

Unlike previous studies of public parks, this research is about understanding and making connections between their past Victorian heritage, their current use/management and their future prospects historically as places where different social groups mix and in our contemporary cosmopolitan cities.

The first core theme of the research is to explore the different expectations and aspirations people have about the social role of parks in the future. The Victorians had a clear social and moral vision for public parks, and this research questions if the contemporary city park has lost such a strong sense of their public purpose, as well as what new or changed social roles they are expected to play today. The constituency for urban parks has broadened and become more diverse and we want to understand the different/competing expectations about their use and aspirations for their future. Hence, we want to engage the public, including children and young people, in research about key public spaces in the city that impact on their well-being, quality of life and capacity for social cohesion.

To understand their role in the future, we need to look at their heritage and social purpose in the times that they were created. As parks were designed in one context and are now used in another very different context, by exploring the founding vision of the park can help us to reflect upon and question its present-day and future social role. We will question whether aspects of the public park's original social rationale, design and management remain relevant (in a much-changed context) to the needs of the contemporary city and how it has adapted to changing social conditions.

There is a longstanding expectation that access to urban parks should be free and inclusive. For these reasons, public parks offer important sites of connection between diverse communities. A second core theme of the project is to explore the lived experiences of parks as places of social mixing and the perceptions of park users towards the governance and policing of parks. Social mixing speaks to some of the challenges of bringing diverse groups together – of different behavioural expectations, concerns about social disorder and of the potential for conflict and crime – and of the social purposes and outcomes to which social mixing may facilitate in terms of social cohesion, the promotion of certain values, and of the Victorian ideas about potential civilising effect of social mixing on the labouring classes.

We hope to contribute to new thinking on the future role of public parks, in particular in terms of developing sustainable ways for managing and using public parks so they are vibrant, inclusive and thriving spaces for another century. So this research is about allowing us to 'care for the future' of city parks, not merely just by understanding better their past and their present, but by informing policy proposals for its future governance. We expect the project will also have broader lessons for other UK city parks.

At the end of the project, we want to share the information we have learned with the public. Many people know only a little about park history in general and about the history of their local parks in particular.