doing a great deal to restore, renovate and revive these green hearts of our cities. GreenSpace, together with CABI Space and other governmental and non-governmental organisations are working together to promote a renaissance of parks and green spaces.

However, the old problem still remains: there is a limited

pot of money available for the restoration and renovation of countless parks and areas of green space across Britain, and even less for their long-term maintenance, upkeep and staffing costs. Clearly another way must be found to ensure that we leave a legacy of parks and green spaces for future generations.

In the USA, public-private partnerships are proliferating across the country. Parks partnerships are successfully combining the assets of the public and private sectors in novel ways to create new and refurbished parks and green spaces. These public-private partnerships work in a similar way to business partnerships, by including both general and limited partners. In a public-private partnership for a specific park, the general partners are usually the local parks department and a not-for-profit organisation which supports that park. The limited partners generally include the organisations and constituencies which use or support the park, for example recreation associations, environmental groups, youth organisations and community development agencies.

A well-known example of a successful public-private partnership is the Central Park Conservancy. This is a private, not-for-profit organisation founded in 1980 that manages Central Park under a contract with the City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation. The Central Park Conservancy works with many individuals, private companies and foundations to raise funds to restore and maintain Central Park, and to date has raised more than \$300 million which has transformed the park into a model for urban parks across the States. Since its founding, the Central Park Conservancy has prescribed a management and restoration plan for the park, funded major capital improvements, created programmes for volunteers and visitors and set new standards of excellence in park care.

The Conservancy provides more than 85% of Central Park's annual \$20 million operating budget and is responsible for all basic care of the park. The money is raised through a combination of philanthropy, donations from private companies and fund-raising events, which are all managed as part of a long-term, sustained



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Private companies, individuals and organisations are able to become partners in the Conservancy and enjoy benefits in return for financial donations, volunteer hours and in-kind contributions. For example over a hundred companies are part of the Corporate Partners membership programme. Corporate partners receive a range of employee and company benefits, which are tied in to annual donations.

Another example of a successful American public-private partnership is Philadelphia Green. Decades of declining population had left Philadelphia riddled with empty spaces that compromised the security and cohesiveness of the urban community. In 1974, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) experimented with a pilot community garden programme to put wasteland to better use. Inspired by the level of community participation and feedback, PHS launched Philadelphia Green four years later, providing plants, building materials, technical assistance and workshops for residents' groups who expressed an interest in transforming their streets and open spaces. Since then, Philadelphia Green has grown to a staff of 40 and offers a broad range of programmes. Working with over 1,100 community groups, government organisations and private companies, Philadelphia Green has been involved in nearly 2,000 greening projects throughout Philadelphia.

Examples of these successful public-private partnerships proliferate all over the USA. Parks professionals here in the UK are becoming more and more aware of the potential of these partnerships to turn around the continuing decline of urban parks, and enable money from new sources to be invested in their restoration, management and maintenance.

Public-private partnerships are a sustainable way to ensure that city parks and green spaces receive the resources that they so desperately need.

Public-private partnerships are just one of the innovations which will be discussed at the Great Parks, Great Cities: London 2004 conference, to be held on 10-13 July 2004. The conference will provide a rare opportunity for parks people from around the world to gather together to share their stories, information and best practice, and learn from each other.

