

Thirsty play

A survey of drinking
water provision
in public parks



Children's Food Campaign

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Introduction

Health campaigns are constantly encouraging us to get more exercise and, particularly for children, parks can be a great place to get active, whether it's playing in the playground or kicking a football about. But this physical activity can be thirsty work, and in many parks today there's nowhere to get fresh, clean drinking water.

Children often have to go thirsty or visit the nearest ice cream van, shop or takeaway where there may be few healthy options available, and lots of tempting but unhealthy drinks and snacks on offer.

Children's health

Soft drinks are often high in calories, and regular consumption of soft drinks is linked to childhood obesity and tooth decay. It can also lead to children developing a taste for sweet products. With evidence that children sometimes mistake thirst for hunger¹, lack of drinking water in parks can lead to children consuming calories they don't need, and otherwise wouldn't.

Despite lip service to the contrary, soft drinks manufacturers still market their products to children. Some have reacted to health concerns by developing flavoured waters as an alternative, but it's far from clear that these are a better choice. Some of these products contain controversial additives such as Acesulfame K and sodium benzoate (E211), and many still contain sugar, often at similar levels to the fizzy drinks they seek to replace.

Drinking for the planet

We're increasingly being reminded of the importance of drinking plenty of water, and while water is a much healthier option than soft drinks, bottled water is expensive and damages the environment. While a number of government departments and local authorities have switched from bottled water to tap, provision of mains-fed drinking water in public places such as parks remains woefully inadequate.

Drinking water in parks

Historically, many of today's public parks were set up in the nineteenth century to provide local people with a healthy and green respite from inner city life. Often providing clean drinking water was seen as a key aspect of this service. Today, people have access to safe drinking water in their homes, so fountains in many parks have been removed or not maintained properly.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the current provision of drinking water in parks is, at best, inadequate and often completely lacking. Often large parks have too few sources of drinking water, requiring people to walk long distances for water. To gather more evidence on this issue and get a clearer picture of the situation, the Children's Food Campaign ran a national survey, asking local people around the country report back on the drinking water provided – or not – in their local public park.

¹ Hilpern, K. (2003) It's the real thing. London: The Independent, 23 June 2003

Our survey

Between July and September 2009, the Children's Food Campaign asked its supporters to visit their local public park to report on the provision of drinking water. They were given a simple questionnaire (see Appendix A) and were asked to let us know what they found, either by filling in an online survey on the Children's Food Campaign website, or returning their completed questionnaire by post.

Those that were unhappy with the drinking water provided at their park were encouraged to contact their council to ask for improvements, and to report on any response they received.

Our results

Parks surveyed

A total of 142 responses were received, of which 127 were parks across 89 council areas in England, with a further eight parks across six council areas in Scotland, two park in two council areas of Wales and two parks in two council areas of Northern Ireland. Given that there are around 5,000 public parks in the UK², this represents roughly a 3% sample. Three responses were not included because they were duplicates, incomplete or referred to parks outside the UK.

Of the parks surveyed, 15% were described as "small" (defined as "I could walk from one side to the other in two minutes or less"), 42% as "medium" (defined as "I could walk from one side to the other in five minutes") and 42% as "large" (defined as "it would take me more than five minutes to walk from one side to the other"). While imprecise, these estimates provide a guide to the size of the parks surveyed.

Only four respondents (3%) reported that there was not a children's playground in the park.

² Department of Communities and Local Government (2009) Town and Country Parks. Available: <http://www.communities.gov.uk> [30 September 2009]

Drinking water provision

Only 15 (11%) of the parks surveyed had drinking fountains. These were the following:

Ranking ³	Name and location of park	Name of county council / borough or district council/unitary authority	Number of fountains (working)
1	Southwark Park	London Borough of Southwark	2 (2)
1	Dulwich Park	London Borough of Southwark	2 (2)
3	Egerton park, Bexhill-on-Sea	Rother District Council	1 (1)
3	Frimley Lodge Park, Frimley Green	Surrey Heath Borough Council	1 (1)
3	South Park Gardens	London Borough of Merton	1 (1)
6	Abbey Gardens	Bury St Edmunds Borough Council	1 (1)
6	Regents Park, London	London Borough of Camden	1 (1)
8	Paddington Recreation Ground	London Borough of Westminster	1 (1)
9	Brockwell Park	London Borough of Lambeth	2 (1)
9	Ruskin Park	London Borough of Lambeth	2 (1)
11	Kings Park	Stirling Council	4 (0)
12	Brixton Windmill Park, Brixton Hill	London Borough of Lambeth	1 (0)
12	Museum Gardens	London Borough of Tower Hamlets	1 (0)
12	Vauxhall Park, Vauxhall	London Borough of Lambeth	1 (0)
12	East Park, Hull	Kingston upon Hull	1 (0)

A much higher proportion of parks in London had fountains, compared to parks in other parts of the country.

Of the parks that were found to have fountains, most (10) had just one fountain. Four parks had two fountains, while one, Kings Park in Stirling, had four (although, unfortunately, none of them were in working order).

Of the respondents who found fountains in their parks, more than half (53%) felt there weren't enough fountains, given the size of the park, and 40% said that they weren't easy to find. Furthermore, in only eight of the parks (around half of all parks with fountains) were all the fountains in working order. Of the seven parks where there were problems with fountains, five didn't have a single working fountain.

³ The parks in the table above were ranked on the following basis: Number of working fountains, Proportion of working fountains and Number of fountains

Other options

For those whose parks did not have water fountains, only 14% said that there was somewhere else in the park for them to get free drinking water. Most of these respondents (65%) said that there was a café which provided tap water free of charge, although some people noted the limited opening hours, or said that they didn't feel they could ask for tap water when bottled water was on sale. One respondent wrote: "The only café there kindly leaves a jug of tap water on a table for people to use, but if I forget to carry at least 2 litres of water for our family of 4, I feel too guilty to use it up and ask for more." Another said: "There is a café and they provided me with free tap water. If others started doing this, I'm not sure the response would be as positive." Other sources of free tap water mentioned included public toilets, community room, children's centre or sports club.

When asked where they would get a drink if thirsty, many respondents explained that they would have to bring their own, or return home, because there was nowhere to get a drink. Many also mentioned visiting a park kiosk or ice cream van if one was there, or the café, although problems included limited opening hours, over-priced drinks or small bottles. The most common response was to visit local shops, although some mentioned the long walk – sometimes a 20 minute round trip – this involved, and one respondent had concerns about having to cross a busy road.

Public attitudes

A significant 70% of respondents (whether or not their park had any drinking fountains) said they would be happy to use fountains. Of those who said they wouldn't be, the main reason stated (by 60% of those not happy) was that there weren't any to use. Only about 10% of respondents who answered this question had concerns about the installation or use of fountains: eight expressed concerns about hygiene, and three about vandalism.

An overwhelming 92% of respondents said that they would prefer children to quench their thirst for free at the park, rather than pay for bottled drinks.

Recommendations

The results of our survey provide more evidence that the majority of public parks in the UK no longer have working drinking fountains where people can quench their thirst in a free and sustainable way.

The Children's Food Campaign believes that this problem should be addressed by councils in the following way:

- **Install new drinking fountains** in parks which do not currently have any, or in areas of large parks where people would be required to walk a long distance to get water. Locations should be considered to ensure that any risk of vandalism is minimised, and a fountain design chosen to minimise any risk of vandalism or contamination.
- **Install signs**, and mark drinking fountains on park maps, to help people to find and use existing fountains.
- **Repair or reconnect existing drinking fountains** which are currently unused.
- **Ensure existing drinking fountains are regularly cleaned and maintained** so that they are hygienic to use and kept in working order.
- **Encourage cafés and other food/drink outlets in public parks to offer tap water.** This could include signs to alert customers that they are happy to provide tap water, and providing jugs so that people can help themselves. Use of disposable cups should be discouraged because of the waste that this creates. A drinking fountain on the outside of the building is likely to be the best solution, as this means there is no need for jugs or cups, and that water can be used when the outlet is closed.

Below is an example of the type of fountain being installed in some public spaces. The design is intended to minimise the risk of vandalism and contamination. (Courtesy Santa & Cole/Landscape Forms)



Conclusion

Drinking water in parks and other public places used by children would enable thirsty children to quench their thirst without having to purchase sugary drinks, regular consumption of which is linked to tooth decay and childhood obesity. Replacing bottled drinks with water from public fountains would also reduce the waste and other environmental damage arising from their consumption.

In order to reap these benefits, drinking water needs to be made available in these spaces. While existing outlets may be able to provide water in some cases, water fountains are a simple and cost effective way of ensuring that people are able to get drinking water at all times. These fountains should be well designed and sited to reduce the risk of vandalism, and kept clean and well maintained to ensure that they are hygienic to use.

Appendix A: Park drinking water survey

1. Name and address of park: _____

2. Name of county council/borough or district council/unitary authority: _____

3. Size of park:

- small (I could walk from one side to the other in two minutes or less)
 medium (I could walk from one side to the other in five minutes)
 large (it would take me more than five minutes to walk from one side to the other)

4. Is there a children's play area? Yes/no

5. Are there any drinking fountains in the park? Yes/no

If yes, how many? _____

Please take a photo of any fountains you find and post them on the Children's Food Network (<http://www.sustainweb.org/childrensfoodcampaign/network>) or email them to Jackie@sustianweb.org.

6. Do you think there are enough drinking fountains, given the size of the park?
Yes/no

7. Are the fountains easy to find? Yes/no

8. Were all the fountains in working order? Yes/no

If no, how many had problems, and what were they? _____

9. Would you be happy to use the fountains? Yes/no

If not, please say why? _____

10. Was there anywhere else in the park to get free drinking water e.g. café is happy to provide free tap water? No/yes (please provide details) _____

11. If you were thirsty at this park, where would you get a drink? _____

12. Would you prefer children to quench their thirst free at the park, rather than pay for bottled drinks? Yes/no

Thanks for taking part in the survey. Please let us know what you found by filling in our online survey at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=Dpwfer8Y9F8i_2bubUbCSRSg_3d_3d by 30th September 2009. Alternatively you can post your completed questionnaire to Drinking Water in Parks, Children's Food Campaign, 94 White Lion Street, London, N1 9PF.

We will use this information to develop a picture of drinking water provided in parks across the country. We hope to be able to highlight where councils are doing a good job, and explore the reasons why there is not better provision in some areas. This will help us to mount a national campaign to make sure drinking water is available in every public park across the country.

Appendix B: Parks surveyed

England

Park	Council
Belper River Gardens	Amber Valley Borough Council
Victoria park, Ashford	Ashford Borough council
Haddenham Playing Fields, Woodways, Haddenham	Aylesbury Vale District Council
Hoyle Mill	Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
Bloomfield Open Space, Bloomfield Road, Bath, BA2	Bath & North East Somerset Council
Addison Howard Park, Kempston	Bedford Borough Council
Russell Park	Bedfordshire County Council
Wardown Park, Old Bedford Road, Luton	Bedfordshire County Council
Ellis Park	Blaby District Council
The Walks, King's Lynn	King's Lynn & West Norfolk Borough Council
Brackenhill Park, Bradford	Bradford Council
Maldon Road Park, Witham	Braintree council
Preston Park	Brighton and Hove City Council
Mackie Park	Brighton and Hove City Council
Hove Park	Brighton and Hove City Council
Preston Park, Brighton	Brighton and Hove City Council
Hove Park, Hove	Brighton and Hove City Council
Argyll Place Park	Bristol City Council
Greville Smythe, Ashton Gate	Bristol City Council
Redland Green Park, Redland	Bristol City Council
Cotham Gardens, Cotham	Bristol City Council
Walton Road Park	Broxbourne Council
Central Avenue, Stapleford	Broxtowe Borough Council
Dovecote Park, Beeston	Broxtowe Borough Council
Bramcote Park, Bramcote	Broxtowe Borough Council
Abbey Gardens	Bury St Edmunds Borough Council
Manor Heath Park	Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council
Beech Recreation Ground	Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council
Crow Wood Park	Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council
Jesus Green	Cambridge City Council
Coleridge Recreation Ground	Cambridge City Council
Syston Park	Charnwood Borough Council
Grovesnor Park, Chester	Cheshire West and Chester Council
West Bank Park	City of York Council

Markeaton Park	Derby City Council
Osmaston Park, Allenton	Derbyshire County Council
Decoy Park	Devon County Council
Dawlish Park	Devon County Council
Sandall Park	Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
Quomp - Christchurch Quay	Dorset County Council
Mary Stevens Park	Dudley Borough Council
The Stow	Essex County Council
Potter Street Park	Essex County Council
Churchgate Street Park	Essex County Council
Nicholls Field	Essex County Council
Swallows Park, Old Harlow	Essex County Council
Tanys Dell Park, Harlow	Essex County Council
Carters Mead, Potter Street, Harlow	Essex County Council
Norman Booth, Mulberry Green, Old Harlow	Essex County Council
Northbrooks, Harlow	Essex County Council
Harlow Town Park	Essex County Council
Church Langley Community Park	Essex County Council
Sumners Park, Water Lane, Harlow	Essex County Council
Guildfords, Old Harlow	Essex County Council
Tutshill Recreation Ground	Forest of Dean District Council
Saltwell Park	Gateshead council
Bransbury Park, Milton, Portsmouth	Hampshire County Council
Milton Park, Portsmouth	Hampshire County Council
Queenswood Park, Hereford	Herefordshire Council
Bishops Meadows Playing Field, Hereford	Herefordshire Council
Oakmere Park, Potters bar	Hertfordshire County Council
Bancroft Recreation Gardens, Bancroft, Hitchin	Hertfordshire County Council
Ipswich Stadium Park	Ipswich Borough Council
Church Litten Park, Newport	Isle of Wight Council
"the Rec", Dunkirk Avenue	Kettering Borough Council
East Park	Kingston-upon-Hull City Council
Pearson Park	Kingston-upon-Hull City Council
Moor Park, Preston	Lancashire County Council
Shadwell Park, Shadwell	Leeds City Council
Redwood Park	Lichfield District Council
Recreation Ground, Stamford	Lincolnshire County Council
Regents Park	London Borough of Camden
Bury Lodge Park	London Borough of Enfield
Finsbury Park	London Borough of Haringey
Priory Park	London Borough of Haringey

West Harrow Recreation Ground	London Borough of Harrow
Hylands Park, Hornchurch	London Borough of Havering
Vauxhall Park	London Borough of Lambeth
Ruskin Park	London Borough of Lambeth
Brockwell Park	London Borough of Lambeth
Brixton Windmill Park, Brixton Hill	London Borough of Lambeth
Rock Terrace	London Borough of Merton
Mostyn Gardens, Merton Park	London Borough of Merton
South Park Gardens	London Borough of Merton
Forster Park, Whitefoot Lane	London Borough of Lewisham
Belair Park, Dulwich	London Borough of Southwark
Dulwich Park	London Borough of Southwark
Southwark Park	London Borough of Southwark
Museum Gardens	London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Wandsworth Common	London Borough of Wandsworth
Paddington Recreation Ground	London Bough of Westminster
Memorial Park	Luton Borough Council
Kempsey Play Park and Cricket Field	Malvern Hills District Council
Wythenshawe Park	Manchester City Council
Jackson Fields, Rochester	Medway Council
Bignall End Road Park	Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council
Churchill Playing Fields	North Tyneside Council
Valley Gardens, Harrogate	North Yorkshire County Council
Eaton Park	Norwich City Council
Woodthorpe Park	Nottingham City Council
Chadderton Hall Park	Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council
(various parks in the town)	Peterborough
Whitecliff Park	Poole Council
Lakers Rise, Woodmansterne	Reigate and Banstead County Council
Reigate Priory Park	Reigate and Banstead County Council
Bickerly Park	Ringwood Town Council
Egerton Park, Bexhill-on-Sea	Rother District Council
Cae Glas, Oswestry	Shropshire Council
Mead Park, Stoke Gifford	South Gloucestershire Council
Ilminster Recreation Ground	South Somerset District Council
Fairlands Valley Park	Stevenage Borough Council
Kings Park	Stirling Council
Cale Green Park	Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council
Barnes Park	Sunderland City Council
Meadowbank, Dorking	Surrey County Council
Frimley Lodge Park, Sturt Road, Frimley Green	Surrey Heath Borough Council

St Georges, Ramsgate	Thanet District Council
Calverley Grounds	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Abbey Meadows	Vale of White Horse District Council
Holloway Hill Recreation Ground, Godalming	Waverley Borough Council
Moneyhole Park, Welwyn Garden City	Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council
Arlebury Park	Winchester District Council
St Johns Lye	Woking Borough Council
Ashenbury Park, Woodley	Wokingham District Council
Claregate Park	Wolverhampton City Council
Arrow Valley	Worcestershire County Council
The Meadows and Abbey Fields	Wychavon District Council

Scotland

Park	Council
Gladstone Road Park, Huntly	Aberdeenshire Council
Leith Links	City of Edinburgh Council
Allison Park, Kirkliston	City of Edinburgh Council
Bruntsfield Links	City of Edinburgh Council
Balmullo Park	Fife Council
Queens Park	Glasgow City Council
Cambuslang Park	South Lanarkshire Council
East Calder Park	West Lothian Council

Wales

Park	Council
Victoria Park, Canton	Cardiff Council
Newtown Town Park/Dolerw	Powys Council

Northern Ireland

Park	Council
Newtownards Park	Ards Borough Council
Wallace Park	Lisburn City Council