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## Contracting Out Parks and Roads Maintenance in England

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**Abstract**

**Purpose** Different models have been adopted in England over time to organize public service delivery. This paper explores contracting-out, a prevalent model of public service delivery in England, in relation to parks and roads maintenance delivery by examining private contractors' performance according to local authority stakeholders.

**Design/methodology/approach** Since the Conservative government was in power during the 1980s, local authorities have been an arena for experimentation of contracting-out to private and other sectors. This paper provides a review of the academic and grey literature, and findings are presented from a large-scale online questionnaire survey (N=103) which was distributed to the relevant public realm managers in English local authorities.

**Findings** The paper shows that contracting-out of parks and roads maintenance happens across the country in different ways. By and large, local authorities are satisfied with the performance of contractors, particularly as a response to economic constraints. Responsibilities, particularly for parks, are increasingly shared with non-governmental organisations, including community groups, although this is not reflected in budget distribution.

**Research limitations** Despite our efforts, the response rate was relatively low (32%), potentially due to the email communication and online nature of the questionnaire.

**Originality/value** The research provides empirical evidence about how contracting-out is currently delivering public services and how it has changed in recent years. The findings suggest that responsibilities (and to a lesser extent, budgets) are increasingly shared in England between different combinations of public, private, third and community sector stakeholders. This marks a shift away from in-house public sector delivery of parks and roads services.

**Key-words** Contracting-out, England, local authorities, parks, public services, roads.

## Introduction

Marketization has long driven public service management (including roads and parks) in England, in attempts to enhance competition and improve quality (Boyne 1998). This marked a shift from the traditional bureaucratic form of public service administration based on in-house service delivery towards a range of other models (Gill-McLure, 2013; Kuhlman, 2010). These models include contracting-out, public procurement, public-private partnerships and agencification. The underlying argument for engaging non-public sector stakeholders in public service delivery is that services will be better, more cost efficient and provide value-for-money. However, there has been little recent research examining how and why this is happening in relation to specific service areas (Rodrigues et al., 2012), such as green and grey infrastructure provision and to what extent the goals of improving quality and enhancing competition have been achieved (recent exceptions include Williams and Thwaites, 2007; Dempsey et al., 2016). It is unclear for example, how past government policy reforms in England which favoured modes of service delivery privatisation such as Compulsory Competitive Tendering, contribute to today's practices (after Bel and Fageda, 2007). This paper therefore aims to address these gaps in knowledge by focusing on the use of contractors by English local authorities. We focus on parks and roads maintenance in this paper as public services which involve different degrees of contracting-out but which both have a long history of private sector involvement. We address the following questions:

- Who carries out parks and roads maintenance on behalf of English local authorities and how has this changed over the last five years?
- To what extent are contractors used by English local authorities to carry out parks and roads maintenance and why?
- How satisfied are local authorities with private contractors engaged in parks and roads maintenance?
- To what extent are current service delivery practices a legacy of past policies?

The paper begins by examining some of the underpinning ideas behind public service delivery in England, followed by an exploration of how this has been implemented in parks and roads maintenance in England over time. We then set out the methodology of the research, present the findings and conclude with a discussion of the implications of the findings. Before starting, we outline briefly how central and local government are organised in England.

The UK consists of the national government in Westminster which governs England with devolved governments in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. This report focuses on England which has 353 councils organised into 56 unitary authorities, 27 county councils, 201 district councils, 36 metropolitan district councils and 33 councils in the London boroughs. Many parts of England have two tiers of local government: county councils (e.g. Oxfordshire County Council), and district, borough or city councils (e.g. South Oxfordshire District Council and Oxford City Council). With a traditional, top-down approach to governing (Richards, 2011), England's political system is based on concentrating executive power in one party which is implemented via centralised legislative power in

1  
2  
3 Westminster. The relationship between central and local government has been a  
4 contentious one, with a long tradition of a strong and decentralised local  
5 government, derived from medieval times. In modern times, central government  
6 has, to a greater extent than other European countries, become more involved in  
7 local politics; a trend which grew stronger after WWII, with the creation of the  
8 welfare state and nationalisation of local government functions (McEldowney,  
9 2003). However, local government has been increasingly “hollowed out” since  
10 the Conservatives’ terms of office starting in 1979 (Kuhlman, 2010), where  
11 democratically-elected, locally-responsible forces were replaced by central and  
12 national scale actors, NGOs and private sector organisations. This aimed to  
13 reduce public expenditure (Painter, 1991; Gill-McLure, 2014). Since 2010 when  
14 the Conservative-led Coalition government came to power, local authority  
15 budgets have been cut by around 40% with varying levels of cuts across  
16 individual authorities (NAO, 2014). It is predicted that budgets for local services  
17 will have been reduced by two-thirds by 2020. Alongside statutory  
18 responsibilities, the challenges of welfare reform, the living wage and the ageing  
19 population, local authorities are under significant pressure to deliver more with  
20 less (Mathers et al., 2015).  
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### 25 **Public service delivery in England: a changing landscape**

26 Opening up public service delivery to the market has been shaping England and  
27 other Western countries for decades (Rodrigues et al., 2012). It is underpinned  
28 by public choice theory where the *problem* is bureaucracy and the *solution* is  
29 competitive pressure. In this way, public authorities operate as market-oriented  
30 entities to reconstruct the public sector through new forms of state organization.  
31 England is viewed as a benchmark when it comes to different ways of engaging  
32 private actors to carry out public services (Barzelay, 2001).  
33  
34

35 There has long been an association between private and public sectors, going  
36 back to Victorian private parks being open to the public, e.g. Princes Park,  
37 Liverpool, created in the 1840s and conveyed to Liverpool City Council over 60  
38 years later (Layton-Jones, 2014). A market-led approach was embraced by the  
39 Conservative Party when they came to power in the late 1970s. The introduction  
40 of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) for local authorities was  
41 underpinned by a wish to create a more efficient public sector (Bovaird, 2006).  
42 The Conservatives implemented a manifesto based on theories of rational choice.  
43 They considered the public sector to be too big and inefficient whereas the  
44 private sector could provide significant financial savings and better value for  
45 money (Gill-McLure, 2014; Kuhlman, 2010), and so made CCT mandatory for  
46 local governments (Patterson and Pinch, 1995; Boyne, 1998).  
47  
48

### 49 **Compulsory Competitive Tendering**

50 The 1980 Local Government, Planning and Land Act stated that construction and  
51 maintenance work had to be put out for competitive tendering. Opening up the  
52 market meant that private, public and/or third sector could deliver the service as  
53 long as the procurement process was competitive (Boyne 1998). Services  
54 covered in the later 1988 Local Government Act included street cleaning and  
55 grounds maintenance.  
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3 CCT had significant and long-lasting effects, both positive in terms of cost-  
4 savings and negative in relation to quality (Barber, 2005). Even if a local  
5 authority could demonstrate that delivering a service in-house was more cost-  
6 effective than contracting-out to private organisations, CCT regulations barred  
7 this from happening (Frederick, 1994). Local authorities responded to this by  
8 forming 'direct service organisations' (DSOs) to tender for contracts. DSOs had  
9 to demonstrate greater cost-effectiveness when compared to external  
10 competitors (Milne et al., 2012).  
11

12  
13 DSOs were hybrid organisations sitting within the local authority but operating  
14 as a private concern (Patterson and Pinch, 1995). This separation of *client* and  
15 *contractor* was encouraged to avoid biased choices in the competitive process of  
16 contract tendering (Clark, 1997). The arrangements between local authority and  
17 DSO sometimes resulted in antagonistic relations as well as mistrust between  
18 service deliverers and commissioners (Milne et al., 2012). Long-term  
19 relationships were not always feasible as local authorities were forced to accept  
20 bids from 'better' contractors (Osborne, 2010).  
21

22  
23 Milne et al. (2012) found that parks staff on the ground felt a loss of autonomy,  
24 skill and knowledge. While transparency of the process was often achieved,  
25 tendering to the lowest bidder left little scope for professional judgement and  
26 specialist knowledge in carrying out grounds maintenance (Robinson, 1995).  
27 CCT meant tasks were increasingly controlled by the conditions of contracts, for  
28 example, grounds-maintenance staff were less able to use their knowledge about  
29 timing and appropriateness of maintenance work (Patterson and Pinch, 1995),  
30 such as pruning.  
31

32  
33 During the first round of CCT projects, the majority of contracts were won in-  
34 house as cost savings through redundancies and lower wages were used as a  
35 means of competing with private contractors. The terms and conditions of  
36 workers' contracts worsened under both private contracts and DSOs where rates  
37 of pay were reduced and/or hours were cut and entitlements to many statutory  
38 employment right such as holiday pay and maternity leave were reduced  
39 (Patterson and Pinch, 1995).  
40

#### 41 42 ***Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and Public Private Partnership (PPP)***

43 Because publicly procured projects in England have a long history of running  
44 over time and over budget, Public Private Partnership (PPP) was an interesting  
45 form of investment (Grimsey and Lewis, 2005). 'PPP' describes partnerships  
46 between public, private and sometimes third sector organisations, based on  
47 flexible methods of finance and operation of facilities and/or services, which  
48 result in a form of privatisation (Whitfield, 2001). The Private Finance Initiative  
49 (a form of PPP) was introduced in 1992 as a financial mechanism of securing  
50 private finance to "increase investment in...infrastructure without affecting  
51 public borrowing" (Whitfield, 2001, p. 5), which is of particular relevance to  
52 roads in the context of this paper.  
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56 PFI collaboration means the private actor takes on all/most of the funding of a  
57 project or a service that government wishes to carry out but does not want to  
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3 take the risk for (Arrowsmith et al., 2010), such as schools, hospitals and  
4 transport infrastructure. PFI contracts factor in whole-life costing to build in  
5 high standards from the outset (Nisar, 2007). This is distinct from traditionally  
6 procured services where, e.g. a construction company builds a school but does  
7 not manage it. PFI was therefore predicated on the integration of design,  
8 construction and maintenance.  
9

10  
11 PPP supporters claim it can enable projects without increasing public spending,  
12 bringing in expertise from the private sector through a competitive process.  
13 However, it has become clear after project implementation that PFI was not cost-  
14 effective for the public sector (Whitfield, 2001). The 2008 financial crises meant  
15 there was so little lending by banks that PFI contracts were untenable, and the  
16 costs were passed on to the taxpayer. The Treasury's efforts to stimulate the  
17 economy led to PFI projects going ahead even though they would incur higher  
18 charges, to be covered by the public sector (NAO, 2010). The PPP model has  
19 therefore been severely criticised for falling far short of the claimed efficiencies  
20 it would bring (e.g. Nisar, 2007; Carpintero and Petersen, 2014).  
21  
22

### 23 ***Best Value – quality over economy***

24 The New Labour government (elected 1997) criticised CCT for its inflexibility,  
25 compromise on quality and over-emphasis on competition and efficiency. Hefetz  
26 and Warner (2007) comment on the life cycle of policy reforms: in this way, this  
27 marked the end of one reform (CCT). New Labour introduced the 1999 Local  
28 Government Act making it was no longer mandatory to contract out local  
29 services to the lowest bidder. New Labour wanted quality to be the overriding  
30 goal regardless of who delivered public services (Bevir, 2012). Best Value (the  
31 new reform) was about ensuring that local people were provided with efficient  
32 and effective services, through the principles of quality and value-for-money. In  
33 reality, the shift towards “best value” led to performance targets and monitoring  
34 by central government auditors (the now defunct Audit Commission). Often  
35 these centrally controlled performance indicators meant expensive evaluation  
36 processes and heavier workloads for local government (Kuhlman, 2010).  
37  
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40  
41 More recently, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government in  
42 power between 2010-15 made the most significant cuts to the public sector since  
43 1945 (Cowley et al., 2011) which the current Conservative government (elected  
44 2015) continue. After the financial crises of 2008, minimizing public expenditure  
45 and state power were seen as solutions to the national economic problem. The  
46 Conservatives conceptualised this as the “Big Society” which, among other  
47 things, supported a greater involvement of third and private sector to reduce  
48 government spending and the size of the public sector (after Richards, 2011).  
49

### 50 ***Strategic commissioning***

51 Strategic commissioning has been ‘a central concept in UK public management  
52 for almost a decade’ (Bovaird et al., 2014, p. 541). According to Localis (2011),  
53 the advantage of strategic commissioning is that it is not simply outsourcing or  
54 contracting-out, but it directly involves third sector organisations (Thomson,  
55 2011), marking a focus on end-users. Strategic commissioning has been  
56 advocated by the government and so is used by local authorities as a model for  
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3 public sector service delivery. It is widely popular and met little opposition from  
4 opposition parties or local government, providing opportunities for  
5 organisations such as social enterprises and mutuals to provide public services  
6 (Localis, 2011). Taking a holistic approach is distinct from the traditional form of  
7 public procurement, e.g. contracting-out, and has led to greater externalisation of  
8 public service delivery to create partnerships and mutual agreements with non-  
9 governmental actors (Bovaird et al., 2014).  
10

### 11 **Road and park provision and management in England**

12 England is legally required to follow the EU Directive 2014/24/EC (adopted  
13 April 2014). The first Directive (enacted 2004), coordinating public service  
14 contracts, was underpinned by principles of equal treatment, non-  
15 discrimination, mutual recognition, proportionality and transparency (EU,  
16 2014). The EU public procurement Directive is only relevant for contracts above  
17 EU-determined thresholds according to project type; nation states draw up  
18 individual competitive coordinating procurement procedures (EU, 2014).  
19

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22 EU member states must implement the new Procurement Directive by April  
23 2016. The UK lobbied successfully for changes enacted in the Directive to  
24 deregulate and simplify procurement rules (Cabinet Office, 2014) including  
25 support for small and medium enterprises to participate in the procurement  
26 process. Before the EU Directive, the UK relied mainly on guidance and  
27 administrative briefings from government departments. The use of public  
28 procurement was to a great extent interpreted by the local authorities  
29 themselves (Arrowsmith et al., 2010).  
30  
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32  
33 Road, and park, provision and management are two different public services.  
34 There is almost no responsibility held by central government in relation to  
35 parks<sup>1</sup>. Local authorities have responsibility for park management as a non-  
36 statutory service. In addition, depending on how a council is organised,  
37 departments often have overlapping responsibilities for parks, which can render  
38 the governance arrangements complex and fragmented (Mathers et al., 2015).  
39 Roads on the other hand are considered infrastructure, constituting a statutory  
40 duty for central and local governments to provide and maintain. While  
41 allocations vary for local authorities, roads receive on average 4% and parks less  
42 than 1% of total local authority budgets (DCLG, 2015).  
43  
44

45 Both the road and park sectors have challenges ahead. A report from the Local  
46 Government Association (2014) forecasts a 42% rise in traffic level and a rise of  
47 61% of the congestion levels on the UK roads by 2040. The state of the roads in  
48 the country today are claimed to be in bad condition, with issues including  
49 potholes and poor management of ageing roadside trees. This constitutes a huge  
50 task for local authorities: the backlog of maintenance is calculated (as of 2012) at  
51 around £12 billion (LGA, 2014). While funding is readily available for roads and  
52 highways, there are ongoing budget cuts for park services. 86% of park  
53 managers have seen cuts in budgets since 2010 and 81% of local authority Parks  
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56 <sup>1</sup> Recent examples where national government has become involved in funding parks and green  
57 spaces are high profile and often London-centric – e.g. the Queen Elizabeth (Olympic) Park and  
58 the proposed Garden Bridge.  
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3 Departments have lost skilled management staff (Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF),  
4 2014). Almost half the local authorities surveyed by HLF were considering  
5 selling parks and green spaces or transferring their management to other  
6 stakeholders (HLF, 2014).  
7

### 8 **Roads maintenance, regulation and procurement**

9  
10 There are three categories of roads in England – a) trunk roads and motorways,  
11 b) local authority major roads and c) minor roads. The government, via  
12 Highways England, is responsibly for the funding and planning of the national  
13 road network. Local authorities manage local major and minor roads directly  
14 through planning and maintenance (LGA, 2014). The responsibility for local  
15 highways is often held by district, metropolitan borough and city councils. In  
16 London, Transport for London (a statutory body) is responsible for most of the  
17 capital’s transport system across all the boroughs.  
18

19  
20 The Transport Act 2000 demanded that local transport authorities make a local  
21 transport plan to support safe, efficient and effective transport. Local authorities  
22 were given “powers and responsibilities to make traffic move more freely” via  
23 the 2004 Traffic Management Act (Department for Transport, 2015).  
24

25  
26 Highways maintenance was one of the first public services to be put out for  
27 tender under the 1980 Local Government Planning and Land Act. Street cleaning  
28 was also included under the 1988 Local Government Act. Small-scale research  
29 conducted in Wales and Scotland suggests that PFI funding for road projects  
30 results in more sustainable and cost-effective outcomes than by traditional  
31 procurement methods (Akbiyikli et al., 2012) and successful partnerships  
32 (Hodgson and Rankin, 2000) – although no equivalent research could be found in  
33 England. There have been ongoing calls for more local influence to allow local  
34 authorities make their own arrangements for road maintenance (LGA, 2014),  
35 which are to some extent reflected in the changes to the EU Directive proposed  
36 by the UK.  
37

### 38 **Parks maintenance**

39  
40 Despite being consistently well-used and popular public services, parks in  
41 England have been mostly ignored by central government with the exception of  
42 New Labour’s raft of urban regeneration programmes of the 2000s (HLF, 2014).  
43 Between the late 1970s-1990s when the Conservatives were in power, they  
44 lowered local government expenditure. Parks were an easy – non-statutory –  
45 target. CCT played an important role in this development. While CCT was  
46 underpinned by a market-oriented approach to provision, parks provide a public  
47 service with a non-market value (i.e. the environmental, social and cultural  
48 values of green space were never quantified). While this has been addressed  
49 more recently through a move towards monetary valuation of green space (e.g.  
50 Mell et al., 2013), the value of long-term management of parks and green space  
51 is consistently underestimated (Dempsey et al., 2014). Implications of CCT,  
52 alongside cost reductions, include a loss of (horticultural) skills as tasks became  
53 over-simplified and effectively reduced to grounds maintenance such as grass  
54 mowing (English Heritage, 2005). A loss of community contact has also been  
55 found because the park-keeper role had been abolished (English Heritage, 2005),  
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3 along with a lack of a long-term perspective taken by contractors and cash-  
4 strapped local authorities (Jones, 2000).  
5

6  
7 When Best Value was introduced under New Labour to gain better quality in  
8 contracts, parks fared well and citizens were included in the decision-making  
9 process. But while there were improvements to many parks through capital  
10 investment, it was difficult for local authorities to achieve benchmarking targets  
11 without accompanying revenue funding, while under pressure to be financially  
12 viable and accountable.  
13

14  
15 The budget cuts made to parks management post-2010 mean that managers  
16 expect park standards to fall over next three years (HLF, 2014). It has also led  
17 park service managers to seek sources and new ways of funding beyond the local  
18 authority. This might be through development of more business-like models and  
19 private financing. These changes to parks management have brought a focus on  
20 partnerships and management practices based on models of delivery which may  
21 or may not account for the true nature of 'public' service (Williams and Thwaites,  
22 2007).  
23

### 24 **Primary data collection**

25  
26 The literature review has set out the foundations for understanding the policy  
27 context of parks and roads maintenance delivery in England. To answer the  
28 research questions, the paper calls on data analysis collected via a countrywide  
29 survey conducted in late 2015. We developed an online questionnaire survey,  
30 which was distributed among 326 local authorities, to managers with  
31 responsibility for parks and roads maintenance. The researchers called on the  
32 collective expertise of landscape architects, public administrators, local authority  
33 managers and green space managers to develop and pilot the questionnaire  
34 which was adapted from one used in the INOPS research conducted in Sweden,  
35 Norway and Denmark. We did not contact county councils on the advice of  
36 project partners given their distinct split in park and road responsibilities  
37 compared to other local authority types. The questionnaire asked questions  
38 about current practices in relation to parks and roads maintenance as well as the  
39 drivers for different arrangements and barriers to change. Findings from the  
40 INOPS research are presented in this journal as stand-alone studies and  
41 comparative analysis will follow in future publications. Given the pressures that  
42 local authorities are under (and our resource limitations), we conducted an  
43 online survey to contact local authority managers. After the initial email, two  
44 reminders were sent out. 103 valid responses were received with a response  
45 rate of 32%. This is lower than the 41% response rate achieved by the HLF's  
46 State of Public Parks survey in 2014. Tables 1a and 1b show the spread of  
47 respondents by region and local authority type. We received valid responses  
48 from between 22-42% of local authorities in the different regions and between  
49 27-42% of local authority types in England. The data here were collated and  
50 analysed using SPSS software, with a number of frequency-based analyses run as  
51 well and more detailed statistics including paired sample T-tests, analysis of  
52 variance and correlations.  
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57 <<Tables 1a and 1b about here >>  
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### Findings and Analysis

The findings are presented in the tables below. Table 2a shows who carries out *parks and road maintenance*. Column totals do not add up to 100% as respondents were asked to list all relevant providers.

For *parks*, these findings are interesting when compared to recent studies. 60% of local authority respondents use of private contractors for parks maintenance and 64% make use of in-house green space maintenance services. The HLF study found that 23% of local authority respondents reported contracting-out parks maintenance. HLF (2014) also found that over half of UK local authorities surveyed (56%) maintained their parks through in-house services, and the APSE 2013 study found that this number was higher at that time (83%). Our findings would therefore suggest that contracting-out of parks maintenance is on the increase across local authority types, echoing the HLF's findings which predicted 'a greater mix of service delivery models including external trusts and partnerships with other organisations'. Our findings also bear this out. We found that respondents reported widespread use of other green space maintenance providers, including community groups (44% of the respondents), third sector organisations (20%), public-private ventures (7%) and social enterprises (5%).

We examined the influence of location in more detail as some correlations emerged between the region the local authority was in and the use of 'other' organisations for park management. Our analysis showed that respondents from the north-west, north-east and Yorkshire & the Humber reported social enterprises as parks maintenance service providers. Further analysis showed this to be a weak but statistically significant correlation. There were no other overall significant differences recorded in responses between urban or rural local authorities, or for type of local authority<sup>2</sup>.

Our findings suggest a more complex state of affairs when we examined how budgets are distributed across these different providers. Over 40% and 50% of maintenance budgets are distributed respectively to private and in-house contractors, which is not particularly surprising given the high proportions of local authorities who use these providers for parks maintenance. However, the large proportion of respondents (56%) who report using *other* organisations for parks maintenance allocate only 8% of their budgets to them. The findings suggest that the kinds of activities engaged in are smaller-scale and less costly than those done by in-house and private contractors, and/or may be based on work by unpaid ('free') volunteers.

We also asked respondents about how the contribution of different organisations had changed over the last five years, to explore if private contractors are increasingly used to deliver parks and road maintenance. While there were missing data as not all respondents answered these questions, Table

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<sup>2</sup> There are data limitations to bear in mind here as only 4% of respondents were from rural local authorities.

2c suggests some interesting findings. There are similar proportions of respondents reporting increases and decreases in using private contractors over the last five years and the longstanding influence of CCT may explain the high proportion of respondents (29%) reporting that this has stayed the same. There are broadly similar figures for in-house provision with an increase (12%) and decrease (18%) in contribution to maintenance over the last five years and a higher proportion (34%) of respondents reporting that this has stayed the same. In particular we want to highlight the 24% increase of involvement of community groups in parks maintenance over the last five years, which is unsurprising in light of findings reported in Table 2a even though Table 2b highlights that involvement is not replicated in financial terms.

<<Tables 2a, 2b and 2c about here >>

For **roads maintenance**, over a quarter of local authority respondents reported using private contractors. Only 36% of respondents reported using in-house providers and 9% using other types of providers (Table 2a). Almost a third of respondents did not respond to these questions. Of the other providers, these included public-private ventures (4%) and community group involvement (2%). When we look at the budget breakdown (Table 2b), they are relatively similar with 37% of local authority budgets distributed to private contractors, 52% to in-house providers and 9% to other types of provision. There were no significant differences found in responses between urban or rural local authorities, region or local authority type. Table 2c shows that the contribution of private and in-house contractors for roads maintenance has not really changed significantly across the different providers, with larger proportions of the sample reporting that providers have stayed the same. It should be noted that at least two-thirds of the sample did not answer the questions reported in Table 2c. Respondents who did volunteer information about the 'other' types of provision largely described joint venture partnerships (reflected in Table 2a).

Table 3 shows some of the reasons why private contractors are used by local authorities for both parks and roads maintenance. Most respondents indicated five main reasons: cost effectiveness, testing and benchmarking prices, responding to changing budget pressures, achieving high maintenance quality and flexibility of delivery. The focus on budget-related issues is consistent with the pressures experienced by English local authorities reported elsewhere (HLF, 2014). Other reasons include private contractors being able to provide work that the local authority cannot do, providing focus on strategic management, developing services, internal organisation and work routines. Noting the same caveats around data limitations, no significant differences were recorded in responses between urban or rural local authorities, region or for local authority type, or change in different organisations' contribution to service provision over the last 5 years. One exception is that we found a medium and significant correlation (coefficient .530) indicating that respondents reporting an increase in private sector involvement were more likely to report testing and benchmarking prices as a reason for using private contractors.

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2  
3 <<Table 3 about here >>  
4

5 Table 4 provides an assessment by respondents of their satisfaction with  
6 contractors' performance on a number of dimensions, both for **parks** (n=52) and  
7 **roads** (n=20). Similar results are reported for both types of maintenance, and for  
8 all the dimensions, respondents were satisfied with contractor performance  
9 (slightly higher for parks maintenance). Respondents were satisfied with the  
10 quality and the cost of services provided, alongside the degree of flexibility for  
11 change that contractors were able to provide. Respondents described contractor  
12 performance in responding to problems in maintenance as satisfactory  
13 alongside, to a lesser degree, contractors' ability to develop and innovate  
14 maintenance services and achieve their long-term service objectives. There were  
15 no statistically significant differences between satisfaction with the contractors'  
16 performance in parks and in roads except on cost. Further statistical analysis to  
17 calculate the effect size shows that while significant, this is a small effect (eta  
18 squared statistic = 0.25), suggesting parks maintenance was perceived to be  
19 more cost-effective than roads. This is perhaps indicative of the generally lower  
20 costs of services for parks maintenance in comparison to roads maintenance, but  
21 caution is required given the small sample size answering questions about roads.  
22 Additional statistical testing revealed no significant differences recorded in  
23 responses between urban or rural local authorities, region or for type of local  
24 authority. However, we did find consistent and weak-medium correlations  
25 (coefficients between .348 and .479) indicating that respondents reporting an  
26 increase in private sector involvement were likely to report relatively higher  
27 satisfaction levels across *all* six performance indicators in Table 4.  
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32 The findings in Tables 3-4 show a high degree of variation (standard deviation)  
33 and skewness towards more positive responses overall. Supplementary (and  
34 cautious) analyses of the variables in Table 4 for the sub-samples (no more than  
35 52 for parks and 20 for roads) show correlations amongst all indicators listed in  
36 Table 4. This indicates that respondents who reported satisfaction with one  
37 aspect of contractors' provision of road and parks maintenance (e.g. price) were  
38 also likely to report relatively higher satisfaction levels on other related aspects.  
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41 Further analyses were conducted to explore if satisfaction with contractors was  
42 correlated with the reasons for contracting-out maintenance tasks. A number of  
43 statistically significant correlations were found, including (for parks only)  
44 between satisfaction with price and using contractors to achieve cost-effective  
45 maintenance (correlation coefficient .603, sig .000). Again however, it should be  
46 noted that these findings are reported cautiously given the small sample of  
47 respondents (here, 45) and require further statistical testing.  
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51 <<Table 4 about here >>  
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### 53 54 **Discussion and conclusions**

55 In England, current policy means that local authorities use contracts and  
56 partnerships with a range of public, private and NGO stakeholders to provide  
57 and manage parks and roads, which is described as costing less and maintaining  
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3 high-quality standards (after Richards, 2011). Our literature review shows  
4 variation in how commentators concurred that different policy interventions  
5 achieved cost reductions and high standards. Our findings suggest that past  
6 policies (e.g. CCT), and the practices they introduced, have had a lasting effect on  
7 public service delivery and the propensity of local authorities to contract this  
8 out. Some policy instruments (e.g. Strategic Commissioning) have influenced  
9 practice insofar as non-private, NGOs are increasingly being used as service  
10 providers. In this way, the findings support the literature review discussion  
11 around policy focus towards collaborative approaches in public service delivery  
12 (Rodrigues et al., 2012), i.e. not only local authority or private contractor – in  
13 parks and, to a lesser extent, roads maintenance. This will be of interest to  
14 practitioners and policymakers in other countries where different models of  
15 public service delivery may be required (after Bel et al., 2007) as policy reforms  
16 go through their life cycle to be replaced by new ones (Hefetz and Warner,  
17 2007).  
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21 The findings overall indicate that parks and roads maintenance are shifting  
22 towards shared responsibilities between different combinations of local  
23 authorities, private, third sector and voluntary actors. Such collaborations might  
24 be more prevalent in certain areas (such as the north of England for parks)  
25 although further research is needed to explore any geographical spread given  
26 how social enterprises are located around the country, not specifically  
27 concentrated in the north (BMG Research, 2013). It would be interesting to  
28 explore if there might be a party-political effect of local authority budget cuts  
29 where non-Conservative-led local authorities collaborate with NGOs more as a  
30 result of the severity of their funding cuts.  
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33 An important finding from the survey, and one which challenges the negative  
34 readings of CCT cited in the literature review, is that local authorities are on the  
35 whole satisfied with the performance of contractors for both parks and roads  
36 maintenance. This is particularly striking for cost-effectiveness of service  
37 delivery, which supports the underpinning aims of CCT and Best Value (after  
38 Patterson and Pinch, 1995). Respondents reported greater satisfaction with  
39 contractors' performance in the quality and cost of maintenance. However, to  
40 what extent this satisfaction is attributed to a specific policy intervention, or  
41 legacy thereof, is unclear and would be an interesting focus of future research.  
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45 Reasons for local authorities using private contractors show a close correlation  
46 with the aims of, and underpinning drivers for, contracting-out. In addition, the  
47 survey respondents highlighted how flexibility was an important reason for  
48 using private contractors, suggesting a need for responsiveness to the ongoing  
49 context of austerity in the English public sector (after Mathers et al., 2015). It is  
50 interesting to consider the importance that respondents attached to these inter-  
51 related aspects in light of the incoming EU Directive and how it might affect  
52 public service delivery in the future. To what extent this flexibility will be  
53 enhanced or hindered by the EU Directive requires further research, particularly  
54 as England's particular tradition of governance mechanisms is not present in  
55 other countries. More research is also needed to compare quality, cost and  
56 performance of the range of different service providers involved in parks, to  
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3 understand better the implications of depleted funding streams for the long-term  
4 provision and management of parks. Broadly speaking, for English parks where  
5 budgets are increasingly limited, we suggest that flexibility will be important in  
6 the future as different models are explored and developed by local authorities  
7 and a growing range of service delivery organisations (after Mell, 2016). It will  
8 be interesting to see if, for example, if the engagement of third sector  
9 organisations and community groups – with an increase in contract value? – for  
10 parks maintenance continues. The forthcoming HLF's new State of Public Parks  
11 report will also contribute to this growing evidence base.  
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14 We would add a caveat to taking a wholly positive interpretation of contracting-  
15 out. The questions in the questionnaire asked respondents about their actual  
16 situation of contracting-out. We did not ask them about the appropriateness of  
17 contracting-out as a method of delivery of a public good as this was outside the  
18 scope of this study. We would therefore recommend that, particularly for  
19 contexts where open space management does not involve contractors, a debate  
20 about the relevance of practices such as contracting-out and CCT in different 21<sup>st</sup>  
21 century political, economic and social contexts around the world would be  
22 beneficial. To help inform such a debate, this paper has provided empirical  
23 evidence of how that public service delivery has changed over time in England  
24 (often held up an example of innovative practice), which can provide interesting  
25 reading for local authorities using contractors (or not) around the world. In this  
26 way, the paper helps our understanding of the inter-related advantages *and*  
27 disadvantages as experienced in practice: for example cost-effectiveness can  
28 come at the expense of skills and knowledge (after Milne et al., 2012).  
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32 There are limitations in this study including the relatively low response rate  
33 which may be due to overworked local authority personnel not responding  
34 favourably to email-based correspondence and an online questionnaire survey.  
35 For example, Clark's (1997) survey received a 47% response rate (compared to  
36 our 32%), at a time before email and without significant local authority budget  
37 cuts. Our research asked questions of local authority managers only – indicating  
38 that further research is required for us to understand whether different  
39 stakeholders (end-users as well as the service delivery organisations) would also  
40 report relatively high levels of satisfaction with parks and roads management.  
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44 Describing a *state of current play* within a national context, as our descriptive  
45 findings do for England, provides valuable information for how local authorities  
46 engage in public service delivery in practice over time. We will examine these  
47 findings further and scrutinise the INOPS research data collected from local  
48 authorities in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and England to provide a cross-country  
49 comparative analysis in the future, and help contribute to our collective  
50 understanding of grey and green infrastructure public service delivery.  
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Table 1a. Sample characteristics by region.

Region	Responses received	Responses received as % of total sample	% of total number of local authorities in region
London	9	8.7	27%
South East	16	15.5	25%
East	18	17.5	42%
South West	10	9.7	26%
West Midlands	12	11.7	40%
East Midlands	11	10.7	32%
Yorkshire & Humber	5	4.9	22%
North East	7	6.8	32%
North West	15	14.6	37%
<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>100%</b>	

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Table 1b. Sample characteristics: local authority type\*

Local authority type	Number of responses received	% of total number of local authority type in England
Metropolitan	15	42%
London borough	9	27%
Unitary	19	34%
District	60	30%

\*the sample does not include County Councils.

For Review Only

Table 2a. Who carries out maintenance in parks and roads for your department?

Type of provider	Park maintenance (N=103)	Road maintenance (N=73)
1. Private contractors	60%	26%
2. In-house providers	64%	36%
3. Other type of provision	53%	9%
3.1 <i>Public-private venture</i>	7%	4%
3.2 <i>Local social enterprise</i>	5%	---
3.3 <i>Other public authority</i>	3%	1%
3.4 <i>National/ local third sector organisation (e.g. trust)</i>	20%	---
3.5 <i>Community groups</i>	44%	2%
3.6 <i>Other (not specified in the survey)</i>	7%	2%

Figures will add up to more than 100% as respondents were asked about all organisations that contributed to the maintenance.

For road maintenance, 29% of the sample did not answer these questions.

Table 2b. How are your budgets for maintenance distributed among different organisations?

Type of provider	Average of Park maintenance budget (N=103)	Average of Road maintenance budget (N=59)
1. Private contractors	40.5%	37%
2. In-house providers	51.5%	52%
3. Other type of provision	8%	9%
3.1 <i>Public-private venture</i>	4.7%	4%
3.2 <i>Local social enterprise</i>	0.1%	---
3.3 <i>Other public authority</i>	0.02%	1%
3.4 <i>National/ local third sector organisation (e.g. trust)</i>	0.59%	---
3.5 <i>Community groups</i>	1.44%	2%
3.6 <i>Other (not specified in the survey)</i>	1.36%	2%

Or Review Only

Table 2c. How has the contribution of different organisations to parks/ road maintenance changed over the past 5 years? (actual numbers reported in parentheses)

Type of provider	Increased	Decreased	Stayed the same	No response
<b>Parks maintenance</b>				
1. Private contractors	14% (14)	16% (16)	29% (30)	41% (43)
2. In-house providers	12% (12)	18% (19)	34% (35)	36% (37)
3.1 <i>Public-private venture</i>	---	4% (4)	2% (2)	94% (97)
3.2 <i>Local social enterprise</i>	3% (3)	---	2% (2)	95% (98)
3.3 <i>Other public authority</i>	2% (2)	---	---	98% (101)
3.4 <i>National/ local third sector organisation (e.g. trust)</i>	7% (7)	1% (1)	12% (12)	80% (83)
3.5 <i>Community groups</i>	24% (25)	1% (1)	18% (18)	57% (59)
3.6 <i>Other (not specified in the survey)</i>	5% (5)	1% (1)	1% (1)	93% (96)
<b>Roads maintenance</b>				
1. Private contractors	6% (6)	5% (5)	15% (15)	75% (77)
2. In-house providers	3% (3)	7% (7)	25% (26)	67% (65)
3. Other type of provision	3% (3)	1% (1)	3% (3)	92% (95)

**Table 3. Reasons for using private contractors (parks and roads)**

To...	N	Mean	S.D.
<i>Achieve cost-effective maintenance</i>	46	7,8	2,2
<i>Test and benchmark prices</i>	46	6,3	2,6
<i>Address changing budget pressures</i>	45	6,3	3,1
<i>Achieve high-quality maintenance</i>	47	6,3	2,7
<i>Ensure flexibility of delivery</i>	46	6,1	2,6
<i>Carry out work the municipality cannot do</i>	45	5,5	3,8
<i>Allow the department to focus on strategic management (instead of day-to-day maintenance)</i>	45	5,2	3,3
<i>Develop and renew sites and services</i>	45	4,4	3,2
<i>Develop/ improve internal working methods</i>	44	4,2	3,1

*The table reports the purposes for using private contractors for both parks and roads.*

*Data are based on responses on the degree the respondent finds various purposes a key part of the municipality's rationale for using private contractors for parks and road maintenance services.*

*All items measured by an 11-point response-scale with anchors (0 = 'Not at all' and 10 = 'To a very high degree').*

**Table 4.**  
**Satisfaction with the contractors' provision of road and park maintenance services**

Performance dimension*	Park maintenance (N=50-52)			Road maintenance (N=19/20)		
	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.
Quality of maintenance services	52	7,5	1,9	20	7,1	2,4
Price / cost of maintenance	51	7,7	1,8	20	7,0	2,6
Flexibility for change/ improvement of maintenance	52	7,5	2,1	20	7,1	2,9
Responsiveness and problem-solving in maintenance	52	7,4	2,0	20	7,0	2,6
Development and innovation of maintenance	50	6,3	2,6	19	6,4	2,6
Satisfaction with long-term service objectives	50	6,1	2,6	19	6,2	2,8

The table reports the evaluation of six performance dimensions of park and road maintenance services provided by private contractors. Paired samples T-tests for each performance dimension shows no statistical significance at p-levels < .1 between road and park maintenance except for 'Price/ cost of maintenance', where  $p = .030$  and  $t(17) = 2.361$ .

\* Data based on self-reported evaluations based on responses for all items on an 11-point response scale with anchors (0 = 'very unsatisfactory', 5 = 'neutral' and 10 = 'very satisfactory') for the question: Specify on a scale of 0 to 10 your level of satisfaction with the work private contractor(s) have undertaken in parks and green spaces in relation to the following.