

**Section 2: The Present -  
An Audit of Country Parks Today**

## Section 2: The Present - An Audit of Country Parks Today

This section of the report gives an analysis of the data provided by country park managers in response to the questionnaire. The number that responded constituted only a small majority of all country parks and may well mean that there is an element of bias in the results.

### 2.1 Land mass

Of the 267 country parks contacted during this study, 137 responded and returned completed questionnaires. The 137 responding country parks collectively cover 18,795 hectares. The average size of a country park from this sample is, therefore, 146 hectares and, if this is extrapolated, it can be estimated that the total landmass for all country parks is 38,901 hectares.

113 (or 82%) of the responding parks considered themselves to be formally designated under the 1968 Countryside Act. (This could be extrapolated to suggest that 219 of the 267 country parks are officially designated.) These 113 designated country parks cover a total of 14,687 hectares with an average size of 137 hectares. There is no significant difference in size between designated country parks and all other parks that operate under the assumed title of country park.

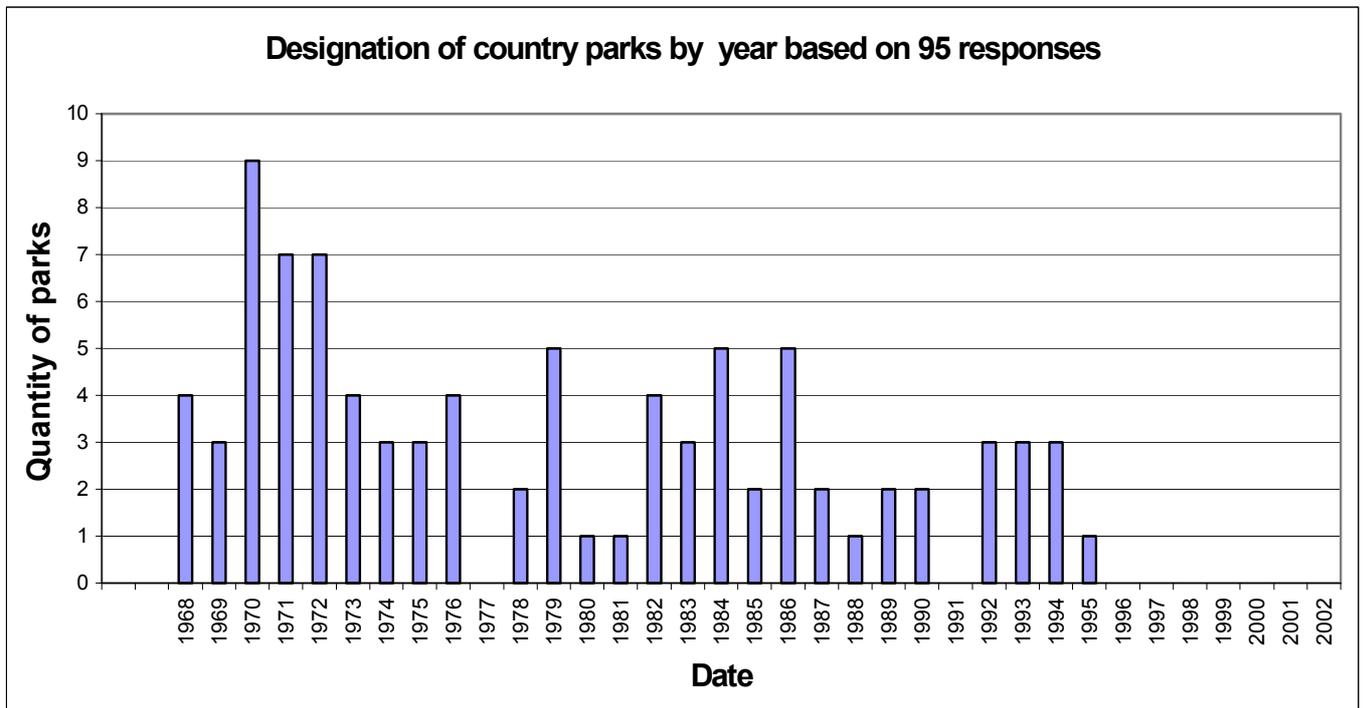
### 2.2 Designations

Of the 113 designated country parks that responded, 95 were able to provide their date of designation. All were designated prior to 1996. No formal designation procedures have taken place since 1996. The study team suggests possible reasons for this:

- country park managers no longer considered the designation process to be of sufficient value to justify the time and effort involved. That is to say that a park could, in every way, operate as a country park without designation;
- the designation process required a park to apply to the local authority which could provide formal designation if the park met the criteria stipulated by the Countryside Act 1968. Reorganisation of local government (resulting in the abolition of some County Councils, the creation of Unitary Councils, and the redistribution of roles and responsibilities within local authorities) may have resulted in confusion about whom parks should apply to, or even a 'disowning' of the designation process with no tier of local government taking responsibility. One park manager reported that when they applied to their County Council they were told that it was no longer the County's responsibility and the manager should approach the Planning Department of their own local authority.

Figure 1 illustrates the number of country park designations that took place each year.

Figure 1: Designation of country parks by year



## 2.3 Characteristics of country parks

### 2.3.1 Physical characteristics

Using the questionnaire data, a country parks database was created which includes the name and address of the park, ordnance survey grid reference, size and contact details. Each responding officer was also asked to provide a 50-word description of the park and detailed information about:

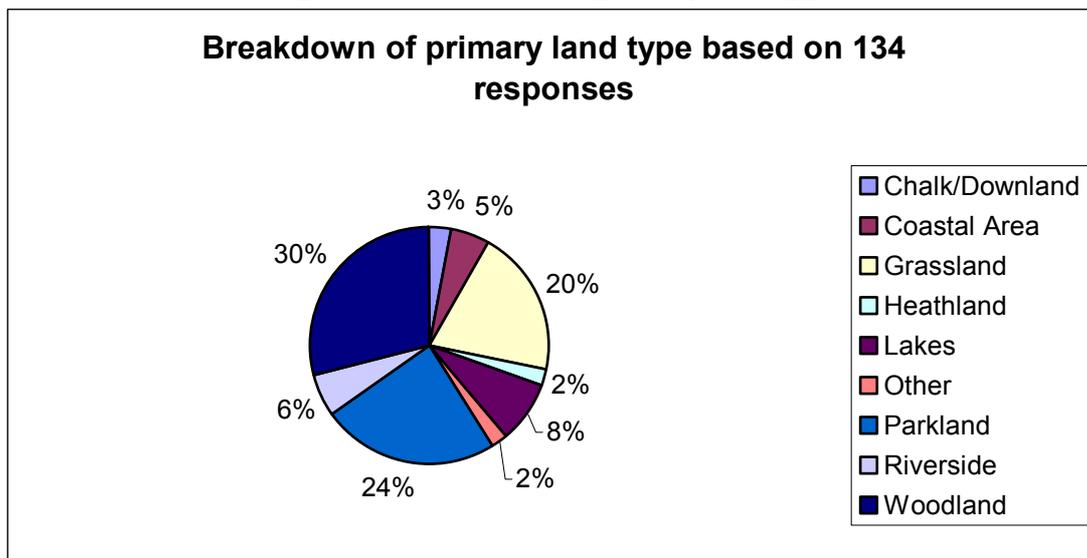
- **Primary land type** – predominant land type i.e. woodland, grassland, heathland etc;
- **Use prior to designation** – what the land was used for before it was designated or operated as a country park;
- **Location** – i.e. rural, urban fringe etc;
- **Other land type** – other types of land included within the boundary of the park;
- **Historic park status** – any official historic park designations, e.g. inclusion in the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest;
- **Nature conservation designations** – any specific nature conservation designations, e.g. Local Nature Reserve or Site of Special Scientific Interest;
- **Landscape planning designations** – any specific planning designation awarded, e.g. Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or Green Belt.

From the information provided, it was possible to record the details of the individual sites on the database - providing baseline data that can be used in any future audit process - and to examine the predominant physical characteristics that prevail throughout the range of country parks.

### 2.3.2 Primary land type

This information was provided by 134 of the responding parks and the results are shown in Figure 2. Woodland was the most predominant primary land type (30% of responding parks), closely followed by parkland and then grassland. Between them these three categories accounted for 74% of responding parks. Coastal areas, heathland and chalk/downland appeared scarce, with only 10% of responding parks falling into these categories.

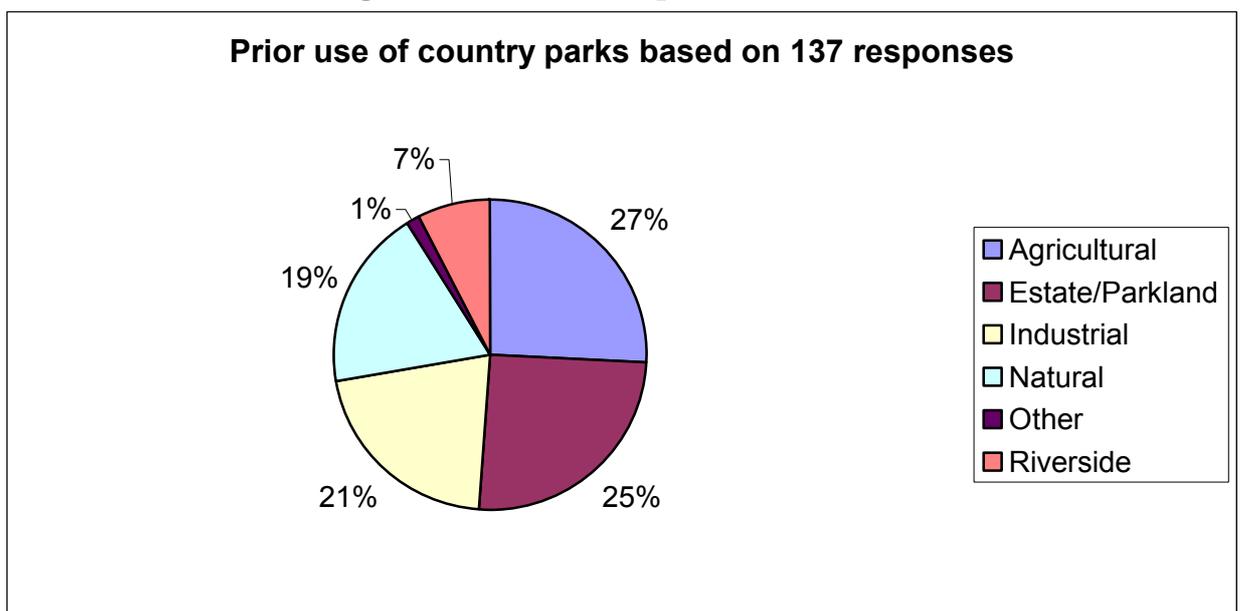
Figure 2: Breakdown of primary land type



### 2.3.3 Prior use

All of the respondents answered this question. The majority of country parks were formerly agricultural land, estate/parkland or industrial sites, with percentage scores of 27%, 25% and 21% respectively. The data is illustrated in Figure 3 where 'Other' relates to three parks that listed their prior uses as public open space, disused railway line, and an army hospital site.

Figure 3: Breakdown of prior use



### 2.3.4 Location

The majority of country parks (65%), were found in urban fringe areas, 40% were found in rural areas and just 1% were located in inner city and industrial locations. However, some initial work by the Urban Parks Forum on the creation of a Geographical Information System (GIS) for country parks has taken place. This makes it clear that more than 65% of country parks are located within a few miles of a large town or city.

Figure 4 provides an example of how the data provided by the parks can be represented on a GIS system. Further development of the country park GIS will allow urban conurbations that are above a specified size to be overlaid with the geographic positions of the parks. This will provide a clearer understanding of how many of the parks should be considered as 'urban fringe'.

During the early stages of the creation of the GIS system, it was noted that there appeared to be a relationship between the geographic positions of country parks and the network of major roads and motorways. This suggests that the choice of where to create country parks was influenced more by the location and movement of urban populations than by the countryside that would surround the park. Figure 5 illustrates the relationship between country parks and the network of motorways and shows that a high percentage of parks are located close to motorways. When 'primary' roads are overlaid the relationship between parks and the road network becomes even clearer.

Figure 4: Location of country parks

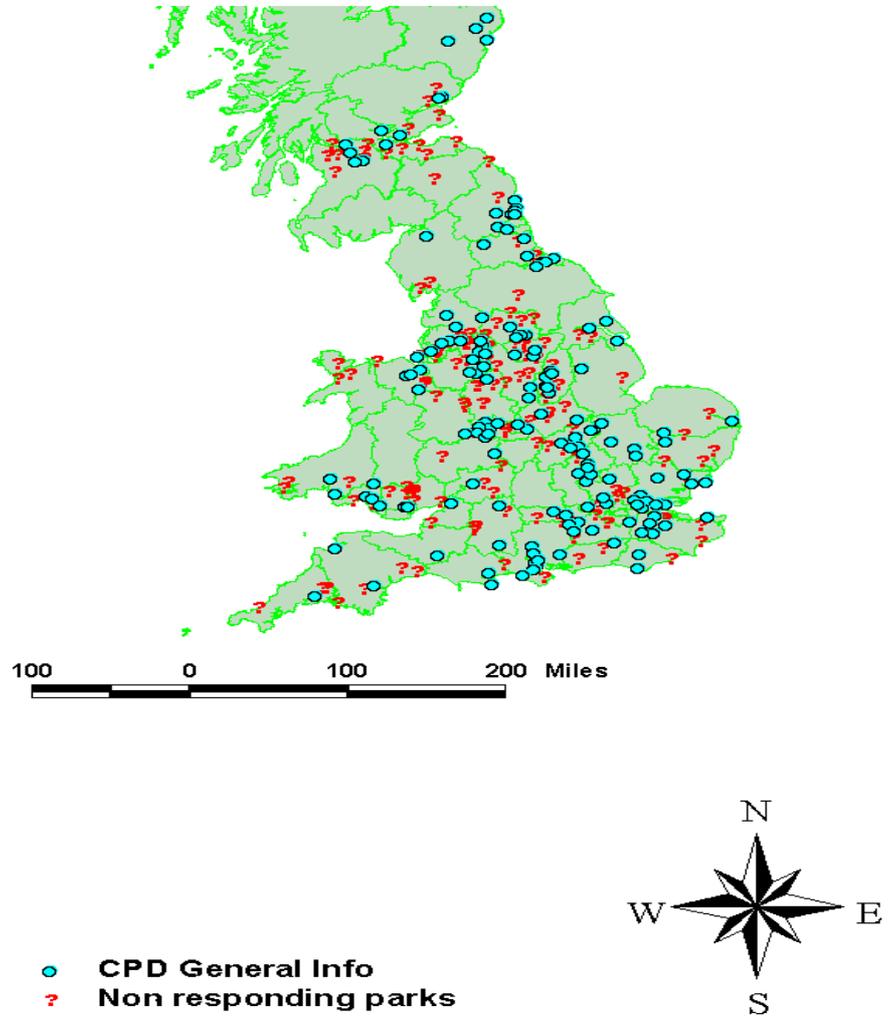
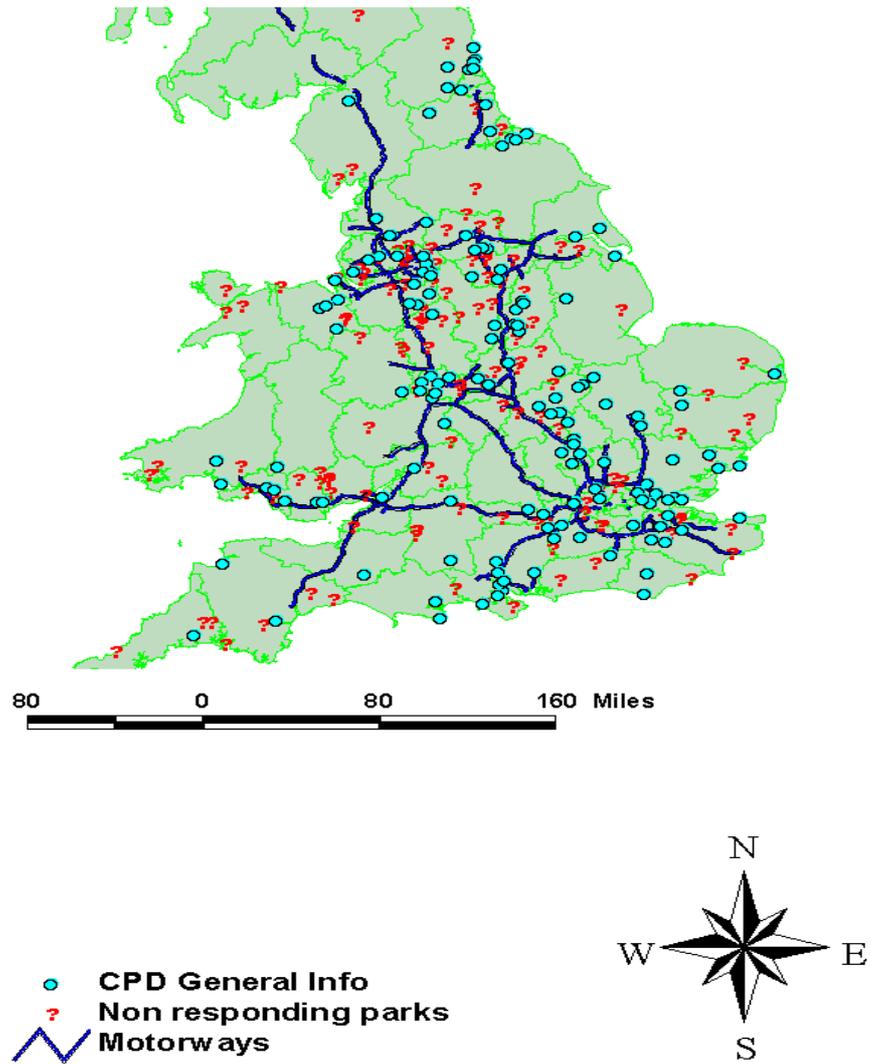


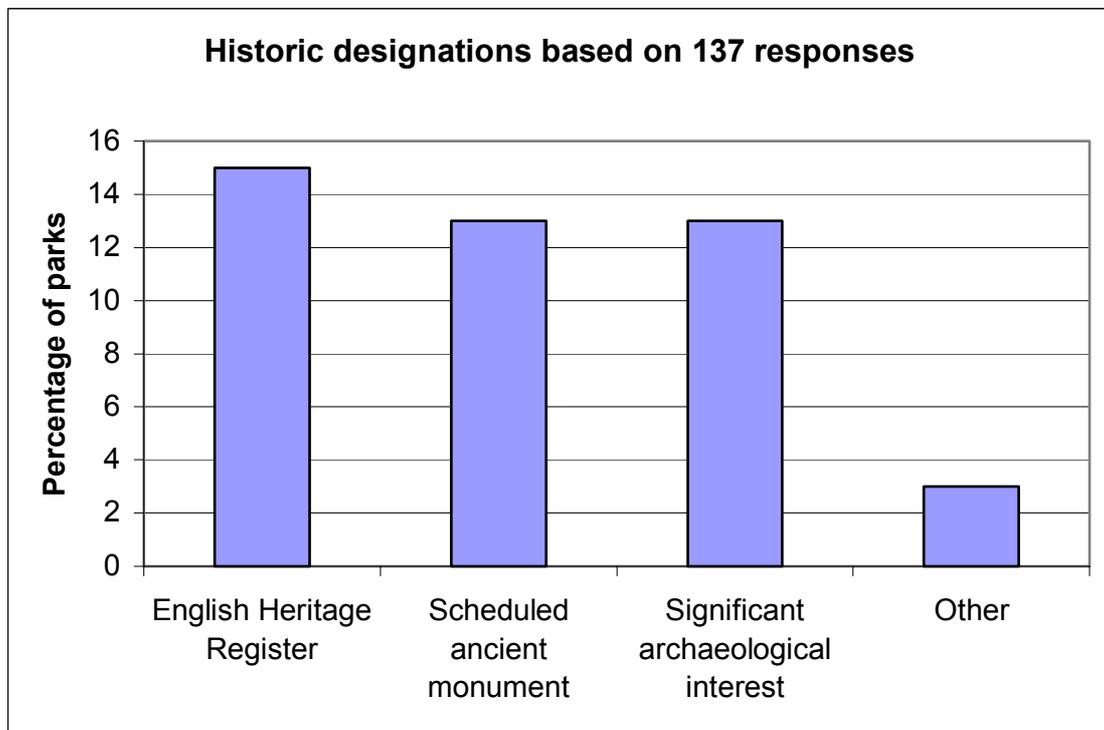
Figure 5: Relationship of country parks to motorways



### 2.3.5 Historic status

Of the 137 parks that responded, 97 (71%) declared that they had no historic designations. Between them, the remaining 40 parks declared a total of 60 historic designations. Sites on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest were most frequent (15%) with sites of Archaeological Interest (13%) and Scheduled Ancient Monuments (13%) following closely. The 'Other' consisted of Sites of Local Interest or sites with historic remains. This data suggested that within the range of country parks there was a historic and heritage value with 29% of parks carrying at least one official historic designation. Figure 6 indicates which of the historic designations were most commonly found within country parks and shows what percentage of parks carried each of the designations.

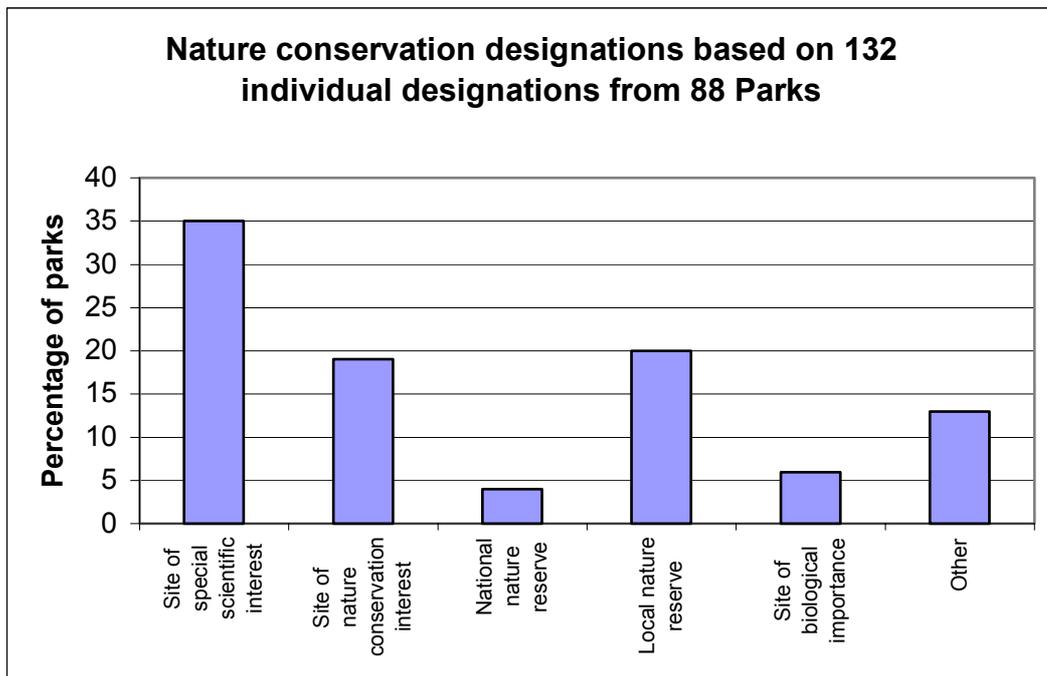
**Figure 6: Historic designations**



### 2.3.6 Nature conservation status

Between them, 88 (64%) of the responding parks had 132 nature conservation designations and 49 (36%) had none. The most common designation was that of Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), representing 35% of all nature conservation designations applied to country parks. The two designations of Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) and Local Nature Reserve (LNR), were the next most common representing 20% and 19% respectively of the nature conservation designations. These are illustrated in Figure 7. The large 'Other' bar in this chart comprises Ramsar sites (wetlands of international importance) and sites of local importance.

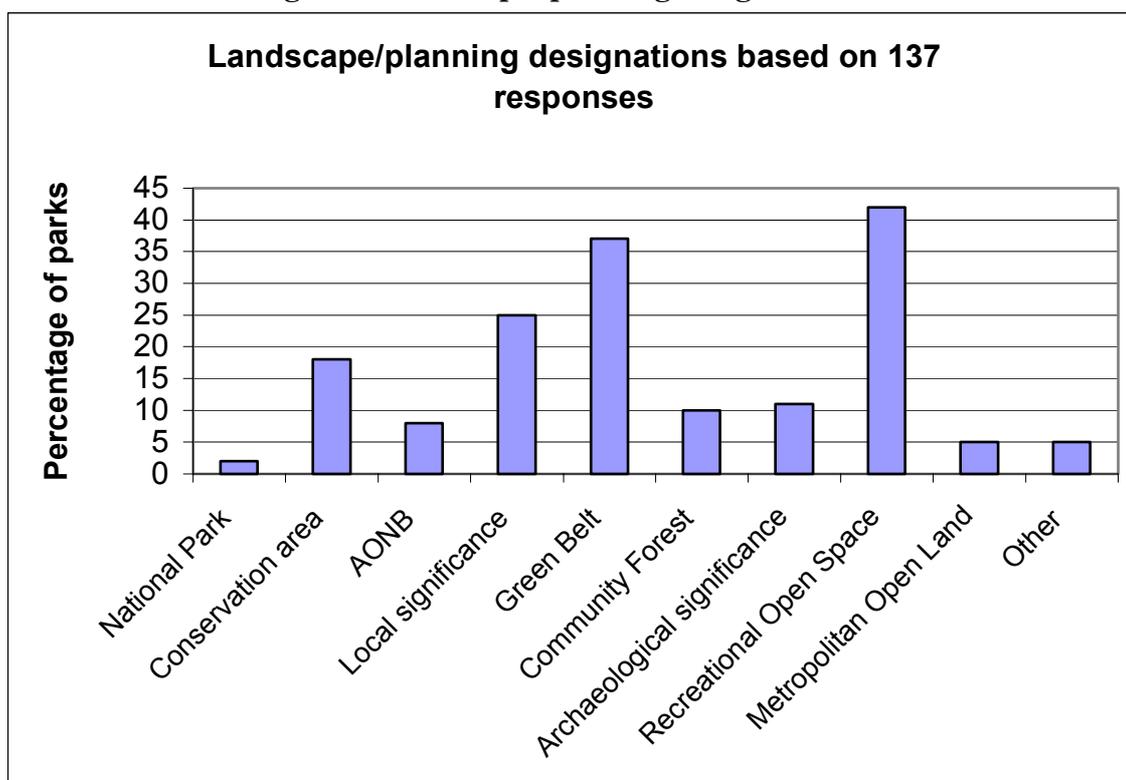
Figure 7: Nature conservation designations



### 2.3.7 Landscape planning status

Landscape planning designations reflected the importance of these areas in planning terms. There were 225 landscape/planning designations within the 137 responding country parks. Figure 8 indicates which of the landscape planning designations were most commonly found within country parks and shows what percentage of parks carried each of the designations. Recreational Open Space (42%), Green Belt (37%), and Local Significance (25%) were the most popular of landscape planning designations. The 'Other' comprised: County Wildlife Sites, Heritage Coast, River Valley or Great Landscape Value. Twenty-nine (21%) of responding parks had no landscape planning designations.

Figure 8: Landscape/planning designations



Ten (7%) of the responding parks carried no historic, nature conservation or landscape planning designations. When these 10 sites were separately examined, only one feature of the sites, their use prior to designation, emerged as significantly different to the rest of the sample. A substantial 60% of them were previously industrial sites, compared to 21% of the whole sample.

## 2.4 Condition and trend in condition

### 2.4.1 Grades of condition

The questionnaire asked about condition and trend in condition for various aspects of the park in addition to an overall assessment. These aspects were: landscape features, accessibility, visitor facilities and other built structures. The questionnaire defined the grades of condition as:

- **Very good** – where the park or an aspect of the park could be described as in excellent condition with no outstanding repairs or defects;
- **Good** - where the park or an aspect of the park could be described as in good condition with only minor repairs or defects;
- **Average** – where there may be evidence of some major problems or defects but in general the park or an aspect of the park was in acceptable operational condition;
- **Poor** – where there is evidence of some major problems and defects which affected the operational condition of the park or an aspect of the park;
- **Very poor** – where the condition of the park or an aspect of the park created a serious operational crisis requiring major effort and investment to rectify.

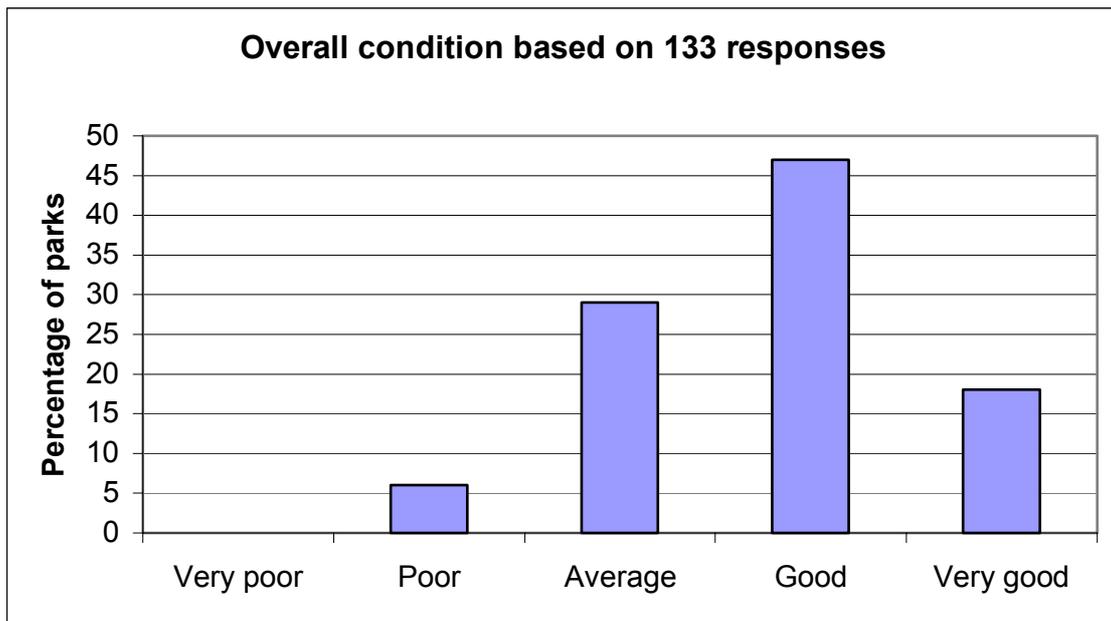
The Public Parks Assessment found that a significant number of local authority owned parks were in poor condition and the condition of many parks was declining<sup>1</sup>. This questionnaire provided an opportunity to examine whether or not the condition and trend in condition for country parks was worse than that for all parks.

### 2.4.2 Condition: park overall

Responding officers were asked to indicate which grade of condition they believed best described their parks. The information obtained is represented in Figure 9 and, from this, the prognosis for country parks looked slightly better than for all parks.

More than 65% of responding officers reported that their parks were in either good or very good condition, and only 6 % described their parks as in poor condition, with the rest described as average. There appeared to be little difference in the condition of those parks which considered themselves to be purely historic or nature conservation orientated.

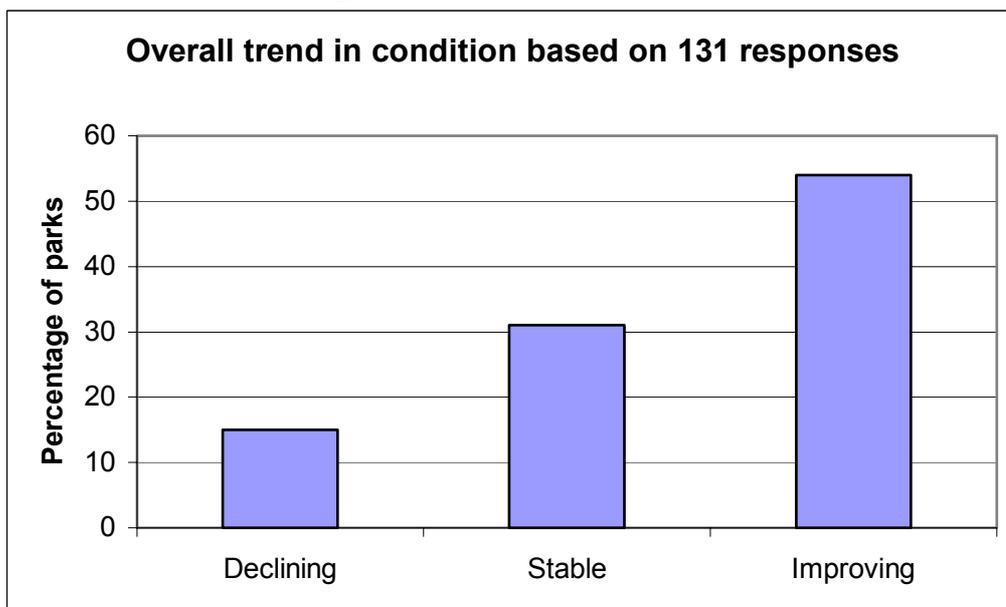
**Figure 9: Overall condition assessment**



#### 2.4.3 Trend in condition: park overall

Responding officers were asked to assess the trend in condition of their parks. The data received provided an indication of the future prospects for country parks. The majority of parks (54%) were described as improving, nearly a third (31%) were stable and, encouragingly, less than a fifth (15%) were declining in condition. Figure 10 illustrates the trend in condition data provided by 131 parks.

**Figure 10: Trend in overall condition**



#### **2.4.4 Condition compared to trend in condition**

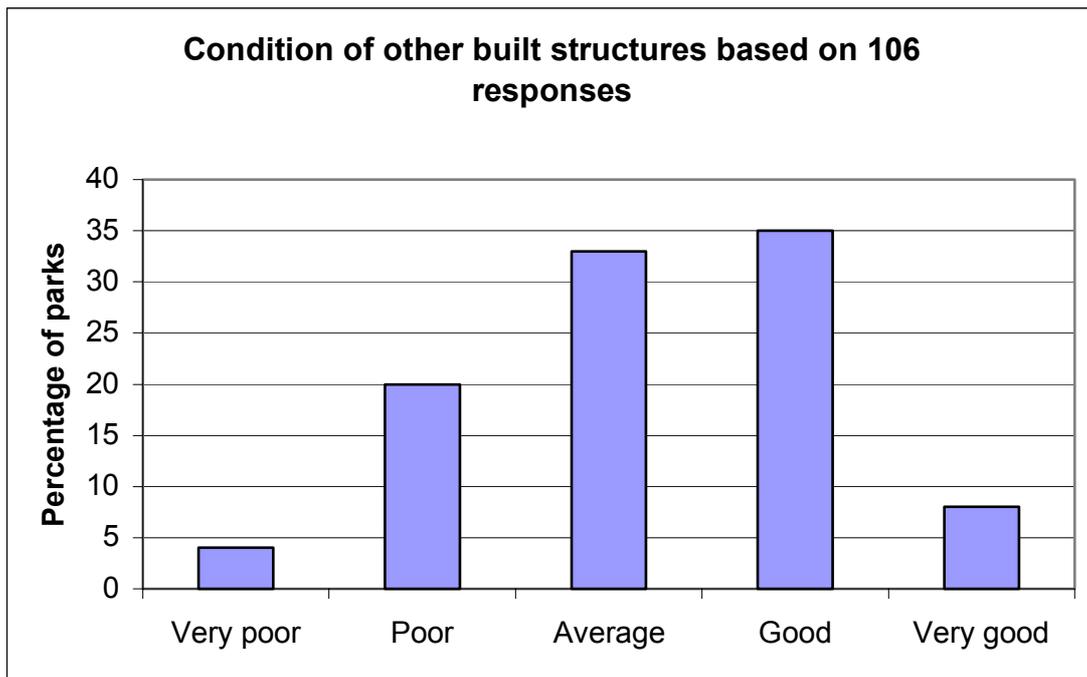
- Worryingly, of those parks who rated their overall condition as poor, 88% also rated their condition as declining and none rated it as improving.
- Twenty-eight percent of parks rated as average said that their overall condition was declining and 33% said it was improving.
- Of those parks which were rated good, 65% stated their condition to be improving, with only 5% declining.
- Seventy-five percent of very good parks said they were improving, with none declining.
- Thus the majority of parks which were in poor condition were in decline, while those rated in good or very good condition were more likely to be improving. This reflected the broad findings of the Public Parks Assessment<sup>1</sup> in which 53% of good parks were improving with only 4% declining, whilst 88% of poor parks were in decline with less than 1% improving.
- Although this data provided a view of the overall condition and trend in condition for country parks, a breakdown into categories reflecting ‘accessibility’, ‘other built structures’, ‘ecology’, ‘landscape condition’ and ‘visitor facilities’ provided further insight. This followed the trend noted from the overall condition, i.e. the good parks showed a higher percentage of improvement, with the poor parks a showing higher percentages of decline.

#### **2.4.5 Condition: other built structures**

Condition assessments for their ‘other built structures’ were provided by 106 parks. Forty-three percent of these reported the condition of their other built structures to be either good or very good. This was considerably less than the percentage that had assessed their overall condition to be good or very good (65%). Moreover, only 6% reported their overall condition as poor or very poor whilst 24% made this assessment of their other built structures.

This illustrated that the condition of the built structures within country parks was not fairing well compared to the park overall. Figure 11 illustrates the data provided by 106 respondents.

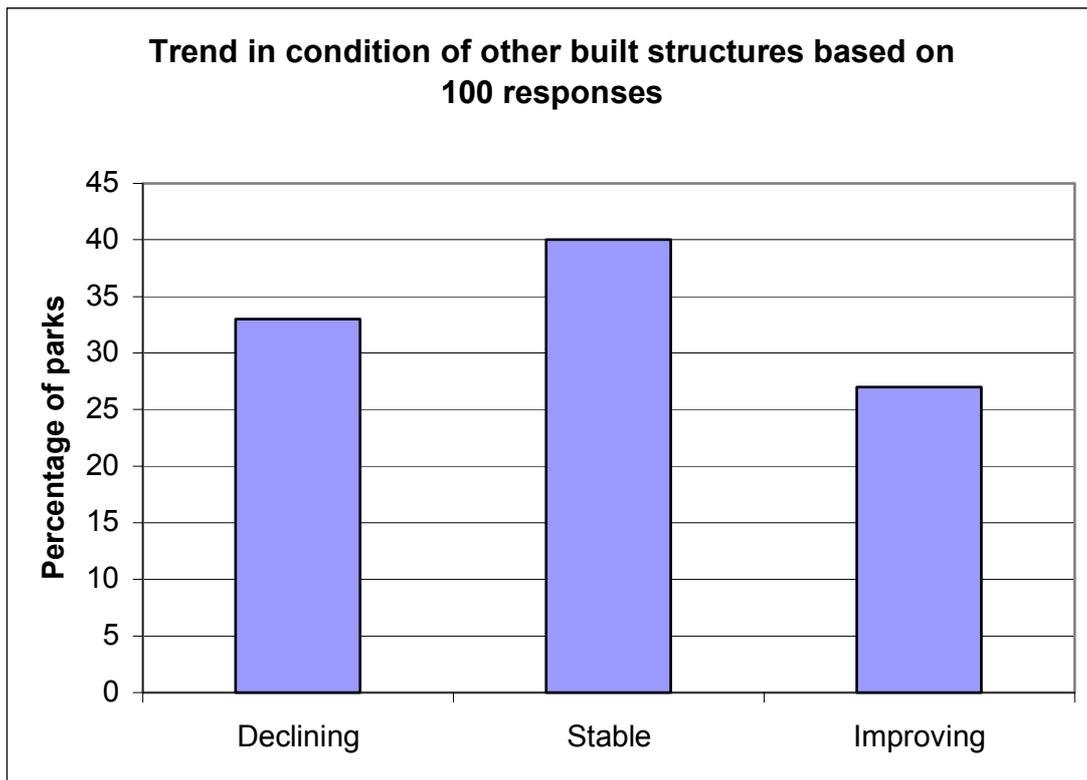
Figure 11: Condition: other built structures



#### 2.4.6 Trend in condition: other built structures

The assessment of the trend in condition of built structures was far less favourable than that which was provided for the park overall. There was a higher percentage of decline than improvement, with almost 33% of parks reporting decline of other built structures, compared to 15% reporting decline for the park overall. Assessments that rated the other built structures as improving were also greatly reduced (27%) when compared to similar assessments for park overall. Figure 12 illustrates the data provided by 100 respondents.

Figure 12: Trend in condition: other built structures



It is clear from the data provided, that the built or man made structures that exist within country parks were in worse condition than the rest of the park, and the trend in their condition is extremely worrying. Built structures are generally important elements of any park infrastructure and those built structures of no value or serving no useful purpose are usually removed at an early stage in any park's life. The data provided suggests that this problem is likely to require substantial investment of resource. If this resource is not committed many built structures will be lost. This situation is of greatest concern when considering historic country parks where the presence and value of built structures is likely to be highest.

## **2.5 Finance and Funding**

### **2.5.1 Financial data**

The questionnaire asked for various types of financial information to be provided by the responding officers with the intention of examining the financial basis on which country parks operated. The data requested was intended to answer the following questions:

- What is the total revenue expenditure?
- What is the level of capital expenditure?
- How successful are country parks in attracting revenue and capital grants?
- Who provides the majority of grant funding?
- What contribution do the various charges applied by country parks make to the overall financial situation?

However, many responding officers were unable to provide even basic financial data relating to their parks. This indicated that parks were not treated as stand-alone cost centres and the individuals responsible for day-to-day management of many parks had little or no access to relevant financial data.

The major funding bodies referred to are the Countryside Agency (CA), the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), English Heritage (EH) and English Nature (EN).

### **2.5.2 Total gross revenue expenditure**

Responding officers were asked to provide information about the amount they spent on running and maintaining their park for four specific date periods, from 1984/85 through to 1999/2000. Only 23 (17%) country parks were able to provide total gross revenue expenditure figures for each of the date periods requested.

Initially the figures provided, as illustrated in Figure 13, appeared encouraging, with an apparently small but steady increase over the years. However, when the effects of inflation were added to the equation, the financial situation facing country parks was reversed. In real terms, the amount of total gross revenue expenditure - applied to the 23 country parks responding to this section of the questionnaire - had declined significantly. The 1999/2000 budgets would need to be increased by 28% in order to have an equivalent value to the real term value of the 1984/85 budgets.

Figure 14 provides an illustration of how inflation had affected the budgets of the 23 parks over the 15-year date period. The dark blue line represents the path of the 1984/1985 budget had it matched the year-on-year inflation, the projected finishing point for this line is substantially greater than the 1999/2000 budget figure. The pink and yellow lines follow the same process for the years 1989/1990 and 1994/1995 respectively.

Figure 13: Revenue Expenditure

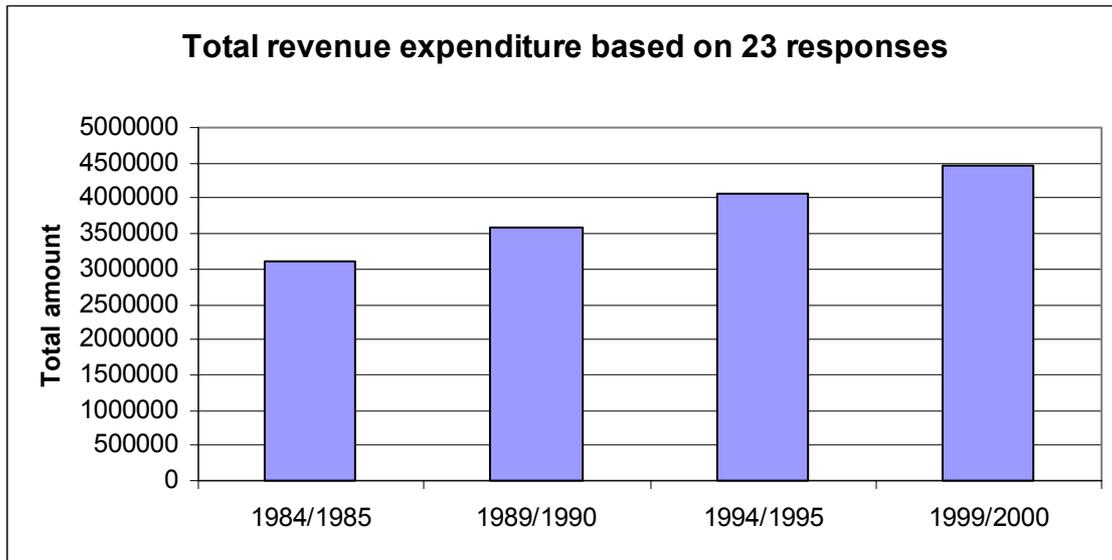
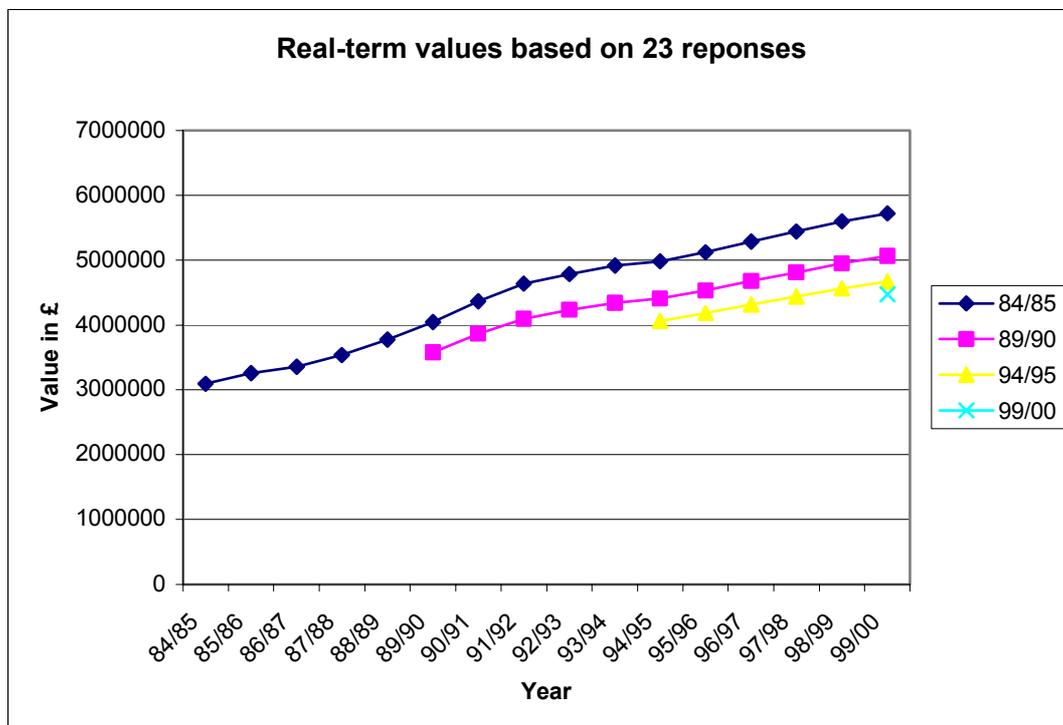


Figure 14 clearly shows that the decline in the real-term value of revenue expenditure had been consistent throughout the date range with similar drops between 1984/85 through to 1989/90, and 1989/90 through to 1994/95. The decline appeared to have slowed slightly between 1994/95 and 1999/2000.

Figure 14: Revenue expenditure – Inflation Linked

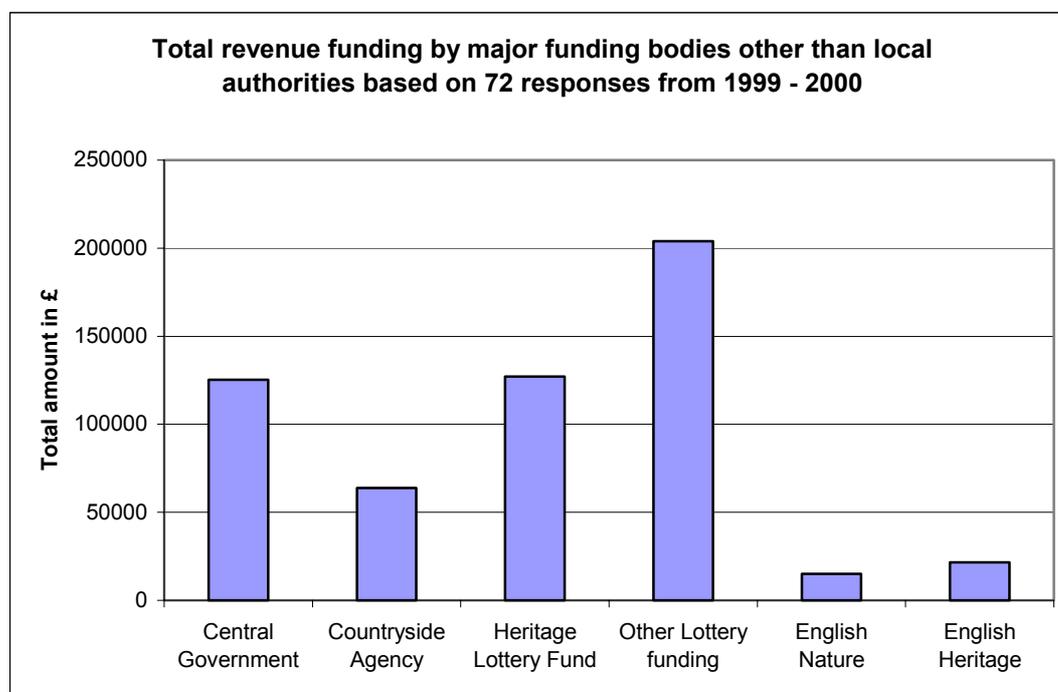


### 2.5.3 Sources of revenue

Responding officers were asked to provide details about the sources of their revenue funding. Seventy-two parks were able to respond to this question. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the Countryside Commission provided the vast majority of funding to

country parks. The data supplied by respondents relates to the period 1984 onwards, and showed that local authorities provided 93%, or over £7 million, of the total revenue funding. Figure 15 provides a breakdown of which organisations provided the remaining 7% of the revenue funding for the 72 parks.

**Figure 15: Total revenue award from major funding bodies other than local authorities from 1999 to 2000**



The combined contribution of lottery bodies (other than Heritage Lottery Fund) made the largest contribution to the remaining funding, closely followed by Central Government and Heritage Lottery Fund. Lottery bodies are generally associated with contributing to capital expenditure but they now also make a significant contribution towards revenue expenditure.

Table 1 shows how much each body contributed expressed as a percentage of the total revenue expenditure, and as a percentage of the deficit not provided by local authorities.

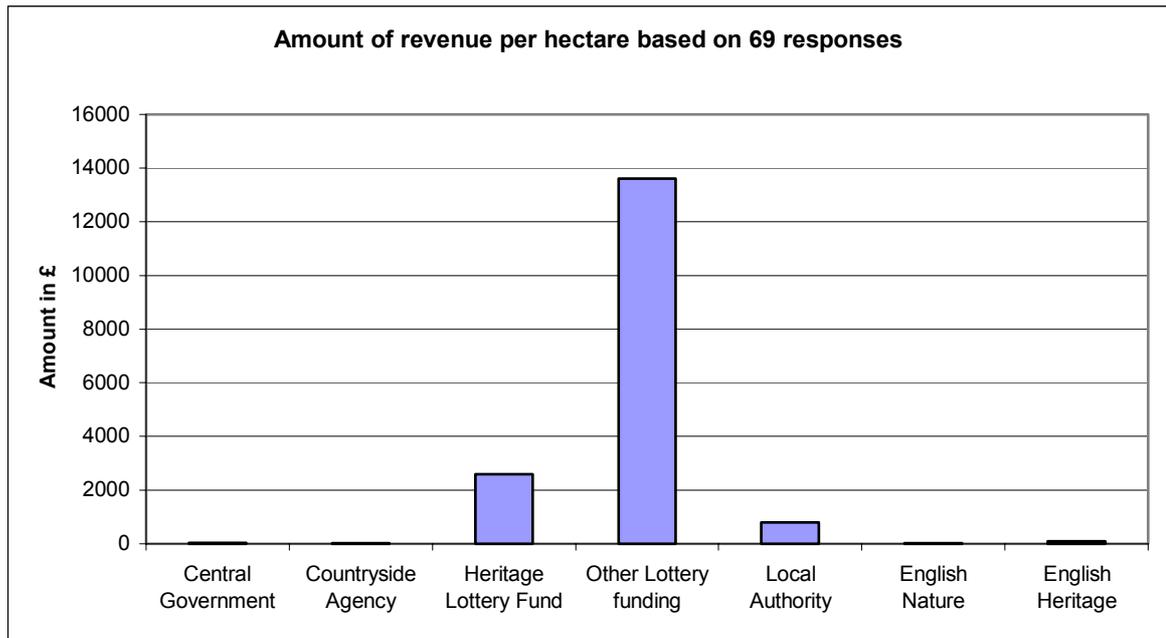
**Table 1: Contribution of funding bodies towards total revenue and deficit from 1984-2000**

Funding Body	% of Total Revenue	% of Deficit
Local Authority	93%	
Other Lottery	2.6%	36.7%
Heritage Lottery Fund	1.6%	22.8%
Central Government	1.6%	22.5%
Countryside Agency	0.8%	11.2%
English Heritage	0.2%	3.8%
English Nature	0.1%	2.6%

Because 69 of the 72 parks which provided financial data also gave the size of their park in hectares, it was possible to calculate the contribution made by each funding body on a 'per hectare' basis. Although local authorities provided the largest total expenditure, their revenue funding is spread across the largest landmass. Figure 16 shows how the substantial contribution made by 'Other Lottery' bodies appeared to be more targeted; affecting fewer sites and a much smaller landmass.

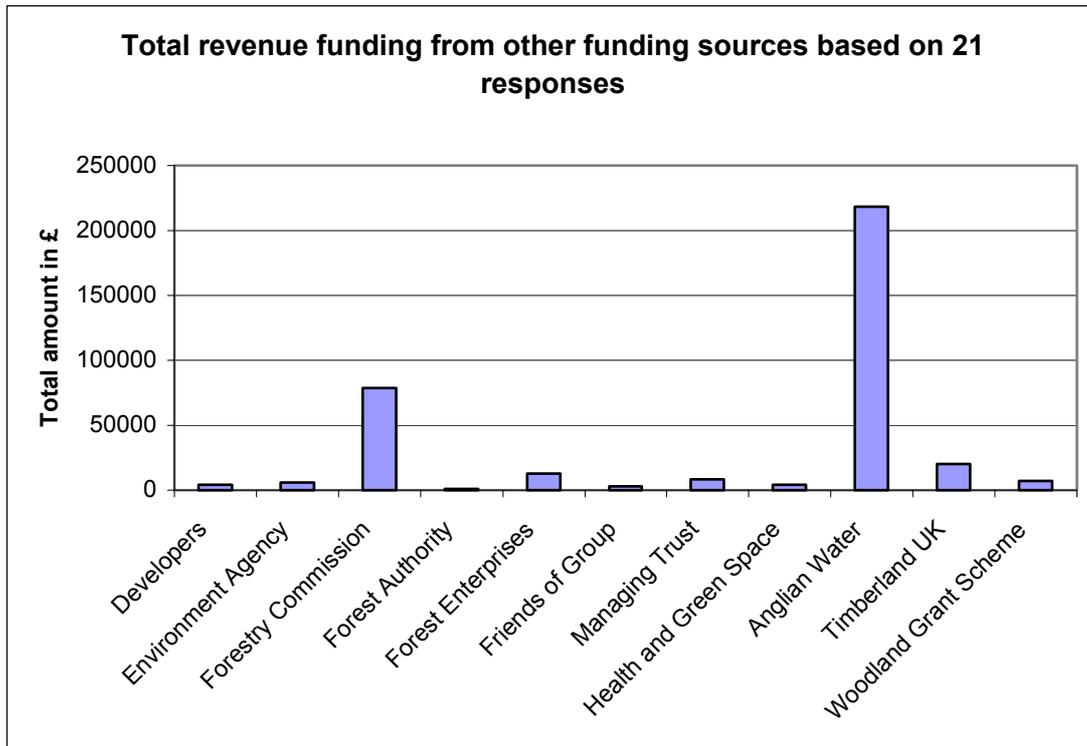
Heritage

**Figure 16: Amount of revenue award per hectare**



The questionnaire offered an opportunity to note other bodies from which responding parks had received funds. A further breakdown of these figures is provided in Figure 17. Anglian Water's high revenue funding level was due to the work carried out at Brixworth Country Park. In the case of the 21 parks that provided this information, the only other substantial contributor was the Forestry Commission.

Figure 17: Total revenue award from other funding bodies



#### 2.5.4 Revenue expenditure per hectare

The 89 parks that provided both financial data and information about their size, collectively covered 11,916 hectares. They had an average size of 133.8 hectares, which was smaller than the average size for all country parks (previously calculated as 146 hectares).

The total revenue expenditure for this sample was £18,995,150. The total revenue expenditure per hectare for these 89 parks was £1,594. Utilising average size and average cost per hectare, it was possible to estimate the total revenue expenditure for all country parks as £62,137,308.

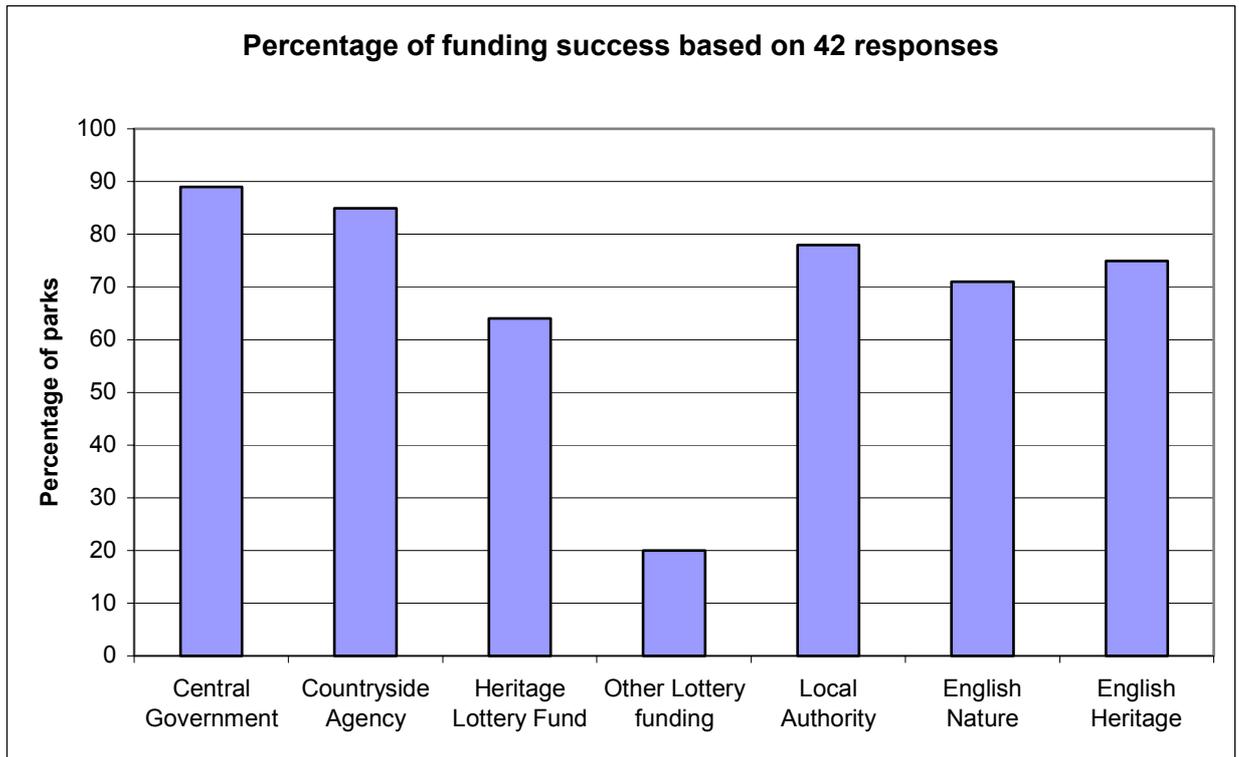
#### 2.5.5 Applications for funding

Responding officers were asked to provide details of applications they had made for capital money from grant awarding bodies. The intention was to examine which bodies made the largest contribution to the capital funding needs of country parks and also to examine funding application success rates.

Figure 18 shows the percentage of funding success from funding bodies. The majority of funding bodies appear to be very receptive to applications from country parks with success rates of between 60% and 90% being shown for most of the funding bodies.

Only 42 of the 137 responses were able to provide funding success information indicating that the responding officers did not have access to this information and were, therefore, possibly not involved in applying for funds.

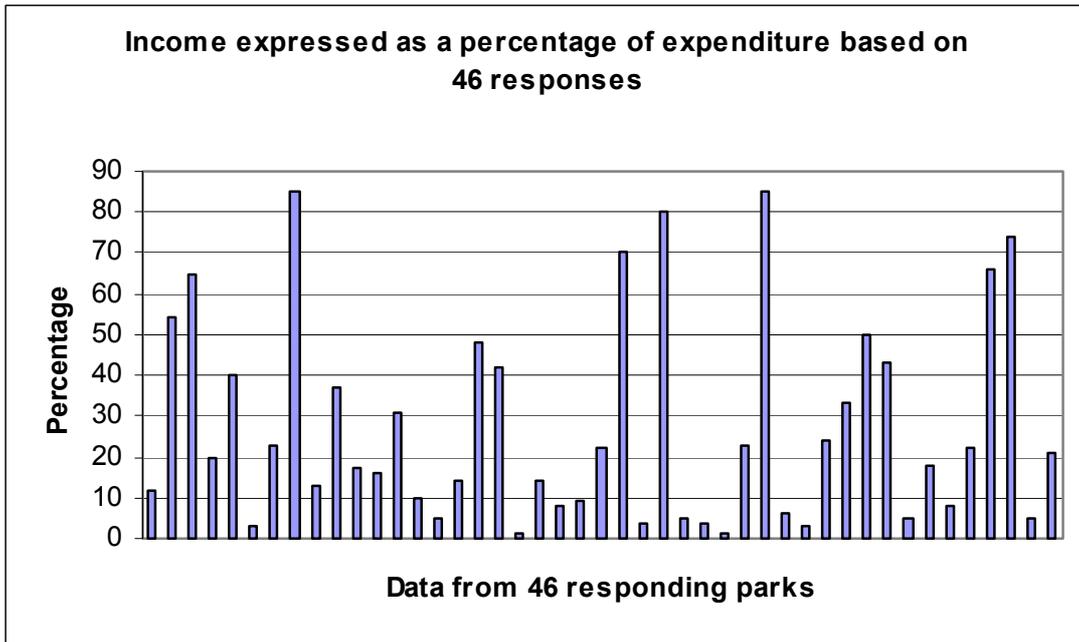
Figure 18: Percentage of funding success from major funding bodies



### 2.5.6 Income

Responding officers were asked to provide details of the income that they received from various park operations. Forty-six of the respondents provided all the relevant information and, of these, the variance between the different parks was great. One park reported that its income was almost equivalent to its expenditure (85%) and one reported that income was less than 1% of expenditure. Based on this sample of 46 parks, the average income to expenditure ratio is 1:27, i.e. income is equivalent to 27% of expenditure. Figure 19 shows income expressed as a percentage of expenditure for each of the 46 parks.

Figure 19: Income as % of expenditure



Responding officers were asked to provide details of the income created by their parks and 54 responded. Figure 20 shows the percentage of country parks that utilised each specific income generator. Charges for activities were the most popular and were made by 67% of responding parks, with 52% of parks offering merchandise to their visitors, 52% making a charge for car parking, 50% for tenancies and 41% provided catering. It is interesting to note that only 15% of parks charged an admission fee and 25% of these were privately owned and managed. This demonstrated that the majority of parks were committed to retaining free access. Of those parks that made a charge, only 2 (25%), made a reduction for unwaged/low income visitors. The questionnaire did not distinguish between entry fees that were applied to the whole park and those applied to restricted areas of the park. During the course of the study, discussions with park managers, and evidence seen during visits to various sites, suggested that many of the parks that charged entry fees still offered free access to other areas of the park.

Figure 20: Income generating activities

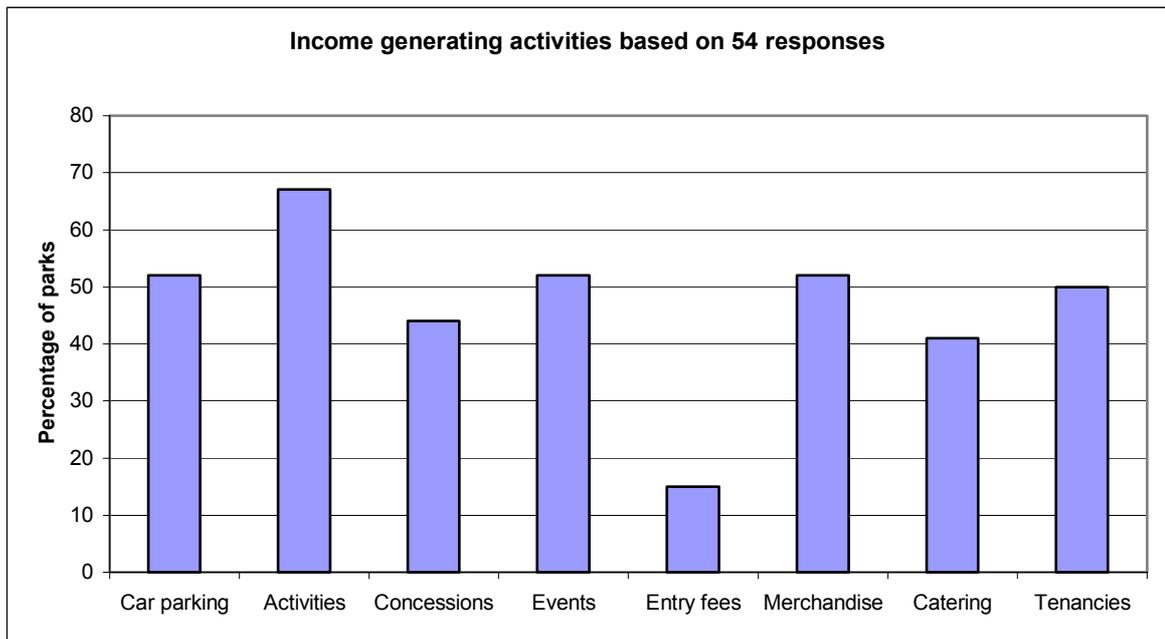
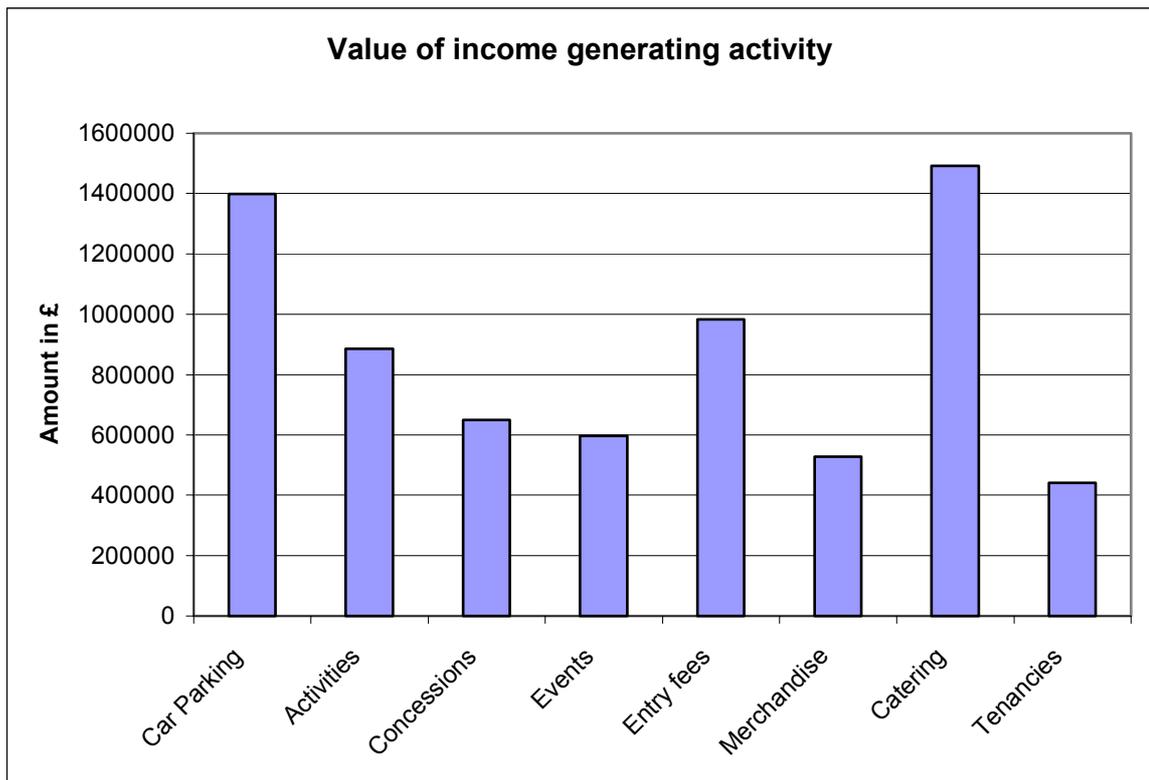


Figure 20 shows the percentage of parks engaged in each income generating activity and Figure 21 shows the value of each of the main income generators. It is clear that catering generated the highest income, followed by car parking. Whilst a higher percentage of parks (67%) charged for activities, compared to any other form of income generation, the amount of income generated by activities was comparatively small. This suggests that the charges applied for participation in park activities were being kept low; perhaps the charges were only intended to cover costs rather than generate a profit. By comparison, entry fees were applied by only 15% of parks but generated comparatively high levels of income. Considering how many parks were involved in selling merchandise it was surprising how little income was generated. An observation made during the study team visits to parks was that many of the product lines were very similar from park to park; the lack of product variety may be an issue that parks need to consider.

Figure 21: Revenue created by income sources



Responding officers were asked to provide details of any new charges that have been introduced over the last 10 years - see Figure 22. Figure 23 shows that there was a significant increase in charge introductions during 1990/1991, which relaxed until the mid-1990s when a marked increase was again observed. The number of newly introduced charges during 2001 eclipsed both of these increases. This trend continued into 2002. The marked increase in the introduction of new charges could be a symptom of the reducing value of revenue budgets available to country parks and the subsequent need to prevent further deterioration of the value of their revenue budgets. (It should be noted that Figure 23 shows a drop in new charges introduced during 2002 due to data collection for only part of this year.)

Figure 22: New charges by subject

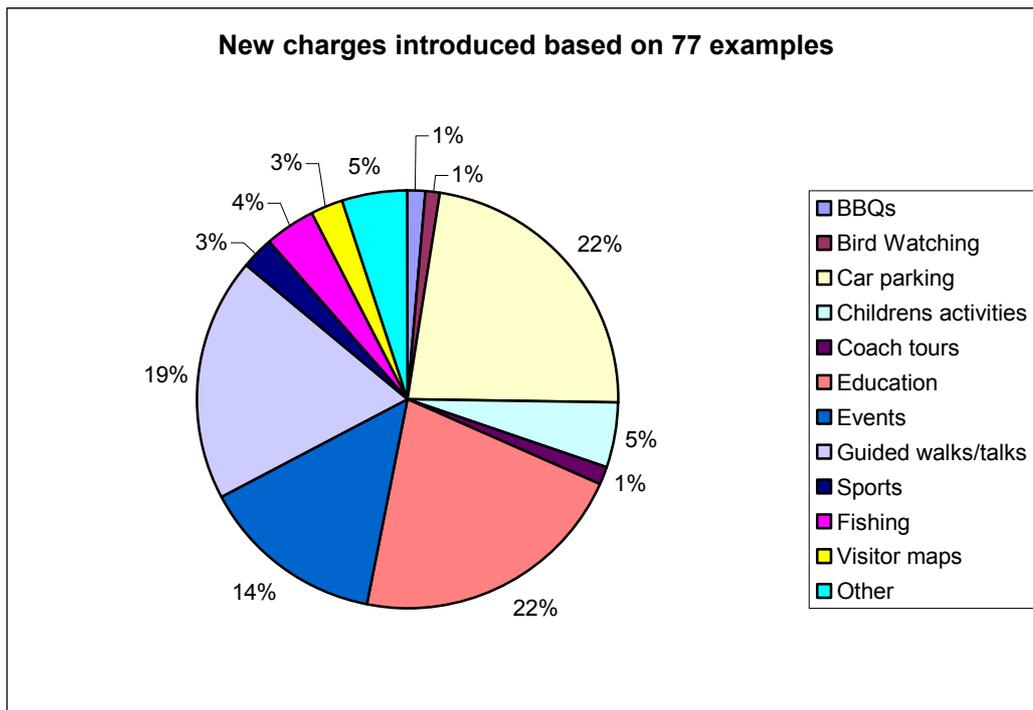
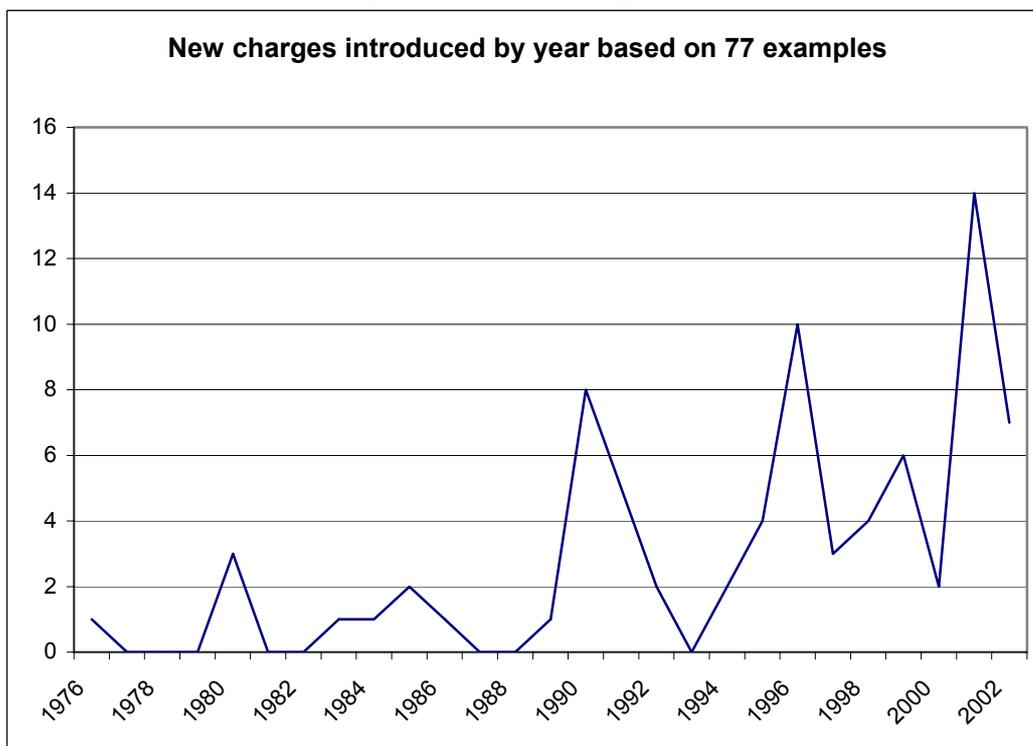


Figure 23: New charges by year



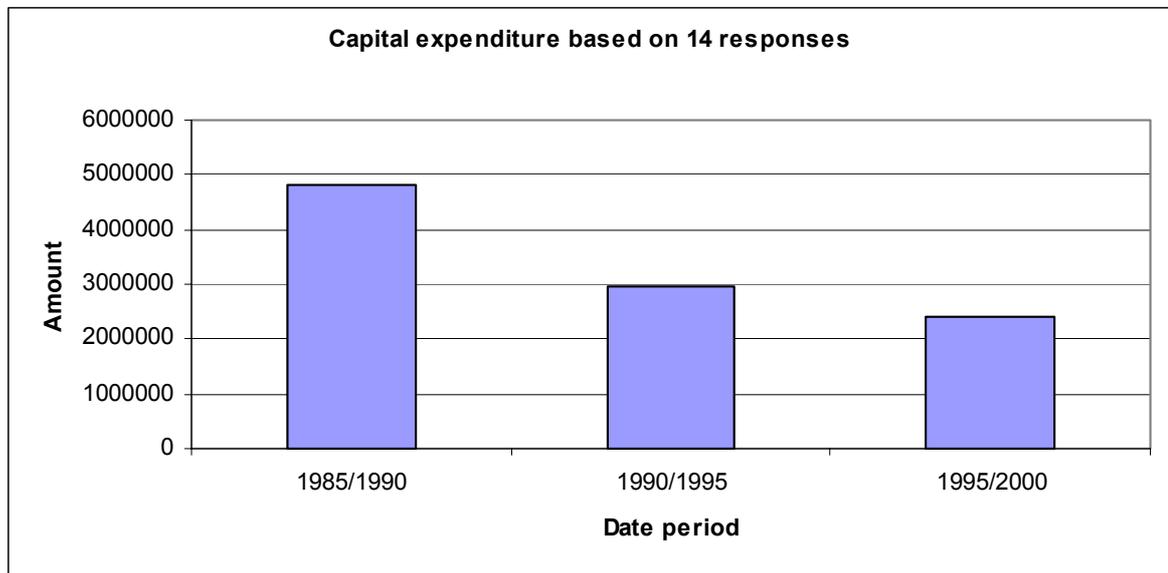
The most commonly introduced new charge was for car parking. Car parking fees were clearly good income generators, as illustrated in Figure 21. The introduction of car parking fees also sat well with the environmental ethos of many of the managers working within country parks; they were committed to the development of sustainable systems

and charging for car parking challenges car-dependency. However, the early development of the country park concept was based around a culture of car use. Many country parks are poorly served by public transport and are located slightly too far away from towns for widespread pedestrian access to be practical. There is a danger that excessive car parking charges will discourage visits rather than simply discourage car use and any reduction in visitor numbers threatens all other income generation methods. Until more sustainable transport links are in place, country parks may need to ensure that their car parking charges are placed at a level that capitalises on the dependency of private car use without discouraging visits.

Figure 23 shows the number of new charges introduced for each year. Responding country parks provided 77 examples of new charge introductions.

### 2.5.7 Capital expenditure and funding

**Figure 24: Capital expenditure**



Fourteen (11%) of the responding officers were able to provide capital expenditure details for the three different periods shown. Figure 24 illustrates the information received. One obvious feature is the marked drop in capital investment from 1985/1990 to the five-year period 1990-1995. The decline is still visible, if not so marked, for the following five-year period (1995-2000).

Responding officers were asked to provide details of where their capital funding came from. Figure 25 shows the total granted by specific non-local authority funding bodies for capital purposes over the previous 12 months. Local authorities provided £3,158,381, or 35%, of all capital funding. The 'Other lottery' funding came from the Millennium Commission and Sport England, whose £2.2 million capital funding of Haigh Hall Country Park greatly contributed to this total figure. Removing Haigh Hall, 'Other lottery' funds provided over £1.5 million in capital funding for country parks.

As Figure 25 shows, the combined lottery sources, including Heritage Lottery Fund, have funded nearly £5 million of capital work within the 45 responding country parks. Without the contribution made by lottery funds, capital investment in country parks

would have declined substantially over the period 1985-2000. Some may argue that, without the intervention of lottery funds, local authorities would have continued their own capital investment. The decline in capital investment, shown by the figures in Figure 24, suggests that this is not the case.

**Figure 25: Total capital funding from major funding bodies**

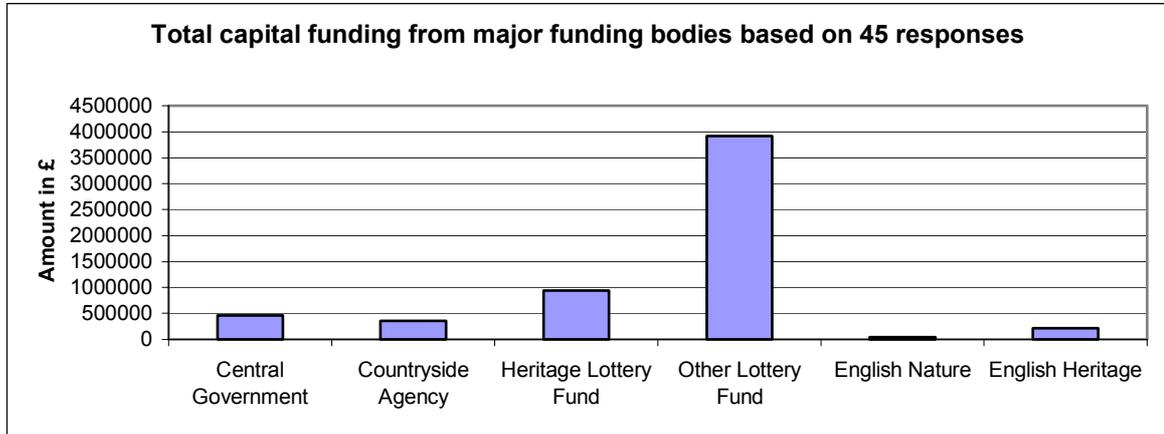
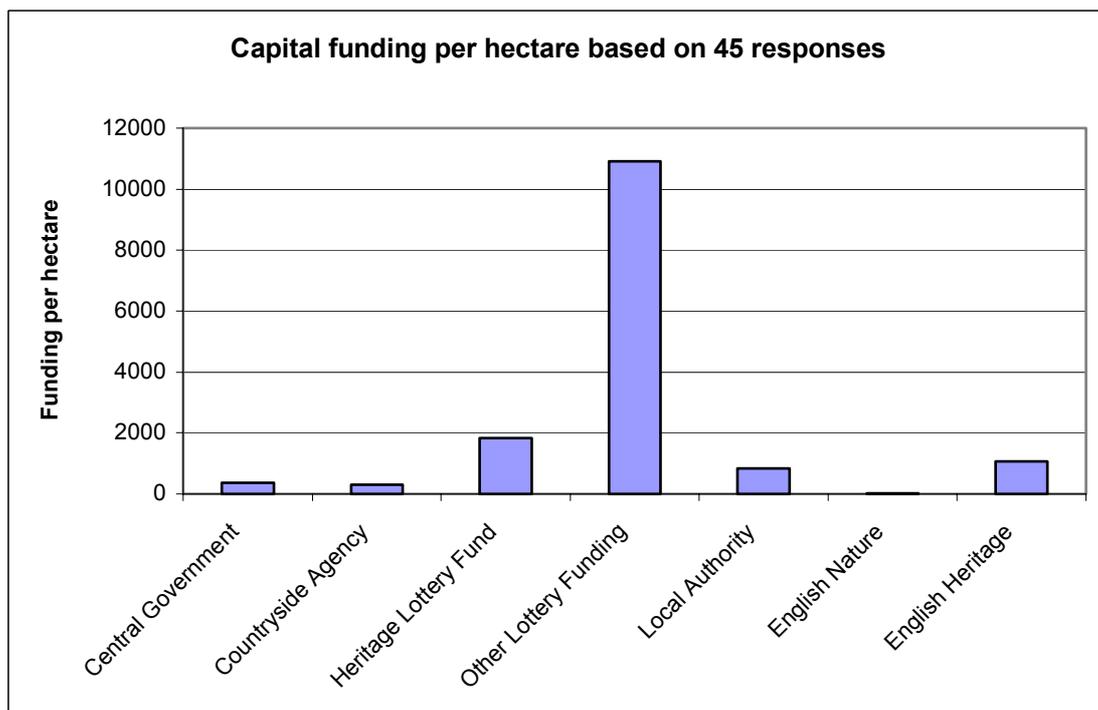


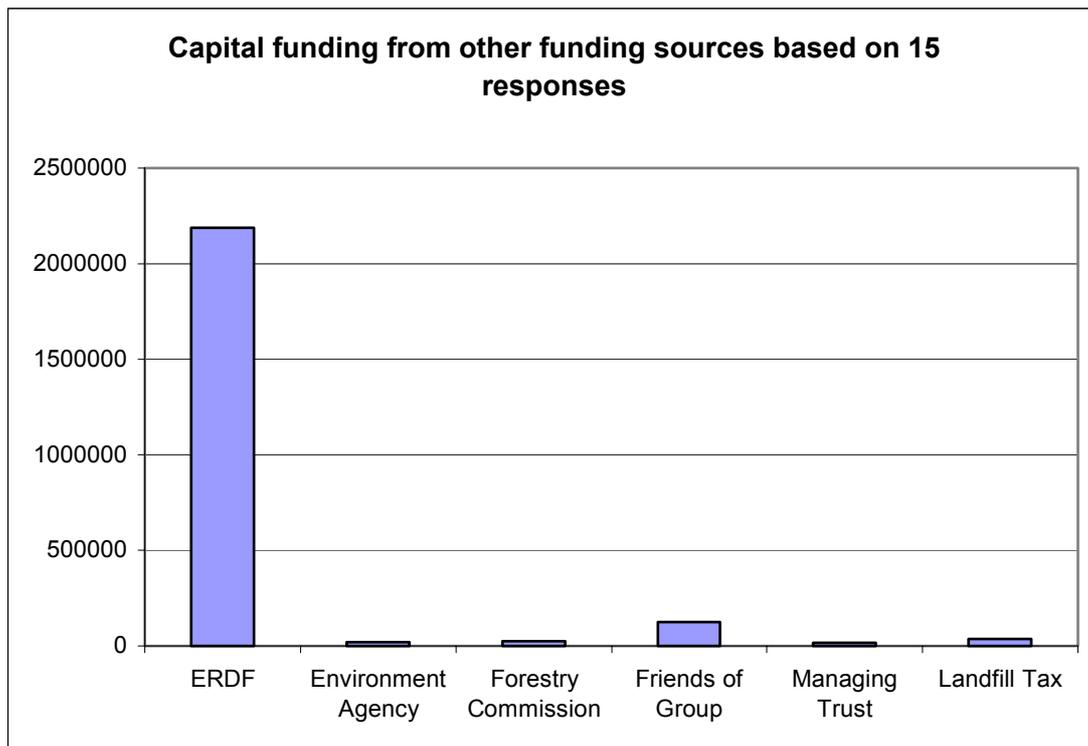
Figure 26 shows these figures expressed as amounts per hectare for the 45 parks that provided this information (again influenced by Sport England’s funding of Haigh Hall). This illustrates that the contribution made by ‘Other lottery’ funding is restricted to large grants awarded to a small number of sites. So, while the lottery contribution helped to ensure a good overall level of capital investment, its effects are limited with the vast majority of country parks still experiencing a significant decline in the availability of capital money.

**Figure 26: Capital funding per hectare**



In addition to the stated funding bodies, the questionnaire also offered an opportunity for responding officers to note other bodies from which they had received funds for capital purposes. This is shown in Figure 27. As can be seen, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) has made capital awards of over £2 million to country parks, a substantial investment that surpassed that of the Heritage Lottery Fund. The large contribution made by Friends of Groups represents funds given by two such groups to their local country parks.

**Figure 27: Total capital funding from other funding sources**



Of the 60 responses that included this information, 38% said they received no external capital funding, whilst 35% said they relied on external sources for all of their capital expenditure. This suggested that capital funding was very much a case of ‘all or nothing’, with the vast majority of respondents reporting that they either funded their entire capital investment programme internally or entirely from external sources.

## **2.6 Use and users**

### **2.6.1 Knowledge of customer base**

Increasingly, country parks need a good level of knowledge about their customers. They are under pressure to increase visitor numbers and the income generated by visitors in order to supplement the declining value of revenue budgets. Modernisation of local government through Best Value legislation and the introduction of Local Strategic Partnerships placed a substantial emphasis on the involvement of the community and customer feedback.

Through the questionnaire, the study sought to examine park managers' general awareness of their customer base and the needs and preferences of their customers. In order to achieve this, responding officers were asked:

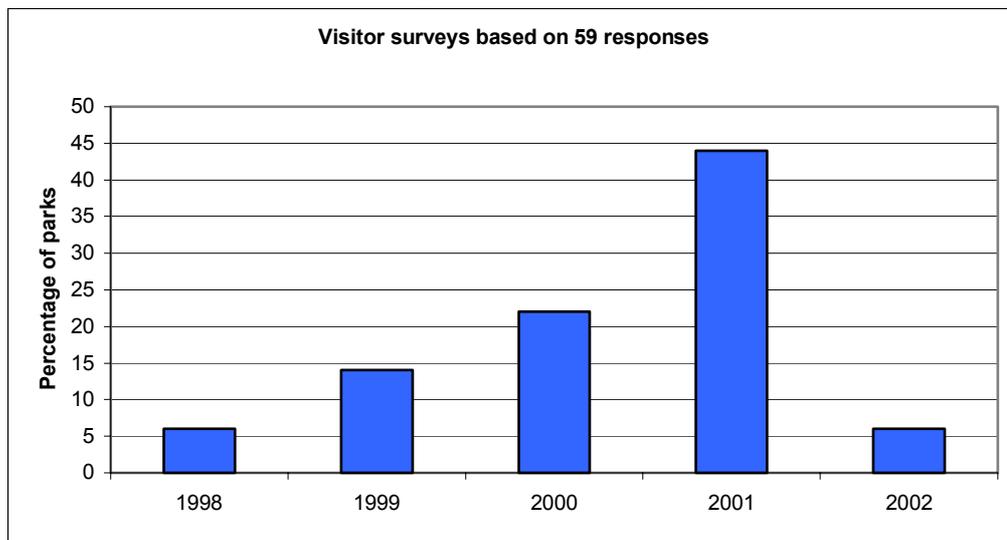
- how often visitor surveys were being undertaken;

- whether visitor numbers were being estimated, at least on an annual basis;
- whether schools are specifically targeted;
- details about visitor activities catered for by the park.

### 2.6.2 Visitor surveys

Responding officers were asked to provide details of any visitor surveys carried out in the previous five years. Forty-three percent of responding officers (59 parks) said that they had completed visitor surveys in the previous five years, and provided the date of the last survey. Figure 28 provides a breakdown of visitor surveys completed by year, based on the 59 parks in question. Fifty-three percent of parks did not carry out visitor surveys.

**Figure 28 Visitor surveys**



### 2.6.3 Visitor numbers

Sixty-one parks (45%) provided both total visitor numbers and park size. The latter totalled 8,621 hectares. A recorded 16,668,631 visits were made to these sites, which equates to an average of 1,934 visits per hectare.

This also translated to 273,256 visits per park which, when projected forward, gave a figure of nearly 73 million annual visits to country parks nationally. (This equated to approximately 6% of all visits to the countryside in England.)<sup>2</sup> Country parks are generally larger than other parks and, in many cases, they are intended to impart some sense of countryside to the visitor. They are also often intended to act as centres of high ecological value. Both objectives could be undermined by excessive numbers of visitors. It should also be noted that, whilst the average number of visitors per hectare was lower for country parks compared to other parks, so too was the average expenditure per hectare - £1,594 per hectare for country parks compared to an average of £3,200 per hectare for historic urban parks.

The impact of foot and mouth disease appeared to have had little effect on country park visitor numbers with a drop of only 3.3% from 2000 to 2001. This figure does not illustrate the severe impact on individual parks, several of which were forced to close for six weeks or more during 2001. Thus, the real trend in visitor numbers could show stability or an increase.

Based on visitor survey comparisons or park staff impressions, 42% of parks felt their visitor numbers were stable, with 41% increasing and 17% declining.

#### 2.6.4 Educational resource

Of the responding parks, 111 (81%) carry out activities specifically for schools. Of these, 65% provided teaching packs to accompany the activities, the vast majority of which were based on the national curriculum. Country parks clearly represented a valuable educational resource and made a useful contribution to fulfilling educational demands.

#### 2.6.5 Activities

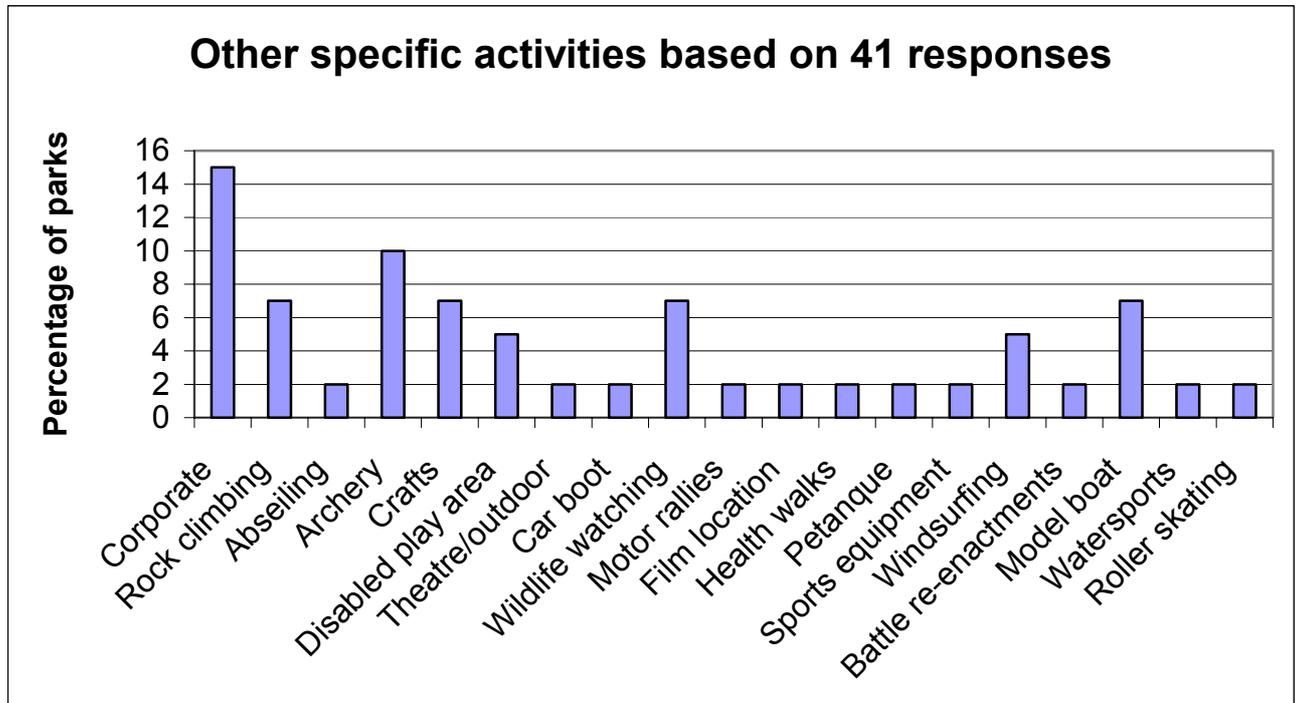
Eighty-five percent of country parks provided interpretive walks and talks, which perhaps illustrated their commitment to public education. These, like the special themed events, were also likely to be based around heritage, environmental or ecological themes. Consideration of the remaining activities that featured highly in the list indicated that country parks made a valuable and significant contribution to sport and the local culture.

Table 2 shows the range of activities indicated by the responding officers.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>% of parks</b>
Interpretive walks/talks	85
Special themed events	76
Orienteering	62
Cycling	61
Angling	54
Horseriding	46
Fetes	42
BBQ	35
Musical events	31
Sporting events	29
Camping/caravanning	26
Boating	19
Sailing	18
Weddings	16
Stock rearing	13
Miniature railway	11
Sports pitches	11
Cycle hire	9
Golf course	9
Markets	8
Fairs	7
Swimming	7
Murder/mystery events	4
Water-skiing/power boating	4
Crazy golf/putting	4
Ski facilities	2

In addition to the activities listed in Table 2, the questionnaire provided the opportunity to note other activities offered in country parks. These are shown in Figure 29, based on 41 responses.

Figure 29: Other activities



## 2.7 Management

### 2.7.1 Aspects of park management

This section of the questionnaire considered the use of management plans, the number of staff employed, the level of marketing that took place, and the level of involvement by volunteers and other organisations. Management plans are often required to support grant applications and, following the revision of Planning Policy Guidance 17 (PPG 17), they have become essential to negotiating Section 106 or planning gain agreements. The use of management plans perhaps also indicated that a park was developing and moving forward, rather than static, and that the factors that might affect the park's long term future were known, understood and subject to active management.

The involvement of volunteers in country park management was accepted as well established, but little was really known about how widespread their involvement was or how much they contributed in terms of workdays. Volunteer involvement from the community was becoming increasingly important, and with the value of revenue budgets appearing to be in decline, the activities of volunteers made a valuable contribution to park maintenance and management. In recent years, country park staff, and volunteers, have begun to work in effective partnerships. Such partnership working could help to provide access to important resources such as knowledge, information, grant funding, facilities, expertise and labour.

### 2.7.2 Management plans

Of the 137 country parks that responded to this study, 87 (64%) indicated that they had a current management plan. It was encouraging that the majority of parks operated with such a plan. Figure 30 shows how often these parks updated their management plan based on details provided by 76 parks.

Of these 76, 37% reported that they updated their plans at least yearly whilst 46% updated them at least every two years. Whilst this was very encouraging and indicated that many parks were actively managed and utilised regular review procedures, it was somewhat tempered by the knowledge that 50% of parks that used management plans only updated them every five years or more. Furthermore, 36% of country parks operated with no management plan at all.

Figure 30: Management plan updates

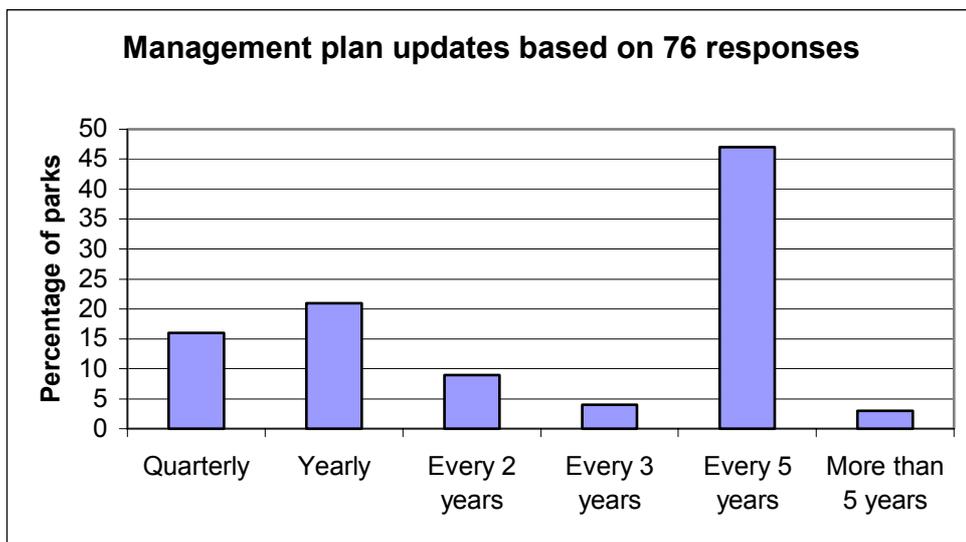
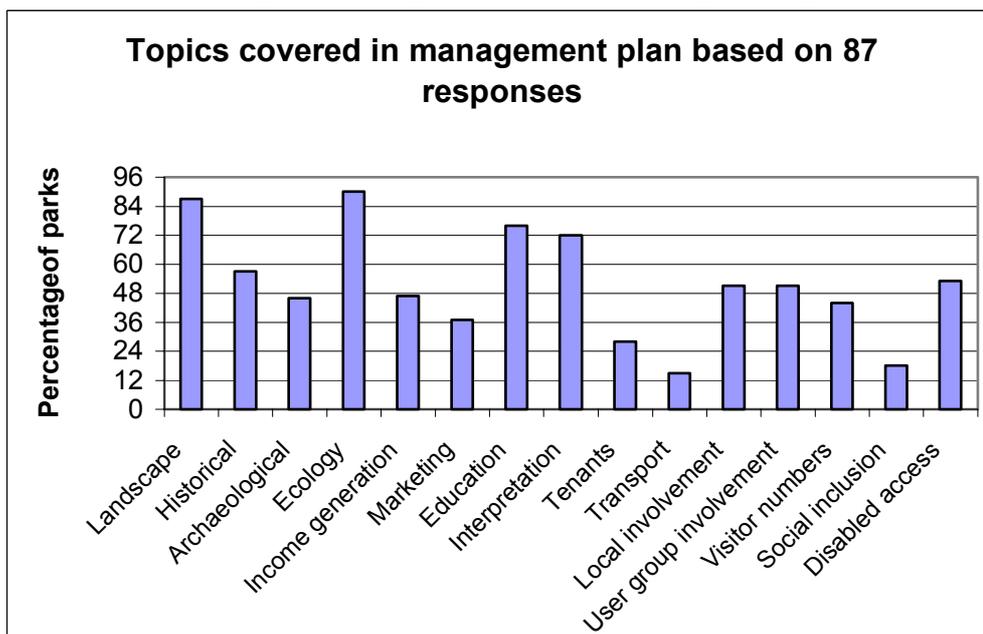


Figure 31: Topics covered in management plans



The questionnaire provided park managers with a list of topics that might be included within a management plan and asked them to indicate which of these topic areas were covered by their plan. Figure 31 illustrates the percentage of parks that included the topics suggested by the questionnaire, and is based on 87 responses.

Ecology and landscape were the topic areas most commonly addressed by management plans, with around 90% of respondents reporting the inclusion of these two topics. This perhaps further reinforced the impression that country parks took their commitment to the environment very seriously, placing environmental considerations above all else. Education and interpretation work also featured very highly with around 75% of those parks operating with management plans reporting inclusion of these two topics. Given that only 29% of country parks carried any kind of formal historic designation, it is interesting to note that 57% of the parks that operated with a management plan included park history within their plans. This indicated one of two possible options: either historic country parks are more likely to have a management plan, or, there may be some scope for increasing the number of parks whose historic value is recognised by a formal historic designation.

Six other topic areas: archaeology; income; local involvement; user groups; visitor numbers; and disabled access also featured reasonably well, with around 50% of parks reporting the inclusion of these areas within their management plans. The inclusion of archaeological interest in this group, again suggested that historic parks are disproportionately represented within parks that have management plans. It is noticeable that visitor numbers were not included within a high percentage of management plans and may indicate that country park management regarded its responsibility to the environment as more important than its responsibility to visitors. However, visitor numbers are likely to have a direct impact on the ecosystems within the parks and it is therefore surprising that more parks did not include some specific recommendations regarding visitor numbers within their management plans.

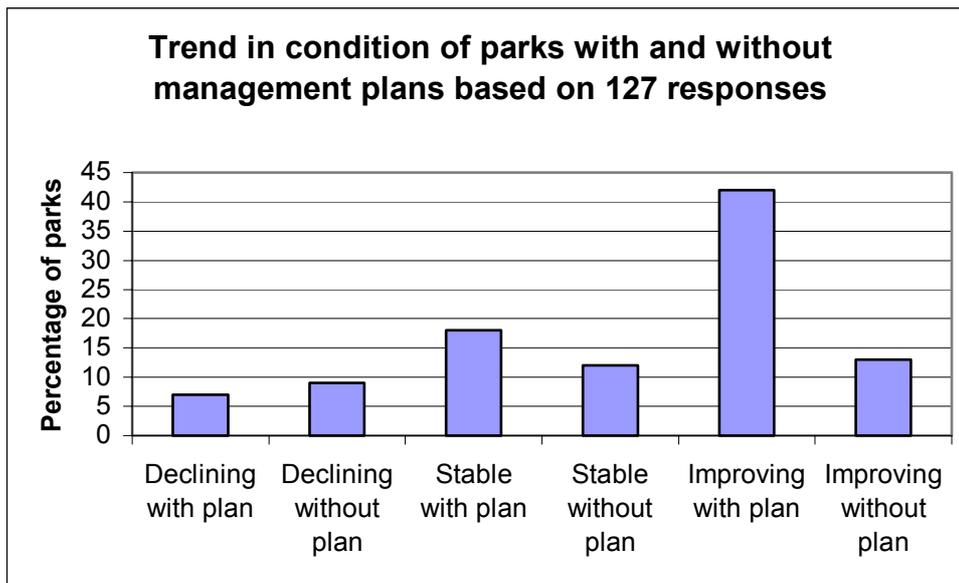
The two topics least likely to be included within management plans are transport and social inclusion.

### **2.7.3 Effect of management plans on trend in condition**

The Public Parks Assessment<sup>1</sup> identified that those park authorities which made use of park strategies reported slightly better trend in condition results for their parks. When this issue was examined for country parks, the positive effect of park management plans on the trend in condition of the park was clearly illustrated. Those sites that operated with management plans in place produced a substantially better set of trend in condition assessments; there were far fewer declining parks, far more stable parks and a massive increase in the percentage of parks that were actually improving. The data is illustrated in Figure 32.

The evidence clearly suggests that management plans were directly helping managers to protect, improve and develop their parks. The time and effort involved in establishing, implementing, reviewing and updating a management plan, appears to represent an excellent investment that paid substantial dividends.

**Figure 32: Trend in condition of parks with and without management plans**



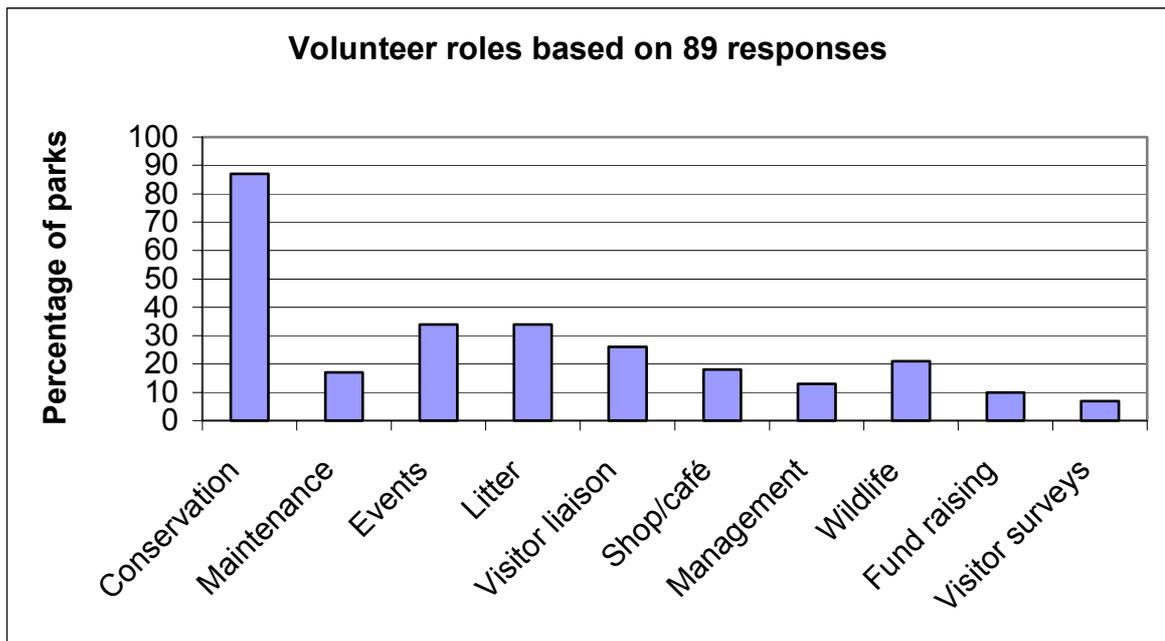
#### 2.7.4 Staff and volunteer groups

In the 115 parks that responded to this section of the questionnaire, 1093 staff are employed, giving an average staff level per park of nine people. This equates to one member of staff being responsible for 15 hectares. The total number of hectares covered by all country parks is estimated to be in the region of 39,000 hectares. On the basis of one member of staff for every 15 hectares, the total number of staff directly employed in the operation of country parks throughout England is estimated to be in the region of 2,600 people.

#### 2.7.5 Volunteers

Eighty-two parks provided details about the number of volunteer groups operating within the park and the number of work days provided by the volunteers. These parks reported a total of 294 active volunteer groups, producing an average of 3.5 groups per park. Collectively, the 294 groups involved in the 82 parks provided 25,806 workdays a year, which equates to an average of 315 workdays per park per year. Only 1% of parks did not have any volunteer groups operating within them although many parks failed to complete this section altogether. It was clear, nevertheless, that volunteer involvement represented a substantial resource, equivalent to almost two full-time members of staff per park per year. These figures illustrated that, in general, country parks were successfully engaging their visitors and local communities and encouraging participation in the management and maintenance of the park.

Figure 33: Volunteer groups



Eighty-nine of the responding parks provided details about the activities in which volunteers were engaged. These are shown in Figure 33. Conservation work was by far the most popular activity. The lack of direct involvement by volunteers in carrying out visitor surveys and applying for park-based grants was evident from the data. These are both areas of work that seem to offer great scope for increased volunteer activity in the future. However, this may require the groups to attract a more diverse membership, e.g. those members of the community that have an interest in the parks and would like to contribute but are not physically able to take part in conservation tasks.

The limited involvement of volunteers in all the task areas other than conservation work does perhaps represent an opportunity not yet fully exploited. Research undertaken in urban parks has indicated that volunteers there have a much broader range of involvement in fundraising, events management and the maintenance of the parks.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.8 The way forward

### **2.8.1 Country park criteria**

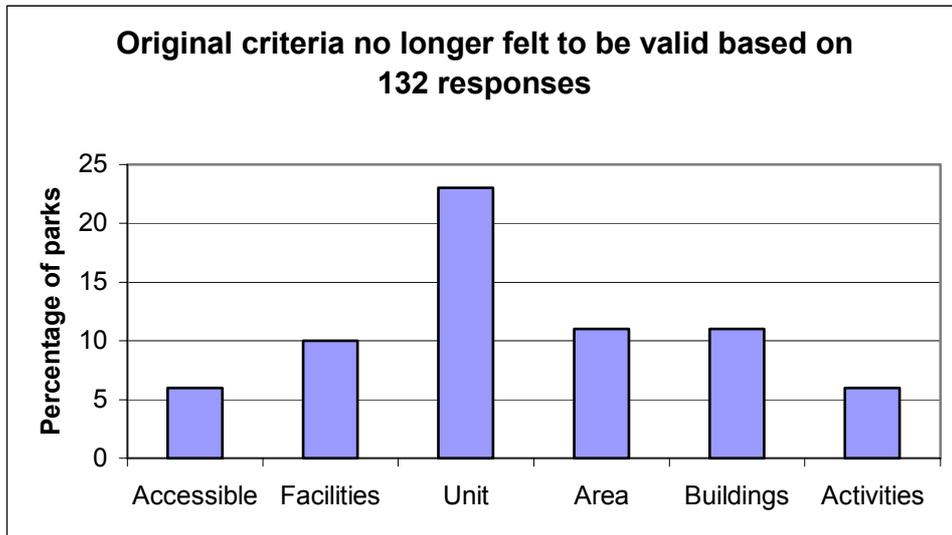
This section of the questionnaire asked if the person completing the form felt that the following original Countryside Commission designation criteria for country parks were still valid:

- Readily **accessible** for motor vehicles and pedestrians;
- Provided with an adequate range of **facilities** including, as a minimum, parking facilities, lavatories, within or adjacent to the park and a supervisory service;
- Operating as a single **unit** and managed by statutory bodies, or private agencies, or a combination of both;
- An **area** of land/water normally greater than 25 acres;
- Having no more than a small proportion of its area covered by **buildings**;

- Providing for a variety of recreational **activities**, for specialised interests, or for quiet enjoyment of the countryside.

Figure 34 shows which of these criteria the responding officers felt no longer applied to their parks.

**Figure 34: Original criteria**



Accessibility for both pedestrians and vehicles and the provision of diverse recreational activities were seen as the most relevant points for the future. The operation of the site as a single unit was seen as least valid.

## **2.9 Issues pertinent to future development**

Efforts were made to identify and understand the current issues and problems most directly relevant to the successful development of the ‘country park’ brand or concept. Members of the advisory panel, country park managers who responded to the questionnaire, and consultants working on country park projects, had all provided suggestions. These suggestions were further consolidated by the study team’s investigation of the historical development of country parks, by visits to a variety of country parks and by the statistical data collected through the study questionnaire.

### **2.9.1 The need for a ‘champion’**

All parks, including country parks, have for a long time lacked a strong representative body that could ‘champion’ their cause at both a national and local level. The need for a parks’ champion was identified in the Urban Green Space Taskforce report, *Green Spaces, Better Places*, 2002. Other areas of public service provision are represented by a statutory body or agency. Such bodies ensure that the importance of the service is recognised and awarded due respect and consideration when valuable public sector resources are being apportioned. Neither urban nor country parks are statutory services and they are therefore easily overlooked.

A future champion for country parks need not necessarily be a statutory body, although it would need to have recognisable authority and knowledge and be capable of commanding the respect of government, local authorities, and the staff responsible for operating the parks.

The role of the future champion would be to:

- highlight and promote a better understanding of the benefits provided by country parks such as: ecology and biodiversity, health, sport, heritage and culture;
- demonstrate that country parks can positively contribute to the agendas of many different areas of public service - such as education, community development and health - and encourage these service areas to work in partnership with, and contribute to, country parks;
- publicly encourage and promote visits to country parks and assist in raising their popularity;
- influence government in the development of appropriate policies and the apportionment of suitable levels of financial and other resources;
- influence local authorities to recognise the importance of country parks and place a greater emphasis on supporting their country park services;
- co-ordinate a multi-agency approach in order to influence grant awarding bodies to develop appropriate funding programmes and actively to encourage applications from country parks;
- encourage the inclusion of country parks within greenspace strategies and planning policies;
- provide access to information, advice, and guidance on country park issues to park staff, local authorities, government and the public.

### **2.9.2 A system of support**

There appeared to be a need for a support network for staff and managers of country parks. Country parks did not work in isolation but neither did they have easy access to advice, guidance and relevant information. Country park staff were keen to hear about new initiatives, new funding opportunities, any aspect of good practice and new methods of working - in fact, anything that might assist them to do their jobs better and deliver a better service to their customers. At present, the only way for country park teams to find out what is being done within country parks elsewhere, is through private research and endeavour.

A network of country park managers and staff would help to identify relevant information and ensure that it is readily accessible. Seminars, workshops, conferences and publications would all help to ensure that examples of good practice, project successes and failures, were identified and examined and the information disseminated as widely as possible. This mutually supportive network would assist managers to learn from each other's triumphs and mistakes and to bring about a controlled and progressive development of distinct areas of service delivery.

### **2.9.3 Minimum standards**

The original criteria for country park designation implied that certain minimum levels of provision such as toilets, car parking and supervision would all be in place. However, this is no longer always the case. A redefined set of minimum standards that were commonly agreed and adopted, would do a great deal to resolve the identity crisis and restore the public's confidence that a visit to any park awarded the 'country park' brand name would be interesting and enjoyable.

The problem is not so much what should be included within the minimum standards, it is more about how such a set of standards could be implemented, monitored and validated.

#### **2.9.4 Finance and funding**

There were serious concerns about the level of financial resources available to country parks. The audit clearly showed that, whilst revenue budgets have increased over the years, the increases have failed to keep pace with inflation and consequently the real-term value of revenue budgets has decreased significantly. Capital investment has also suffered substantial reduction for a significant period of time and, whilst lottery funding has started to reverse this decline, the contribution from lottery sources tends to be targeted to specific large initiatives at a limited number of parks, leaving the majority of parks still without adequate capital investment.

Condition assessments indicated that the decline in available financial resources has not yet affected country parks as badly as their urban counterparts. However, trend in condition assessments, especially for built structures, suggested that the situation facing country parks will worsen and it is only a matter of time before more parks descend into the 'poor' and 'very poor' condition categories.

Like their urban counterparts, country parks required a greater level of commitment from local authorities to ensure that current revenue budgets kept pace with inflation and did not further reduce in value. This would at least extend the period of time that country parks could continue to deliver services that are equivalent to the current standard. Improving quality standards and expanding available services would require access to additional revenue and capital funding. It seemed likely that local authorities would not supply additional funding, and country parks would become increasingly reliant on other funding sources. Accessing these other funds will depend on how well the activities of country parks match the agendas and objectives of the funding bodies. Developing appropriate projects and initiatives, matched by quality applications for funding, represents a significant challenge to all country parks and those that are presently the most under-resourced, and most in need of additional funding, will struggle the most to access the funding that they require.

The current funding crisis is probably largely responsible for the widespread introduction of charges, often for services that were previously supplied to visitors free of charge. Many of the commercial activities parks are engaged in are to be applauded, but there is clearly a concern that too many new charges, or excessive charges, will discourage visitors and undermine the ability of country parks to be as socially inclusive as possible.

From discussions with park managers, and based on the poor level of response to the financial section of the questionnaire, it was clear that very few parks and park managers were in direct control of park finance. Whilst some parks operated as financial cost centres, the vast majority did not. Additional income generated by parks was generally not retained for reinvestment, removing the incentive to generate new fund raising initiatives. Most parks seemed to operate on an annual budget with no ability to roll over surplus funding into following financial years and thereby generate an investment fund. Such a fund could be used for contributory or match funding to support grant applications.

Country parks have the latent capacity to support and help achieve the objectives of many different public service and social agendas including health, education, sport, and community development. They have the potential to contribute to both rural and urban regeneration initiatives and to tackle deprivation and social exclusion. They are already established as sites of high ecological value contributing significantly to improving biodiversity. Within park teams there is generally good knowledge and experience of sustainability issues such as the use of renewable resources; this could allow country parks to become centres of excellence, demonstrating and promoting sustainable development to businesses and the public. Many country parks also have historic value, either as designed landscapes, or sites of social, cultural, or industrial heritage. If this latent capacity was to be released, allowing country parks to support and contribute to these many different social agendas, the lead organisations within each field would need to recognise the potential within country parks and be prepared to provide some financial support and backing.

### **2.9.5 Staff**

Recruitment and retention of staff has also been identified as an important issue. The effectiveness of parks in rising to meet the challenge of responding to current and emerging social agendas would depend largely on the quality of staff employed within parks. Increasingly park teams would be expected to have a broader range of skills including visitor and community liaison, commercial and business development, sports development, education and interpretation and fund-raising. These skills are in addition to the land management, ecological stewardship, task leadership and horticultural, arboricultural, and animal husbandry skills already commonly found within park teams. This range of skills demands high calibre, well-trained staff.

It is generally accepted that public sector employment is poorly paid in comparison to similar jobs within the private sector. As a non-statutory service, local authorities often have a comparatively low regard for parks, as demonstrated by the declining park revenue budgets, and the lack of first and second tier local authority officers from a park background. As a consequence, country park staff are often not only faced with low pay but also a lack of career development opportunities. This combination makes it difficult for country parks to attract and retain staff, and the sector is perhaps too dependent on the dedication and good will of those employees that see the job as a vocation, for which they are willing to sacrifice alternative and more prosperous employment.

### **2.9.6 Management**

A feature of many of the conversations held with park managers during the course of the study was the common disregard for management plans. There appeared to be a tendency to ignore existing ones and 'leave them on the shelf, and get on with managing the park'. Sometimes it seemed that management plans were a part of the bureaucracy of managing a park, rather than an invaluable tool that defined the most effective management direction.

Management plans also appeared to be more focused on the park as a place, with far less regard for managing the visitors. Only around 50% (or less) of management plans included information about visitor management. This apparent under-emphasis on visitor management was also demonstrated by the data provided on visitor surveys. Only 33% of parks had carried out a visitor survey within the previous two years and 53% of country parks did not conduct visitor surveys at all.

**Section 2 references**

- <sup>1</sup>. Public Parks Assessment (May 2001): A survey of local authority owned parks, focusing on parks of historic interest, undertaken by the Urban Parks Forum
- <sup>2</sup>. Data based on United Kingdom Leisure Day Visits (1998) - 1,253,000,000 visits to the countryside in England.
- <sup>3</sup>. Urban Parks Forum, Community Networking Project *Interim Report* July 2002