

THE FUTURE'S BRIGHT, THE FUTURE'S GREEN



THERE IS MUCH TO BE LEARNED FROM GREEN SPACE MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES FROM ACROSS THE POND. **ALAN BARBER**, AUTHOR OF GREENSPACE'S NEW PUBLICATION GREEN FUTURE, TAKES A LOOK AT HOW US-STYLE GREEN SPACE SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS COULD HELP TO REVOLUTIONISE THE FUTURE OF THE TRADITIONAL BRITISH PARK.

It is interesting to compare the park and green space scene in the UK with that of the USA. Like the UK, many cities in the USA have experienced a decline in the upkeep of public parks. Again like the UK, community groups external to the local authority have played a significant part in pushing parks back onto the political agenda. The restoration of Central Park, New York from its deplorable condition in the 1970s is much celebrated. So too is the turnaround in Boston, MA, where Olmsted's 'Emerald Necklace' of parks now contributes much to the city's booming economy.

Both the Boston Park System and the Central Park Conservancy feature as case studies in 'Green Future', which is based on a two year research project at the University of Manchester. The project looks at the current state of park and green space management in the UK and USA, not least in their attitude to partnerships with voluntary support organisations such as 'friends' groups.

Two USA case studies in 'Green Future' are voluntary bodies, particularly adept at working with, but also influencing, their local authorities. The Boston Greenspace Alliance started out as a lobbying movement for the rescue of parks in that city. It was a hard fought fight and the Alliance brought together no less than 80 voluntary groups.

The battle being largely won in the mid-90s, Boston Greenspace Alliance has re-cast its role as a

support organisation, doing much in the field of education. Both the City Council and the Alliance regard improving children's knowledge of the importance of the city's green space system as a priority. It is their appreciation of the many benefits that will help sustain the park renaissance.

New York's Partnership for Parks is a hybrid organisation. It is itself a partnership between the City's Parks and Recreation Department and the City Parks Foundation, a private fund-raiser and lobby group who funds programmes in New York's parks. Two-thirds of employees in the Partnerships for Parks Programme are funded by the City Parks and Recreation Department. The Department also supplies Partnerships for Parks with office space and facilities.

Partnership for Parks' aim is to strengthen, support and start neighbourhood park groups, linking them together so that they can learn from each other and be stronger collectively.

When it comes to influencing local politicians, I have long been an admirer of the Friends of San Francisco Parks, now known as the San Francisco Parks Trust. Prior to the last two local council elections, the Trust sent questionnaires to every candidate to ascertain their support for the City's parks. Based on the response, the candidates were then graded and their park-friendly rating displayed on the Trust's website.



Office space is just about the only support the Trust receives directly from the City Council. Indirectly, the Trust's nine staff are also supported by their management of a \$4 million worth of park-related grant programmes. Not all yield a management fee and the only connection with the City Council is that the City Council would probably have to manage some of these grant programmes if the Trust did not.

The main income is from donations and subscriptions from 3,500 households in the city, which tops \$1 million and enables the Trust to employ nine staff. The Trust typifies the city-wide support organisations which are common in America's bigger cities but which have no equivalent here. These groups are not a substitute for friends groups dedicated to individual parks of which there are plenty. However, they do illustrate how both local authority and the wider general public view their collection of parks as in need of protection across the whole city.

Green Future sees the case for better parks gaining ground as a way of encouraging the housing market and inward investment in the North of England, whilst being an essential ingredient of the more compact, mixed-use developments planned for the South. Even without such pressure, the improvement of parks is seen as a move to more liveable communities, influencing behaviour and civic pride.

More problematic is the long-term

funding of the maintenance of all green spaces. So much of it has been lost in the last few decades. There are many funding schemes for single projects to improve green spaces but research undertaken for the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce shows that what the public wants is better maintenance and site-based staff.

The case for at least a one third increase in budgets is overwhelming. Poor parks lose their value and ability to deliver benefits. If the investment is made, the benefits are more widespread and reach more people than any other local provision. All this for just half of what the NHS spends on dishing out Prozac to six million people who would probably be better off in a good park.

Green Future makes the case for cross-authority support groups being integral to the securing of additional funding by acting as partners. They would be community-guarantors for the monitoring and the integrity of the park improvement programmes which would result. There is plenty of opportunity to create new mechanisms which would ensure more dedicated funding and management of parks and green spaces, the detail being decided at local level. The old ways won't do. As Einstein once said: "The world today is full of problems that cannot be solved by the type of thinking which we employed when we created them."

To purchase Green Future, go to: www.green-space.org.uk.

