

Growing a community: Myatt's Field Park, Lambeth



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Contents

Growing a community: Myatt's Field Park, Lambeth.....	2
Contents.....	3
Summary.....	1
1. Introduction	2
2. Involving the community	7
3. Improving health and wellbeing	10
4. Bringing people together	11
5. Engaging with nature and the environment.....	13
6. Reducing inequalities	15
7. Supporting the local economy	17
8. Myatt's Field park during Covid-19	19
9. Opportunities and challenges	21
10. Learning points	22
11. Conclusion: the difference Parks for People has made	23
Appendix 1: Methodology.....	24
Appendix 2: About the area	25

Summary

Myatt's Fields Park in the London Borough of Lambeth is one of 135 projects funded by the £254m Parks for People restoration programme, run by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund. This report shows the difference the restoration project has made, and explores the value of the park to the local community. Building on research evidence on the social value of parks and green spaces, this report finds an inspirational story of change in the park with positive impacts for the local area and residents. Above all this project has shown the value of people in communities uniting to drive change and the value of listening to local people about their needs to create a truly inclusive space. This report shows how the park has contributed to the six areas of social value identified through the Heritage Fund and Community Fund's Space to Thrive report:

- Involving the community.
- Improving health and wellbeing.
- Bringing people together.
- Engaging with nature and the environment.
- Reducing inequalities.
- Supporting the local economy.

The report identifies ten learning points for the future. These are:

- The basics matter. A big success of the park's transformation has been the central location and use of the park's infrastructure (such as its café) to create a welcoming environment for users.
- Presence matters. Having people working in the park who are accessible to park users makes a big difference to how people feel about the park.
- Leadership matters. Having a consistent group of dynamic and determined people leading the project has been critical to the project's success, although this also be physically and emotionally draining for those leaders.
- Letting go matters too! As the project leaders have learnt over the years, it is also important to let go sometimes, to build others' strengths and confidence to lead.
- Partnership *really* matters. the many partnerships that Myatt's Field Park Project (MFPP) has built with local services has made the park a critical resource for the community.
- Community matters. More specifically, devoting time and resources to galvanising and empowering the local community has been a cornerstone of the project's success.
- Listening matters. A strength of MFPP has been its outreach to local communities, taking time to properly listen to people rather than treat outreach as a one-way communication.
- Maintenance matters. MFPP didn't realise in advance how much money and effort is required to keep shiny new things shiny, or at least in working order.
- Succession matters. Seeing the funding as a catalyst for future growth rather than an end in it itself has been really important to the development of the park over the last decade.
- Doughnuts matter. Parks can be an incubator or hub for new economic models that put people and nature first (like the idea of [doughnut economics](#) by Kate Raworth).

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Parks for People was a programme by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund to revitalise historic parks and cemeteries. Since 2006 the programme has contributed £254 million to 135 projects across the UK. It is the successor programme to two other funding schemes, the Urban Parks Programme and the Public Parks Initiative. Since 1996, over £900m of National Lottery funding has been awarded to more than 900 UK public parks for capital works and public engagement activities.

This case study is part of a national evaluation of the Parks for People programme. It is designed for people involved in parks and green spaces generally, but especially for people who are directly involved in looking after Myatt's Field Park, organising activities in it, or supporting the wider local community in Lambeth.

The evaluation is being undertaken by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University, along with colleagues at the University of Sheffield and Urban Pollinators Ltd. As part of the evaluation, the research team first conducted a review of the academic evidence on the social benefits of parks and urban green spaces. This document, *Space to Thrive*¹, was published by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund in January 2020. Following this research the evaluators examined six Parks for People projects, conducted at different times in different locations, to consider the impact of the funding and the lessons for local and national policy. These are:

- Alexandra Park, Manchester.
- Boultham Park, Lincoln.
- Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, Tunbridge Wells.
- Myatt's Field Park, Lambeth.
- Saughton Park, Edinburgh.
- Stafford Orchard, Quorn, Leicestershire.

This report starts by introducing Myatt's Field Park and the work done there. It then looks at the impact of the Parks for People project, framing the discussion by referring to the six types of benefit identified in the *Space to Thrive* report. It also briefly considers how these benefits were affected by the restrictions on public parks and urban spaces imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. Finally, it considers some opportunities and challenges for the future, learning points from the project, and the overall difference it has made.

1.2. About Myatt's Field Park

The name 'Myatt's Fields', it is said, commemorates a tenant on the land prior to its designation as a public park, who used the field for growing food. Growing food and

¹ Dobson, J, Harris, C, Eadson, W and Gore, T (2019) *Space to Thrive. National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Lottery Community Fund.* <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/publications/space-thrive>

other plants remains an important part of activity in the park today: a theme that returns regularly throughout our story about the impacts of Parks for People funding at the park.

Like many public parks, it was handed over to the local council (London County Council at the time) in the late 19th Century by a family who owned large amounts of land in the area. It was then landscaped by the Council, designed by Fanny Wilkinson, one of the first professional women landscape gardeners and campaigner for women's suffrage. Like food growing, a legacy of empowering women is felt today, both in the leadership of the park and the activities undertaken there.

It is hard to know which facet, which story of change best sums up the essence of Myatt's Field park as it stands today - which of the many people's lives that have improved through the transformation of this 14-acre square of land in South East London. So it is perhaps best to begin with the story of how it all started, beginning with the story of Tori², a mother of a young child, new to the area, feeling alone in her new home. She began to regularly visit Myatt's Fields park to meet other mums at the 'one o'clock club'; a group where under-5s can play together while their parents meet up. But the park was rundown ("I loved it but it was run down" says Marj, chair of the charity since 2014 and part of that original gang) and not seen as a safe or welcoming place for most people, and other local services were also lacking:

There was virtually nowhere to go with a baby to meet anybody and cos I was very isolated I was quite keen on doing that. So a group of us, mostly women with little children, got together and we worked for about eight years with HLF and the council to do a plan for the park and to get the funding. It was really all about the fact that the park could be a much better resource for people locally, I live on a local estate and it's very crowded, the houses are very close together where I live anyway, so you're overwhelmed and isolated at the same time (Tori, Myatt's Field Community Development Manager)

The story of Myatt's Fields park over the last 20 years then is a personal story about this group of women – and others they encouraged to join them along the way – they worked with to change it for the better. And it is also very much a story of community, both the tight knit group who have thrown their lives into transforming the park, and the activities, networks and sense of place that they have fostered through their work.

1.3. The park and the local area

Myatt's Fields is located in the London Borough of Lambeth, South London on the edge of Camberwell as it runs into Brixton. Like many parts of London it is an area where people living in extreme poverty live next door to the extremely wealthy. This is reflected in the built environment. As you approach the park walking from Brixton you come through rows of smartly appointed Victorian and Edwardian terraces juxtaposed with low-rise flats in need of investment and care.

Overall the Vassall ward - where Myatt's park is – sits in the 4th highest decile for deprivation, having been in the 3rd decile in 2010 and 2015, but this masks high inequalities. Just as the built environment surrounding the park quite starkly illustrates this, changing house prices give an indication of how inequality has grown over the last 10 years. In 2010 the cost of a house was broadly in line with the London average,

² Because they are so central to the story of Myatt's Fields Park and it's development over the last decade, Tori, Marj and Eliza provided consent for their real names to be used in this report. All other names have been changed to protect anonymity.

while a flat was over £100,000 cheaper than the London average. In 2020 flats remained about £100,000 cheaper than the London average, but houses were now between 33% and 50% above the London average. Over half of households rent from the council or a housing association.³

Reflecting the nature of the local area, the park today is a space that serves a wide range of needs and interests, from a nursery and stay and play drop-in service for young families, to food and flower growing, organised football, a nature area, regular community events, outreach activities for vulnerable and isolated people (including homeless people and women from migrant communities), facilities for weddings and celebrations, and a hugely popular waterplay area which attracts families from across South London and beyond. The park is managed by the Myatt's Field Park Project (MFPP), a standalone social enterprise formed back in the early 2000s, which has over time taken on increasing responsibility for overseeing the park's development and stewardship.

1.4. About the restoration project

Now the Myatt's Field Parks project development manager, Tori first arrived in Lambeth in around 2000. From then she worked with a group of other people in the area including the original chair and eight other trustees to develop plans for improving the park to turn it into a proper resource for the community. They had various conversations with The National Lottery Heritage Fund, who supported them to apply for £1.5 million of Parks for People funding (supplemented by nearly £700,000 from London Borough of Lambeth). The PFP project finally began in 2007. The project included the following physical improvements, costs for staff and community activities:

- Landscaping works to repair and refurbish pathways, fencing, greenery and so on in line with Fanny Wilkinson's original design for the park
- Introduction of a nature conservation area
- Redeveloping the children's playground
- Refurbishing and upgrading the park depot, where park offices, meeting rooms and greenhouse are sited
- Repairing and refurbishing the bandstand
- Repairing and refurbishing the 'roundhouse' – a building in the middle of the park that is now used for community activities and can be hired for events
- Redeveloping a building used for the 'One O'Clock Club' – now a privately run nursery but with a continuing 'stay and play' offer some days.
- 5 year's funding for part-time development manager, project manager and park administrator posts
- Funding for a range of activities including:
 - An annual festival
 - Intergenerational project to encourage older people to visit the park
 - Local history project and local history schools' pack

The works were all completed in 2010 and the posts funded until 2012.

³ Office for National Statistics Census Data: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census>

1.5. After the restoration project

The story of Myatt's Fields park is as much about what happened after 2010 as it is about the initial Parks for People project. The first part of the story – about mobilising a group of people and the council to apply for funding and deliver the funding – is impressive. But it is what has happened since that shows the true extent of work and commitment invested into the park project. The period since 2010 has been a period of extensive public sector funding cuts: Lambeth council's budget reduced by 58% between 2010 and 2018. As a result MFPP has had to expend huge amounts of energy to develop funding streams – from grants to commercial activities in the park – to keep going, maintain the improvements made during the PFP project, and make further improvements to the park and its connection to the local community.

For the period of the PFP project the project team were employed by Lambeth council. But in order to make savings to the council budget, in 2015 the team were made redundant. Whereas in many other places that would have signalled the end for the project – the staff would have moved on to other work elsewhere, and momentum lost for any future development – at Myatt's Fields this instead signalled the second phase of the project. The project team submitted countless grant applications to make sure that their work could continue, and responsibility for management of the park was largely passed from the council to MFPP. A number of the grant applications were successful, including:

- City Bridge Trust⁴, to fund a community gardener and support local community organisations and volunteers with food-growing activities (2013-15 and most recently 2020 - 2025)
- The National Lottery Community Fund Local Food fund (2012 - 2015),
- Power to Change funding to redevelop the Park Depot and grow MFPP's community and commercial business (2017-19).
- The National Lottery Heritage Fund Resilient Heritage grant, focusing on developing a plan for the future of the project to put it on a sustainable financial footing, diversify the trustee and volunteer group and to pave the way for the original chair and manager to step away from the project over the next five years (2019-20)
- A partnership with Lambeth Early Action Partnership which supports local families with young children
- London Community Foundation⁵, which supported the community plant nursery at the park's Greenhouse (2017-19).
- London Catalyst⁶, Battersea Power Station Foundation⁷ and Tesco Bags of Help – supporting community growing outreach from the Greenhouse (2017- 19)

Lambeth council continues to provide routine maintenance for the park, and an on-going grant of £24,000 per year to support MFPP activities. This grant may be renewed for a further year to 2022. And in 2019 Nike funded redevelopment of the park's 5-a-side football pitches as gesture of support to the community after young children witnessed the murder of a man while taking part in a football training session nearby.

⁴ <https://www.citybridgetrust.org.uk/>

⁵ <https://londoncf.org.uk/>

⁶ www.londoncatalyst.org.uk

⁷ <http://bpsfoundation.org.uk/>

Aside from the continuing concerted efforts to raise funding and to set the project on an even keel financially MFPP has worked hard to improve connections to the local community, particularly focusing on health and wellbeing – which many of the grants listed above are testament to. This list of grants and activities is far from exhaustive and each conversation with different project stakeholders and users brought to light more events, activities and projects that the park was home to. According to the project team, the Parks for People funding was critical to being able to continue the work, even in such difficult circumstances:

“the [Parks for People] funding for the park and subsequent revenue funding for staff completely set us up ... being able to make that big shift, you have to do that, in an area like this you have to have that big shift because it’s been a kind of shift in confidence for people to say things have changed. Having the infrastructure to make the new phase happen and the whole story around what the park is and what the park means to local people is completely different from what it was, in my mind anyway.”

This has been tiring work, though. Tori and her fellow travellers have admitted to being exhausted at times. As Tori herself put it, *“it’s insane really”* and after 20 years, Tori and Marj (now the MFPP chair) are both looking to step down and allow others to take over the reins. A formidable act to follow.



The Myatt's Field 'Roundhouse'. Photo: Myatt's Fields Park Project

2. Involving the community

There's no doubt that above all else Myatt's Field park is a community park and its transformation is a community story. Everything else flows from that.

It is a community story in the sense that it was concerned and committed local residents who catalysed and led the process of gaining funding for the park, which then led to establishing a community-led organisation who later took on management responsibility for the park. But it is also very much about what this community-led organisation (MFPP) has done to engage the local community and make the park a community hub for a wide range of activities and services that serve the local area and its people.

Working together since the early 2000s the close-knit group who pushed forward the park's regeneration are a clear example of how local residents can come together to make change. The organisation is rooted in the community, both through its employees, who almost all are local to the park (as a matter of principle for MFPP) and the wider group of trustees. Although working in partnership with the council MFPP have very much led change, with the council playing a supporting role. The project lead and other project workers were notionally employed by the council but they worked for MFPP as the delivery organisation for the project, again showing how the project and subsequent work was rooted in the community from the beginning.

The tightness of the central group of people leading MFPP (Tori, Marj, the previous chair and other trustees) has been a strength of the project: they have made the most of their respective skillsets to work effectively as a team. Tori is known as a 'machine' when it comes to writing bids for grants and drives forward community engagement; Marj has developed strong links with the council and other parks; and Eliza, the current park manager, knows who to find to get a job done in the park.

Some suggest that the tightness and dynamism of this group has sometimes meant that others have been less keen to come forward, to make their voice heard. It can at times be hard for the leaders to let go. But as Lisa, a local resident who works for one of MFPP's many partner organisations explained, the project team are, '*always trying to get people involved in those discussions to build up their confidence that actually you can be heard ... they run all the spaces, so the café, the depot and office space, just very much trying to get it more accessed by the community, the wider community not just an elite few*'.

Tori and the team have also been working hard to use the Resilient Heritage grant, developing governance structures to involve a greater number and more diverse range of people in decision-making: '*we're building the sub-committees so more people can have more control over what happens, so I'm trying to delegate cos I'm horrible at it*.' There is also a committed group of volunteers that help to keep the park tidy and help at events: '*the different projects we do, in every project, every event there's always volunteers involved either running it, like the walks that we have, it's usually locals that do it, professionals in different areas who give their time to share it with other members of the community*'.

2.1. Community partnerships

It is striking how much MFPP is at the heart of community action in the local area. Central to the project's success has been developing a network of partnerships across a range of organisations in Lambeth, many of which are also community-led. A wide range of groups also make use of the depot's facilities and the roundhouse, making

the park an important site for community action. This is also intensive work, as Tori explains:

“practically every amenity in this community is now run by community organisations which is why we’re doing the partnership work to try and hold ourselves together really but that adds another layer of work. It’s bonkers trying to hold it all together.”

This partnership working is also critical to the financial sustainability of the park, working with other organisations to develop new funding streams and grant applications. Key local partners include the Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP, part of a National Lottery Community Fund programme) and various food- and nature-related funders and charities locally and across London.

The sense is a whirlwind of activity: project meetings, new grant applications, routine maintenance, liaising with the council, making new partnerships, holding together existing partnerships. For some people, at times this way of working seems slightly chaotic, but it has also been hugely successful and has brought the park to the centre of a hub of community organisations all working together to improve the local area.

The project leaders have been very important to the development of these partnerships. Tori is renowned for her determination and commitment to making links with local organisations, and a lot of the project’s activity focuses around developing new partnerships. Personal relationships have clearly been important, but MFPP has established a positive reputation for delivery over the years which has led organisations to seek them out to work on new projects or extend existing partnerships. A legacy of partnership working across the borough from the period prior to 2010 when Lambeth council and other local organisations received various forms of regeneration funding helped to create the conditions for working to maintain and strengthen these links once resources were withdrawn from communities over the subsequent decade.

Lambeth council has also been important to the growth of MFPP. Although in part motivated by ever-decreasing budgets, the parks service has supported MFPP to take on increasing levels of responsibility for the park and its facilities, handing over various buildings and recently providing equipment and training so that the project can take on responsibility for basic landscape maintenance. Some of the functions MFPP provides are contracted from the council – and MFPP are aware of the small risk that another contractor could try to outbid them when the contract is up for renewal in 2021 - but the services required and delivered are relatively unique to the project. All this has required the council accepting a degree of risk, and providing support for the project to develop over time. In some senses the period when the council directly employed MFPP staff during the PFP project delivery could be seen as a form of protected incubation for the project, although the end of this support was not necessarily by design.

2.2. Engaging local residents

The project has worked hard to engage local residents in a variety of ways. Major decisions about changes in the park have always included public meetings, and Tori works ceaselessly to go out in person visiting different neighbourhoods, groups and organisations in the local area to talk to people about what they are doing at the park, and ask what the park can do for them.

Food-growing has been an important part of the park’s history and MFPP has kept this going through a multitude of different growing initiatives that engage the community in various ways (see ‘bringing people together’ and ‘Covid-19’ sections below). During the period of the original PFP project the greenhouse was restored, a horticulturalist

was employed and the project ran a range of food-related initiatives and events, as Tori recalls: *'lots of great food stuff around Caribbean food, African food, heritage, collecting information about the heritage of different food ... [this helped develop] a real sense I think of community and a change in ethos about the park'*

Holding community events has been an important way of bringing the local community into the park. The park hosted six events per year during the PFP period, and they have continued to hold regular community events. Many of these events have become a fixture in the local calendar:

"I've had some really good experiences with them personally and I've taken [my children] to festivals there like the autumn festivals etcetera so it's been really positive, so it's been a bit of a feature in our lives" (Lisa, park user and project partner).

These events are well attended and enjoyed by many residents but some people in houses neighbouring the park have made complaints. There have also sometimes been complaints about noise from football games and different activities in the park. As a park is very closely surrounded by houses, there is sometimes a tension between the needs of wider park users and those living immediately around it.

"I do drumming with Graham ... we did this because Graham started playing for kids and it was beautiful. Slow drumming with kids between the age of 0 and 18 months. So we brought it to the quiet area. The kids love it, singing along. It was as quiet as my voice now. But we still had residents complaining." (Marsha, park user)

"This is what annoys me, they overlook it and we've done so much restoration and the price of their house has gone up exponentially because they've got a beautiful park in front of them, but no, all they do is complain and you think my god, do you not remember what it used to be like" (Sam, project stakeholder)

There is also still some work to do to develop better communication between the organisations that use the park for their business, such as Lambeth Tigers, the café, the nursery and two other small businesses that recently moved into a disused part of the park (a stone mason and a landscape gardener). The MFPP team say they are working on ways to improve this as part of the Resilient Heritage project, but more broadly the main challenge at the moment is how to ensure the financial resilience of the park without jeopardising the ownership the community feels for the space, as Marj put it: *'if we succeed then the project will be sustainable so then we'll have steady income, which will make it much more likely that the park will just continue to be well-maintained. The tricky thing is ethos and values.'* A community ethos is certainly not something the park currently lacks.

3. Improving health and wellbeing

Food and food education have been at the heart of the park's activities over the last decade or so, bringing people together (see Section 4, below) but also improving health and wellbeing among those that learn about healthy eating and develop new cooking skills through one of the many initiatives MFFP has been involved in over the years:

"We started doing work around food, particularly because we had the greenhouse and the park has the food heritage with the market garden and round here it's really terrible, there's hardly any shops or anything for food and also with high levels of bad health and everything, it just seemed like a really good fit" (Tori)

Volunteers have benefitted from being involved in the park in lots of ways through physical activity and, for some, developing a sense of purpose.

Anecdotally park use has increased significantly since the Parks for People-funded improvements, which should mean that the positive health and wellbeing impacts of visiting greenspace are felt by greater numbers of people. And of course the park is used for the usual kinds of fitness activities: walking, running, cycling, impromptu games of frisbee and so on. Improvements to the tennis courts and 5-a-side pitches make sure that people benefit from formal sporting activities too; and some schools also use the park for PE. Lambeth Tigers train around 200 young people per year who will all benefit from the physical activity. Others go to the park for peace and quiet.

But much of the benefits that Myatt's Field provides is again through the sense of community that has been fostered over time, intangible benefits like building confidence and pride. Different activities in the park are an important part of this: *'just getting people out and doing little talks and walks'* (Eliza, park manager) - but the physical improvements through the PFP project have been pivotal:

"I think it has a really positive impact on people's well-being that they know the park is as it is, that it's a community park and they're welcome and there's a community around it, so I think that sense of belonging and being able to contribute has a huge effect on well-being and I think that change wouldn't have happened without [Parks for People funding], definitely. I think the number of opportunities to participate and be part of something, I think that has a huge effect on people. I think the sense of belonging to a group, the greenhouse project has an incredible impact on health and well-being and we couldn't have done that without the depot development and we wouldn't have got access to the greenhouse without [Parks for People] happening" (Tori)

So, much of what brings improvements to health and wellbeing is the park's role in *bringing people together*, which is the focus of the next section.

4. Bringing people together

The area around Myatt's Field can be a lonely and isolating place. 40% of over 65s live alone in the Vassall ward, compared to the England average of 32%. People have moved in and out of the area over the years bringing a rich cultural mix but also making it hard for some people to settle, to make new friends and connections within the community – especially for those who English is not their first language. Before PFP, Myatt's Field was part of the problem. It was seen as an unwelcoming place, the sort of place you might feel afraid to go alone, at best the sort of place you went to because there was nowhere else to go. That image of an unsafe, unwelcoming place has been transformed through the PFP project and subsequent work by MFPP.

Day-to-day, basic infrastructure like the café are an important part of that. Its position in the centre of the park makes it well placed to provide various functions. It's a meeting place – for instance for local mums' groups – and a place for people to come for a cheap cup of coffee (by London prices at least) and possibly bump into a friend, or strike up conversation with a stranger. Eliza, the owner of the café, is also employed as the park manager at Myatt's Field so the café becomes a focal point for booking activities or commenting on facilities or how the park is run. The café is owned and run by Eliza and her family. Her family who moved to London from Ecuador and who had found themselves increasingly distant from one another working in different parts of London before they came together again to run the café. In this instance the park's infrastructure had literally brought a family together again. The café's central location means that there are always people around throughout the day, making the park feel more welcoming to people who might otherwise have worried about being in an unsupervised open area.

“The café is between the tennis courts, the dog area and the major gardens so it's right in the middle of it all. That's why the café is the central point of the park, anybody you meet and greet at the café then move to the different areas of the park, it's mostly used as a meeting spot” (Eliza).

Having a number of businesses and organisations based in the park has helped to make the park feel vibrant and more welcoming as a result, as the pre-school manager explained:

“Having someone in here all the time it definitely makes it feel like there's someone, we haven't got any [local authority employed] park keepers .. when I first knew the park there was a regular park keeper there but we don't have that. I think it's really important to have people like us in here ... I think we're here and keeping it feeling like home for a lot of people ... even the other day we took the kids out to run around in the picnic area, it was early morning but a lady who works for me, she said ‘have you noticed all the people watching?’ and there were several, an older man and a man on his way to work or something just stood watching and people like watching the kids running around and doing things ... it's not a lonely dark place then is it?” (Nicola, pre-school manager)

These activities and organisations are important to reducing isolation. Tori, Marj and their fellow activists first came to the park to join the 'one o'clock club', which was held in a rundown building where the café now stands. The role of the park in supporting mums of young children who are often feeling isolated has been important to the park. The café is an important part of this and the one o'clock club continues in the new Mulberry Centre building which is also home to the pre-school.

Food has also brought people together in the park. Pre-Covid there was an over 50s lunch group, and one of the greatest success stories was a women's cooking group.

The group was set up by a Lambeth resident initially as a volunteer and later was able to be paid after securing some funding from the City Bridge Trust. The project was aimed at 'hard to reach' women who were at risk of loneliness and isolation, often because English wasn't their first language. It brought women together and helped them to feel comfortable in the company of others and connect with the local community, as Sakhira, the group coordinator explained:

"It was somewhere safe, the atmosphere was amazing, being in this environment, you look through the window and you will feel you're in a little cottage in Kent so it was really amazing to have this ... We had a lot of women suffering from depression so it was a very great way to heal those kind of mental health issues really, so it was a means to decrease some of the symptoms of anxiety or loneliness. The fact that they were in a group and socialising as well, so they managed to also gain new friends, socialise with other people from different cultures and also to know what's happening within the borough because some of them are isolated, they don't even know what's happening ... Myatt's Field Park is very special for us" (Sakhira)

MFPP was an important reason that the park was so special for this group. The group lead commented on how positive the project team was and solved any issues that arose; and the depot and greenhouse facilities which had been renovated through the PFP project were essential to the group's success.

Volunteering and employment in the park, too, makes a difference, exemplified by one story of a volunteer who progressed into employment at the park:

"... people can participate by working for the park. Sam⁸, for example, he lives in sheltered housing next to the park, then he started volunteering with us, he did training with us and now he works for the park and runs volunteering for other people." (Marj)

Like in lots of parks there is a challenge to provide a space for young people to take part in meaningful activities. Many young people who would not otherwise visit the park have done so because Lambeth Tigers offers them a chance to take part in sport, although the football pitches are fenced off from view and so remain a little bit separate from the rest of the park. MFPP continue to seek ways to engage young people in the life of the park in different ways, including music-focused events, although doing so can also create complaints about noise. But as park user Abigail said: *'we need to be strong and say this is important ... and it's only 1 or 2 days a year'*

Overall the users and stakeholders see Myatt's Field park as critical to the cohesion of the local community, bringing together people from a range of backgrounds. A lot of the success in making the park a place where people come together is down to the approach taken by the project team. As local resident Hannah put it: *they've had a really inclusive approach in terms of involving people and making the park open, accessible, flexible.*

⁸ Name changed to protect anonymity

5. Engaging with nature and the environment

If there's one common theme to the numerous groups and activities that take place in the park it's connecting to nature. Whether it's the bat walks that were organised over the 'Covid summer', the wide range of food related initiatives over the years or the outdoors focus of the park's preschool, nature is often at the fore. There's also the way the park has been landscaped, the wildlife garden in particular offering opportunity for people to spend time connecting to nature. In a large city like London where many local residents don't have their own gardens this matters even more:

"It's inside the estate but it's like you're actually in the countryside, so for some person just to come out of the house, a lot of them would be living in buildings on the 10th floor so having some trees around them was very different, they will go and pick up the children from school, they might see a few trees around the way but some of them will be very isolated. So it was a way not only to come out of the house and be in a very pretty and natural atmosphere, just the air that they were breathing was different, and also to be in contact with nature." (Sakirah)

Children in particular are encouraged to connect to nature in the park. Myatt's Field is an accredited Natural Thinkers site. The Natural Thinkers programme aims to connect children with nature led by early years practitioners, and Myatt's Field provides access to different activities including:

- use of the shed in the wildlife area, which contains pond dipping equipment, digging equipment, den building, whittling equipment and various other tools and resources for engaging with nature.
- an outdoor mud kitchen
- opportunities to grow food or help to maintain wildlife habitats

Hannah, also an early years practitioner locally, described some of the benefits children get out of taking part in these activities.

"They do things like mud throwing, making mud and throwing it on trees, making things out of the natural environment and using the natural environment for creative and learning for very young children. It is a workforce programme but then people deliver it in their own way, whether it's food growing which is a strong link to the park, it's about promoting health and well-being and supporting children to understand their role in terms of protecting the environment so it's a great programme, we love it" (Hannah)

The park's pre-school also takes a nature-based approach to learning, getting the children out into the park as often as possible. The pre-school is privately run but it offers free stay-and-play one o'clock club sessions as part of the lease agreement with the park. These free sessions are often nature-based and also help to overcome any reticence among parents to allow their children freedom to play in nature:

"we are a nature-based, everything we do is based around the seasons. So we're going to be offering these free sessions coming up and I think that stretches through what we do, through our stay and play ... we had a photo from one of our parents, during lockdown we did story time every day so we made sure we stayed in touch with the kids and there was a photo her child had taken her around the park and told her the name of the trees that she didn't even know herself, so we felt quite proud of that one." (Nicola)

Everyday users of the park also talk about how it has connected them to nature, especially the wildlife garden, and it is clear to outsiders how much the park does in this regard, as a parks consultant who has recently been working with MFPP on its Resilient Heritage project remarked:

“Through what I’m seeing by way of community events and activities and volunteering that takes place, local people having the opportunity to engage with nature, they’re adding a lot of value over and above what would just be the normal experience of being a park user” (Hannah)



Willflowers in the meadow area. Photo: Debbie Sears

6. Reducing inequalities

Community is again central to understanding how MFPP has helped to address inequalities where there are high levels of deprivation in parts of the local area. It matters that Myatt's Field is now seen as a park for everyone, and there is continuing work to overcome any sense that it is "owned" by its neighbours. One park user talked about how much this had improved since the start of the PFP project:

"know that over the years it's evolved, it's a beautiful park, it's such a wonderful space and I know MFPP tried to bring in more community-based projects like the pensioners groups, they run all the spaces, so the café, the depot and office space, just very much trying to get it more accessed by the community, the wider community not just an elite few" (Hannah)

And this extends to involvement in decision-making: ensuring that diverse voices are heard, and people are empowered to have a say. MFPP have been more successful than lots of other parks in this regard: *[MFPP have] got a broad, diverse board, whereas on my board, I'm a local charity as well, I find it really hard to get people involved (Louisa, project stakeholder)*. The Project has a policy of trying to employ people who live locally too, supporting people into employment via volunteering, such as in the case of Sam above.

It is also about how PFP investment has built confidence in the community and various people commented on how the initial investment and subsequent work helped people in the local area to feel valued, and to develop a sense that change really can happen and that they can be a part of that change.

The big point here is about empowerment of local people to achieve more, either through working in the park, being part of decision-making or just the intangible benefit of feeling valued by local stakeholders and feeling better about the place they live in.

The park is home to innumerable initiatives and partnerships, not all of which can be detailed here. One example that typifies the approach to addressing inequalities in the area is MFPP's role in the Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP). MFPP has been part of the LEAP partnership board since it began in 2015. It felt like a natural fit, the LEAP manager explained: *'we've got a shared vision and outcomes and understanding of what good outcomes are for children and I think the fact that a lot of funding and work had been invested in terms of the needs of young children and families, that meant that we very much aligned in terms of our work' (Rae)*

The Project was commissioned to deliver family engagement work for the partnership, and two people are employed at Myatt's Field to do this, running operations from the park depot. It felt important to LEAP to have that base in the community, and in the park especially:

"It's a non-threatening space, if people are a bit reluctant to go to any kind of service that's based anywhere else I think a park is very much neutral, non-threatening territory. Some of the work we do is working with quite vulnerable mums and pregnant women particularly and we run a befriending scheme for pregnant women. We have something called CAN, Community Activity Nutrition, so that's a programme that supports pregnant women who have a high BMI during pregnancy, so it's a diet and nutrition-based programme and part of that is to encourage using open spaces for walking, so Myatt's Field has been quite a critical place." (Rae)

The park has become an important part of supporting the lives of vulnerable families in the area through LEAP but also through the various other activities it hosts. And the reputation of the park, and of MFPP, as a safe place, and a safe organisation to work with, means that those connections continue to grow: *'we can pass on that confidence to other people and other families with great authority, it's somewhere that we know people can trust and that they'll be looked out for and looked after'* (Rae).



Myatt's Field Park bandstand. Photo: Myatt's Fields Park Project

7. Supporting the local economy

With any investment it can be difficult to unpick the difference it has made to local economies, or at least to have any level of certainty. In one sense the impact of PFP and subsequent investments in Myatt's Field park is the same. A look at typical indicators like employment levels in Lambeth or numbers of new businesses would tell you very little. But look closer, at a more human scale, and it is possible to see how the Project has made a difference to the local economy in a range of different ways.

MFPP has created jobs. 13 people work for MFPP in various roles. This includes the community development manager, park manager, accounts manager, volunteer coordinator, horticulturalist and two family engagement workers. Moving people into employment is positive, but it is important that this work is meaningful, fairly paid and is carried out under good conditions. This is one way that MFPP sees itself as making a difference:

“What we did is set up a wage structure where there's London living wage for the work that is paid for from hire income (like gardeners and cleaners) and then everybody else is on 30,000 pro rata per annum, we decided a long time ago that if we're going to work as a team and bring in the right people and try and make everything unified that we would go down that route and so far it's worked.” (Marij)

Beyond direct employment the park offers ways into employment through volunteering (as a way of building skills and CVs – *'I give so many people references and it's been their first reference'* said Tori) and formal training: for instance in recent years nine people have completed NVQ Level 2 in horticulture and *'loads of people'* have undertaken food safety training. The park is also home to a number of enterprises who also create economic benefits for the area as well as people who provide various services within the park, all of whom live locally. Tori talked through the different enterprises that now operate in the park:

“So we've got the Tigers now are a business really that is running and doing well, as is the Mulberry Centre, and the café, so we've got three businesses running and we've got a couple more businesses in the compound at the moment, one is a horticultural landscaping company, they were running at home and they've been running in the compound and he's got a contract for Lambeth that he wouldn't have been able to do at home ... we also have Bee Urban in the nature garden ... when I first started the café used to provide the lunches for the kids but they couldn't manage it after a while, it was just too many so we've got someone else now local who works from home, two chefs that are not working so much now because of everything so that's worked really well. The guy who teaches tennis, he teaches the kids tennis, there's also a lady who used to run a nature group in the park, she's now working with us as well. I like keeping people connected within here as much as possible.”

The ethos of these enterprises is also what is distinctive. The pre-school offers free sessions through the one o'clock club, the café reinvests any surplus back into the café and park projects, as well as providing refreshments to volunteers and people who can't afford to buy a drink; and Lambeth Tigers has a social mission to develop well-rounded young people. And of course MFPP is a social enterprise in its own right with a clear social and environmental mission. There are plans to go further too, with redevelopment of the depot, which the council has committed to funding. This will allow MFPP to set up an incubator for food businesses.

So it is not just that the park employs people or that it provides a site for businesses, although these are important. It is that through its social mission it helps to create

conditions for a different model of economic development, one that is people and nature-centred, and where profits are reinvested into communities. This kind of approach to economic development has been referred to as ‘doughnut economics’, which refers to the need to create an economy that sufficiently supports human wellbeing (the social foundation) while living within environmental limits (the ecological ceiling). The ‘doughnut’ is the ring that exists between these two limits)⁹. The park, through the work of MFPP, has created potential for an ecosystem of economic activity which puts these principles into practice.



Seedlings in the greenhouse. Photo: Myatt's Fields Park Project

⁹ <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>

8. Myatt's Field park during Covid-19

The research for this case study was mostly carried out in September 2020 as the first wave of Covid-19 seemed to have passed and the respondents all reflected back on experiences in the park over the first lockdown in Spring 2020 and the 'Covid summer'.

Like everywhere else the local park was 'rediscovered' as a green haven in the midst of strict restrictions on movement and gatherings. Use of the park increased significantly, with users appreciating the open space to relax and/or exercise during the time permitted for outdoor activity:

"It's been fantastic for me, because it's so quiet and near to me I use it for, during lockdown I'm on this routine where I'm doing health and well-being, that's a new thing I'm doing, I go running round the park and I play tennis there as well and table tennis sometimes ... There are different areas around the park. There are thick woods and I like to walk in the woods where there's no-one, during Covid I was walking in the street and people are ducking and diving trying to avoid you and stuff like that so when I go to the woods it's just like total trees and stuff like that. So with Myatt's Field Park I go there because it's nice quiet people, relaxed people tend to be in there." (Graham, Park user)

Like everywhere this brought some challenges. Increased usage meant increased litter for a while putting strain on park resources. But this problem seemed to be resolved relatively quickly, partly attributed to government and council information campaigns but also to community action which built on the work put in over the last few years to ensure that local people valued Myatt's Field Park as 'their' space. Eliza felt that that Myatt's Field had fared better than elsewhere: *all the effort from years of campaigning and getting the community involved in the management of the park, self-management of the park, we're seeing the results now cos every other park had so many issues.*

Unsurprisingly, given what we have learnt over the last 15 or so pages of this report, MFPP was busy in this period supporting the local community. Although many of the projects based in the park had to pause, the Project and its partners worked to find alternative activities and ways of working. The most impressive initiative involved repurposing horticultural work that was intended for activities with the community in the park into a 'grow and eat at home' initiative, as Eliza explained:

"Right now all our resources have been focusing on providing seedlings to our community and encouraging our community to grow their own food. So we started this project during lockdown, we couldn't invite our volunteers to grow food in our settings any more, in our greenhouse any more, we came up with this plan to give the seedlings and allow them to grow food in their gardens if they have a garden, on the windowsill, whatever ... For years we've been trying to get the community involved in growing food but we haven't really been able to get to that point, but lockdown allowed us to do that cos it gave everybody more time and gardening became a good way to spend the extra time that everybody now has."

This was then rolled out to growing food for local charities and community groups, and they estimate that they distributed up to 50,000 plants across the local area: *I think half of Lambeth now has a tomato plant growing in some form or other (Elaine).* The idea is to continue this initiative indefinitely into the future. Lockdown ended up creating an opportunity for MFPP to do something they had been thinking about for a long time: *if we can teach the community, encourage the community to grow their own food at home then we'll be happy with that outcome (Elaine).*

As restrictions eased over the summer some activities recommenced and small events like a bat walk and a tree walk were able to go ahead with Covid-proofing in place (splitting sessions into small groups and maintaining social distancing). But revenues for MFPP and the enterprises in the park were badly hit by Covid restrictions, although costs were also lower as a result of putting on fewer events and activities. The hope for the park is that a level of 'normality' can be restored for 2021 so that the important work MFPP does supporting the community can be rebuilt and it can continue to develop its revenue streams towards becoming more financially resilient. Eliza was optimistic:

“Covid is very challenging, the sales have been affected as every other business but we're still ok, we believe we'll be able to manage because the community really do support us.”



Myatt's Field Park in Springtime. Photo: Myatt's Fields Park Project

9. Opportunities and challenges

During interviews, the phrase ‘holding it all together’ kept cropping up. There are of course day-to-day challenges of running a park, and there will likely always be some challenges managing tensions between different park users. But it feels that this question of holding it all together is what presents both the main opportunities and challenges for the park.

Holding the organisation together. Strong and committed leadership through the group of core project members has been essential to the success of the project. But keeping the project going since the PFP project came to an end has been a challenge personally and collectively for those closely involved in the project. Tori, Elaine and others close to project reflected on the personal toll the work of finding money, building partnerships, delivering improvements has taken: *‘What it takes to keep these things going is insane really ... It’s bonkers trying to hold it all together’*, says Tori. For the project as a whole the challenge is to find a way of working that is less dependent on the finite time and emotional resources of this small group and which also leads the park towards a more sustainable footing. They are working hard to make these changes through the Resilient Heritage funding, by creating new governance structures that spread the load and improve diversity in decision making.

Holding finances together. In a context of on-going uncertainties over public funding for parks both MFPP and Lambeth are keen to see the park become self-sufficient. A range of funding streams are being explored, including donations from local residents. Aside from any continuing effects of Covid-19, a lot hinges on the proposed depot redevelopment which would create opportunities to hire out more rooms and potentially open space for a food business incubator. The council has committed to funding this redevelopment but projected costs keep rising and there are concerns the budget set aside for this won’t be sufficient.

Holding community together. Myatt’s Field Park is a real community success story, and the extent to which MFPP has helped a diverse range of local people feel ownership over the park is impressive. There is an opportunity to continue this work and go further to really embed different voices within decision-making through the current Resilient Heritage project. There is also an opportunity to build on the emerging community economy within the park, making the most of the potential to bring in money for MFPP while also strengthening the social and environmental ethos: if such activities can be carefully curated any concerns about revenue generation being detrimental to the wider value the park brings can be set aside.

Holding on to silver linings. Finally, MFPP’s response to Covid-19 by building an impressive plant-distribution operation has created an opportunity to further build the park’s reach into the local community by bringing nature into homes across Lambeth. MFPP is keen to build on this work rather than see it as a one-off gesture in a time of crisis and it is this adaptive approach to challenge – to more than just hold it together but to hold it together *and* try new things *and* grow, whatever comes their way – that is an inspirational lesson for anyone trying to make a difference in their local community.

10. Learning points

1. The basics matter. A big success of the park's transformation has been the location and use of the park's infrastructure to create a welcoming environment for users. Siting the café in the centre of the park and using the depot as a base for park management and community activity make a big difference to the feel of the park.
2. Presence matters. Having people working in the park who are accessible to park users, including an on-site park manager, makes a big difference to how people feel about the park and their feelings of ownership over what happens in the park. And the work of Tori and colleagues to go into local estates to spread the word makes a difference to how the park and MFPP is perceived: they are an accessible presence in the local area
3. Leadership matters. Having a consistent group of dynamic and determined people leading the project has been critical to the project's success, particularly in gaining funding and building partnerships. Often when a grant ends the people associated leave and move on to something else: although difficult for MFPP to negotiate, maintaining most of the core team was central to the Project's continued success.
4. Letting go matters too! As Tori and her fellow leaders have learnt over the years, it is also important to let go sometimes, to build up others' strengths and confidence to lead. It has been hard sometimes to let go, but developing new formal governance arrangements is helping to make sure the work is distributed among a wider, more diverse range of people. Lambeth council have also shown the importance of letting go in allowing MFPP the freedom to develop the park and activities in its own way.
5. Partnership *really* matters. The park would not be such a critical resource for the community without the array of partnerships that MFPP have built with local service providers. These partnerships make the park a central hub for a network that supports community wellbeing.
6. Community matters. Devoting time and resources to galvanising and empowering the local community has been a cornerstone of the project's success.
7. Listening matters. A real strength of MFPP has been its outreach to local communities and taking the time to properly listen to people's wants and needs rather than treat outreach simply as a one-way communication. A representative of a partner organisation put it like this: *in the simplest possible terms if you wish to be more inclusive, just talk to people who are different from yourselves and ask them what they think and invite them to act on it.*
8. Maintenance matters. MFPP didn't quite realise in advance how much money and effort is required to keep shiny new things shiny, or at least in working order (physically holding things together): *I didn't ever really get that, things run down very quickly, the maintenance is an ongoing thing and really you need to have a proper maintenance schedule and allowance for that (Tori).*
9. Succession matters. Seeing the funding as a catalyst for future growth rather than an end in itself has been really important to the development of the park over the last decade. The PFP project was always seen as the start of something bigger and this has borne fruit in the long-term development of the project.
10. Doughnuts matter. Parks can be an incubator or hub for economic models that put people and nature first (like the idea of doughnut economics by Kate Raworth). Myatt's Field Park shows possibilities to nurture community-focused economic-development.

11. Conclusion: the difference Parks for People has made

Parks for People funding has made a huge difference to Myatt's Field park and to the people living locally. And – in case this isn't sufficiently clear already – it is the combination of funding with a talented, dedicated team with a clear vision that has made Myatt's Field Park the fantastic community amenity it is today, which meets the wants and needs of an increasingly diverse array of people in the area. The leadership of the MFPP team has been essential to delivering specific goals as well as galvanizing the local community.

The most affecting stories are those which have brought people together and helped people feel more part of a community. The story of the women's cooking group for example, and of MFPP's involvement with Lambeth Early Action Partnership. The connection to nature through food and growing flows through the essence of most activities and MFPP's seedlings initiative in response Covid-19 was emblematic of this. Although taking place years afterwards, the seeds for each of these activities were sown in the original Parks for People project through the investment in infrastructure, people and communities it provided.

The park is much more than the initiatives MFPP is involved in though. It is a vital day-to-day health and wellbeing resource that connects people to nature and is a place to be among other people or to be alone in a peaceful space for a few moments. Making the park feel a safe and welcoming place was a legacy of the PFP project, and of the on-going investments in the park that MFPP have secured. PFP acted as a catalyst for everything else and even when things were difficult for MFPP they resisted any urge to give up, to pass control back to the local authority. As Tori says, there's an element of stubbornness to that: *“the other thing to say about funding and the Parks for People grant, there's this weird effect that once you've invested so much and got so far you can't bear to let it go.”*

Appendix 1: Methodology

Research for this case study took place in September and October 2020. After reviewing the documents related to the project, the researchers visited Myatt's Field Park in January 2020 to see the work done and speak to the project lead. Because of Covid-19 restrictions the remaining work was done remotely. In September and October 2020 we conducted in-depth interviews with 10 individuals connected with the park. These included a council officer; seven members of voluntary or community organisations; one business owner and one volunteer. MFPP had separately commissioned a piece of research as part of the Resilient Heritage project: they provided recordings from two focus groups with a total of 11 parks users, which have also informed this report. The individuals interviewed are not a representative sample of the population, but are knowledgeable about the project and the local area and in many cases have been involved in community activities connected to the project.

Appendix 2: About the area

Local Health

	Vassall Ward	London	England
Limiting long term illness or disability, 2011	15.0%	14.2%	17.6%
Households that experience fuel poverty, 2016	9.0%	10.0%	11.1%
People aged 65 and over living alone, 2011	40.3%	34.5%	31.5%
Life expectancy			
At birth for males, 2013-2017 (years)	78.6	80.3	79.5
At birth for females, 2013-2017 (years)	86.7	84.7	83.1

Source: ONS and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

Index of Multiple Deprivation

	2010		2015		2019	
	IMD Rank	IMD Decile	IMD Rank	IMD Decile	IMD Rank	IMD Decile
Lambeth 005D	7,336	3	7,104	3	12,452	4

Source: English Indices of Deprivation, MHCLG.

Note: Data is included at LSOA level (Lower Layer Super Output Area).

Economic Activity

Economic activity rate – aged 16-64	Vauxhall	England
2005	68.7%	76.6%
2010	81.6%	76.3%
2015	86.4%	77.9%
2019	80.1%	79.2%

Source: Annual Population Survey, ONS.

Note: Data is included parliamentary constituency level (Vauxhall).

Housing Market

Average price paid	2010		2015		2019	
	SE5 postcode	London	SE5 postcode	London	SE5 postcode	London
Detached	£761,875	£791,381	£1,787,333*	£928,706	£1,646,250*	£1,059,515
Semi-det	£503,667	£433,576	£1,111,755	£590,678	£984,219	£653,988
Terraced	£460,149	£450,055	£796,537	£604,266	£902,726	£677,347
Flat/maisonette	£231,297	£340,046	£391,584	£474,890	£456,930	£554,886
Overall average	£293,024	£408,351	£509,461	£545,448	£541,866	£628,430

Source: HM Land Registry.

Note: * total number of sales is less than 5.