Community engagement

This guidance will support you to undertake community engagement work in your parks and green spaces. We have collated a range of ideas, approaches and case studies that you may want to consider when thinking about, planning for and delivering community engagement. Case studies are from the Future Parks Accelerator programme.

Community engagement takes many different forms with varying levels of collaboration, from delivering an activity with one particular community, to a park being entirely managed by the community. You may want to work with city-wide communities or one individual community group. Whichever way, the key to delivering good community engagement work is to do it with people, not for people.

1. Understand your community

Before you start it is important to understand the communities that your parks and green spaces serve. Local councils, voluntary sector umbrella bodies and central government will have carried out research into the communities in your area, available on sites like commonplace.is, an online tool that collects data about spaces and places. Use this data to build your understanding of your local populations.

Combining this information with your own data on who uses your spaces can help inform the community engagement work you'll undertake. If you do not know who your existing park users are, surveys or collecting postcode data are useful ways to understand this.

CASE STUDY: Birmingham City Council surveyed residents through a YouGov poll and staff, volunteer and partner surveys, the results of which informed how they engaged communities with their City of Nature plan. They then collected "Earth stories" from Birmingham residents on how they use their parks. They also invited local schools and community groups from six key wards to share the City of Nature plan.

2. Articulate your purpose

Community engagement may be an end in and of itself, but it's more likely to be one workstream of a larger project – and a crucial one for meaningfully achieving many broader objectives. Consider why you are getting involved or asking others to get involved. Is there a problem or opportunity where you can step in? Have you been asked to support a project? Are you building on something that's already underway or in development? Being able to talk clearly about your purpose will help everyone understand why it might matter to them.

CASE STUDY: The councils of Camden and Islington were really clear about the purpose of their Parks for Health project: using parks and green space to deliver greater health benefits for communities. This made it easier for them to have conversations with partners and communities about how they could contribute to achieving this outcome.

3. Find people to work with

Depending on what you are trying to achieve, you'll need to identify which communities to collaborate with and how you are going to do this. You may want to work with established community groups to build on existing work, such as friends of groups, or choose to engage underserved communities and work to build their confidence in accessing green space. Working with others and co-designing a project results in better outcomes for everyone.

CASE STUDY: Plymouth, the UK's first Social Enterprise City, saw an opportunity to reinvigorate their green spaces by bringing community-led businesses into parks. They brought together local experts including rangers and park users, as well as community business leaders, to imagine what a social enterprise approach would look like. They've been supporting a number of these businesses to start up and grow in parks and green spaces, repurposing underused assets to create jobs, providing sporting and cultural activities, and even generating local, green electricity.

4. Think about underserved communities

There are many physical and social barriers people face to participate in parks and green spaces and these are not the responsibility of those who face them – it is up to you to find out what these are and remove them. Targeted community engagement work with these communities is an important approach to understanding what these barriers are and making your spaces more inclusive.

CASE STUDY: Camden and Islington worked with a range of voluntary sector partners to better understand their audience and needs. Starting with a co-design process involving 70 groups in the local area, they then led follow-up work with a select number, including Bright Start, Janaty women's group, Age UK Islington and Age UK Camden, Islington Guides and the Bloomsbury Association. From here, they put certain programmes and projects in place, such as Age UK Islington's online Let's Talk sessions.

5. Learn from existing practice

It's likely that there are already people doing work, or trying to do work, around the issue or project you're interested in; it's important to find these people or organisations and learn from them. Case studies can also be useful sources of information.

You may need to go directly to the various locations where communities are forming around your chosen issue: shops, market stalls, schools, community centres, local charities, political groups, or the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. Consider whether these groups are formal networks (e.g. political groups, community groups) or informal (WhatsApp groups, neighbourhood groups).

CASE STUDY: Nottingham took a park bench on a public roadshow and asked people around their local parks what was important to them. This informed their volunteering strategy, and the Green Guardians volunteering programme by starting where people are, with their own experiences at the heart of the conversation.

6. Develop partnerships

Partnerships can be crucial to community engagement. Find out if there are key organisations in your area that could support local projects. These should be established, often public sector and/or non-profit organisations that serve and are fixed to the city or town in which it is based, like Real Ideas Organisation in Plymouth. You may know these as anchor organisations. With them, you can identify joint outcomes and a process for the project you want to undertake and make sure your work has a long-term home.

CASE STUDY: Camden and Islington, whose anchor organisation was Octopus Communities, started by mapping voluntary organisations around their parks. This involved a collaborative assessment of what skills and connections certain groups had. For example, where local VCSE organisations often have unique skills, experience, connections and trust within diverse communities, parks services have the land and authority to manage public assets. By working together, they were able to better understand how to support activities through, for example, fundraising, networking, tools, and permission, in order to create green spaces that are enjoyed and maintained as health assets for all.

7. Think about how you are going to deliver

There are many ways to deliver community engagement work, and communities can participate to different degrees. It may be appropriate to consult with particular groups to inform your work, co-design or deliver a project or event with them or even collaborate fully in all stages: design, planning and delivery.

CASE STUDY: Edinburgh ran a series of Participatory Budgeting workshops, where they asked local people to decide which projects to run in their local greenspaces. They also ran online workshops at different times of day, used the Maptionnaire Community Engagement Tool and ran creative events in public parks.

8. Plan how you are going to work with the community in detail

When working with community groups, careful planning is really important. You need to consider the needs of the community and how to best engage with them, bearing in mind that a range of site-based opportunities will be needed to meet different needs. This requires detailed planning and resourcing. For example, consider accessibility requirements, what days and times you hold events or activities, whether there needs to be a facilitator with specialist skills, a translator, or whether there are particular activities that would most suit the community you are engaging with. Working with a local partner or anchor organisation can inform how best to work with your communities and ensure you meet their needs.

CASE STUDY: In Edinburgh, the Thriving Green Space project team undertook public engagement at Inverleith Park, resulting in over 700 responses to The Friends of Inverleith Park survey. The results of this informed Greenspace Scotland's Young Placechangers project, through which young people asked for charging stations and a mini youth space. The team also coordinated pilot working group monthly meetings and site visits for more interested local partners and residents.

9. Test and learn

It's a good idea to try out and evaluate any new community engagement work within your parks and green spaces to ensure they are being delivered effectively and meeting the needs of the community.

CASE STUDY: Birmingham City Council's parks teams are trialling an 'impact' app. It's designed to capture people's experiences and enjoyment of green spaces through on-the-ground conversations with park users. Information from these interactions is captured as both text and a "happiness" rating. This data can then feed into designing and planning how parks are managed.

10. Sustain and empower communities

Explore what skills, resources and help communities need to sustain some of this work or activity themselves, for example, through running network meetings, offering meeting space and online tools, or helping apply for grant funding.

CASE STUDY: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's Future Parks project set up a small grants programme to fund activities in green spaces, enabling friends of groups to develop volunteering models, run network meetings and apply for grant funding. They also provided toolkits to help with this. Based on this pilot, they hope to make this model a sustainable part of delivering green space county-wide, working alongside the county's local authorities.

Future Parks Accelerator

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