

Taking account of heritage values of urban parks and gardens

How can planners, decision makers and land managers ensure that the diversity of heritage values assigned to urban parks and gardens is adequately assessed and embedded in planning and decision making?



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The Living With Environmental Change Partnership brings together 22 public sector organisations that fund, carry out and use environmental research and observations. They include the UK research councils, government departments with environmental responsibilities, devolved administrations and government agencies. The private sector is represented by a Business Advisory Board.

Recent research has shown that parks and gardens have considerable heritage value for people, suggesting that their appreciation extends beyond obvious aesthetic and/or recreational values. Historically created to replicate the qualities of nature and enhance urban life, these open spaces form essential environmental and cultural assets in our cities. They provide areas for recreation, leisure, and social activity; contribute to our health, local economies and wellbeing; offer space for nature to flourish; and enhance the environmental resilience of the built environment.

What are urban parks and gardens of heritage value?

For the purpose of this note, we use the broad term “historic parks and gardens” to refer to urban green spaces of dissimilar scales, forms, functions and historical importance that, regardless ownership status and management regime, are normally accessible to the public. These would usually fall into the following categories:

- Public parks – including municipal, royal, memorial, and landscape parks, large playgrounds and public recreation grounds.
- Public gardens – including municipal, town and suburban, pleasure, botanic, seaside and winter gardens.
- Public walks – designed linear landscapes, similar to the gardens in terms of planted features.
- Town squares – urban squares conceived as an original part of a historic building development.
- Heaths, commons and greens – communal green spaces often connected with long human histories and practices within cities.
- Cemeteries and burial grounds.

Why do the heritage values assigned to parks and gardens matter and how should decision makers respond?

A wide range of interrelated heritage values are assigned to parks and gardens. These influence people’s preference and choice and can help decision makers to:

- Make links between tangible heritage (eg specific features, vegetative forms, functionality) and intangible expressions of individual and social life within a park.
- Identify and accommodate uses to meet the needs of all cultural and social groups.
- Avoid conflicts by understanding and deliberating in advance shared and communal values held by different groups.
- Encourage participation in heritage conservation by creating a sense of belonging, and emphasising benefits for the whole society.
- Create a positive outlook for heritage by promoting inclusivity and empowerment of publics.
- Integrate new evidence and facilitate physical and intellectual change, as heritage values do not remain fixed over time.
- Advocate and prioritise multidisciplinary work to reflect social, cultural, economic and environmental concerns.
- Document local social histories and enhance existing databases.

How do values of the historic and natural environments interrelate?

The historic significance of parks and gardens influences decisions about preservation and management that have a direct impact on the natural environment and vice versa:

- Historical significance protects parks and gardens from development so they provide essential, and often large, parts of the green fabric of the city.
- Historic plantings, mature vegetative and other features such as lakes and open water, provide illustrative examples of past social trends and values; often host rare species and wildlife communities; contribute significantly to surface water drainage and flood control; reduce air pollution; and regulate the micro-climate within the city.
- Highly valued ecological habitats, supported in Commons and other historic green spaces, are archives of longstanding human activities and provide highly valued habitats, such as heathlands, that offer recreational opportunities.
- Many historic parks and gardens are gene pools for rare native and exotic species and are valued for maintaining biological diversity.
- The natural environment affects people's awareness and evaluation of built heritage within historic parks and gardens, which often generates wider social and economic benefits.

How can heritage values of urban parks and gardens be identified and described in meaningful ways?

A mixture of methods can be used to help people express their views on the significance of places they value. These include:

- Archival research on the origins, character and significance of the place, as well as current uses and pressures.
- Deliberative and interpretative methods to establish who values the place today and why, eg participatory mapping, oral history, surveys, questionnaires, discussion groups etc.
- Inventive outputs illustrating how diverse values reflect spatial and temporal significance.
- Interpretations that reveal the importance of the individual historic elements as well as the contributions of setting and context in which these are experienced.

How can heritage values inform planning, decision making and management?

Taking account of the heritage values of parks and gardens within urban areas can have particular added value when:

- Evaluating the contribution of the historic environment to sustainable planning using the ecosystem approach.
- Existing evidence about heritage conservation is contested and there is uncertainty about issues of planning and implementation.
- Activities such as tourism and recreation are considered, as change to, or loss of, cultural values may affect the attractiveness of a place for visitors.
- There is pressure for change to provide accessible green spaces of different sorts within historic space.
- A large number of stakeholders are concerned and different perspectives need to be taken into account.
- There is a need to forecast trends, for example, whether diversity of values presents a challenge or serves as an asset, in order to manage change.

What barriers impede the use of values for planning and managing urban historic parks and gardens?

Heritage values can be highly varied, conflicting and complex and their integration in decision making presents challenges. At present:

- Existing evidence on participation and values in heritage conservation is not easily accessible by local authorities, planners and other land managers.
- Current designation values for parks and gardens are based on criteria relevant to built heritage (ie historic and architectural merit).
- Current approaches to assessing significance of a place rely almost exclusively on expert knowledge, and public participation is limited.
- Stakeholder and public participation in decision making is costly and time consuming and financial pressures on local authorities may mean that other priorities take precedence.
- Protection and planning policy artificially distinguishes between the historical and natural environment and the cultural and regulatory services provided by parks.
- Participation in heritage remains unequal between different social classes, ages and cultural groups.
- As societies evolve values may change, so there is need for constantly updating information.

What are the key actions for practitioners and decision makers?

Local authorities, planners and land managers should take into account a series of underpinning principles in order to achieve an integrated, value led approach for the historic and natural environment. This will mean:

- Considering recreational, historic, habitat, amenity and regulatory values together when planning and carrying out management.
- Assessing the vulnerability of heritage of urban parks and gardens.
- Accommodating change in parks to improve urban biodiversity.
- Promoting public engagement at individual level, and also the expression of personally and collectively held meanings of place.
- Supporting more extensive and place-specific research to document local social histories.
- Working with stakeholder and participatory planning to prioritise conservation aims and actions.
- Integrating heritage values of parks and gardens into a wider urban planning framework.
- Improving accessibility and connectivity of historic parks for recreation and biodiversity by linking natural, semi-natural and highly managed green spaces.
- Improving links between historic parks and gardens and other culturally important parts of the city.
- Establishing new (public-private) partnerships and assuring funding for high quality maintenance.
- Putting in place long term maintenance and monitoring plans.
- Providing leadership for training, and management direction.
- Communicating with the public in plain language and encouraging participation by involving all cultural groups in decisions.
- Encouraging communities and citizen science to monitor wildlife levels and associations between wildlife and heritage.

Further information

This Policy and Practice Note was written by Eirini Saratsi, University of Kent, with Vince Holyoak and Jenifer White, Historic England, based on research funded by the Valuing Nature Programme.

Useful resources:

Valuing Nature network <http://valuing-nature.net>

Cadw, 2011, Conservation Principles for the sustainable management of the historic environment in Wales

http://cadw.gov.wales/docs/cadw/publications/Conservation_Principles_EN.pdf

David Lambert and Sally Williams The parks agency (2005) Commons, Heaths and Greens in greater London. English Heritage, Research report series no. 50-2014. <http://www.parksagency.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/commons-heaths-and-greens-in-greater-london.pdf>

English Heritage (2000) Power of place - the future of the historic environment

English Heritage (2008), Conservation Principles; policies and guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment.

<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/constructive-conservation/conservation-principles/>

Fish, R., Saratsi E., (2015) Naturally Speaking... A Public Dialogue on the UK National Ecosystem Assessment. Final Report, CRPR, University of Exeter, Exeter. <http://valuing-nature.net/naturally-speaking>

Heritage Lottery Fund (2015) 20 years in 12 places - Improving heritage, improving places, improving lives.

English Heritage (2013) Register of Parks and Gardens selection guide: Urban Landscapes. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/pag-selection/>

English Heritage (2013) Register of Parks and Gardens selection guide: Institutional landscapes.

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/pag-selection/>

English Heritage (2013) Register of Parks and Gardens selection guide: Landscapes of Remembrance.

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/pag-selection/>

Historic Environment Scotland 2016, Scotland's Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationId=7c365ace-e62d-46d2-8a10-a5f700a788f3>

Historic Scotland, December 2011 Scottish Historic Environment Policy. <http://www.pkc.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=28665&p=0>

Katy Layton Jones (2014) National Review of Research Priorities for Urban Parks, Designed Landscapes and Opens Spaces. English Heritage, research report series no 4. <http://katylaytonjones.com/national-review-of-research-priorities-for-urban-parks-designed-landscapes-and-open-spaces/>

LWEC PPN no 11 Taking account of shared and cultural values of ecosystem services

<http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/partnerships/ride/lwec/ppn/ppn11/>

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