

**TOWARDS A  
COUNTRY PARKS RENAISSANCE**

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**A REPORT PREPARED FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY  
BY THE URBAN PARKS FORUM AND THE GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY**

## Preface

Country parks are a lasting and popular legacy of the provisions of the Countryside Act 1968. However, evidence presented by the Countryside Agency to a Select Committee's enquiry into Town and Country Parks in 1999 highlighted the fact that

‘Country parks are now at risk of neglect and decline...Action is needed now to ensure they have a better future.’

The findings of the Public Parks Assessment<sup>1</sup> confirmed this view, revealing that whilst country parks were generally faring better than their urban counterparts, there was still a decline in condition. The Rural White Paper (2000)<sup>2</sup> tasked the Countryside Agency with ‘issuing guidance on best practice to revitalise the country parks around our towns and cities.’ In response, the Agency commissioned a programme of work entitled ‘Towards a Country Park Renaissance,’ guided by a ‘Country Parks Renaissance Advisory Panel’ comprising representatives of organisations with an interest in the future of country parks together with acknowledged experts and managers of country parks.

The Agency contracted the Urban Parks Forum to undertake a health-check of country parks. This document reports the findings of that research. It establishes the current condition of country parks, and makes recommendations in Sections 3 and 4 for their future management.

The Countryside Agency is working with partners to address these recommendations through:

- supporting the development of the country parks network into a national forum for the discussion and exchange of information;
- developing a country parks website to promote and disseminate good practice within the country parks ‘community’;
- compiling practitioners guidance and a self-audit database for inclusion on the country parks website;
- securing the long-term competencies of country parks staff and the commitment of local authorities to the wider social worth of country parks;
- identifying funding and income generation opportunities for country parks and promoting them through the network and website.

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<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> DETR (November 2000): Our Countryside: the Future – A fair deal for rural England

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# Executive Summary

This report examines and reviews the role, function and viability of country parks. It seeks to provide an improved understanding of the level of services provided by country parks and it identifies the issues that might ensure further development and improvement. The report questions:

- whether country parks are fulfilling their potential;
- whether the circumstances in which they operate are improving or declining;
- what is required to ensure that their usefulness and popular appeal has a long-term and sustainable future.

A comprehensive questionnaire was sent to 267 country parks and 137 of the parks completed and returned it. The report draws on detailed information, provided by those parks which responded, about:

- the physical composition of the parks;
- condition and trend in condition;
- finance and funding;
- use and users, including community/volunteer involvement, and management.

In compiling the report, the following sources of information were included: the expertise of an advisory panel; site visits and case studies; discussions with park managers; the input of the Countryside Agency, the experiences of landscape consultants working on country park pilot studies and a review of the history of country parks.

## History of country parks

- The origins of the country park date back to the 1960s and were borne out of a concern to protect the greater countryside from the perceived threat of thousands of recreational urban dwellers. The country park was intended to act as a 'honey pot'.
- By 1978 the original 'honey pot' concept had been discredited. The emphasis on rural locations, only accessible by car, diminished in favour of urban fringe areas.
- During the 1980s the impetus for creating country parks declined although this period also saw the development of the concept of country parks as 'gateways' to the wider countryside.
- With limited access to funding opportunities, the last thirteen years (i.e. 1990 to 2003) have been a period of stagnation for most country parks.

## The Present situation

- Country parks represent a substantial landmass, estimated to be in the region of 39,000 hectares.
- The data collected mirrors the findings of the Public Parks Assessment <sup>1</sup> which reported that good parks are continuing to improve whilst poor parks are continuing to decline.
- An analysis of the financial information provided by responding parks highlighted a consistent and unrelenting decline in the financial resources available to country park managers.
- Whilst 64% of responding parks reported the existence of a management plan, only 46% of these were updated at intervals of less than two years.

- Country parks were very successful in attracting volunteer involvement, with the average park supporting the involvement of 3.5 volunteer groups.

### **The Future**

This report identifies a set of issues most likely to influence the future success and development of country parks:

- the need for a champion;
- a system of support;
- a shared identity and common goals;
- minimum standards;
- finance and funding;
- staff training and support;
- management plans.

Country parks offer unique resources for narrowing the divide between town and country. They deliver a range of benefits, services and recreational opportunities to diverse and varied visitors at a comparatively low cost. They address many issues: health; social inclusion; culture; sport; the arts; education and life-long learning; sustainability; biodiversity and active citizenship.

Country parks now need support if the contribution they make to recreation, the protection of vulnerable land, environmental conservation, the rural economy and the viability of villages, towns and cities is to be sustained or further improved.

### **Recommendations**

The report concludes with a set of recommendations and actions to address:

- the inclusion of country parks in local authority parks and greenspace strategies;
- the continuity and enhancement of the country park image;
- incentives that encourage the participation of all country parks;
- the development of a shared vision;
- the town and countryside interface;
- the development of a set of eight core activities;
- development of a set of minimum quality/service standards;
- issues concerning 'people' as well as 'place';
- meeting the social agendas of other organisations;
- the requirement for additional marketing and promotional support;
- the establishment of a delivery group.

Despite the resource problems highlighted in this report, country parks are popular, multi-functional greenspaces. Some new country parks are being created and some existing parks are being extended. Their continuing relevance and appeal is evident. The recommendations within this report should ensure a more sustainable basis from which country parks can provide a full range of benefits to future generations.

### **Executive Summary reference**

<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



## **Section 1: Introduction and Methodology**

## Section 1: Introduction and Methodology

The Countryside Agency launched its 'renaissance of country parks' programme in 2000 recognising that, whilst good parks are continuing to improve, poor parks are continuing to decline. This multi-faceted programme of work included the establishment of the country parks renaissance advisory panel to address the future of country parks and a Country Parks Network to act as a main contact point for country park managers, facilitating the sharing of ideas and the development of a country park 'community'.

The Urban Parks Forum was contracted by the Countryside Agency, working in partnership with the country parks renaissance advisory panel, to consider objectively how a renaissance of country parks might be brought about.

The initial impetus came from a general, rather than specific, concern about country parks as a group. The findings of the Public Parks Assessment<sup>1</sup> included some data on a limited number of country parks. This indicated that, whilst country parks seemed to be fairing better than urban parks, there was still evidence of a decline in condition and trend in condition. The Countryside Agency and the advisory panel were also concerned that there was a lack of clarity about the role and purpose of country parks and about how a sustainable and viable future for country parks might best be secured.

The study:

- objectively considered how country parks have developed in the years since their inception;
- gained an accurate understanding of the size and distribution of country parks;
- examined the major issues facing service providers;
- examined the contemporary relevance of country parks and how they might relate to current and planned initiatives.

This report of the study is presented in three main sections which look at:

- 1) the present situation for country parks;
- 2) the future of country parks;
- 3) recommendations.

The history and development of country parks is contained in Appendix 1.

The first section of the report, The Present, considers the current situation and conditions affecting the operation and development of country parks. In January 2002, a questionnaire was distributed directly to the 267 country parks in England identified by the Countryside Agency. The questionnaire was broken down into several distinct sections:

- **Finance and funding** - included detailed financial information as well as charging policies;
- **General information** - included size, location, description, land type and specific historic, conservation and planning designations;
- **Park structure** - included condition and trend assessments of landscape, accessibility, visitor facilities, built structure and overall park conditions;
- **Use and users** - examined how the park was used and by whom;

- **Management** - included details of existing management plans, marketing activities, volunteer involvement and staffing levels;
- **The way forward** - invited views on the term 'country park' and how respondents would like to see the country parks brand develop in the future.

In addition to the questionnaire, two other methods were used to inform this part of the study and provided valuable insights:

- 1. A meeting** was arranged with three separate landscape consultancies who were currently implementing pilot studies funded by the Countryside Agency. The consultants were developing restoration management plans for three country parks to support applications for grant funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund's Public Parks Initiative.
- 2. Case studies** were conducted at 12 country parks by the Urban Parks Forum team. These were designed to provide a 'snapshot' of the situation for these 12 parks and give the team an opportunity to talk to park managers and gain their comments and feedback.

By the end of July 2002, 137 replies had been received, representing 51% of all parks contacted. **This was obviously a small majority and may well mean that there is an element of bias in the results.** Comments made by non-responding country park officers suggested that there were several reasons for the relatively low response rate:

- the questionnaire was quite lengthy and detailed;
- pressure of work and time constraints prevented the questionnaire from becoming a priority area of work;
- low levels of motivation and morale amongst staff deterred completion;
- country parks receive excessive amounts of questionnaires and staff failed to recognise the particular importance of this questionnaire.

The information provided by the 137 responding parks was entered into an ACCESS database. This allowed analysis of any aspect of the data received and comparison of the relationships between different aspects of the data. Major issues affecting the delivery of country park services were identified through discussions with park managers, comments attached to the questionnaires, and a focus session involving the members of the advisory panel. Having identified the major issues, the focus meeting then went on to look at ways in which these issues could be addressed and how the future relevance of country parks might be consolidated.

The second section of the report, *The Future*, identifies approaches to dealing with the major issues. It suggests:

- various ways in which country parks might be improved;
- how their contemporary relevance might be appreciated;
- how the potential they hold for linking to other existing or planned complementary initiatives might be realised.

The final section of the report, *Recommendations*, then looks at a set of eleven recommendations and associated actions that should ensure a sustainable basis for country parks.

In addition to country parks, there are a number of significant areas of greenspace that provide countryside recreational opportunities, such as Forest Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), National Parks, and land owned by utility companies. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be of value to the providers of

these areas of greenspace and that they will make use of, and benefit from, the recommendations.

It is also of note that the Countryside Agency, together with its contractors, is developing a country parks website to allow dissemination of the research, to provide good practice recommendations and to identify future funding streams. Section 3 of this report describes this in more detail.

**Section 1 reference**

<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

**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.

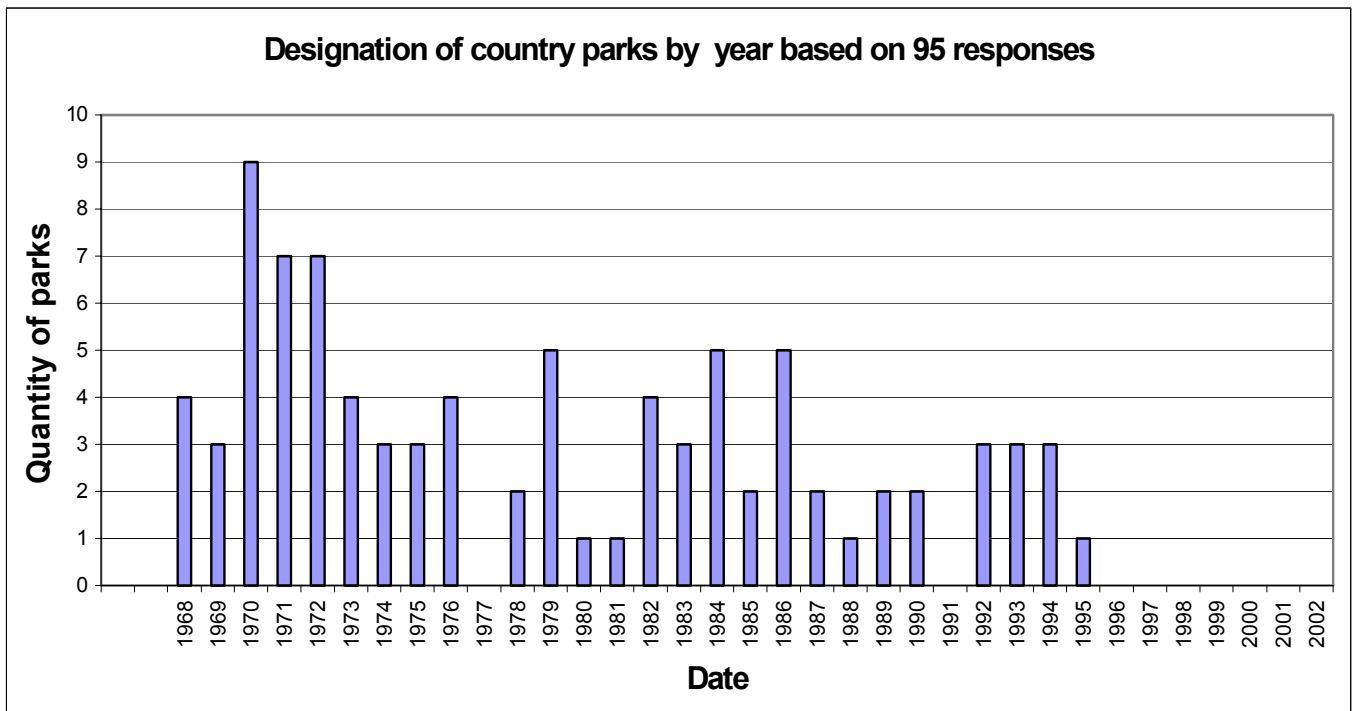
### **2.2 Designations**

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.