

# Why should we invest in parks?

Evidence from the Parks for People programme



## Foreword

**For 26 years The National Lottery has invested in the UK's public parks and urban green spaces. Over 900 urban parks have been regenerated with over £1billion invested by The National Lottery working in partnership with the many local authority owners.**

The physical evidence of this investment is everywhere to be seen, from replanted historic avenues to restored memorial fountains, from new play spaces to thriving park community cafes. But what impact has this investment had on the people that use parks, how have they benefited and were we right to insist that all National Lottery funded park projects should also focus on supporting local communities to use and engage with their newly regenerated parks?

Parks are more than just the green oases beautifying our towns and cities and providing a home for nature. Parks are one of our most used publicly-funded services. They form the heart of local community life, providing space for people to exercise to improve their physical health and mental wellbeing, to play, chat, eat, gather, protest and relax. Parks are essential pieces of community infrastructure.

The huge importance of our urban parks has never been more appreciated and understood than it is today. Covid-19 has meant that increasing numbers of people have discovered, used and relied upon their local parks and green spaces to help them to cope with lockdown restrictions, although this has also placed more pressure than ever on these vital green assets.

Our research shows that simply investing in capital improvements to put parks in good physical health is not enough. Whilst good quality

and well maintained parks are essential, so too is investment in facilities and resources to help people actively engage and make full use of their local parks. Simply maintaining a basic status quo in park maintenance is not enough. What makes great parks is providing community facilities such as cafes, community spaces and toilets, as well as inclusive leadership and staff support to help everyone access the benefits we know local parks and green spaces can deliver.

The case studies included within the report demonstrate how essential our parks are and that continued investment in both their ongoing maintenance and the resources needed to help people access these benefits is fundamental. Reducing park maintenance budgets to cover just grass cutting and litter collection, at the very time when use and demand is increasing, is a false economy.

Our Parks for People investment programme shows that the best way to maximise the benefits that parks can provide is to ensure that ongoing investment supports both the park and its landscape, as well as providing support and resources to allow everybody to equally enjoy and access local parks and green spaces.

**Drew Bennelick**  
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## Evidence from the Parks for People programme

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## About this report

**This report highlights the multiple social benefits that can be achieved by investing in public parks, and in the people who bring those parks to life. It focuses on six examples of parks supported through the Parks for People (PFP) programme, funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund.<sup>1</sup>**

The six parks were selected to encompass a range of locations, types of community, and periods of investment. Some were mature projects where improvements had been completed for some years, while others have only just completed their programmes of work.

## What we did

The study is about the wider benefits that investment brings to a community, rather than simply showing what was done with the money awarded. It was conducted by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University, supported by Urban Pollinators Ltd and the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Sheffield.

The study was in two parts. First the team examined the academic evidence on the social benefits of parks and green spaces. This evidence review was published in early 2020 under the title [Space to Thrive](#). The research team then conducted in-depth case studies in the six selected parks. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, most of this work was done remotely. Nevertheless we were able to speak to a wide range of volunteers, council officers, community organisations and members of the public.

The six selected parks were:

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

## What difference Parks for People investment made

We found that investment in parks had positive impacts across six policy challenges:

- 1. Improving health and wellbeing:** Investing in parks created more opportunities for sport and exercise, attracting a more diverse range of users. Creating different types of spaces within parks, opportunities to volunteer, activities for park users, and connecting people to nature all benefited health and wellbeing. Vulnerable or marginalised people benefited from investment by connecting the diverse networks they belong to with parks, either by PFP projects providing relevant facilities and activities or through creating opportunities for volunteering.
- 2. Reducing isolation and loneliness:** Parks investment supported efforts to reduce isolation and loneliness. These benefits were realised in part by attention to the 'basics'.

<sup>1</sup> The Parks for People programme covered all UK nations but National Lottery Community Fund only supported those in England

## 'Good quality parks are critical social infrastructure'

These include providing informal spaces where people can meet or simply be near each other, and ensuring different vulnerable groups can have a say in landscape and building designs. Targeted outreach activities also helped to include groups who do not usually use parks.

3. **Increasing public participation:** Investment in parks catalysed community engagement through the delivery process and beyond. PFP projects developed a wide range of activities to promote participation and civic action, although these could be difficult to maintain once the grant ended. Some projects were making concerted efforts to extend civic engagement beyond population groups already more likely to be civically active.
4. **Tackling inequalities:** Investing in parks made a difference by making parks more inclusive places, through inclusive design and through activities. Good quality parks are critical social infrastructure, providing freely accessible services to local residents regardless of wealth. Investment in parks promoted pride of place and helped disadvantaged communities feel they 'matter'. Parks can be good sites for activities that support inclusion or seek to reduce inequalities: investment in these activities through PFP benefited a range of people.
5. **Connecting people with nature:** Parks investments have created new natural habitats and encouraged biodiversity. Local residents were inspired by improved possibilities to connect with nature, and experienced wellbeing benefits from these connections. Volunteering or learning in parks helped people connect with and care for nature.
6. **Growing local economies:** Investment has supported a range of economic activities, from park maintenance to social enterprises delivering education. The investment has created jobs through these activities and

provided people with skills to find employment: for example through training provision linked to volunteering activities. Importantly investment has supported different approaches to economic development: developing enterprise to meet the needs of people and planet through social enterprise and cooperatives.

Parks for People investment also led to further investment in parks, bringing additional benefits to communities: the impacts of Parks for People can be seen over time and without the ability to bring in further investment because of the additional capacity created by Parks for People, many of the initial benefits would have been lost or greatly reduced.

### What difference Parks for People investment made to experiences during Covid-19

In addition to our case study work we interviewed park users in Saughton Park, Stafford Orchard and Grosvenor and Hilbert Park about their experiences of using the parks during the first Covid-19 lockdown in Spring 2020.

For many of these park users, their local parks provided an important space for wellbeing, exercise and connecting with nature during the lockdown period.



This was particularly significant at a time of increased anxiety and uncertainty. The parks that had received investment through the Parks for People programme offered high quality, enjoyable spaces that – in the words of one interviewee – provided a ‘really happy place’ at a stressful time.

However, the story was not universally positive. The upsurge in use led to increased wear and tear and reports of antisocial behaviour – although in Myatt’s Field Park local residents responded to the challenge by organising community litter-picks.

Some users were unable to take part in their usual activities because these were organised by voluntary and community groups that had to suspend face-to-face work during the pandemic. The shutdown of community activities disproportionately affected more vulnerable people.

Access to good quality green space was unequal before the onset of the pandemic and interviewees highlighted that those without access to private gardens were disadvantaged as they sometimes had to share crowded places and were limited in what they were permitted to do.

### Essential ingredients for investing in parks

1. To make parks a ‘destination’ they need to provide **something for everyone**. This means giving careful thought to the balance of features and facilities. While restoring heritage elements was important this was not the only focus. The Parks for People projects were distinctive in their variety, catering for a wide range of interests and demographics.
2. **Buildings or community hubs** form a key part of many successful parks. Community-owned or community managed spaces might find it hard to resource the costs that come with these
3. **Events and festivals** provide opportunities to bring the community together for celebrations and fun. They can reinforce a sense of local identity and help residents to feel valued. But the scale and cost of events needs to be considered. Ticketed events can exclude people who are less able to pay, while large-scale events can prevent people enjoying a park as a quiet outdoor space.
4. **Regular activities** to engage with different population groups is critical, especially to make access easier and parks more welcoming for people who might otherwise find it difficult to access the park, or not feel like it is ‘their’ space.
5. **Connecting with nature** is an increasingly important part of people’s experience of urban green spaces. Trees and wildlife can help people cope with the stresses of their lives and feel a connection with a wider world. These benefits are enhanced when connections are actively made through volunteering or learning activities.



buildings without on-going fund-raising, but they also ensure that benefits and any profits are invested back into the park.

## How improvements need to happen

1. It is important to **build capacity** within communities and within the organisations involved in park management. The need to support local residents was evident from all the case studies, and where that support was limited delivering the project could be challenging. But capacity also needs to be built within local authorities.
2. **Involving and engaging communities** is key to success. This can be achieved in a range of different ways through inclusive local partnerships, co-design with residents and communities of interest, and creating open and inclusive ways for local people to engage directly with decision-making.
3. There needs to be a **long-term approach to management** to ensure the benefits of improvements are not lost over time.
4. **Flexibility is essential** in delivering complex projects.
5. **Learning and resources need to be shared** to inform projects elsewhere, locally and where appropriate across the UK.
6. All the projects highlight the importance of **handling difference respectfully** and managing multiple interests. Effective communication and listening is a skill that must be nurtured. The Parks for People projects have frequently been as much about community development as about the physical improvement of a green space.
7. **Income generation can be challenging.** Events need to be managed carefully and need to balance 'everyday' users' needs with those of event-goers and the need to generate income. There needs to be clarity about where any surplus will go to help overcome residents' concerns about events.



## Conclusion

**Taken together, our findings show that maintaining parks at a basic status quo level is not enough.** What makes great parks for people is investing in facilities for people to use and activating people to really engage in parks through supporting them in activities.

In the post-pandemic period it will be important to resume community activities safely and inclusively. Community organisations will need appropriate support and resources to achieve this. The long-term impacts of Covid-19 on health and wellbeing are unknown, but we can expect them to continue for some time. By investing in the upkeep of parks and by putting on activities that support wellbeing, green spaces can play an important role in a post-Covid recovery.



# 1

## Introduction



# 1 Introduction

**Parks for People was a programme by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund. It aimed to revitalise historic parks and cemeteries. Since 2006 the programme has contributed £254 million to 135 projects across the UK.<sup>2</sup>**

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 report is the final output of a national evaluation of the Parks for People programme. It is designed for people involved in parks and green spaces, including community groups, local authorities and other local service providers, funding providers and national government. The report provides evidence for the value of investing in parks. It can be used to support decision-making about parks investment and provides evidence to support development of new practices and policy for parks management.

The evaluation was 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](#), 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 social benefits of the funding and the lessons for local and national policy.

These are:

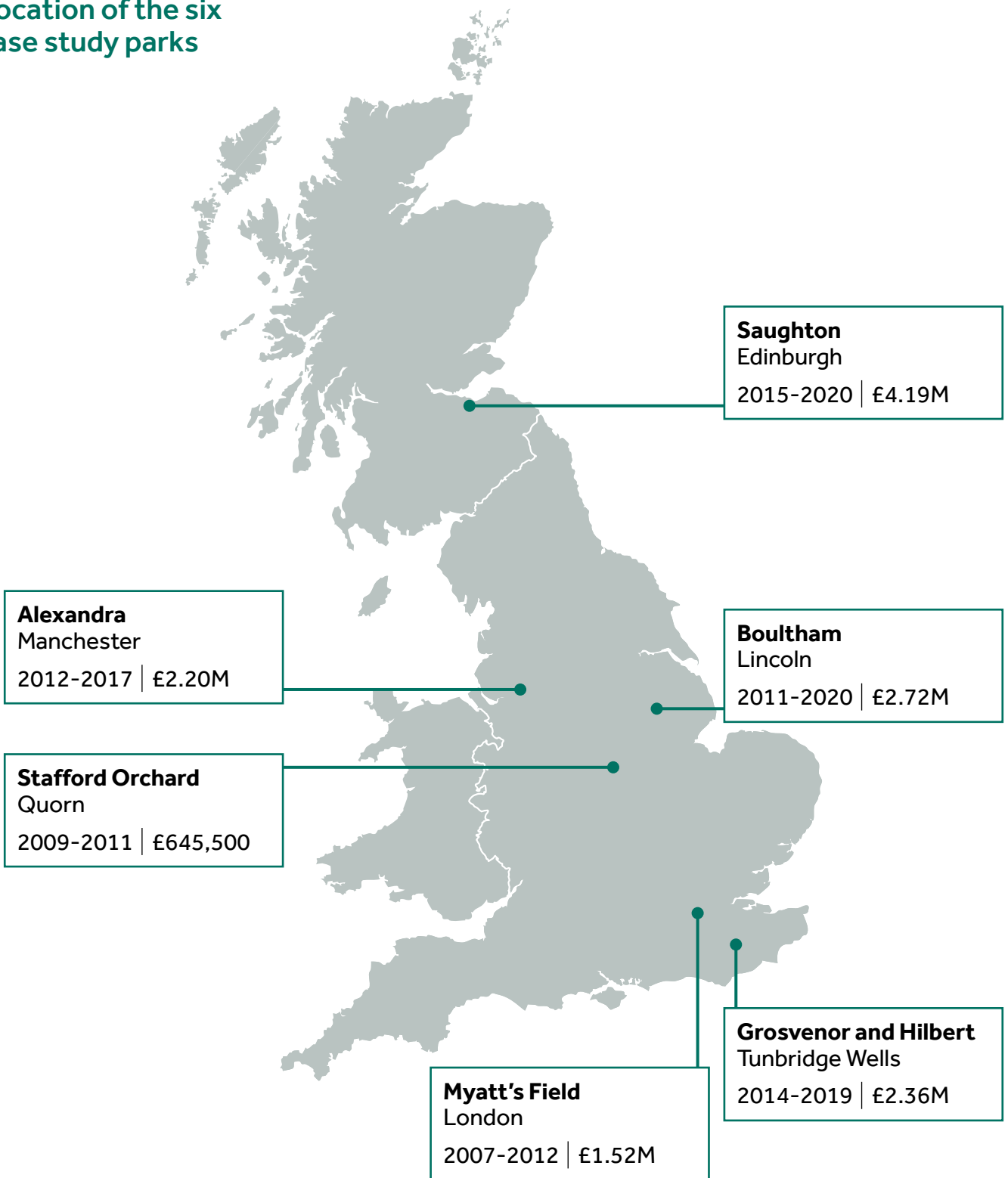
- Alexandra Park, Manchester
- Boutham Park, Lincoln
- Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, Tunbridge Wells
- Myatt's Field, Lambeth
- Saughton Park, Edinburgh
- Stafford Orchard, Quorn, Leicestershire

The case study parks were chosen to reflect a range of different contexts including different types of local authorities, geographic location, scale and focus of projects. Figure 1 below shows the location of these parks. Research methods for the case studies can be found in Appendix 1.

This report starts in Section 2 by introducing what we already know about the value of parks to people, drawing on [Space to Thrive](#). It then looks at the impact of the Parks for People programme across our six case study areas, framing the discussion by referring to the six types of benefit identified in the evidence review: health and wellbeing, reducing isolation, community engagement, tackling inequalities, connecting to nature, and economic development. It also briefly considers how these benefits were affected by restrictions on public parks and urban spaces imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. Finally, it considers learning points from the programme and challenges and opportunities for the future.

<sup>2</sup> The National Lottery Community Fund only funded projects in England

**Figure 1**  
Location of the six  
case study parks



# 2

What does existing evidence tell us about the value of parks?



# 2 What does existing evidence tell us about the value of parks?

Existing evidence tells us very clearly that good quality greenspace provides a range of social benefits. The evidence is particularly clear that parks are important for enhancing physical health, mental wellbeing and overall life satisfaction. However this evidence tells us less about the impacts of investing to improve parks, which our case study research set out to investigate.

## 2.1. Our assessment of the evidence

In 2019, the Parks for People (PFP) evaluation team undertook a thorough survey of the peer-reviewed academic literature on the social benefits of urban parks and green spaces. We examined 495 empirical studies published in the previous ten years that had been through a process of academic peer review, supplemented by another 31 papers reviewed in order to cover evidence gaps. After sifting for quality and relevance, 385 papers were considered. This research provides a solid evidence base for policy and practice, but does not include work that has not been peer-reviewed which may be more recent and is also valuable.

This evidence review, *Space to Thrive*, was published by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund in early 2020. The full report is available on the [Heritage Fund website](#). The report focused on issues such as health, wellbeing and social integration rather than on the wider environmental and ecological benefits of green spaces.

## 2.2. What the evidence shows

1. Physical health, mental wellbeing and life satisfaction are all enhanced through access to and use of parks and green spaces. The way parks are used is as important as how easy it is to get to them. People need parks and green spaces nearby, but they need to be of a good

enough quality to encourage regular visits. Visiting parks can help address government priorities such as reducing obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Visits to green spaces support mental wellbeing and stress relief. The quality of green spaces has a stronger bearing on health outcomes than quantity.

2. Parks create important opportunities to bring people together and reduce isolation. They can help refugees and migrants build a sense of belonging in new communities. But they can also amplify social divisions and groups may exclude themselves from green spaces if they feel the space is dominated by one particular group (for example, if a park is overwhelmingly used by young people) or if they feel unsafe (for example, when a space is poorly maintained or attracts antisocial behaviour).
3. Parks provide opportunities for community engagement and local residents value the chance to be involved in designing and improving their green spaces (e.g. through volunteering). Community gardening offers new residents the chance to build social connections. Children appreciate the opportunity to have their say on park improvements. Schemes to include young people in the care of green spaces can enhance their personal development and increase their environmental awareness.

**'Parks and green spaces enable people to connect with nature'**

4. Parks and green spaces highlight inequalities in society. There is evidence that the quality of parks and green spaces is worse in areas of lower income. Minorities are often marginalised in terms of access to green space in addition to the other forms of discrimination they face.
5. Parks and green spaces enable people to connect with nature, which in turn brings benefits in terms of wellbeing. Nature connectedness includes experiencing the natural world through the physical senses, learning about it, and engaging mindfully with nature by noticing and paying attention. Connectedness with nature is associated with a sense of gratitude and feelings of belonging in a place. Feeling connected to the natural world helps people recover from stress and mental illness. Connections with nature also help to build a sense of place and community and foster gratitude and self-worth.
6. Parks and green spaces can generate economic benefits in terms of creating employment, providing business opportunities (such as cafes or events) and encouraging inward investment.

Taken together, the evidence makes a compelling case for investing in urban green spaces. However, this evidence does not always lead to action at a local scale. The following sections of this report show what happens when there is funding to restore and improve parks. Although that investment came in the form of time-limited grants from The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund, the examples presented here show what could be done at a wider scale with sufficient will and resources. They provide clear examples of the transformative difference investment in parks can make for people and places.



3

What difference does investment make to health and wellbeing?



# 3 What difference does investment make to health and wellbeing?

Investment in parks created more opportunities for sport and exercise, attracting a more diverse range of users. Creating different types of spaces within parks, opportunities to volunteer, activities for park users, and connecting people to nature all benefited health and wellbeing. Vulnerable or marginalised people benefited from investment by connecting the diverse networks they belong to with parks, either by PFP projects providing relevant facilities and activities or through creating opportunities for volunteering.

## 3.1. Introduction

The value of good quality, accessible green space for health and wellbeing is increasingly well known. But this requires investment in appropriate facilities and activities as well as the 'basic' provision of open space and access to nature. Our case studies show just how important the Parks for People investments were for the health and wellbeing of local park users. This included improvements to the landscape and facilities and opportunities to take part in different activities. Benefits ranged from physical impacts of exercise (including through volunteering) to the wellbeing effects of socialising with others, taking part in meaningful volunteering activities and simply connecting to nature.

The challenge for some of our case studies was not creating spaces and opportunities to improve park users' health and wellbeing, but to maintain them once PFP funding came to an end so that benefits could be sustained.

## 3.2. Physical health

Most PFP projects and some subsequent investments included works to improve or create new facilities for physical activities, especially sport. In an online survey of users of all six parks conducted as part of our research, 56% of

respondents said they had become more physically active since using a PFP park. Alexandra Park was particularly prominent in this regard (see Case study 3.1, on page 19), but was not alone. At Stafford Orchard, for example, new play equipment for younger and older children, outdoor gym equipment, a Multi-use Games Area (MUGA) and skate park all promoted physical activity and were well used. Football and rugby teams have also benefited from improvements to the park, with open space for pitches levelled and maintained.

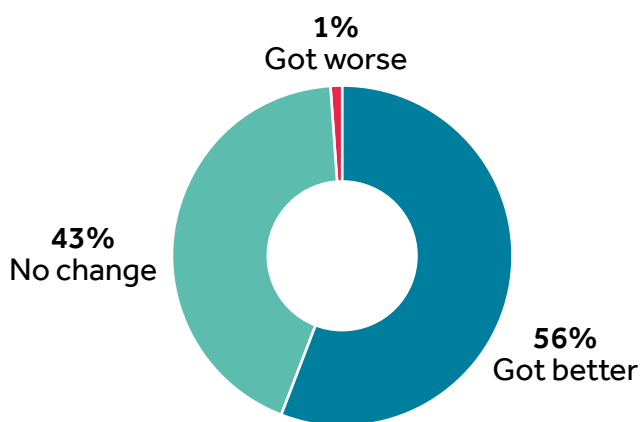
Improved sport facilities can also increase the diversity of park users, bringing physical benefits to a wider range of people. In Myatt's Field, redevelopment of 5-a-side football pitches helped a local community football team to improve its offer to young people in the area, giving young people (especially from Black British, Black African and Black Caribbean backgrounds) the chance to take part in formal sports. Projects also used PFP funding to support activities such as walking and cycling. Landscaping works enabled others to host activities such as Parkrun, as well as providing a venue for entrepreneurs to host keep-fit, yoga, kettlebell classes, or dog training. Volunteering activities, including helping to maintain planting and landscaping, and more mundane activities like litter picking, also provided important opportunities for some people to get more physically active.



**“why don’t you spend 10 minutes sitting in the park?”**

The value to physical health goes beyond taking part in formal activities or sport. The park improvements generated increased use, spreading the benefits of exercise to the wider population.

**Figure 3.1**  
Level of users’ physical activity since using a PFP park



### 3.3. Mental health and wellbeing

All our case studies demonstrated strongly the value of the PFP investments in supporting mental health and wellbeing. Users, volunteers, project workers and others gave examples of ways that parks improvements had benefited people’s mental health.

Volunteering, in particular, could sometimes have dramatic impacts on wellbeing. The volunteer coordinator at Boutham Park spoke about long-term benefits for people volunteering in the park, who were otherwise at risk of becoming isolated after falling out of paid employment:

**‘I’ve had guys come to me who haven’t left their flats or houses for six months. They’ve been made redundant and become almost hermits. And within five or six weeks in our groups, they can be completely different people. We’ve had great successes of people going on to get full time jobs or to do**

**other volunteering – really positive results and I think that’s something that’s easily overlooked and that’s very difficult to put a value on’.**

A user in the same park talked about the multiple wellbeing benefits of volunteering in green space:

**‘the fresh air, you’re doing physical work sometimes which is good for you and you’re meeting people when you might not normally meet them, and it all comes together. But doesn’t it always all come together in open spaces? Fresh air, movement, meeting people, community.’**

The development of formal wellbeing activities through and beyond PFP funding was a common theme. At Grosvenor and Hilbert Park a ‘mosaic’ of activities took place, working with a wide range of groups. These include an art and wellbeing group, the Green Care project which promotes volunteering as a route to wellbeing, and a social prescribing project. These organisations were able to recruit people who were more isolated or from marginalised groups, extending the wellbeing impacts of activities. This relied on a mix of dedicated volunteer coordination and extensive, diverse networks of groups linked to the park and activities in it. This wasn’t always easy to develop, or to maintain beyond the PFP funding period (see Section 5 on community engagement).

It is important also to recognise the wellbeing benefits for users who just valued the opportunity to be in a peaceful, open space:

**‘It’s a really good break. My wife sometimes says “why don’t you spend 10 minutes sitting in the park?” and I might sit on the bench where the park goes across to Hilbert, or I might go down to the oast house and sit there for a couple of minutes, just collecting my thoughts.**

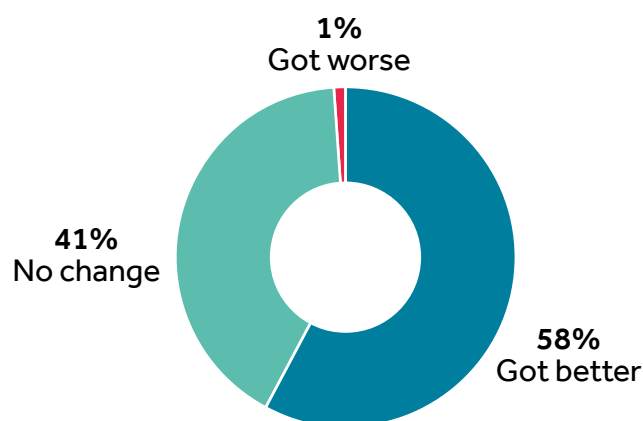
'it's lovely around about Guy Fawkes night or Diwali'

It's wonderful at Christmas time because you can see the backs of the houses and all this life that's going on...it's lovely around about Guy Fawkes night or Diwali because you walk across the park, say it's a really clear night, and there'll be fireworks going on 360 degrees around you and yet you're in this little place that's your own.' (Quote from a park user, Grosvenor and Hilbert Park).

Redevelopments in each park created or enhanced the diversity of spaces, offering different benefits to different people. At Myatt's Field Park a lot of attention was paid to making sure different user groups could benefit from a variety of spaces, from a wildlife garden to a water play area. At Boultham Park the PFP partnership with a local disability charity – Linkage – helped to ensure the redevelopment was sympathetic to users with different needs. Providing quiet spaces for users including Linkage students was seen as important. The Linkage project partner explained that events such as the Park's re-opening celebration could be off-putting. One student said, 'it's too noisy...I won't be able to come because there will be too many people'. This highlights the need to recognise 'hidden' disabilities. 'It's the quiet spaces because parks are so sensory, leaves, trees, they're great for being out there and doing things...but you need to be able to hear the birds sing and water or nothing at all'.

Through the story of park users at Grosvenor and Hilbert and Boultham parks, it is clear that the benefits of everyday or casual use is a critical part of what makes public parks so valuable: they are free to access and the benefits are felt simply by walking through, or sitting and being away from the day-to-day stresses of life (see also Section 7 on connecting to nature).

**Figure 3.2**  
Change in mental health since started using PFP park



### 3.4. Conclusion

The value of PFP and subsequent investments to health and wellbeing was clear throughout our six case studies. Creating spaces that attract more, and more diverse users (see Section 6 on inclusion) will inevitably have positive impacts on health and wellbeing, as the volume of existing evidence shows (see section 2). But we saw also how, by developing spaces that provided 'something for everyone' (as a park user at Stafford Orchard put it), the projects made sure a wide range of individuals and communities could enjoy the health and wellbeing benefits of parks. No matter what a person's preferences may be or what barriers they face in joining different activities, they can benefit more when parks are well designed, with coordinated activities and community-wide engagement. This is about providing informal as well as formal spaces, facilities and activities so that people can engage with parks in different ways that suit them.

## Case study 3.1

### Health and wellbeing activity in Alexandra Park



Parks for People helped to restore and expand sporting facilities at Alexandra Park. This included:

- A full-sized football pitch
- Mown ovals of grass that could be used informally for football
- 10 grassed cricket pitches and one artificial pitch
- 2.5k of circular paths suitable for walking, running and roller skating, and five marked running routes
- Four floodlit tennis courts
- Two suites of fully accessible changing facilities
- Restoration of a historic tree lined avenue for walkers to enjoy

The project's Activity Plan included the creation of the 'Sports Alliance' group. The Park Development Officer for the project said:

**'The idea was to get health and wellbeing and sports activities all together so they are not competing for funding, that we're talking about how we use the space, and that we can support each other and become one park rather than fighting about changing rooms and things like that.'**

A range of new sports and activities now take place in the park. These include cricket, football, running, tennis, cycling, walking, volleyball boot camps, yoga, tai chi and health walks. The park is now home to annual events such as the 'Ramadan Cup'

(organised by the local Muslim community) and a Gambian Football Festival, reflecting the diversity of the community.

New users are coming to the park to improve their health. This includes patients of a local GP who 'refers' patients for walks around the park to improve their wellbeing, or groups who use the space for light exercise, for instance:

**'Several of [the local South Asian community] are also quite keen on keeping a bit fitter and use the park to make sure that they can do that. So you get Muslim women of all ages doing that...going up the steps and coming down again and they do that in groups of two, three or four...and the feedback is that...this is their park...they feel comfortable there.'**

Running has always been popular, but runners have benefited from the wider restoration of the park. Between 2005 and 2017 there was a monthly timed 5km run organised by a local LGBT running group. This was before the development of the popular 'parkrun' format. An evaluation report by the Park Development Officer provides a reflection from one of the run's organisers: 'It put the park on the map. We got great feedback and I hope that it helped shift and dispel that bad reputation the park had...'. This organised run closed in 2017 but in 2019 parkrun arrived. The arrival of parkrun shows the increasing popularity of sport in the park and the impact of the investment on the local community's health and wellbeing.

4

What difference does investment make to social integration?



# 4 What difference does investment make to social integration?

Investment in parks supported efforts to reduce isolation and loneliness. These benefits were realised in part by attention to the 'basics'. These include providing informal spaces where people can meet or simply be near each other, and ensuring different vulnerable groups can have a say in landscape and building designs. Targeted outreach activities also helped to include groups who do not usually use parks.

## 4.1. Introduction

Since the 19th century public parks have been places for people to meet and to gather. This remains a central part of what makes a park important. They are outside the normal restrictions of life, and allow greater freedom of association than other more carefully regulated spaces. In the past parks have been sites for public demonstrations and political meetings, as well as fairs and exhibitions. While parks continue to provide such a function, their importance is as much about providing a welcoming and safe space where individuals can bump into, talk to or just be near each other. This helps them feel more connected and less lonely in a sometimes alienating world. This might be especially important for people at the margins of society. Parks can bring people together in an everyday sense – 'nice day, isn't it?' 'Don't the trees look lovely this time of year' – as well as for purposeful activity. In this section we focus on how investment in parks has helped to address loneliness and bring different people together.

## 4.2. Bringing people together

The cafe in Myatt's Field Park is a good example of how basic infrastructure can bring people together. Sited in the centre of the park, it provides 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. The owner of the cafe is also employed as the park manager at Myatt's Field Park so the cafe is a focal point for booking activities or commenting on facilities or how the park is run. The cafe itself is owned and run as a social enterprise by a 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 cafe. In this instance the park's infrastructure had literally brought a family together again. The cafe's central location means people are around throughout the day, making the park feel welcoming:

**'The cafe 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 cafe is the central point of the park, anybody you meet and greet at the cafe then move to the different areas of the park, it's mostly used as a meeting spot.'**  
(Quote from park manager, Myatt's Field Park).

The basics are important. Facilities must be in the right place, run by the right people, offering the right sort of atmosphere and service. But this is only a foundation for wider activity: a necessary but not sufficient element of a space that brings people together in different ways. All the parks we visited were also home to a range of activities that brought people together.

**'It does bring the community together definitely'**

These were important for generating a sense of community, making sure people felt welcome and safe. These activities ranged from regular sessions (regular volunteer sessions, art groups, informal gatherings at park cafes and so on) to larger events, like the annual May Day event at Stafford Orchard, which brings people together from across the town of Quorn:

**'One of the lovely things we see on May Day is friends and neighbours who haven't seen each other for some time all greeting each other and people bring picnic rugs and sit down together and it's such a wonderful atmosphere. It does bring the community together definitely.'**

There's also a need to run activities to target groups who might not feel included. Our evidence review showed that some people feel excluded from parks. The Parks for People projects had put a variety of strategies in place to reduce isolation, engage different generations and to engage different population groups who might otherwise feel less included. For instance Myatt's Field Park held events explicitly designed to engage with local residents of African and Caribbean heritage and a free 'stay and play' session for

new parents and their children. They also worked with the Lambeth Early Action Partnership to use the park for sessions to support and empower disadvantaged families.

### 4.3. Reducing isolation

The very existence of a well-used park with informal meeting points, places to sit and to bump into others can help to reduce isolation and loneliness for some people. Volunteering sessions have been particularly helpful in this regard and successful examples could be found in most of our case studies. As we found at Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, volunteering sessions offer opportunities for people to get together and make connections. Volunteers aren't necessarily in touch with health or social services, but getting involved can make a big difference to their quality of life, as a former community engagement officer commented:

**'Leaving the house generally, so going out, even if it's to the shops, coming to an event, specifically here, you get people who start to engage more with the regular events or volunteering. Just being more communicative I suppose and joining in a bit more in their local community.'**



**'it's a lifeline, coming out and talking to people'**

**You can see physically, just in people's behaviour, a change from being quite enclosed and quiet to a bit more open and relaxed.'**

Many of those who take part in environmental work or join Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert (FoGH) might not admit to being lonely or isolated, but as one council officer pointed out, for some volunteers:

**'it's a lifeline, coming out and talking to people....Even if they come and just talk all day and make tea rather than actually doing anything, for us it's fine because people are doing stuff anyway, but for them it is a lifeline I think, having that engagement and that social interaction with people that they possibly wouldn't be getting otherwise.'**

#### 4.4. Engaging young people

Helping young people to feel engaged and a part of park life could prove difficult, although projects did not always make specific plans to engage with young people and involve them in decision-making. One volunteer in Boutham Park described how 'teenagers are the hardest group to connect with in parks...'. The project has sought to address this in plans for further developments. Similar stories were heard at Grosvenor and Hilbert and Myatt's Field Parks. For primary-age children and those in their early teens activities like Forest School can be fun and interesting, and provide an alternative to school or home environments where there is little open space.

At Grosvenor and Hilbert Park an official graffiti wall has proved popular with teenagers, with new artworks appearing regularly. The skate park is well used, but is physically and socially separate from the hub area, creating the impression that



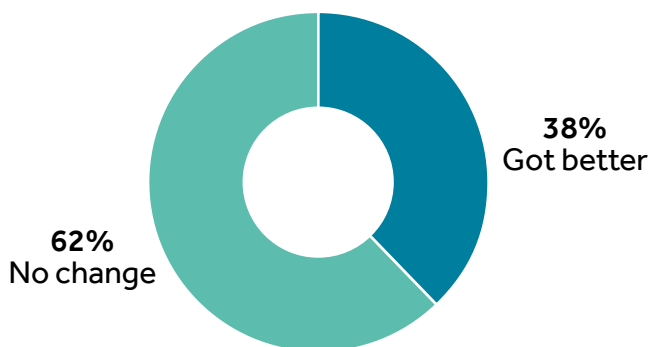
young people have their own domain within the park. Similarly, at Myatt's Field the location of Lambeth Tigers on the 5-a-side pitches meant that young people – mostly boys – could engage in a purposive activity. This helped to make them feel more connected to the park, but the benefits were limited because boards had been placed around the pitch, removing them from view from the rest of the park.

One answer here might be simply to provide spaces for young people to hang out and be with friends (the park as a so-called 'third space'), but which are well connected to other spaces and services in the park. But there is a need for parks projects to develop tailored plans for engaging young people, working with people who have the skills and knowledge to do so. In other research conducted by the research team it was found that locating youth services (such as a youth club) in parks made a difference to how young people were perceived and how parks were used. In one example from the Groundwork Green Leaders programme, a youth club had teamed up with the park Friends group to work together to improve the park. Actively working with young people to understand needs, and co-designing changes to the park with dialogue between these different groups helped to break down some of the mutual suspicion felt between the Friends group (mostly older adults) and youth club members.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Source: Eadson, W., Sanderson, E., Devany, C., Gore, T. and Ramsden, S (2020) Green Leaders evaluation: summary report. [Groundwork UK website](#)

**'it was a very great way to heal those kind of mental health issues'**

**Figure 4.1**  
Change to feelings of isolation since using a PFP park



#### 4.5. Engaging recent migrants and other marginalised groups

Public policy in the UK has stressed how important it is to integrate people who migrate to the UK from other countries. Our research found that dedicated activities in PFP projects helped to bring different population groups into parks and potentially improve feelings of inclusion or reduce isolation. Case study 4.1 on the inclusion of Syrian refugees at Saughton Park is one such example (see page 25). At Myatt's Field park the park depot (the hub for park offices, a greenhouse, kitchen and small meeting space) was used for a variety of activities to reduce isolation and support inclusion among different groups. A women's cooking project created a safe, inclusive environment where women could feel part of the community, as the community development worker who led the activities explained:

**'...so it was women from everywhere but I get mostly the Muslim community because they were hard to reach and a lot of them couldn't, some of them, English wasn't their first language or if it was they didn't feel integrated within the community so it was a means to bring these women to be engaged with the local community as well ... 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.'** (Quote from community development worker).

Of course inclusion is not only an issue for people who have moved from elsewhere. For example, people with disabilities can often feel excluded or find that they can't always take part in activities with other people. At Boutham Park the PFP project's partnership with the learning disability charity Linkage supported people with learning disabilities in joining in the life of the park and, by extension, in the wider community. There were some challenges: one was that the physical works in the park were not always designed with these potential users in mind. This underlines the importance of engaging different groups during the design phase. Making spaces inclusive requires understanding from client managers, maintenance contractors and designers.

#### 4.6. Conclusion

Our case study research found that a vibrant park with well-run basic facilities (such as a cafe) can provide an important platform for including people who might be at risk of isolation. We also found that more targeted activities could work well, but they needed to be properly resourced and may require involvement from specialist organisations – for example, organisations with experience in supporting isolated migrant women, or integrating young people (the latter was an ongoing challenge for our case studies).



## Case study 4.1

### Supporting refugees at Saughton Park



In 2015 Scotland began to accept refugees from the Syrian civil war as part of the international resettlement programme. In Edinburgh a key link organisation was The Welcoming Association, which exists to support newcomers arriving in the city. Many of them have settled in the neighbourhoods near Saughton Park, and the Welcoming Association is just a short walk from the park in Gorgie.

During the park restoration project the Welcoming Association developed close links with Friends of Saughton Park, and it has run various events designed to bring different communities together. These include 'climate challenge' events to discuss local responses to climate change, as well as celebrations of traditional community festivals such as Eid. These offered a perfect opportunity to create closer connections between the new Syrian community and long-term local residents, as one of the association's staff explained:

**'People were just naturally curious and because the whole Syrian programme nationwide has had such huge publicity and a lot of interest to support and befriend and help, people were very keen to meet and get to understand more about this new community and the community themselves were very keen to be part of something. Mainly the younger Syrians were in college or learning English or looking for work and really wanted to be part of the community and feel valued and appreciated and to contribute something back because they felt they'd been given a lot of support and kindness.'**

The Syrian cooking, music and hospitality provided at these events drew in local people and showed that refugees could play an important part in community life.

# 5

What difference does investment make to community engagement, public participation and civic action?



# 5 What difference does investment make to community engagement, public participation and civic action?

Investment in parks catalysed community engagement through the delivery process and beyond. PFP projects developed a wide range of activities to promote participation and civic action, although these could be difficult to maintain once the initial grant ended. Some projects were making concerted efforts to extend civic engagement beyond ‘the usual suspects’.

## 5.1. Introduction

There has been a trend in recent years towards greater involvement of volunteers and community groups in managing parks. So it is not surprising to find that community engagement and volunteering played an important part in the story of each project.

But our research has also shown the value of investment in catalysing community involvement. In some cases community groups are now leading the delivery of projects and on-going parks management. In this sense financial investment leads to investment in time, skills and labour from those who care most about parks: their users.

This is not a uniform story, of course. The form and extent of engagement varies, from more traditional modes of ‘consultation’ through to communities taking on full responsibility for managing parks. In some cases the involvement of community groups has created challenges and tensions. But such tensions are an inevitable part of creating more democratic green spaces where local people have a say in what happens and how they are managed.

## 5.2. Empowering formal community groups

Formal community groups were important to the delivery of all our case study projects. In most cases these included one or more groups with a specific focus on the park – Friends’ groups and

similar organisations – but also a range of other organisations and groups with a stake in the local area, such as the volunteer-led Parish Council in Quorn. In each case these organisations have continued to play an important role in the park’s development after PFP: investment in parks has a positive legacy for community action beyond the initial project.

The local council was sometimes instrumental in the creation of these park groups, recognising the benefits of community-led action for thriving parks. These benefits include the ability of community organisations to bid for funding that councils cannot access as public bodies. The Boutham Park Advisory Group was set up as part of a network of groups created to advise the council on parks across the local authority area.

At Myatt’s Field Park, as in other places, community or Friends groups had formed prior to the PFP project, often rallying around to address a particular problem. In Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, for example, local residents mobilised against a proposal by an energy supplier to build a road through the part of the park to service a substation, and in response to fears that the local council might allow homes to be built on part of the land. These perceived threats led to the formation of Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert, an enthused and active group of volunteers that now has 102 signed-up members and around 30 regular volunteers.

**'PFP projects empowered individual community groups'**

Even where there were existing community groups PFP projects acted as a catalyst and focal point for positive action in most cases. Most PFP projects sought to involve community groups in decision-making. The prospect of having a say in how money could be spent gave groups the opportunity to engage positively with local partners to deliver change. In the case of Myatt's Field, funding enabled Myatt's Field Park Project (MFPP) to employ several staff, lead the entire PFP project and then work towards a range of subsequent developments in the park. In this sense community action was directly empowered by the PFP grant.

MFPP was not alone in playing a central role in delivery of the grant: at Boutham Park the PFP project was delivered in partnership with a local disability charity, Linkage, and the Stafford Orchard project was led by a group of volunteers from the Town Council. In Saughton Park, although the project was led by the council, Friends of Saughton Park (FoSP) kept in regular contact with City of Edinburgh Council and partner organisations over progress and was closely involved in discussions about design and delivery.

Existing community action, with community involved in the planning and delivery stages for PFP projects was important to longer-term community engagement and ownership of projects beyond their completion. Local councils needed to feel

confident to hand over resources and freedom to community groups, which also meant providing support to build capacity in community organisations. Councils and community groups also needed to work continuously to build and strengthen partnerships with a wide range of service providers and community organisations.

### 5.3. Creating a community ecosystem

PFP projects empowered individual community groups, but they also acted as an important stimulus for wider community action. The PFP funding and subsequent investments have helped to nurture self-sustaining and supportive networks of community activity: a community ecosystem, with the park as a focal point for community action. This has made the parks more resilient to possible future challenges by spreading and growing capacity for development parks across a range of organisations and increasing shared capacity for generating funding, volunteering and community engagement. The story of Saughton Park (Case study 5.1, on page 30) is particularly striking, showing how PFP funding both galvanised the park Friends group and inspired a range of groups to engage with the park.

Community partnerships have been central to success at Myatt's Field Park, too. The Myatt's Field Park Project has worked hard to develop 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 park's two community buildings, making the park an important site for community action. This is also intensive work, as the project lead explained:

**'...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.'**

Direct establishment of new community bodies by project leads (such as the local council) can also encourage greater community involvement, as in the case of Alexandra Park. When the PFP project began, there was already an established Friends group in Alexandra Park (Friends of Alexandra Park – FoAP) but the council was keen to establish a more diverse set of groups to reflect different voices and priorities for the park's development. This led to the creation of four 'activity forums' to be led by local residents: Wildlife Forum; Arts and Culture Forum; Heritage Forum; and Sports Alliance.

However, the example of Alexandra Park also carries a note of caution: the creation of new tailor-made groups alongside the existing, organically grown, FoAP has created challenges in understanding their respective roles. This suggests a need to be careful in creating new structures rather than working with what the community is already offering, but also to ensure clear communication and engagement with community groups on governance structures.

Sometimes councils find it hard to let go: it isn't necessarily easy for a council to hand over decision-making to other organisations, even when it is seen to be a good thing from a democratic perspective and for councils' stretched finances. As a local stakeholder at Saughton Park pointed out, 'it's a different way of working for the council, I think that's why it's hard'. When community groups bring additional resources into parks through volunteering they will also want a say on the future of those parks. On the whole this has happened in each of our case studies, through on-going negotiation between community groups, councils and other partner organisations.



## Case study 5.1

### Saughton Park, fuelling a hotbed of community action



Less than a decade ago there was no community involvement to speak of at Saughton Park. Local football teams used the sports pitches, but took little interest in the rest of the park. At one point a group of local residents formed to oppose the construction of the skate park, but that soon petered out. The Parks for People project, by contrast, has brought together a host of community and voluntary organisations in a dense network of groups that not only provide a strong local voice in the way the park is run, but also make sure the park caters for everyone.

Central to this network is the Friends of Saughton Park (FoSP). When the group formed in 2014 there were seven members. Today there are 400, of whom more than 30 are actively involved in the Friends and the activities they put on. FoSP puts on an apple day and Halloween festival in the autumn, Christmas wreath making and more, sometimes attracting up to 1,000 people to its public events. But the smaller scale matters too. FoSP has taken charge of one area of the walled garden and transformed it into a physic garden, showcasing

medicinal herbs and plants. It works closely with the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society, which is based at the park, and has created a community orchard beside the Water of Leith, planted early in 2020. The Winter Garden has a regular 'knit and natter' group organised by FoSP, and the Friends' Facebook page keeps them in touch with the wider community in the local area and beyond.

The success of the project in fostering community engagement across different groups is at least in part down to the fact that FoSP is an inclusive group that has connected with a wide range of community organisations. These include The Welcoming Association, which works with refugees, asylum seekers and other newcomers to Edinburgh; Health All Round, a community development charity; Garvald, a day centre which provides therapeutic activities for adults with learning difficulties; Redhall Walled Garden, a project run by the Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) which specialises in therapeutic horticulture; and Cycling UK, which runs all-ability cycling sessions from the park.

**'At the heart of much of the activity is the Hub'**

### 5.4. Community engagement and community activities

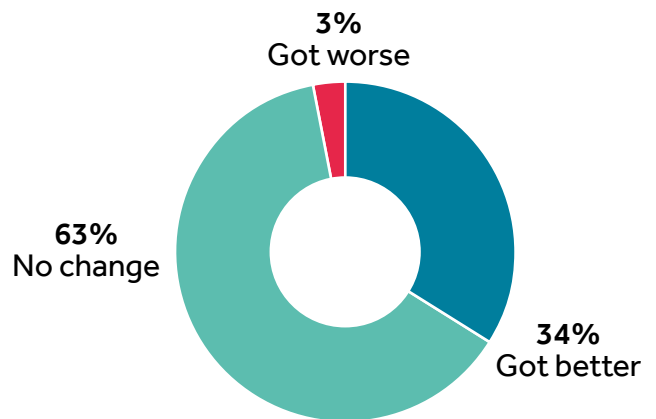
Formally constituted community groups are important for creating vibrant and democratic parks. Equally important is ensuring that the voices of local residents are heard in decision-making, beyond those who are actively involved in volunteering – in particular people who regularly use or even rely on parks as part of their everyday routines.

Our research showed that investment in parks through PFP could transform how users and residents were engaged in the life of parks. In some cases they felt they became more included in decision-making. In our survey of parks users around a third of respondents felt that their ability to influence decisions relating to the park had improved over time (only 3% thought it had got worse). This suggests a significant proportion of users have been positively engaged in park decision-making.

More striking is the hugely expanded variety of community-focused activities, as part of or stemming from PFP projects. Each park has witnessed an explosion of community activities and events, bringing parks even closer to the heart of local communities. Grosvenor and Hilbert Park is now used for an annual picnic for Love Parks Week which brings in around 200 people, and family fun days that can accommodate several thousand. There's a popular annual dog show, too, with more than 100 entries. At the heart of much of the activity is the Hub, a stylish conversion of what used to be the bowls club's changing rooms into a multi-purpose meeting space with a cafe attached. The bowls club still uses it as their clubhouse, but it's available to hire and hosts a wide range of activities from a fish'n'chip quiz night to community carol singing and yoga. It is also the local polling station. Community spaces were important to success of projects by providing hubs for community activity, which in turn encouraged

wide engagement with the parks, and also as a point of contact with local services.

**Figure 5.1**  
Ability to impact decision-making since started using a PFP park



### 5.5. Volunteering

The result of increased engagement with community groups and local residents is a rise in volunteering – both in terms of numbers of people and the hours put in. Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert estimates that its volunteers put in between 1,300 and 1,800 hours of unpaid time every year. The Stafford Orchard project was entirely volunteer led, and the park continues to rely on volunteers from the local community for its development and upkeep. Case study 5.2, on page 33, tells the story of volunteering in Boultham Park, involving formal volunteering programmes such as the National Citizen Service as well as 'traditional' routes to volunteering.

Challenges remain, however. As always, volunteer workers tend to be those with time and resources to spare, and existing connections with the park or with other people who volunteer. These people are often older, White, and not representative of the wider local population. In Alexandra Park community groups recognised their limited knowledge about how to engage with different population groups, such as younger people.

In other places the development of a network of organisations engaged with the park had offset some of these challenges. However as PFP grant funding came to an end it could be a struggle to keep supporting volunteering activities. At Grosvenor and Hilbert Park the end of funding and the effect of wider council cuts meant the loss of a community engagement officer for the park, with knock-on effects for volunteering, as one resident commented:

**‘They set up such a good volunteering group that functioned once a week I think on a Monday, and a lot of people with mental issues and people who find it difficult to integrate, people who are long term unemployed came to that, and when these things stop, which stopped as the community engagement officer position finished, it all goes down the plughole.’**

One place that had managed to maintain and build its volunteering base (and the diversity of volunteers) beyond the end of PFP was Myatt’s Field. Here the transition to a self-managed and increasingly self-sufficient organisation post-PFP had been enabled by a committed team of trustees (go to Myatt’s Field and you will hear the same names repeated as ‘saviours’ of the park). They have been able to generate funding

for a community development worker, whose job had been threatened by the end of PFP and a reduction in Lambeth Council budgets. Later they were able to raise funds for a dedicated volunteer coordinator. The Myatt’s Field Park Project team then worked tirelessly to engage the wider community, bring in volunteers and offer routes into paid work through volunteering (see Section 8 on economic benefits), which in turn helped to attract a more diverse range of volunteers. The project also made links with local businesses to encourage corporate volunteering in the park.

## 5.6. Conclusion

Community engagement was a central plank in the activities of all our PFP case studies. It has thrown up challenges that might not have arisen if a more top-down approach had been taken, but it has made the projects richer and more successful. Indeed the one case study that seemed to find community engagement hardest was also the project that appeared to have taken a more top-down approach to project delivery and community involvement. Without the extensive work to foster community action and networks that extended beyond parks, many of the benefits in other policy areas would not have been realised.





## Case study 5.2

### Volunteering in Boutham Park



Boutham Park Advisory Group (BPAG) is an important partner, devoting a significant number of volunteer hours to the restoration project. The original estimate of volunteer time as set out in the project application was exceeded by over 30%. This included formal training such as first aid, risk assessment and training for working with children. Some of this time has been given up by incredibly motivated and enthusiastic volunteers, some of whom have been awarded the Mayoral Medal for outstanding contribution, commitment and dedication to the project and have developed professional skills through their volunteering activity.

The training that volunteers undertook was funded through the restoration project to allow them to work on the events organised by the Activities Project Officer, as well as activities beyond the funding timeframe. BPAG members work closely with the Council's Volunteer Coordinator. As one BPAG member puts it: 'People like structure. People like fun. People coming on a litter pick don't want to think they've got to bring the wheelbarrow or the plastic bags. They want to know that when they arrive it is all there for them.' A Council colleague echoed this: 'if you make it relevant, then people...will find the time. The reason we

get the older demographic is because they've got plenty of spare time. Yet we all find time to do something and indulge in our hobbies or interests....' Another Council interviewee said young people were getting involved through 'the biodiversity side of things, especially when it comes to cutting up bits of wood or the stumpyery... some of the young people who are walking through the park will see something a bit exciting and get engaged'. The Volunteer Coordinator described having a cohort of at least eight committed volunteers who would get involved in activities in the park on any given day. As well as BPAG volunteers, there is also help from people doing community payback via the probation service, and young adults taking part in the National Citizen Service or volunteering with the Prince's Trust. This demonstrates a strong relationship between the volunteers and the Council.

In the second phase of restoration (redeveloping the park's lake) project contractors will work with volunteers from the outset. Volunteer support will be built into the project plan: contractors will be required to show how they will work effectively with volunteers and manage their input as part of the contract.

# 6

What difference does investment make to inclusion and inequalities?



# 6 What difference does investment make to inclusion and inequalities?

Investments made a difference by making parks more inclusive places, through inclusive design and through activities. Good quality parks are critical social infrastructure, providing freely accessible services to local residents regardless of wealth. PFP investment in parks promoted pride of place and helped disadvantaged communities feel they 'matter'. Parks can be good sites for activities that support inclusion or seek to reduce inequalities: investment in these activities through PFP benefited a range of people.

## 6.1. Introduction

Britain's towns and cities are unequal places. Our evidence review found that while all population groups stand to benefit from good quality green space, access, or perceived access, to parks was not equal. Our case study areas were in or close to areas of deprivation, and investments were seen to make a positive difference to inequality and inclusion in all six places.

## 6.2. Socio-economic inequalities

Investment in parks can't solve deep-rooted social and economic inequalities in places but it can help to ameliorate some of the consequences of inequalities. For instance, investment to improve green space can create new spaces for recreation or relaxation for those who do not have space at home, or cannot afford to access other leisure services to relax or destress.

A well maintained park is less likely to attract crime and antisocial behaviour. It also sends a message to local residents that the place they live in matters. All our case study parks were within or

next to pockets of deprivation<sup>4</sup> and we saw from our research that restoration of parks in deprived areas creates a sense that local people deserve something as good as anywhere else. A mental health professional connected to Saughton Park commented:

**'It looks amazing now and looks like something that the local people can be proud of as well, because it is a deprived area, it does generally get forgotten about, that part of Edinburgh.'**

Beyond the space itself, holding inclusive, free activities has offered opportunities to people who might not otherwise access them. For instance, the day Boutham Park officially reopened following the PFP landscaping works was also the weekend of the FA Cup final and a royal wedding. In recognition of this a royal wedding celebration was held at Lincoln Castle, but a local event was also held in the park. According to the Linkage partner, 'people in this community wouldn't ever have gone to the Castle. That would have been seen as far too middle class. Actually, this [event in Boutham Park] was...very local...very accessible'.

<sup>4</sup> Four of the parks neighboured or were within the top 20% most deprived Lower Super Output Areas as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation; Saughton Park neighboured an LSOA in the 30% most deprived; Stafford Orchard was around a mile from LSOAs in the 30% most deprived

**'Parks are a form of social infrastructure in themselves'**

### 6.3. Creating inclusive spaces

Investment in the fabric of parks, if done sensitively, can make them feel more inclusive. Inclusive design might be as simple as opening up spaces to improve sightlines and make people feel less vulnerable as a result. At Stafford Orchard, small-scale changes to entrances and paths made a big difference to how different people felt about using the park (see Case study 6.1, on page 37), in particular making a difference to accessibility for people with disabilities.

Physical appearance is clearly important in how people feel about spaces. But parks can make a difference by providing a setting for activities that seek to address inequalities, for instance by welcoming people with mental health problems, or migrants or refugees. Myatt's Field offers an exemplar in that sense: the Myatt's Field Project is central to development of a wide range of activities that address various forms of exclusion and disadvantage. One recent example is its role as a delivery partner to the Lambeth Early Action Partnership, a National Lottery Community Fund project to improve the life chances of young children. The Boutham Park PFP project's partnership with Linkage provided new opportunities for young people with learning disabilities. Linkage chose to develop a new campus for its college at the park, creating better physical and social connections with the local community. College students have benefited from having greenspace on their doorstep and chances to participate in a range of activities in the park, including volunteering.



### 6.4. Conclusion

We found that investment in parks in or near deprived areas had positive implications for inequalities and inclusion. The physical improvements to the parks were key in changing the way how people felt about using spaces, making them safer and more accessible for people such as women, older people and young people. An inclusive approach to design, with input from a wide range of interests, helped to deliver these benefits. Equally important was the parks' function as sites for activities that supported inclusion or helped to address inequalities. Such activities need to be free to access and geared to the needs of target groups. Projects that developed and maintained a network of partnerships through and beyond the PFP funding and the park boundaries provided the strongest examples of inclusion. Parks are a form of social infrastructure in themselves, but resources to support the people who maintain and coordinate community partnerships are critical in making parks more equal, inclusive places.

## Case study 6.1

### Creating inclusive space through physical improvements at Stafford Orchard



A key feature of the project was to improve access to the park, and this was achieved through improving entrances, widening and resurfacing paths, and creating new paths (including a path around the perimeter of the park).

The perimeter path has been one of the most impactful changes to the park. Although relatively small in terms of the scale of the project overall, this path is seen to have made the park a destination where people will come to walk around and spend leisure time. Previously, the main path cut across the park meaning it was generally used as a cut-through. The improvements to the paths and entrances have also improved accessibility, opening up the park for more people, such as families with pushchairs, people with mobility issues or disabilities, as participants in the research commented:

**'You see a lot of elderly people walking round or people being pushed in wheelchairs. [...] now they've got this circuitous route it's easy now to push a chair right the way round, where beforehand it was all grass at one stage which is much more difficult.'**

**'The park is disabled-friendly and my son was in a wheelchair and we could take him to the park, it was accessible for everyone, wheelchairs, pushchairs, elderly people, everyone across the community. It is easily accessible and it is all on one level which is important.'**

The landscape designer who was employed on the project said improving accessibility was a key consideration in the design:

**'The whole park is designed so it's accessible and suitable for people of all abilities and the footpath width, the surfacing materials, the gradients, everything was taken into consideration to try and ensure that we didn't put in barriers to people using the park.'**

The project team carried out user surveys on two days in May/June 2008 and two comparable days in May/June 2012 to evaluate the success of the project in increasing visitor numbers. These found that numbers of visitors were over 100% higher in 2012 compared to 2008. Particular increases were seen across specific target groups, including families, older people and people with disabilities.

7

What difference does investment make to people's connection to nature?



# 7 What difference does investment make to people's connection to nature?

Investment in parks has created new natural habitats and encouraged biodiversity. Local residents were inspired by improved possibilities to connect with nature, and experienced wellbeing benefits from these connections. Volunteering or learning in parks helped people connect with and care for nature.

## 7.1. Introduction

Connecting with nature, as the Space to Thrive report highlighted, can support a sense of wellbeing. Building relationships between people and the natural environment can deepen a sense of belonging within a community, and support mental health recovery. Relationships with nature are associated with a good personal quality of life and foster a sense of gratitude.

Parks have not always been seen as natural spaces, and especially not as wild places. Traditional parks have often had a formal design and are associated with images of manicured lawns and massed ornamental bedding plants.

The six Parks for People projects suggest that communities are placing an increasing importance on creating more 'natural' and wildlife-friendly landscapes within their green spaces. At Saughton Park, 73% of respondents to our survey said their connections with nature had improved, while 70% said so at Alexandra Park. By restoring and improving natural habitats, the Parks for People projects have created places that people feel more attached to and may therefore be more willing to look after.

## 7.2. A virtuous circle

The 'pathways to nature connectedness', developed by researchers at the University of Derby and adopted by organisations including the National Trust, highlight how people connect with the natural world through their senses, emotions, ideas of beauty, the way they bring meaning to their lives, and through a sense of compassion or care. These routes to nature connectedness were reflected in the case studies, suggesting a virtuous circle of habitat restoration leading to engagement with nature. This in turn can encourage volunteering or acts of care. All these can contribute to individual wellbeing.

One interviewee in Saughton Park summed up the sense of joy at engaging with the natural world in an urban area:

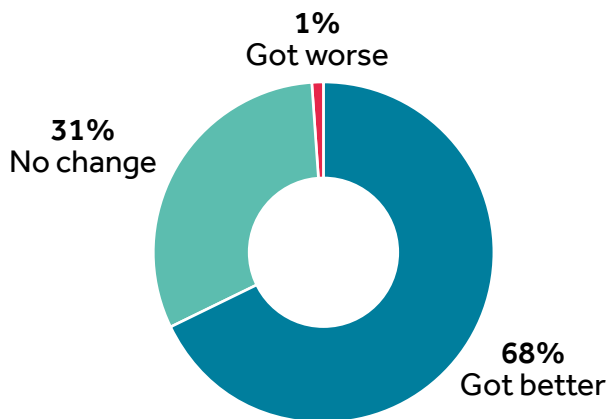
**'We've got otters on the water beside the park, we'd got kingfishers last year and the kids were amazed by the sheer volume of bumble bees in the park this year, we've been looking at ladybirds in the park, we've been looking at the birds of the park. Just the connection to nature, and it gives you a chance to relax somewhere in a green space.'**

These connections have been amplified because the Parks for People projects have expressly set out to create thriving habitats – an approach that has not always been encouraged by parks managers.

'The planting's great, it's really well-maintained'

**Figure 7.1**

Change to connection with nature since using a PFP park



### 7.3. Restoring and creating natural habitats

Some parks, such as Stafford Orchard, had relatively few natural spaces before the restoration. In Stafford Orchard new habitats were created by adding land around a nearby brook to the park and planting trees, as well as planting 15,000 spring bulbs. One interviewee commented:

**'I just remember it as being an open field [before the refurbishment]. It was quite a pretty area at certain times but it's absolutely beautiful now. The planting's great, it's really well-maintained.'**

In Alexandra Park nature trails were introduced and the restoration was informed by a biodiversity masterplan, designed to support a wide range of wildlife. Tree and bulb planting have been important parts of the project.

Water features have been a key aspect in creating habitats and connections with nature. In Alexandra Park and Boutham Park, lakes have been central elements. The previously neglected Water of Leith forms an important boundary in Saughton Park, and creates a natural zone within the park that

is distinct from the more formal planting within the walled garden, and the grassed areas used by sports teams.

### 7.4. Engagement

Biodiversity is not just for the experts. Local communities wanted richer habitats and more natural areas, and became more engaged with the projects as these were designed and grew. In Grosvenor and Hilbert Park and Saughton Park, community orchards have been created, supporting wildlife but also helping to create a sense of ownership and involvement in the park.

Wildlife walks and similar activities have been important in attracting children and young people, but adults have also been keen. Local people have been on bat walks at Boutham and Grosvenor and Hilbert parks; have been otter-spotting at Saughton Park; and birdwatching at Boutham Park. They have appreciated new wildflower meadows (at Alexandra Park, Boutham and Grosvenor and Hilbert) and newly-planted trees at Stafford Orchard.





**'It's the closest you come to nature for an awful lot of children'**

There is an appetite among many community members to learn more about the wildlife in their neighbourhoods. But actively connecting people to nature is critical. In Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, wildlife talks and walks led by an expert from the town's museums service have proved popular. The park also hosts regular Forest School activities.

### 7.5. Volunteering

As communities become more engaged with the wildlife and biodiversity where they live, they are more likely to become involved in caring for their environment. Grosvenor and Hilbert Park hosts regular volunteer sessions where participants repair and restore woodland and wetland features. In Saughton Park volunteers, including people with disabilities, help to maintain the planting. In Stafford Orchard volunteers planted thousands of spring bulbs and created a sensory garden.

As an interviewee at Saughton Park commented, 'just taking people into a green space in the middle of a city can be positive for people's health and wellbeing'. When that connection leads to more engagement with nature and is reinforced by volunteering activities, there is the potential for feedback loops in which individuals and wildlife both benefit.

This may be particularly important for children and young people. One interviewee at Alexandra Park observed:

**'It's the closest you come to nature for an awful lot of children who don't go anywhere very much, outside of the city. Many don't even go into the city centre. So the park is more important for the youngsters in that respect and they do learn about nature and appreciate it.'**



**'It sets us apart from every other park'**

### 7.6. Connecting to global environmental challenges

As well as offering users opportunities to connect with nature, parks can play a wider role in adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change, with potential to connect people to these wider environmental challenges. At Saughton Park, alongside the improvements funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, Edinburgh City Council has raised funds to create a pioneering renewable energy installation, combining a micro-hydro scheme on the Water of Leith with ground source heat pumps. Together these supply all the energy needed to power the park's buildings.

The scheme is being used as an exemplar of how Scottish green spaces can contribute to urban decarbonisation. It also helps to put Saughton Park on the map as a pioneer of new ideas, as one local resident pointed out:

**'It's really important because it sets us apart from every other park. We've got people coming in specifically to see it and the fact that it's all renewable energy within the park, I think it's very important because they're new technologies that really are at the forefront of what's going on with climate change and everything else.'**

People in the park see the installations and there is potential for community engagement activities alongside appropriate information boards and signage to use the park's renewable energy innovations as a means to engage people with the global climate emergency.

### 7.7. Conclusion

The Parks for People projects show that nature and biodiversity are increasingly valued by the communities around urban parks and green spaces, reinforcing findings from our evidence review (see section 2) and complementing our findings on health and wellbeing (section 3). To different degrees the projects have tapped into an interest that was already there, as well as providing new ways for local people to engage with nature. The attachments people feel to plants and wildlife help to reinforce a sense of ownership, which for some will lead to more direct involvement in caring for local green spaces.



### Case study 7.1

## Connecting with nature through water features at Grosvenor and Hilbert Park

In Grosvenor and Hilbert Park the wilder aspects were always there, but had been neglected. People did not know why the muddy areas in the woodlands mattered and few people visited them before the restoration. By involving people in creating new pathways through the woods, constructing 'leaky dams' to manage the flow of water and providing interpretation boards, the Parks for People project helped people to appreciate the diversity on their doorstep. Where there had once been a play area that was prone to flooding, the project created new swales at the centre of the park where people could observe wildlife.



Woodland pathway



Water feature

### Case study 7.2

## Connecting with nature through learning at Boutham Park

A central element at Boutham Park is the involvement of Linkage, a charity providing education and support for people with learning disabilities. Linkage has a college campus within the park, and new glasshouses have been constructed where Linkage students can learn horticultural skills. But their learning also comes from being in a green environment. As one volunteer said: 'This is their back garden – it's a great classroom for them.'



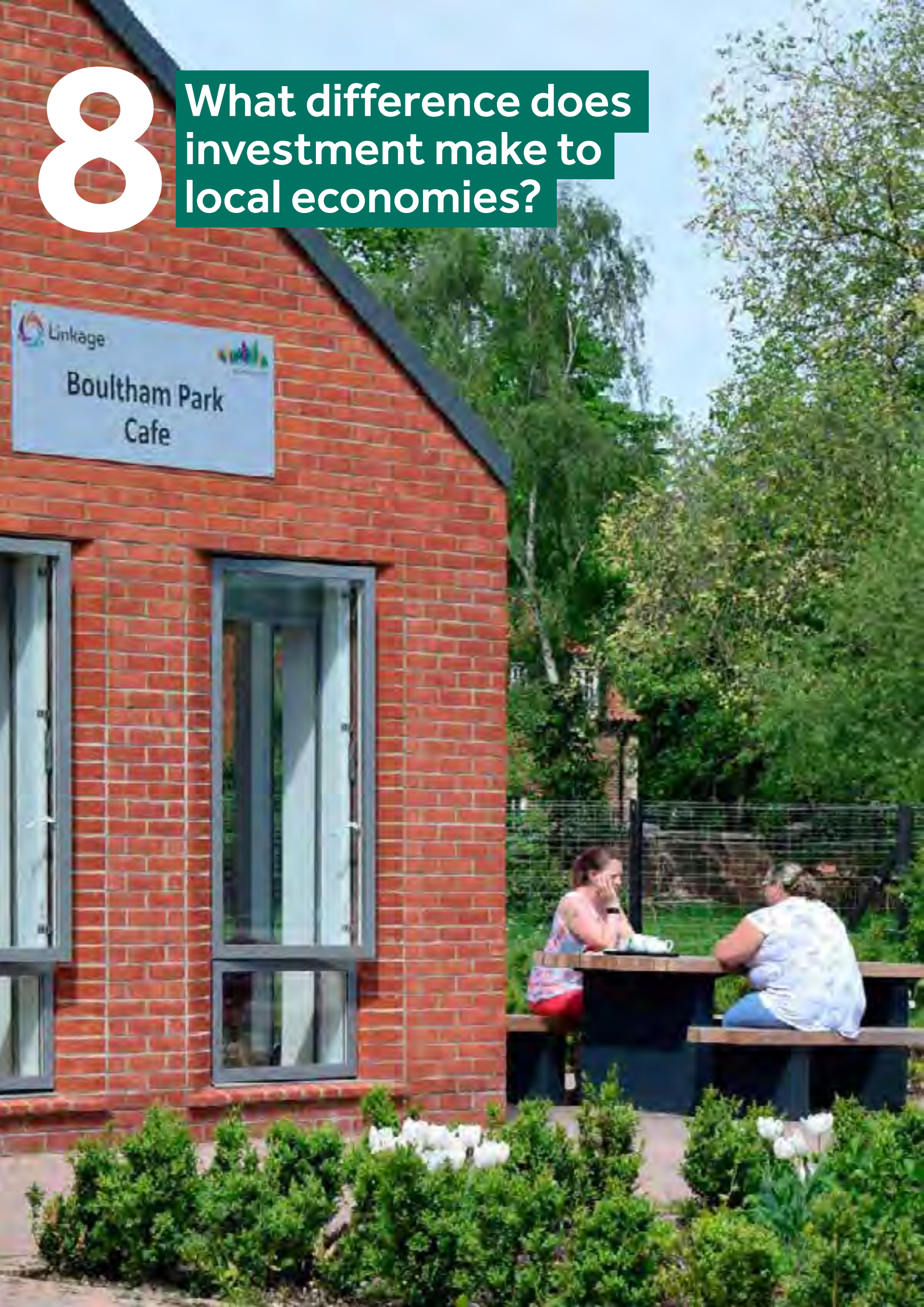
The new glasshouse



Pond dipping

8

What difference does investment make to local economies?



# 8 What difference does investment make to local economies?

Investment in parks has supported a range of economic activities, created jobs and provided people with skills to find employment. Importantly investment has supported different approaches to economic development: developing enterprise to meet the needs of people and planet through social enterprise and cooperatives.

## 8.1. Introduction

It can be difficult to unpick the wider benefits of a park to the local economy because effects cannot always be directly seen. The range of different factors involved in local economic development make it difficult to make direct attribution to parks investment – or at least not without a very in-depth study of individual places over time.<sup>5</sup> But we can look more accurately at what has specifically happened within parks relating to new enterprises and job creation. PFP projects created jobs through delivery and on-going activities as well as creating opportunities for a range of enterprises to operate within parks. These tended not to create large numbers of jobs but the type of work was seen to be meaningful, and the enterprises often brought wider benefits, especially improving health and wellbeing. In this sense we saw that parks could act as hubs for economic activity and create conditions for economic development across communities.

## 8.2. Parks as hubs for economic activity

Our research has shown that parks can be hubs for economic activity that supports community and individual wellbeing. The jobs created in PFP parks are meaningful and create a sense of purpose. Revenue-generating activities tend to focus on

things that communities value, such as cafes, food provision, community events and physical activities. These wider benefits are felt partly because many of the enterprises that work in parks set out to be social enterprises, who reinvest the money they make back into the community.

Renovations to buildings and facilities were particularly important to realising many of these opportunities. Examples include restoration of pavilions or bandstands that can be rented out for events, and development or improvements to cafes. At Myatt's Field and Alexandra Park cafe spaces have been let out to social enterprises, who reinvest surpluses into the local community. Coffee Cranks at Alexandra Park is a cooperative that is employee owned and supports community projects with a particular focus on cycling initiatives.

Landscape improvements and the perception of a safe and thriving space have encouraged small businesses to use the case study parks. Fitness classes are a popular form of enterprise. One interviewee at Alexandra Park spoke about the value of parks in supporting these activities:

**'The availability of good quality public space, which can be used by people to earn their income. I mean these fitness groups, they all pay money.'**

<sup>5</sup> See CRESR (2013) Green Infrastructure's Contribution to Economic Growth: A Review. Defra/Natural England. <https://bit.ly/3y81rSp>

**'it is a very useful way of using public space'**

**'And so when a fitness group comes in and uses the park and you get ten people standing around a guy who's teaching them how to do exercises...that guy is making his living by doing that...I think it is a very useful way of using public space by making it available for people to come and do their business on.'**

PFP funding also led to direct employment through the delivery of projects. 17 people were employed through the cafe and education centre at Boutham Park, while 12 were employed in a range of jobs from community development to food growing at Myatt's Field (see Case study 8.1, on page 47). Jobs were also created for project managers overseeing the PFP schemes, and supported in firms contracted to deliver the improvements. Volunteering and training activities have also enabled people to access employment opportunities. At Boutham Park contracts for the later stages of the park development were tied to creation of volunteer activities to enable people to develop skills and potentially improve employability.

### 8.3. Wider impacts of parks on local economies

The activities above are relatively small-scale and won't in themselves transform a local economy. But good quality, well managed parks are part of the infrastructure that makes places liveable and improves the lives of people in those places. This in turn has economic benefits: people who are fitter and healthier are also more productive. Parks are also important for what is often called the foundational economy, which underpins the social and economic fabric of places. Work in the foundational economy is generally low-paid and includes the often unpaid work of caring and coping that enables other economic activity to take place. A healthy foundational economy reduces pressure on public services and healthcare; keeping it healthy provides

opportunities for support workers such as therapists and carers. The groups that provide volunteering and training opportunities in parks are part of this economy. The work of supporting volunteers and activities in parks builds healthy and more economically active communities.

We can also point to how PFP investments have created opportunities for alternative ways of thinking about economic development. As Case study 8.1 highlights, in some parks a commitment to community-led model of economic development has allowed development of local people's capacity to work (with emphasis on decent employment conditions) and to become entrepreneurs. Focus on social enterprise has brought emphasis on economic activity as a means to an end through using financial gains to continue to improve parks, and focusing on activities that support each of the policy areas explored in this report.

### 8.4. Conclusion

Park investments create economic benefits through the flow of money into an area. But the findings from our case studies shows that they are much more than that. The value of small-scale and foundational economic activities that can be fostered in parks are critical to the wellbeing of communities, as well as to the individuals who gain employment through those activities. PFP projects showed that parks can in this sense be economic hubs, creating jobs, providing volunteering and training opportunities, hosting enterprises and delivering the foundational services that allow local areas to thrive economically and socially.

Generating money within parks also supports their upkeep and future development, which in turn supports the wider impacts of park investment and reduces financial pressure on local services in doing so.

## Case study 8.1

### People and nature-centred economic development at Myatt's Field Park



A look at typical indicators like employment levels in Lambeth or numbers of new businesses would tell you very little about the economic impacts of Myatt's Field Park. 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. 11 people work for Myatt's Field Park Project (MFPP) in various roles. 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 cleaners and people that collect rubbish and stuff like that 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.'**  
(Quote from MFPP Board Member).

Beyond direct employment the park offers ways into employment through volunteering and formal training: in recent years nine people have completed NVQ Level 2 in horticulture, '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. These enterprises cover a wide range of services and activities, including: a football academy for young people (Lambeth Tigers); a nursery; the park cafe; a horticultural landscaping company; tennis coach; an enterprise running nature groups; a catering service, which provides food to the nursery.

The ethos of these enterprises is also distinctive. The pre-school offers free 'stay and place sessions' once or twice a week; the cafe reinvests any surplus back into the cafe 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 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 park depot, which the council has committed to funding. This will allow MFPP to set up an incubator for food businesses.

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.

# 9

## How did Covid-19 affect parks and their users?





# 9 How did Covid-19 affect parks and their users?

During the first Covid lockdown in Spring 2020, people visited parks more often, and at a time when communities were under stress, parks provided a lifeline and a breathing space. But because some facilities closed and park activities were cancelled, some users were less able to experience the benefits of parks. These included vulnerable people who relied on group activities and park facilities.

## 9.1. Introduction

On 23 March 2020, the government imposed a series of restrictions on public and business life across the UK to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. All public buildings and many services were shut until mid-May, apart from essential services or key workplaces. Social gatherings in open spaces were banned. However, public parks and green spaces generally remained open and government ministers repeatedly stressed the importance of using them for physical and mental wellbeing. Exercising outdoors once a day was one of the few permitted reasons for leaving home, either alone or with other household members.

However, even during ordinary times some groups are not able to access open spaces as easily as others and so the benefits of access are not evenly spread. Those at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 (such as elderly people or people with underlying health conditions) and those who usually take part in organised activities were particularly affected by the lockdown limitations. Vulnerable people were told to 'shield' at home, while community facilities were closed and gatherings banned.

National data on the use of green and blue spaces in England for the period 2-30 April, when lockdown restrictions were most severe, were published by Natural England on 9 June 2020. These findings from the [People and Nature Survey](#), an online survey of 2,083 adults, show a sharp divide between those

who accessed and enjoyed outdoor spaces more during lockdown, and a sizeable group who did not. While 49% of respondents had visited a green or natural space in the last two weeks, 46% had not, and 26% had not visited any green or natural space in the last month. The most frequented types of space were urban green spaces such as parks (41% visiting in the last month); fields, farms and countryside (25%); woodlands and forests (24%); and rivers, lakes and canals (21%). This highlights the value of parks and green spaces, but also that more can be done to bring their benefits to all population groups.

In late May and June we interviewed 21 park users in three of the case study locations to find out how the Covid-19 restrictions were changing users' experiences. Interviewees were aged between the mid-20s (two students) and 83 and included a mix of couples, families with children and single people. Participants were recommended by individuals previously interviewed for the Parks for People evaluation or volunteered via an online survey. Interviews were done by phone or videoconferencing.

The location of interviewees was:

- Grosvenor and Hilbert Park: 10 (including two couples interviewed jointly)
- Saughton Park: 6 (including one couple interviewed jointly)
- Stafford Orchard: 5

**'It was like a godsend...I was just so grateful that we had it'**

Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' identity. We analysed the interviews to draw out common themes. At the end of this section we suggest some of the main learning points arising from the lockdown experience.

## 9.2. Spaces of wellbeing at a time of stress and anxiety

During the lockdown interviewees generally spent more time in parks and visited more often. In one case a parent of young children who previously visited Grosvenor and Hilbert Park only a handful of times a year was going there every day. A few people timed their visits to avoid peak periods when social distancing might be difficult.

As well as visiting more frequently, interviewees appreciated their local green spaces more. Many people, especially at Saughton and Grosvenor and Hilbert Parks, commented on how parks and green spaces were good for their mental and physical wellbeing, as the quotes below illustrate.

**'We didn't realise it was a big part of what we did [...] I mean, anecdotally we'd just say, oh, you know, we like being in green spaces, we like plants and stuff, but with the lockdown it's just made it increasingly more apparent.'** (Mark and Frances, Saughton Park).

**'I feel like I have a newfound appreciation of my green space.'** (Orla, 39, Saughton Park).

**'It's just been a really happy place to go for us actually and it's a much slower pace of life [...] it's kind of almost been a new discovery for us. It's made us realise that there's a lot more that we can do in the park, that we don't necessarily have to pay for a nice time out with the kids, we can just go and enjoy time there.'** (Daisy, 36, Grosvenor and Hilbert Park).

Maxine, who was homeschooling two children aged 8 and 10, described Grosvenor and Hilbert Park as a 'godsend' during the lockdown:

**'We go out for a walk every afternoon after [we've] sort of done our school stuff and we went every day to that park. It was like a godsend...I was just so grateful that we had it. I was so, so grateful.'**

Maxine valued the opportunity to observe wildlife and connect with the natural world:

**'It was such a, you know, unnerving and stressful time. Just to be able to actually have somewhere to go and...there were ducklings and baby moorhens on the pond...it just was so nice. Again, that whole nature thing, to get out and to actually be able to breathe and just de-stress really by having somewhere that's nice to walk around.'**

At a time when communities were under stress and nobody knew how serious the pandemic was going to become, parks provided a lifeline and a breathing space.



**'It's been nice to see families using it more often'**

The comments highlight one unexpected benefit of the lockdown, which was that people had more time to explore their local parks. Several interviewees said how much they enjoyed seeing whole families out together. For some older participants seeing families out together was 'almost like winding the clock back' to a time when people were less busy or enjoyed simpler forms of entertainment.

### 9.3. The importance of connecting with nature

For many people, the lockdown provided an opportunity to spend more time in local parks and to appreciate the plants and wildlife there. The fine spring weather that coincided with the first weeks of lockdown highlighted the beauty and variety of green spaces, and this was reflected in several interviews.

One parent spoke of how her son instinctively engaged with the natural world in their local park:

**'he does like to run around and so I think he's just really enjoyed that there's more to do, and we found a tree that he can kind of climb in...he's still quite little but he can still kind of climb in it and he loves picking up sticks and we've kind of just sat and looked for bugs in the grass.'**  
(Quote from Daisy, Grosvenor and Hilbert Park).

Beauty and aesthetic pleasure featured strongly in participants' descriptions of being outside. Nathan described the 'fabulous' planting in Stafford Orchard, while Daisy mentioned paying more attention to the trees in the local park: 'for me, it was somewhere that I'd walk through quite quickly and not really notice anything whereas now, you know, we're looking at the trees and what kinds of trees they are...'

This pleasure and appreciation of natural beauty was often coupled with an emotional response:

**'...it makes a big difference to both of my daughters...it's an anxious time for them, and they both definitely benefited mentally from being able to kind of go to the park, it's helped us all mentally.'**  
(Quote from Maxine, Grosvenor and Hilbert Park).

Another talked about being able to 'almost lose yourself in a wood':

**'I went for a walk last night which wasn't entirely through the park, but it took me into the park, you know, and felt just invigorated when I got back from that. And a lot of that was walking through the park and, you know, spending time looking at the trees, just absorbing things that I probably wouldn't normally notice.'**  
(Quote from Winston, Grosvenor and Hilbert Park).

### 9.4. The importance of parks for physical health

Numerous participants said they were using the parks for walking, often with family members, or for cycling or other forms of exercise. In all three parks interviewees observed family groups using the parks in ways that were previously unusual:

**'I think what's been the most noticeable thing is families, including dad, you know [...] mum, dad and the children. Either all taking the dog for a walk, or they've got their bike, you know, little trikes and bikes going round that path, round the edge. It's been nice to see families using it more often other than at the weekends when maybe they might have done it, you know, or played football or whatever.'**  
(Quote from Ellen, 60, Stafford Orchard).

For children who were unable to use playgrounds, learning to cycle or improving confidence on a bike was a good substitute. Some adults took to cycling during the lockdown because the roads were quieter or as a different form of exercise, and this included cycling in parks.

These activities were not just confined to local parks. Two interviewees, Winston and Linton, used Grosvenor and Hilbert Park as part of a wider pattern of exploring local green spaces during the lockdown. Linton would incorporate the park into his running routes, while Winston discovered woodlands nearby that he had not previously visited.

### 9.5. Effects of restrictions imposed during lockdown

For people who were vulnerable because of ill-health, anxious, or who used parks for organised activities, the experience of lockdown was less happy. While problems of over-use or inappropriate use are highly visible, the effects of being excluded from parks are largely invisible.

Callum, a volunteer with the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society at Saughton Park, described the closure of the walled garden inside the park as 'a shock to the system': he had to rethink the routines he had established to support his mental health. Nadine, an active member of Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, said she was using the park less and trying to avoid busy times.

At Saughton Park the disabled cyclists who attend regular all-ability cycling sessions were no longer there during the lockdown. Neither were the older people who gather for regular health walks, or the people with learning difficulties who volunteer alongside the parks staff. At Grosvenor and Hilbert Park the Mindwell art classes for people with mental health problems stopped. At Stafford



Orchard the temporary closure of the Old School Teahouse by the park removed an important and affordable community meeting place.

These gathering places and regular meetings provide a vital function within communities where isolation, loneliness or disability can lead to more severe mental and physical health problems. The changed use of parks during the lockdown also impacted on some people's ability to enjoy tranquillity and connect with nature. Outdoor organised activities, such as woodland maintenance in Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, ceased during the lockdown because they were not regarded as essential work and because of the risk of infection, aggravated by the vulnerability of many volunteers (often these are retirees or people with long-term physical or mental health problems that limit their ability to work full-time).

While some were less able to connect with nature because the social activities that provided the occasion for engaging with nature ceased, others felt unable to connect because their local green spaces had become overcrowded and – in some cases – characterised by incidents of, or fears of, antisocial behaviour such as outdoor drinking and drug-taking:

**'Before Covid we loved going to the outdoors'**

**'When [teenagers] are bored, they hang around in groups, they can be quite intimidating.'**

(Quote from Michael, Stafford Orchard).

While parks could provide a lifeline for stressed parents (see 9.2 above) the inability to use playparks and similar facilities has meant that using the space at all has been problematic for some. Even those who did find different activities to do commented on how much they missed parts of the park that had been closed:

**'Before Covid we loved going to the outdoors, like Saughton Park was brilliant so it was a combination. So, we would go like bike rides or scootering with the kids, through the whole garden and then play on the park, then do the outdoor gym. Some of that has not been viable since Covid but we used to spend, there used to be like a whole morning doing activities, which was fantastic. Now it's more limited, but that is what we would normally do.'**

(Quote from Orla, Saughton Park).

However, at Grosvenor and Hilbert Park some parents with young children found alternatives to playgrounds by using other spaces within the park. Daisy spoke of sitting on the football field with a bubble machine or playing frisbee with her young children, while Maxine took her children to explore the woods.

### 9.6. Disparities between those with and without a garden

In Stafford Orchard and Saughton Park, interviewees commented on the different experiences of people who had access to a garden and those who did not:

**'There are a few apartments, apartment blocks, that won't have their own greenspace, but normally they [the residents] would perhaps be at work, but you don't want to sit in an apartment do you?'**

(Quote from Ellen, 60, Stafford Orchard).

**'[We have a] a shared space but it's not a garden; it's all stones [...] It's not really somewhere you could actually plant things or do any outdoorsy activities [...] So we've been missing the park a lot.'**

(Quote from Mark and Frances, Saughton Park).

These findings are important because access to good quality green space was unequal before the onset of the pandemic. A review by Public Health England,<sup>6</sup> published in March 2020, before the lockdown, highlighted that there is less good quality public green space in the most economically deprived areas. The people at most risk of poor physical and mental health may have the least opportunity to benefit from green space because of inequalities in provision. Those who do not have private gardens are more dependent on having good local green spaces nearby.



<sup>6</sup> See Public Health England (2020). Improving access to greenspace: A new review for 2020. [Online at gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/86422/Improving-access-to-greenspace-A-new-review-for-2020.pdf)

### 9.7. More antisocial behaviour, and greater wear and tear

Antisocial behaviour was mostly mentioned in relation to playgrounds and skate parks. While it was not a major problem it was regarded as a growing concern as lockdown eased. Littering and gatherings of young people were the main issues, although some interviewees stressed that young people had few other places to go to. There was also a more general perception that parks were suffering increased wear and tear:

**'It's got much busier now but we have noticed a lot of people kind of leaving litter and dog poo and stuff. We've had to be quite mindful of where we're going and that's kind of got worse during lockdown. There's definitely been more dog poo around and a lot more litter.'**  
(Quote from Daisy, Grosvenor and Hilbert Park).

These comments are borne out by national data. A survey of more than 100 local authorities by [Keep Britain Tidy](#) found that 81% of respondents had to spend more on clearing up litter, while 72% had to invest in maintaining public order and enforcing lockdown rules. On average

each had spent an extra £33,000 on managing parks between April and June 2020. On average councils had cleared 57 tonnes of additional waste compared with usual levels.

### 9.8. Learning from the lockdown

Covid-19 has prompted a rediscovery of Britain's parks and green spaces. The People and Nature Survey compiled by the [Office for National Statistics](#) found that in September 2020, almost half the adult population (47%) were spending more time outside than before the pandemic. Urban green spaces were visited most often, with 54% of respondents visiting these in the last month.

This increased usage and appreciation underlines the importance of the Parks for People investment, while the cessation of community activities during the lockdown highlights that access to the benefits of parks is far from equal. Our interviews with park users at Saughton Park, Stafford Orchard and Grosvenor and Hilbert Park reveal five learning points that flesh out the national picture provided by the ONS research.



**'Parks are adaptable and welcoming spaces'**

- Many people, even when they use a park regularly, don't know how much it has to offer. Even when some facilities were closed, people were discovering new spaces and opportunities for exercise and play in their local parks, and opportunities to connect with nature
- However, the closure of community facilities limited some people's ability to enjoy their parks. Those whose main use was through organised activities (such as volunteering) had a poorer experience of their parks in the lockdown. This had a disproportionate impact on more vulnerable people
- In the post-pandemic period it will be important to resume community activities safely and inclusively. Community organisations will need appropriate support and resources to achieve this
- The increased wear and tear suffered by parks during the warm spring weather and as lockdown eased highlights the need to invest in management and maintenance. If the use of parks remains at a higher level than before the pandemic, they will need extra ongoing staffing and funding, and sensitive and responsive management
- Parks are adaptable and welcoming spaces that have helped many people cope better with a stressful time in their lives. The long-term impacts of Covid-19 on health and wellbeing are unknown, but we can expect them to continue for some time. By investing in the upkeep of parks and by putting on activities that support wellbeing, green spaces can play an important role in a post-Covid recovery



# 10

What have we learnt  
about delivering  
investments in parks?





# 10 What have we learnt about delivering investments in parks?

The six case studies bring together a wide range of learning about how to create parks that are revitalised themselves and contribute to a wider improvement of local communities. Many of these learning points reinforce existing knowledge but bear repeating because it is easy to overlook them. They also support the wider evidence base on the value of parks and green spaces. Put together, they offer a useful checklist for park improvement that can be transferred into different settings, such as other local authority owned assets and/or public spaces.

The key learning points are grouped into three sections, covering the who, what and how of park improvement projects.

## 10.1. Who needs to be involved

- The case studies show the importance of **inclusive local partnerships** and an overarching vision that all the key groups and organisations support. These will usually involve the local authority and local residents (often in the form of a 'friends of' group). But it is important to understand who else may benefit from the park and to include them in strategic thinking at the outset. Grosvenor and Hilbert and Saughton Park are examples of inclusive thinking and positive (though sometimes challenging) relationships between the council and local residents. In Alexandra Park it proved harder to involve people in a more top-down approach
- Local partnerships need to have **clear lines of accountability** and governance mechanisms. In Boutham Park a formal advisory group was set up to represent different interest groups, each with an equal vote. Where local residents have made significant contributions of time and energy into a project, they usually expect to have a say in what happens. Local authorities need to welcome and respect this involvement
- **Volunteers are essential** to the successful completion of parks projects. They are the ones who link the project with local people and create a sense of inclusivity and ownership. But projects should not presume on volunteers' capacity or willingness to take on work previously done by paid staff. Volunteers need to feel their skills and capacity are being built through the course of the project. This was largely but not always the case in our case studies. The role of paid activity coordinators also came across as important in several of the parks
- It is important to have **continuity of staff** and an on-site presence: a face for people to get to know and trust in the park. The park-keeper at Grosvenor and Hilbert Park was an important link between residents and the council and a reassuring presence. In Alexandra Park the consistent support of a parks development officer was vital in keeping the project on track. But when staff leave or are no longer funded – as happened with the community engagement officer at Grosvenor and Hilbert – it is harder to keep momentum going

'parks need to actively plan and work to engage young people'

- Parks are livelier, richer places when they **welcome marginalised groups** and include them as part of the community. Saughton Park offered all-ability cycling to people with disabilities and volunteering opportunities for people with learning difficulties, as well as providing an opportunity for Syrian refugees to be involved in putting on events. At Boultham Park the Linkage students were an integral part of the project. Parks can bring people together across class and cultural divides, but these activities need staffing and support – they do not emerge spontaneously
- Following from above, engaging **young people** and making them welcome in parks remains a challenge for parks, including our six case studies. As with the different groups outlined above, parks need to actively plan and work to engage young people, including participation in decision-making during development and on-going management of parks

## 10.2. Essential ingredients for investing in parks

- To make parks a 'destination' (as Boultham Park was described) they need to provide **something for everyone**. This means giving careful thought to the balance of features and facilities. It is noteworthy that while restoring heritage elements was important (the Marnock Lake at Grosvenor and Hilbert, the bandstand at Saughton Park and the historical features of Alexandra Park, for example) this was not the only focus. The Parks for People projects were distinctive in their variety, catering for a wide range of interests and demographics through (for example) cafes, multi-use games areas, nature areas, inclusively designed open spaces and so on. This meant that even when some facilities were closed during the Covid-19 pandemic, there was still plenty for many people to do



- **Buildings or community hubs** form a key part of many successful parks. At Grosvenor and Hilbert the refurbished hub was transformed from a run-down bowls club changing room into a community facility with a cafe and toilets. The bowls club is still there, but many other groups can now use the space. At Boultham Park the cafe, glasshouse and education centre provide an important focal point for the community. However, buildings are costly and require ongoing care and maintenance, so this needs to be taken into account in planning. Community-owned or community managed spaces might find it hard to resource these needs without on-going fund-raising (see Myatt's Field Park), but they also ensure that benefits and any profits are invested back into the park
- **Events and festivals** provide opportunities to bring the community together for celebrations and fun. They can reinforce a sense of local identity and help residents to feel valued. But – as at Alexandra Park and Grosvenor and Hilbert – the scale and cost of events needs to be considered. Ticketed events can exclude people who are less able to pay, while large-scale events can prevent people enjoying a park as a quiet outdoor space

- Beyond larger events **regular activities** to engage with different population groups is critical, especially to make access easier and parks more welcoming people who might otherwise find it difficult to access the park, or not feel like it is 'their' space
- **Connecting with nature** is an increasingly important part of people's experience of urban green spaces. Trees and wildlife – such as the otters at Saughton Park – can help people cope with the stresses of their lives and feel a connection with a wider world. Many of the parks projects – including Stafford Orchard, Myatt's Field and Grosvenor and Hilbert – emphasised the importance of wildlife and introduced new natural spaces; these benefits are enhanced when connections are actively made through volunteering or learning activities
- There may also be opportunities to **introduce new elements** that are not traditional park features, which fit with the spirit, heritage and character of the place. At Saughton Park the micro-hydro installation on the Water of Leith has attracted widespread interest and

demonstrated that parks can be seen as part of a response to wider challenges of climate change. Projects need to make space for such innovative thinking

### 10.3. How improvements need to happen

- It is important to **build capacity** within communities and within the organisations involved in park management. The need to support local residents was evident from all the case studies, and where that support was limited (as at Stafford Orchard) delivering the project could be challenging. But capacity also needs to be built within local authorities. At Saughton Park and Boutham Park, councils grew in confidence and expertise as a consequence of the Parks for People project
- **Involving and engaging communities** is key to success. This can be achieved in a range of different ways through inclusive local partnerships, co-design with residents and communities of interest, and creating open and inclusive ways for local people to engage directly with decision-making



**'Covid-19 has also had a severe impact on many activities and facilities'**

- There needs to be a **long-term approach to management** to ensure the benefits of improvements are not lost over time. Residents need to feel confident that funders and local authorities will not lose interest. Covid-19 has also had a severe impact on many activities and facilities, and it is important to show how these can be restored or adapted to be fit for purpose in future
- **Flexibility is essential** in delivering complex projects. At Boutham Park the project evolved to allow a second phase including the restoration of the lake. At Alexandra Park some of the difficulties in governance could have been avoided if the community forums set up as part of the project had been adapted at an early stage
- **Learning and resources need to be shared.** Boutham Park's experience has informed projects elsewhere in Lincoln. Saughton Park's micro-hydro scheme is seen as a trailblazer in Scotland. In some of the other projects, there is less evidence that the learning has been used to inform practice elsewhere
- All the projects highlight the importance of **handling difference respectfully** and managing multiple interests. For the most part conflicts have been handled well, but in some cases it took time to resolve tensions. Effective communication and listening is a skill that must be nurtured. The Parks for People projects have frequently been as much about community development as about the physical improvement of a green space
- **Income generation can be hard work.** Events need to be managed carefully and need to balance 'everyday' users' needs with those of event-goers and need to generate income. There needs to be clarity about where any surplus will go to help overcome residents' concerns about events
- **Contractors need to be managed carefully.** Delays may not always be avoidable but clear communication between contractors, the local authority and local residents can reduce the likelihood of conflict. Poor performance by contractors can put the reputation of a project at risk



# 11

What are the future opportunities and challenges for parks and funders?



## 11

## What are the future opportunities and challenges for parks and funders?

Beyond specific lessons to take from our case studies, it is also worth reflecting on the wider opportunities and challenges for parks – looking forward to an uncertain economic and funding landscape.

- The Parks for People programme showed how investment in parks could bring a **range of benefits to local communities**. The findings create an opportunity for local authorities, government and other funders to build on these benefits and produce a long-term funding strategy for parks that recognises their value to people and places across a range of policy goals
- The benefits highlighted through our case studies and the 'rediscovery' of parks during the initial Covid-19 restrictions show that people and **communities together do value their parks and are aware of the benefits they provide**. This potentially creates an opportunity for local and national action to promote these benefits to citizens. This can embed local communities more deeply within the operation of parks and enable them to act as parks' champions, helping to ensure that parks are valued in policy decisions
- Our case studies highlighted how **different services can make use of parks to provide benefits for individuals and make green spaces more inclusive**. There is an opportunity for local authorities and other service providers to further consider how local services can embed their activities within parks. One example from our study is the Lambeth Early Action Partnership at Myatt's Field Park; while others have been host to 'green prescribing' projects. Funders could consider how funding streams might be tailored to further support such activity
- The Parks for People programme showed how **local authorities, communities and a range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations can work together to deliver change**. The strength and value of these partnerships will be critical to future maintenance of parks and their benefits. This shows local authorities that 'letting go' can often provide dividends, provided there is sufficient support to develop 'ecosystems' of parks specialists, volunteers, community development organisations and enterprise. For funders, this shows the value of developing social and community networks alongside capital developments, as well as to support local authorities to do so
- The challenge for local authorities is to work out how to deliver similar benefits across all their parks and not just to the small number that can successfully bid for external funding. With stretched budgets, this means taking seriously the value of parks across a range of policy goals. **Parks funding needs to be integrated into decision-making within (for example) public health, social care, infrastructure and economic development**. For funders the challenge is to provide opportunities for local authorities to experiment with different ways of working locally, but also with senior executives across public services, the voluntary sector and business to help embed parks within strategic decision-making. The Future Parks Accelerator programme is one such example of how funders are supporting such activity by working across whole places and green space estates

**'Parks for People had a range of potentially long-lasting benefits'**

- Our case studies have shown the amount of work required to maintain the benefits of funding once the initial grant period is complete. Places like Myatt's Field show how these challenges can be negotiated with some success. As well as ensuring that 'resilience' is built into initial grants, there is also a **case for funders to provide follow-on funds within any similar programmes in future in order to develop long-term maintenance and improvements**. Some parks have successfully applied for Resilient Heritage funding through the National Lottery Heritage Fund but this sort of follow-on funding could be more routinely built into funding programmes; likewise long-term planning should be embedded within grants and funding processes
- While this was not initially a central focus of our work, our case studies have shown **the value of social enterprises in bringing innovation and economic benefits without jeopardising benefits to the community**. In an environment where parks increasingly need to cover their own costs, support for fostering social enterprises in parks would offer an opportunity to do: the example of the Future Parks Accelerator-funded Enrich programme in Plymouth is one good example: there, the local authority has worked with a capacity-building social enterprise to develop new ways of working between the council and social enterprises in green space, and to support social enterprises to develop activities in parks and green spaces<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> For more detail, see: <https://realideas.org/about-us/our-work/enrich> 

### 11.1 Conclusion: the long-term value of parks investment

Our research has demonstrated the long-term value of investing in the fabric and people that make parks important to individual and community wellbeing.

The six case studies on which this report is based show that Parks for People had a range of potentially long-lasting benefits for local people and communities. Such impacts aren't picked up by counting the size of the investment or what the investment 'bought' (new playgrounds, cafe facilities) or even some of the indirect indicators like the number of people employed in delivering investments. Our in-depth, qualitative findings show the human side to these figures: that investment in parks can have quite a direct impact on reducing loneliness, on making nature accessible to a wider range of people, even for embedding different approaches to local economic wellbeing.

Investment in parks through Parks for People was critical to achieving these benefits in the six case study parks because of the emphasis on communities being a key part of change, so that investments led to changes that local people needed and wanted for their green spaces. And it is clear from our research that without that investment the kind of benefits these parks are delivering would be greatly reduced. Further, without the right kind of investment, focusing on people and community as well as physical improvements, these benefits would also have been much less significant.

135 parks received Parks for People funding and our research only looked in detail at six. However, if what we have seen in these six parks is indicative of wider change achieved Parks for People will have made a very important contribution to safeguarding and improving the benefits of parks for large numbers of people across the UK. Our research shows how critically important investment is to achieving the benefits of parks; and that one-off grants also require long-term, sustainable funding in order to maintain long-lasting benefits.



# Appendix: Methodology



# Appendix: Methodology

## Approach

In order to answer the project research questions (as set out in the introduction to this report) the research was conducted in two stages:

- Rapid evidence review of existing academic literature to understand what we already knew about the impacts of parks investment. This was published as a separate report in 2019
- Qualitative case studies to understanding in detail the impacts of Parks for People funding, focusing on the social and economic benefits of parks investments. This approach was taken to understand in detail the stories of change for parks and the people that use them. Qualitative data was supplemented by a survey of parks users and secondary socio-economic data

Together these methods gave us robust evidence about the value of parks to people and places, and the social and economic benefits produced by investment in parks through the Parks for People programme.

## Evidence Review

We examined 495 empirical studies published in the previous ten years that had been through a process of academic peer review, supplemented by another 31 papers reviewed in order to cover evidence gaps. After sifting for quality and relevance, 385 papers were considered. This research provides a solid evidence base for policy and practice, but does not include work that has not been peer-reviewed which may be more recent and is also valuable. A more detailed outline of the evidence review methodology can be found in the [Space to Thrive](#) report which summarised key findings from the review.

## Case studies

Case studies were initially selected through a detailed sifting of the 135 parks for people projects, seeking to select case studies which gave us a range of different characteristics in relation to the following different criteria:

- Time since initial investment
- Type of park (e.g. size, facilities, activities, features)
- Project size (as measure by grant size)
- Geography
- Balance between capital and activity-based spending
- Management model (e.g. whether local authority or community-led)

## Interviews and focus groups

We conducted interviews and focus groups with a total of 68 parks stakeholders. These included:

- Park users
- PFP project leads and park managers
- Local authority officers
- Community groups
- Local enterprises
- Local service providers (e.g. childcare, health and social care)

Interviews focused on understanding how projects were delivered and their impacts for different population groups in the outcome areas covered by the research questions.

## User survey

In five of the six parks we also conducted a short online survey of park users aged 16 and above. This sought to capture users' perceptions of parks, how they had changed over time and the benefits they received from using parks.

We received 563 responses to the survey. Broad characteristics of survey respondents are as follows:

- 71% female; 28% male
- 67% in employment; 25% retired
- 27% aged 21-40; 45% aged 41-60; 25% aged 61+
- 87% White British/English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish
- 66% had no children living under 16 living in their household

The sample was self-selecting: we asked local organisations to promote the survey to local residents and as such were not able to place parameters on who received it. As such, the survey is not a representative sample of park users. However it provides us with indicative data on how users perceive and use parks.

## Secondary data

To provide background supplementary information about the area around parks and how they had changed over the period since the Parks for People grant was awarded we reviewed secondary data on the following indicators:

- Local health: long-term disability or illness; households experiencing fuel poverty; people aged 65 and over living alone; life expectancy (Ward Level data, Office for National Statistics and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy)

- Index of Multiple Deprivation (Lower Super Output Area level; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government)
- Economic Activity Rates (Parliamentary Constituency Level; Annual Population Survey, ONS)
- House prices (Postcode Sector; HM Land Registry)

Index of Multiple Deprivation scores have been reference in this report; all data was used in the individual case study report.

## Additional Covid-19 interviews

In late May and June we interviewed 21 park users in three of the case study locations to find out how the Covid-19 restrictions were changing users' experiences. Interviewees were aged between the mid-20s (two students) and 83 and included a mix of couples, families with children and single people. Participants were recommended by individuals previously interviewed for the Parks for People evaluation or volunteered via an online survey. Interviews were done by phone or videoconferencing.

The location of interviewees was:

- Grosvenor and Hilbert Park: 10 (including two couples interviewed jointly)
- Saughton Park: 6 (including one couple interviewed jointly)
- Stafford Orchard: 5

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