

LEEDS PARKS SURVEY: SUMMARY FINDINGS



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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

For many, visiting parks is an integral part of everyday life, reflecting the vital social role parks play. In 2016, a team at the University of Leeds undertook a public survey in partnership with Leeds City Council Parks & Countryside Service as part of a broader project investigating how Leeds parks have changed through time, how they are used today, and what their future prospects might be.

The survey focused on the use and experiences of, and expectations for, the 70 designated public parks in the city. A core feature of the survey was to ask respondents to identify their main park - i.e. the park they visited most frequently - which was not necessarily the park closest to where they live. The survey investigated uses of parks across the city and by different social groups, experiences and expectations of park-users and levels of satisfaction with parks and priorities for the future. Some 6,432 people responded to the public survey, which was available online and sent to 20,000 households across the city between June and November 2016.

Key findings highlight:

- Parks in Leeds are widely used and enjoyed by diverse social groups; some 91% of people had visited a park in the preceding year and, on average, people visited more than five parks per year throughout the city.
- Some 77% of park visitors reported very pleasant experiences and 90% were satisfied or very satisfied overall with their main park; the majority of park-users said they felt very safe using their park (57%).
- Public parks that meet designated quality standards are associated with enriched visitor experiences and higher levels of satisfaction and well-being.
- Half of park-users visited their main park at least once a week; the average visit lasted for between 30 minutes and two hours.
- Estimated adult visits to parks in the city in 2016 totalled nearly 45 million; of these, 63% were to the 63 designated 'community' parks and 37% were to the seven 'major' parks.
- There were variations in the use of parks and people's experiences of them across the city - notably in terms of the type and quality of the park, and by the age, disability status and ethnic group of the visitor.

The research highlights the importance of accessible, good quality parks and green spaces throughout the city, where people of all ages, cultures and abilities can enjoy the vital leisure, health and well-being benefits that parks afford.

Key recommendations include:

- Priority should be given to raising the standard of parks across the city to ensure access to good quality green space for all residents and visitors, playing due regard to the specific needs of particular social groups so that they can enjoy the full benefits of well-managed parks.
- Park managers should work closely in partnership with diverse organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors to ensure that their contribution and role is harnessed in support of good quality accessible urban parks.
- The differential experiences of park-users across the city should inform park management targets and strategies in ways that seek to ensure a quality park experience is available to all.
- To ensure that there is an equivalent service of accessible, quality parks across the city, managers should prioritise resources and seek investment to raise the level of all community parks to recognised standards.
- Park managers need to develop a better understanding of the personal and social barriers to the full enjoyment of parks by older and disabled people who were much less likely to use parks.



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QUALITY OF PARKS

Leeds has 70 public parks. Of these, seven are designated as formal, 'major' parks and 63 are 'community' parks. All major parks hold the nationally-recognised Green Flag status. In 2016, 41 of 63 community parks (65% of the total) were assessed as meeting an equivalent Leeds Quality Parks (LQP) standard. Existing research shows that good quality, accessible parks are associated with better mental and physical health. Our findings indicate that public parks that meet designated quality standards are associated with enriched visitor experience, satisfaction and well-being.

Only 6% selected a park below these quality standards as their main park to use, suggesting that use of parks across the city is associated with park quality. Those who usually visited a park below LQP standards were more likely to have visited other parks in the city that are below these standards (29%) than those usually visited a park that meets LQP standards (7%). Those who selected a park that meets LQP standards, compared with those who selected a park that was below the standard, were: more likely to be very satisfied overall; less likely to be very dissatisfied; and more likely to feel very safe, have very pleasant experiences and to say that spending time in parks is very important to their quality of life.

Despite differential experiences, those who usually visited a park below LQP standards were more likely to be high-frequency visitors (61%), visiting at least once a week in the summer months, compared with visitors to parks that meet quality standards (49%). The former were also much more likely to use the closest park to where they live and much more likely to walk to this park, suggesting that they have lower levels of mobility or ability to travel to higher quality green spaces, than visitors to parks that meet quality standards.

People visited parks primarily to get fresh air, to go for walks, to enjoy nature and wildlife, and to relax and think in peace and quiet. Parks are also popular places for family outings and children's play. Park-users' top five priorities for the future were to:

1. keep parks clean;
2. keep existing facilities open or improve them;
3. keep parks free to enter;
4. increase events and activities in parks for local communities;
5. tackle anti-social behaviour and crime.

There are some differences in park-users' top five priorities depending on the quality of park. Both sets of respondents agreed it should be a priority to keep parks clean and free to enter. However, visitors to parks below LQP standards were more likely to prioritise anti-social behaviour and crime, personal safety and the condition of paths, benches and other park infrastructure. Whereas, visitors to parks that meet LQP standards were more likely to prioritise the maintenance of existing facilities, the provision of events and activities for local communities and the accessibility of parks for disabled people.

In the context of cuts to local authority park budgets, there is potential for the differential experiences between these groups of park-users to widen. Without significant efforts to counteract such a possible trend, the measurable quality of a park may come to inform park-users' experiences in ways that result in a bifurcated differentiation of parks.

MAJOR AND COMMUNITY PARKS

The findings show variations in use, experiences and expectations by those who selected a major park (49%) and those who selected a community park (51%) as their main park to use. Community park-users were more likely than major park-users to use the closest park to where they live; and they were more likely to walk to get there, although ease of access was rated only slightly better.

Community park-users visited their park more frequently, albeit for shorter periods of time. Some 59% visited at least once a week compared with 39% of major park-users. Yet, 77% of major park-users stayed, on average, for at least one hour compared with 44% of community park-users. Major park-users were more likely than community park-users to rate their park in good or excellent condition. They were also more likely than community park-users to expect its condition to improve.

AGE GROUP

Notably, 77% of people aged over 75 had visited a park in the preceding year, a much lower figure than the average of 91% for all respondents. Those aged over 75 also visited fewer parks across the city than people in other age groups and were most likely to select the closest park as their main park. Over 75s were more likely to be low-frequency visitors (20%), visiting their main park less than once per month in the summer months. Notably this age group

were less likely to say that spending time in their park is essential or very important to their quality of life, but most likely to report having very pleasant experiences visiting their park. The survey findings indicate that pleasant experiences of parks increase with age.

Nearly all those aged 25–44 had visited a park and were more likely to be high-frequency visitors. This age group visited a wider range of parks across the city. They were most likely to say that spending time in their park was essential or very important to their quality of life and the majority reported very pleasant experiences of visits.

Park-users aged 19–24 visited fewer parks across the city; nearly half of this group identified one park – namely Woodhouse Moor – as their main park. They were least likely to report pleasant experiences of visiting their park, more likely to avoid their park at certain times and to perceive it to be less safe, and less likely to think their park is important to their quality of life. However, they were just as likely to be high-frequency visitors as those aged under 64 and more likely to use their park after dark.

While park-users aged 19–24 were most likely to walk to get to their park (70%), park-users aged over 75 were most likely to travel by car (49%). Indeed, walking to parks decreased with age while travelling by car increased with age, despite the fact that older park-users were more likely to have visited their local park.

Dissatisfaction with parks was low across all age groups. People in all age groups agreed that the key priorities should be to keep parks clean, to retain existing facilities or improve them and for parks to remain free. However, young adult park-users aged 19–24 prioritised personal safety more highly than other age groups. Park-users aged 55 and over were more likely to prioritise accessibility of parks for disabled people, highlighting linkages between older age and disability. By contrast, those aged 35–44 were more likely to prioritise activities for children and young people.

DISABILITY

Some 8% of respondents considered themselves to have a disability that affects their access to or use of parks. As with older people, disabled people were significantly less likely to have visited a park in the preceding year. Notably, 77% of disabled people had visited a park in the preceding year compared with 91% of all respondents.

Poor health and disability (29%), as well as a concern that parks are difficult to get to (22%), comprised two of the main reasons for non-use of parks. Other factors, such as not enough time (23%), also inhibited use. Disabled and non-disabled park-users visited the same broad range of parks across the city, for similar reasons and were just as likely to select the park closest to where they live as their main park.

Disabled park-users were just as likely to think that spending time in their park is important to their quality of life. Yet they were less likely to be high-frequency visitors (41%) compared with non-disabled park-users (51%) and a fifth were low-frequency visitors compared with 14% of non-disabled park-users. Disabled people also visited, on average, fewer parks across the city.

Disabled park-users were more likely to travel to their park by car (52%) than to walk (27%), which was the opposite for non-disabled park-users (40% and 52% respectively). Disabled park-users were more likely to say that their park is difficult to get to. One concern that was expressed related to the perceived inadequate amount of disabled parking bays. While the majority of disabled park-users reported pleasant experiences using parks, feeling safe and being satisfied, they were marginally more likely than non-disabled park-users to say that the last visit to their park was unpleasant, slightly less likely to say they feel very safe visiting, and slightly less satisfied.

The findings indicate a need to better understand and address the personal and social barriers experienced by older people and disabled people that adversely affect their full enjoyment and use of parks.

ETHNIC GROUP

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) respondents were as likely to visit parks and be higher-frequency visitors as respondents from a White ethnic group. Park-users from different ethnic groups visited the same broad range of parks across the city, for broadly similar reasons, and were as likely to select the park closest to where they live as their main park. Park-users from different ethnic groups were as likely to walk to get to their park and generally rated their park as easy to get to.

BAME and White park-users were as likely to say that spending time in parks is important to their quality of life. However, BAME park-users were less likely than White park-users to rate their park in excellent condition and less likely to

be very satisfied overall with it. While the majority of BAME park-users reported pleasant experiences using parks and feeling safe, they were less likely than White park-users to report very pleasant experiences, to feel very safe and more likely to avoid their park at certain times.

Park-users from different ethnic groups shared many priorities, including retaining or improving existing facilities, keeping parks clean and for parks to remain free to enter. However, visitors from BAME groups had greater worries about their personal safety in parks.

GENDER

Males and females were just as likely to have visited a park in the preceding year; they stayed for similar amounts of time and they visited the same broad range of parks across the city, for similar reasons. There were broadly similar patterns in the experience of parks as well as priorities for parks by gender.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the core recommendations from the full 16 outlined in the main report for developing parks policy and practice in Leeds and similar cities. We recommend that:

1. Priority is given to raising the standard of parks across the city to ensure access to good quality green space for all residents and visitors, playing due regard to the specific needs of particular groups of people that enable them to enjoy the full benefits that derive from well-managed parks.
2. Park managers work closely in partnership with diverse organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors to ensure that their contribution and role is harnessed in support of good quality accessible urban parks, given the wide-ranging benefits to social relations and people's health and well-being that respondents say derive from park enjoyment.
3. Concerns about the differential experiences of parks across the city - by type and quality - should inform park management targets and strategies in ways that seek to ensure a quality park experience is available to all.
4. Park managers prioritise resources and seek investment to raise the level of all community parks to recognised standards; to ensure there is an equivalent service of accessible, quality parks across the city.
5. Park managers develop discrete action plans, including resourcing considerations, for each

park that does not currently meet LQP/Green Flag standard in ways that can be used by organisations and local groups to support the improvement of parks.

6. Park managers develop a better understanding of the personal and social barriers to the full enjoyment of parks by older people and disabled people who were much less likely to use parks.
7. Park managers investigate further the views and experiences of older people and disabled people, the barriers to accessing and use of parks and green spaces for them, and how these barriers might be overcome.
8. Park managers develop an approach to promoting greater accessibility and inclusivity of parks for disabled park-users, including an accessible play strategy for disabled children.
9. Account is taken of differential modes of transport used to get to parks by different groups in future planning, such that it does not unduly restrict the access to parks for certain groups.
10. Further consideration is given to addressing the disparities in the experiences of parks for BAME and young adult park-users aged 19-24 who were less likely to feel safe using their park.

ABOUT THE STUDY

This is a summary of key findings drawn from the *Leeds Park Survey: Full Report*, which outlines the full survey findings and methods. A copy is available from the project website: www.futureofparks.leeds.ac.uk.

This survey was part of an Arts & Humanities Research Council funded project exploring the past, present and future of urban public parks. A total of 6,432 people responded to the public survey between June and November 2016. The survey was available online and sent to 20,000 households across the city. The findings are representative of the Leeds population in terms of gender and ethnicity.

The project includes a digital archive of images of parks over time, including photographs submitted by members of the public, which is accessible via the Leodis website: www.leodis.net

Further information and a copy of the wider research report *The Future Prospects of Urban Public Parks* are also available from the project website: www.futureofparks.leeds.ac.uk

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